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PREFACE
On the Confederation Poets' Companionship with Nature: Lampman

(This is the second in a series of prefaces on environment in the work of the Confederation poets. The first part appeared in *Canadian Poetry* 47.)

As observed in the first Preface in this series, three collections of essays by the American naturalist John Burroughs, *Winter Sunshine* (1875), *Birds and Poets, with Other Papers* (1877), and *Pepacton* (1881) appear to have made a considerable impact on the Confederation poets. Burroughs' presence in the work of the group is particularly apparent in poems written during the eighteen eighties and 'nineties, and takes many forms, including the conceptualization of Spring and Fall in northern regions as parallel sites of intense conflict between Winter and Summer. Among the many poems by Archibald Lampman that appear to bear the imprint of Burroughs' writings in this regard are "Winter Hues Recalled" (1888) and "Indian Summer" (1899). In the first of these, an evocation of a Wordsworthian "spot . . . of time" that also owes much to the early books of *The Prelude*,[1] the "radiant day" recollected in tranquility occurs in February rather than Burroughs' favorite Spring month of April, but it is nevertheless the scene of a resonantly Burroughsian "struggle / 'Twixt sun and frost" in which, "with advancing spears, / The glittering golden vanguard of the spring / Holds the broad winter's yet unbroken rear / In long-closed wavering contest"; in the second, a sonnet in which the season is figured as an "old gray" man with "misty head" who is lost in "a golden dream of youth," the Fall is similarly the scene of a battle, this time with victory going to "the polar armies [that] overflowed / The darkening barriers of the hills" and "The north-wind ringing with a thousand spears" (*Poems* 28, 225).

Such parallels and contrasts are a recurring feature of the seasonal poems in *Among the Millet* and *Alcyone*, as are atmospheric descriptions that may be responses to Burroughs' call for accurate

and nuanced renditions not only of diurnal and seasonal phenomena, but also of the differences of appearance and emotion engendered by such phenomena. In "April" in *Among the Millet*, for example, "The creamy sun at even scatters down / A golden-green mist across the murmuring town" and in the contrasting poem immediately following, "An October Sunset," "the thin cloudflakes seem to lean / With their sad sunward faces aureoled / And longing lips set downward . . ." (*Poems* 4, 6). A similar attention to detail and effect is observable in the seasonal sonnets in *Alcyone*: as "The air seethes upward with a steamy shiver" towards a sky "as pearly blue as summer," the speaker of "In March" can "almost forget that winter ever was"; as he looks out over "dusking fields and meadows shining pale / With moon-topped dandelions" during a summer sunset in "Evening," his thoughts grow by turns "dark" and bright; and as the unbroken "gray sky" sheds "No . . . light on any field" in "The Autumn Waste," "Life, hopes, and human things seem wrapped away, / . . . in one long decay" (*Poems* 179, 198-99, 228-29). Lampman's powers of observation and description and his cyclical and dialectical habits of mind were not acquired from Burroughs but they were almost certainly encouraged and consolidated by such essays as "April," as very likely was his sense of Canada's natural environment as a rich source of fresh material for poetic treatment.

That Lampman's sense of the significance as well as the richness of the subject-matter available to him in his natural environment was quickened by Burroughs is a conclusion that follows almost inevitably from a reading of the seven collections of nature essays that the American writer published in the 'seventies, 'eighties, and 'nineties (the four not already mentioned are *Wake-Robin* [1871], *Locusts and Wild Honey* [1879][2], *Fresh Fields* [1884], and *Riverby* [1894]). Both as fresh subjects for poetry and as prophetic harbingers, Lampman's frogs are creatures of Burroughs' writings as well as of the Canadian Spring. Similarly, several details of "Heat" and "Among the Timothy" surely gain significance and precision as seasonal markers and sensory experiences from Burroughs' observations à propos the "poetry of midsummer harvesting" in *Birds and Poets, with Other Papers* on the harmonies and correspondences among that season's sounds and textures: "[t]he characteristic sounds of midsummer are the sharp, whining crescendo of the cicada or harvest fly, and the rasping, stridulous notes of the noctur-

