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PREFACE
On the Confederation Poets' Companionship with Nature: Carman

(This is the third in a series of prefaces on environment in the work of the Confederation poets. The first and second parts appeared in *Canadian Poetry* 47 and 48.)

Of all the members of the Confederation group the one who probably felt John Burroughs' influence most profoundly and enduringly was Bliss Carman. Certainly, there can be no doubt of Carman's admiration and appetite for the American naturalist's works. Reviewing the Scottish pocket edition of *Winter Sunshine* in the May 1885 issue of *The University Monthly* (Fredericton), he reveals that he has also read *Wake-Robin* and *Fresh Fields*, expresses admiration for Burroughs' "keen-eyed," "healthy and exact" observations on the differences between English and American national character, and lavishes special praise on his style, proclaiming "Autumn Tides," "The Apple," and "The Exhilaration of the Road" "exquisite prose idylls" that possess a "literary" merit absent from Thoreau's *Walden* (123). Almost thirty years later, in a letter of January 25, 1914, he would evoke Burroughs' famed dedication to accuracy in naturalistic observation to reprove the American poet William Griffith (1876-1936) for a confusion in the second stanza of his "Canticle": "[d]o you mean [that the characters in the poem] are praying for the spring to stay until autumn? Or am I to gather that the partridge drums in Spring? I am sure that he would love to drum for you at any season, but I doubt if John Burroughs would allow him to. How about it?" (*Letters* 206).[1] In the years prior to the First World War, Burroughs was at least as strong an influence on Carman as Thoreau and almost as formative an influence on him (as on Burroughs himself) as Emerson.

By a coincidence that would not have escaped Carman's notice, he was born in the same renovative and portentous spring month as Burroughs. "April is my natal month, and I am born again into new delight and new surprises at each return of it," enthuses the

American naturalist in "April," "[i]ts name has an indescribable charm to me. Its two syllables are like the calls of the first birds,—like that of the phoebe-bird, or of the meadowlark. Its very snows are fertilizing . . ." (6:94). Carman also felt a special affinity with his "natal month," which, as he repeatedly states in the essays collected in *The Kinship of Nature* (1904), brings "the renewal of the ancient rapture of earth," "the old Aprilian triumph" (95, 64). In "The Vernal Ides" in the same collection, he borrows a phrase from Emerson[2] but takes a leaf from Burroughs in affirming the formative influence of "the vernal ides" on "the northern imagination": "[l]ong inheritance of April happiness has given us that peculiar malady we call spring fever; has given us, too, a special spiritual sympathy or wonder in the reviving year. This truly religious sense has made itself widely felt in the racial expression, in the arts of poetry and painting," of northern peoples (66). Perhaps taking his cue from Burroughs' essay on "Spring Poems" in *Birds and Poets, with Other Papers* but focussing specifically on English responses to April Carman refers admiringly to the opening lines of the *Canterbury Tales* and quotes Robert Browning's "Home Thoughts from Abroad" and Rudyard Kipling's "In Springtime" as examples of what Burroughs calls "spring songs" or "vernal poems" (6:109, 112). But for his characteristic modesty, Carman might have mentioned or quoted his own "Spring Song" in *Songs from Vagabondia* (1894), a poem whose rollicking stanzas contain many touches reminiscent of Burroughs, not least its catalogue of migrant birds "Making northward with the spring" and its celebration of the "Shrilling pipe or fluting whistle" of the "frog and tree-toad" (10-11). Such touches can be found in most of Carman's later spring poems, from the "frogs in silver chorus" and the "first robin at his vespers / Calling far, serene and clear" in "April Weather" (1898) (*Pipes of Pan* 17-18) to the "high pealing strain" of the "rainbird" and the "trilling note / Of the tree frog" in *April Airs: a Book of New England Lyrics* (1916) (12, 15). Little wonder that in *Our Friend John Burroughs* Clara Barrus summarizes Burroughs' emotive attitude to April in the (in)famous chorus of "Spring Song": "Make me over, mother April, / When the sap begins to stir!" (Barrus 1:256; *Songs from Vagabondia* 10-13).