nal insects. . . . [T]he grass and the grain at the season have become hard. The timothy stalk is like a file; the rye straw is glazed with flint; the grasshoppers snap sharply as they fly up in front of you; the bird-songs have ceased; the ground crackles under foot; the eye of day is brassy and merciless; and in harmony with all these things is the rattle of the mower and hay-tedder" (6:54-55)—and also, according to Lampman's poems, "The crackling rustle of . . . pitch-forked hay" and the "idly clacking wheels" of "A hay-cart" (*Poems* 16, 12). When seen against the backdrop of Burroughs' description of the predominantly "sharp" sounds and textures of midsummer, such elements of "Heat" as "The cool gloom of the bridge" and the "thin revolving tune"[3] of the "thrush" take on added significance as indications of the mental equipoise that begins fully to emerge in the final stanza with the speaker's statement that "yet to [him] not this or that / Is always sharp or always sweet" (*Poems* 12-13).

Of Lampman's three volumes of poetry the most Burroughsian in both structure and subject matter is obviously *Lyrics of Earth*. Arranged with E.W. Thomson's help around the cycle of the seasons, the volume begins with the arrival of Spring ("Godspeed to the Snow") and would have ended, if a printer's error had not necessitated the placement of "The Sun's Cup" in the final position, with a celebration of the anticipated pleasures of memory that is disrupted by "a vision . . . / Of the labouring world" (*Poems* 171-2) ("Winter-store"). All but a few of its poems are thus bracketed by pieces devoted to the sights, sounds, and psychological effects of the period between April and November and, correspondingly, morning and evening, youth and old age, classical times and the present day.[4] No doubt, many if not most of the details and responses registered in *Lyrics of Earth* are the result of direct observation, but this does not deny Burroughs a role either in directing Lampman's attention to certain phenomena or in supplying him with some of his materials (or both). In "April in the Hills," for example, several of the birds mentioned are given special status in *Birds and Poets, with Other Papers* as early manifestations of the arrival of Spring: "April's bird with me is the robin," declares Burroughs,[5] and no American poet has yet written of "the first swallow that comes twittering up the southern valley"; and none have described the "first note of [the bluebird] in early spring, —a note that may be called the violet of sound, and as welcome to the ear, heard above the cold damp earth, as is its floral type to the eye a few

weeks later" (6:75, 36). (Lampman also mentions the shore lark, which Burroughs describes as a "bird . . . of the far north," and, in discerning "tenderness" in the vesper-sparrow's song in "The Return of the Year" [1895], may have had in mind the American writer's characterization of it as all "peace and gentleness" [6:16, 86].). When Lampman wrote of "waken[ing] with the waking earth" and "match[ing] the bluebird in mirth" in the final stanza of "April in the Hills" perhaps he was remembering both a personal experience in April 1895 and Burroughs' observation in his first collection of nature essays (*Wake-Robin*) that the bluebird is "the first bit of color that cheers our northern landscape" and his assertion in the same place that bluebirds "warble more confidently . . . gleefully" and "cheerily" after the "threat of snow is completely past" (1:190, 3). Perhaps he was also remembering actual sounds of midsummer as well as Burroughs' description of them when in July 1889 he wrote in "Comfort of the Fields" (1895) of "the jolted wains, / The thresher's humming," "The locust's rattle," and "The prattling cricket's intermittent cry" as a "feast of summer sounds" (*Poems* 149). Perhaps the "spectral happiness," the "nameless and unnatural cheer" and "pleasure secret and austere," that comes to the speaker in the "thin light" and "chill air" of "In November" (1895) is the product both of a personal experience in November 1899 and of Burroughs' remark in *Winter Sunshine* that "[o]ur Northern November day is like spring water. . . . There is chill in it and an exhilaration also" (2:111). Such speculative possibilities could be multiplied many times over, but surely the essential point is now clear: Lampman's descriptions of natural phenomena and their effects resemble those of Burroughs both because their environments had much in common and because Burroughs' descriptions helped to determine what Lampman saw and how he responded: in naturalistic observation as in landscape aesthetics, the eye largely sees the phenomena that it has been conditioned to see and every description that ensues is necessarily the outcome of a textual as well as an actual experience: art imitates both art and life.

Carl Y. Connor's impression that Lampman "wanted every man to be a John Burroughs or a Bradford Torrey [1843-1912], or, better still, a loafer with an open heart and a perceptive eye" (148) has the twofold merit of recognizing Burroughs' importance to him and of acknowledging another American literary naturalist whom he greatly admired. "Mr. Torrey is an ornithologist of the heart," "a

poet-naturalist . . . of the class of writers to which Thoreau and . . . Burroughs belong," Lampman asserts in his *At the Mermaid Inn* column of February 13, 1892 by way of recommending Torrey's *A Rambler's Lease* (1889) as the "next best thing to a morning's walk in the woods or along some country lane" (12-13). A little over a year later, in his column of February 25, 1893, he goes further: "although not yet as well known as either [Thoreau or Burroughs], Mr. Torrey is a finer and more suggestive thinker than Burroughs, and a more, if less a brilliant one, than Thoreau. . . . [He] is not only a most minute and patient observer, after the persistent modern manner, of the habits of plants and birds, but also a literary artist . . . a poet-philosopher . . . and a humorist of th[e] tenderly reflective sort" whose essays, particularly "In Praise of Weymouth Pine" in *The Footpath Way* (1892), "introduce . . . his readers to inexhaustible sources of innocent and pleasurable activities, put . . . them upon the watch for innumerable delightful suggestions, and prepare . . . them for a world of tender and humanizing influences" (265-66). "It is a kind of writing that I take to instinctively," Lampman had said of Torrey's *A Rambler's Lease* in a letter to Thomson on December 9, 1891; "Burroughs is the same kind of worker and his books are charming" (*Annotated Correspondence* 27).

On the basis of the resonances between two of Lampman's poems and the lengthy excerpt from Torrey's essay on the Weymouth pine that he quotes in his *At the Mermaid Inn* column of February 25, 1893, there is a distinct possibility that the relationship between the two writers involved a degree of reciprocal influence and reinforcement. A "priest of the true religion" of Nature that stands silent in the "cathedral" or "temple" of the forest until the "heavenly influence" of the wind inspires its "innumerable leaves" to "utter things . . . deeper than words" (qtd. 266), Torrey's pine not only anticipates the "priestly pines" whose "murmur" and "pensive power" calms and inspires the speaker of Lampman's "In the Pine Groves" (1900), a pair of sonnets written in or about August 1892, but it also recalls "the pines / Like tall slim priests of storm" and the "sad trees . . . [that] murmur incoherently" among the "wind-heaped traceries" of Fall in "In October" (1888) (*Poems*, 267-68, 21). The Lampman-Thomson correspondence confirms that by the Summer of 1891 Torrey knew and admired Lampman's poetry and that, through Thomson, the two writers met in Boston later that year (see *Annotated Correspondence* 9, 41, 51), and the editor of the

correspondence, Helen Lynn, has done a valuable service by noting that among the things that they had in common was a keen "interest in ornithology" (10). A member of the Audubon Society since June 13, 1887,[6] Lampman evidently regarded Torrey's accounts of birding as among the most "charming and helpful" aspects of his books and probably drew inspiration from their emphasis on the "family operations and moral qualities" of birds (*At the Mermaid Inn* 265)[7] for such poems as "To the Warbling Vireo" (1900), "Nesting Time" (1900), and "The Robin" (1976), all of which were written in the 'nineties. For his part, Torrey probably used his position as an editor of the *Youth's Companion* (Boston) from 1886 to 1901 to ensure that the magazine provided a steady outlet for Lampman's poems—twenty-six in all between November 1891 and April 1899, including the three ornithological pieces just mentioned.