In both "April" and, more interestingly, in "Spring Poems" Burroughs makes the point that Spring is not solely a time of rapturous awakening: "they are not all jubilant chords that this season awakens. Occasionally there is an undertone of vague longing and sad-

ness, akin to that which one experiences in autumn. Hope for a moment assumes the attitude of memory and stands with reverted look. The haze . . . awakens pensive thoughts" (6:108). The bittersweet mood that Burroughs here attributes to April can be found greatly amplified in another of the essays in *The Kinship of Nature*, a meditation on "Easter Eve" in which Carman presents the Christian celebration of "the immortal fancy of an imperishable life" both as a "great spring festival" of "renewal" (93-99), and as a time of tension between jubilation and sadness:

> what memories return with the April winds! The breath of approaching life sifts through the trees and grasses, the sound of running water stirs in the wild places, the birds make songs as they fly, there is everywhere the renewal of the ancient rapture of earth; yet in the twilight one remembers all those glad experiences which are to be repeated no more, and the faces of unreturning companions. So . . . if Easter is the gladdest of days, the eve of Easter is the saddest.[3] (95-96)

As indebted as these sentiments seem to be to Burroughs' observation that April's sights, sounds, and scents are "delicate and almost spiritual tokens" that have the power to "make . . . [one] both glad and sad" (6:93), they go further than Burroughs ever did[4] in recognizing the "spiritual" and, indeed, religious aspects of Spring by relating the season's natural and emotional characteristics not only to the Christian festival of death and resurrection, but also to the "lovely and encouraging natural religion" of ancient Greece that finds intimations of immortality in "the returning forces of the grain and the sun and the vital air" (94-99). Carman's appreciation and understanding of the characteristics and effects of April were doubtless enriched by Burroughs, but his conception of "the old Aprilian triumph" as a comforting reminder of the certitudes of "fine and ancient" "natural religion" in "Easter Eve," "The Vernal Ides" and other works written around the turn of the century such as "Saint Valentine" (1904), "The March Hare's Madness" (1904) and, as argued elsewhere, *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics* (1903)[5] derive from other sources, most notably Karl Otfried Müller's discussion of the emergence of the Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries from myths connected with the seasonal "disappearance and reappearance of vegetable life" in his *History of the Literature of Ancient Greece* (trans. 1858).[6]

A further aspect of Burroughs' work that seems to have appealed to Carman is his conviction that, while April is the month of renewal and inspiration, it is not necessarily a month conducive to artistic creativity. "In the spring, one vegetates; his thoughts turn to sap; another activity seizes him," Burroughs suggests in "Autumn Tides"; "[f]or my part, I find all literary work irksome from April to August; my sympathies run in other channels. . . . As fall approaches, the currents mount to the head again. But my thoughts do not ripen well till after there has been a frost. . . . A man's thinking, I take it . . . wants plenty of oxygen in the air" (2:103). In "Touches of Nature" in *Birds and Poets, with Other Papers* he puts the matter more succinctly: "when the sap begins to mount in the trees, and the spring languour comes, does not one grow restless indoors? . . . [T]he spring . . . makes one's intellectual light grow dim. Why should not a man sympathise with the seasons and the moods and the phases of nature? . . . [W]hat his great mother feels affects him also" (6:56). As the striking similarity between this and the chorus of "Spring Song" attests, Carman fully agreed; indeed, his petition for animal vitality and the "indolence" to enjoy it at the close of "Spring Song" also echoes Burroughs (see *Songs from Vagabondia* 13), as do his musings in "The Vernal Ides" on whether Spring is "truly a time favourable to artistic creation":

> If there are seasons of the mind, its April should be a month of starting and growth, of extended horizons, renewed vigour, fresh inspirations. But the month of fruitage is September or October, and the achievements of art are ripened to perfection in the Indian Summer of the soul. It is not under the immediate stress of a great emotion that a great work is produced; most often it is the result of . . . a long, silent cogitation, when the mind sits in autumnal luxury thinking of itself. (67-68)

More obviously for Carman than for Burroughs, the relationship between artistic creativity and the seasonal cycle is an environmentally inflected variation of Wordsworth's belief that poetry is the product, not of "powerful feelings" per se, but of "emotion recollected in tranquility."[7] In "The Vernal Ides," as in "Easter Eve," Burroughs' thinking on April is the stem upon which Carman grafted ideas from other sources, the result being a discursive hybrid of American and English elements that many commentators on Can-

ada's cultural identity would consider typically if not quintessentially Canadian.