The fact that "On the Companionship with Nature" (1900) was written in June 1892 and published in the *Youth's Companion* (Boston) on December 1 of the same year places the sonnet that Connor and many others have regarded as the "best sum[mary] of Lampman's attitude to Nature" in its "soothing, enspiriting, instructing and ennobling" aspects (163) very much in the context of his admiration of Burroughs and Torrey, as well as in the broader context of his, and their, indebtedness to Wordsworth, Emerson, and the Romantic tradition in general:

> Let us be much with Nature; not as they
> That labour without seeing, that employ
> Her unloved forces, blindly without joy;
> Nor those whose hands and crude delights obey
> The old brute passion to hunt down and slay;
> But rather as children of one common birth,
> Discerning in each natural fruit of earth
> Kinship and bond with this diviner clay.
> Let us be with her wholly at all hours,
> With the fond lover's zest, who is content
> If his ear hears, and if his eye but sees;
> So shall we grow like her in mould and bent,
> Our bodies stately as her blessèd trees,
> Our thoughts as sweet and sumptuous as her flowers.
>
> (*Poems* 258-59)

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that a model for Lampman's "fond lovers" of nature was "the class of writers" in which, four months earlier, he had placed Thoreau, Burroughs and, above all, Torrey, a "poet-naturalist" "intent upon the everyday life of the woods and fields," "an ornithologist of the heart . . . who never carries a gun, never kills a bird," but, rather, "watches with a happy and affectionate interest [Nature's] multiform activities and intelligences, its little dramas and episodes, and records them in a style full of amusement and sympathy. Like a gentle poet and philosopher as he is, Mr. Torrey . . . bring[s] . . . perpetual charmed surprise to anyone who is himself a lover of the wild wood and its gentle inhabitants" (*At the Mermaid Inn* 12-13).

Notes

1 See especially *The Prelude* 1:80-93, 250-54, 390-400, 425-63; 2:310-52; 3:177-90, 323-38, 370-87.

2 *Locusts and Wild Honey* includes Burroughs' account of an 1877 trip to Canada in which, in addition to visiting the usual touristic sights on the St. Lawrence ("a chain of Homeric sublimes from beginning to end") and the Saguenay (a river that "suggest[s] something apocryphal and antemundane"), he visited a wilderness lake that he describes in terms that may have helped to shape Lampman's "The Lake in the Forest" (1900): "I was alone with the spirit of the forest-bound lake and felt its presence and magnetism. . . . [A] lake is the ear as well as the eye of the forest. . . . Nature ebbs and flows . . . [There is] unity of movement in the two elements, air and water" (3:192, 224, 210; and see *Poems* 313-16).

3 In the title essay in *Birds and Poets, with Other Papers*, Burroughs observes that the "golden-crowned thrush, or oven bird . . . frequently sings on the wing up aloft after the manner of the lark. Starting from its low perch, it rises in a spiral flight far above the tallest trees, and breaks out in a clear, ringing, ecstatic song . . . ceasing almost before you have noticed it" (6:16).

4 Hingston refers to several "members of the animal and vegetable kingdoms" in his discussion of Spring but makes only passing mention of the "harsh gutteral sounds" of the frog (46-47). He does, however, describe April as the month that "divides the extremes [of cold and heat] equally" and "the only month which may in truth be called a spring month" in Canada (44).

5 See also "The Return of the Birds" in *Wake-Robin*, where Burroughs associates the robin with the "universal awakening and rehabilitation of nature" in Spring (1:2).

6 A copy of Lampman's membership certificate from the Audubon Society is in the Lampman Papers at Simon Fraser University.

7 See also *At the Mermaid Inn* 13 for Torrey's knowledge of "the inner life and

domestic character of birds."

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