It is a measure of the impact on Carman of Burroughs' complex and suggestive conception of April that it provided a large component of his "most ambitious work" of the eighteen eighties (Gundy 25), the pastoral elegy on the death of Matthew Arnold on April 15, 1888 that he entitled "Corydon" and intended to publish in "a limited edition of seventy-five copies . . . at [his] own expense" (*Letters* 26). According to available evidence, the elegy was to be divided into three parts, "Death in April," "Midsummer Land," and "Autumn Guard," "each preceded and followed by a lyric interlude"[8] and each provided with an epigraph from another pastoral elegy.[9] Probably because the third part of "Corydon," the enigmatically titled "Autumn Guard" was never finished (see *Letters* 26, 28, 32) the scheme never came to fruition[10]; however, the first part, "Death in April," was published in the April 1889 number of *Atlantic Monthly,* the second, as "Corydon: an Elegy" in the March 1890 number of *The Universal Review* (London), and three of its lyric interludes entitled "Stir," "Ad Vesperum," and "E Tenebris" survive, the first in the January 25, 1889 issue of *The Critic* [Halifax (3)] and the other two after "April in the Hills" in the portion of the projected book that Carman had privately printed in Fredericton in 1888.

On the basis of the existing portions of "Corydon" there is no doubt that Burroughs lies centrally in its background. Cast in a stanza form appropriately reminiscent of Arnold's "Thyrsis" and structured by the three components of the traditional pastoral elegy—loss ("Death in April"), mourning ("Corydon: an Elegy"), and consolation (intimated in the final stanza of "Corydon: an Elegy")[11]—it relies heavily on Burroughs' conception of April as a pivotal month in northern climates and for northern peoples, figuring "Mother England" in the aftermath of Arnold's death as a "Northland wan" in the process of being "freshen[ed] once more" by "Midspring" and April herself as a sad "child of remembrance [and] mother of regret" who is nevertheless the glad parent:

> . . . of all dappled hours,
> Restorer of lost days, for whom we long;
> Bringer of seed time, of all the flowers and birds;
> Sower of plenty, of the buds and showers;
> Exalter of dumb hearts to brink of song;

> Revealer of blind Winter's runic words!
> ("Death in April" 458, 461)

Several passages in both "Death in April" and "Corydon: An Elegy" permit the inference that the consolation that Carman intended to provide in the third part of the poem involved a combination of Burroughs and "natural religion" in which April's ability "evermore [to] redeem / The world from bitter death" ("Death in April" 460) would have been assimilated to a syncretic mixture of Christian and "ancient" ideas of immortality: in one stanza near the end of "Corydon: an Elegy," "Death holds a smile most like foreknowledge of life" that "victors" must "Await . . . since God wrought / Strength out of calm and reverence out of joy" and, in another, a "gold-mouthed veery [thrush] answering / His brother pilgrim" is described as the "Chrysostom of silence and repose" and enlisted as "as essoiner . . . unto Death" on behalf of those who, like "Orpheus . . . Corydon," and the bird itself "go as the wind wandereth" (435, 436).[12] Perhaps it was Burroughs' comment in *Wake-Robin* on the "sweetness and wildness" of its "soft, mellow" song "when heard in the warm twilight of a June day in our deep northern forests" (1:25, 141) that recommended the veery to Carman as a messenger of the living in the court of Death.

Nor is this at all far-fetched, for not only is "Corydon: an Elegy" set in "High June . . . with sun / As only this far North can know" (425), but the poem's three extant interludes are also indebted specifically to Burroughs' writings on birds and bird song. In "Stir," which was to be "the introductory lyric of the first part," the sound of birds "In Northward flight" is a sign of the arrival of "golden April" when "The sap goes upward with morning / And death is a dream" *(The Critic* [Halifax], January 25, 1889, 3) and in both "ad Vesperum" and "E Tenebris," which were perhaps intended to follow "Death in April" and precede "Midsummer Land," the song of a thrush at twilight is conceived as a "cool rush" that will "rebrim / The world" with "calm" and at dawn as a "wild wood charm" that heralds the "sheer / Blue morning."[13] Although the reference to the "gold-mouthed veery" in "Corydon: an Elegy" suggests that Carman had that species of thrush in mind as the source of the song in "Ad Vesperum" and "E Tenebris," the association of the song with a peace born of eschatological hope assimilates the two interludes to Burroughs' hugely influential conception of the hermit thrush's song as "the voice of . . . calm, sweet serenity" and the "deep, sol-

emn joy that only the finest souls may know" (1:47). It may even be that then idea of using thrush song as a leitmotif in "Corydon" came from "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865-66) by way of Burroughs' observation in *Birds and Poets, with Other Papers* that Whitman's "threnody is blent of three chords, the blossoming lilac, the evening star, and the hermit thrush, the latter playing the most part throughout the composition" (6:37).[14] Burroughs could be describing the elegies of both Whitman and Carman when he writes that "[i]t is the exalting and spiritual utterance of the 'solitary singer' that calms the poet" in the face of death.

The poem in which Carman most successfully combines Burroughsian elements with "natural religion" is "Resurgam," written on April 15, 1908 (Sorfleet 167) and first published in *The Rough Rider and Other Poems* (1909). Echoing "Easter Eve," "Resurgam" begins by folding the Christian festival of death and resurrection into the Spring process of renewal and rebirth, first by juxtaposing the two events and then by attaching religious associations to natural phenomena: "Lo, now comes the April pageant / And the Easter of the year. / Now the tulip lifts her chalice, / And the hyacinth his spear . . . Child of immortal vision / What hast thou to do with fear?" (*Poems* 220-21). There then follows a Burroughsian catalogue of spring sights, sounds, and scents—"the migrant wings com[ing] northward," the "full brimming river margins," the smoke of "brush fires"—whose effect on humans ranges from the merely physical ("the blood beats in the vein") to the intuitively spiritual:

> Through the faint green mist of springtime,
> Dreaming glad-eyed lovers go,
> Touched with such immortal madness
> Not a thing they care to know
> More than those who caught life's secret
> Countless centuries ago.
>
> (*Poems* 222)

Like the "Dreaming glad-eyed lovers" of this stanza, the "priests and holy women" who celebrate Christ's "death and resurrection" "With . . . incense, chant and prayer" later in the poem are for Carman a "new fulfilment" of the same Aprilian intimations of immortality that inspired ancient Egyptian worshippers of Osiris to "Put . . . on . . . green attire . . . to greet the fire / Of the vernal sun" and inspired the ancient Greek adepts of Adonis to sing

Linus songs of joy and sorrow
For the coming back of spring,—
Sorrow for the wintry death
Of each irrevocable thing,
Joy for all the pangs of beauty
The returning year could bring.

"[C]ould bring": in "Resurgam," as in "Easter Eve," Carman tempers affirmation with uncertainty, urging his readers to direct the energy of the "spring renascence" to humanitarian and spiritual ends ("Take thy part in the redemption / Of thy kind from bonds of earth. . . . Share the life . . . eternal" of the great artists and mystics who made themselves "Lords of time" [223]), and he concludes the poem, like the essay, with a question:

Still remains the peradventure,
Soul pursues an orbit here
Like those unreturning comets
Sweeping on a vast career,
By an infinite directrix
Focussed to a finite sphere,—
Nurtured in an earthly April,
In what realm to appear?
(224)

A similar combination of credulity and uncertainty characterizes the lame conclusion that Carman attached to the poem entitled "Easter Eve" (1916) when he published it in *Later Poems* (1921)[15]: "I share the life eternal with the April buds and the evening star. / The slim new moon is my sister now, the rain, my brother; the wind my friend. / Is it not well with these forever? Can the soul of man fare ill in the end?" (*Poems* 226). Since the parallel between "the old Aprilian triumph" in northern climates and the persistence of the human soul after death is at best tenuous, Carman's later involvement with Spiritualism and Theosophy[16] was perhaps the inevitable outcome of the connection between Burroughsian determinism and natural religion that he first attempted to forge in the late eighteen eighties. In any case, Carman's spiritualized April is the most elaborate product of the influence of Burroughs on the Confederation group.

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Notes

1 In fact, Burroughs frequently allows the partridge to drum in the Spring: see, for example, *Complete Writings* 1:8, 11, 63-64, 2:101, and 6:109.

2 Admirer that he was of both Emerson and Burroughs, Carman would almost certainly have been aware that Emerson's death on April 27, 1882 called forth a eulogy from Burroughs in which he envisages his mentor in "the bosom of the great Mother on this April day" and meditates at some length on the appropriateness of the month for his death: "[i]t was fit that he should pass in April, the month of Shakespeare's birth and death, the month that opens the door to the more genial season. . . . He was an April man, an awakener, full of light, full of prophecy, full of vernal freshness and curiosity" (qtd. in Barrus 1: 237).

3 See also Carman's letter of April 30, 1919, where he comments on the "sickness of heart" that he sometimes experiences in April and envisages camping and walking in the woods in May as a cure for "regretful thoughts" (*Letters* 174).

4 When Burroughs did address such matters in such essays as "Analogy" (1862) and "Analogy—True and False" (1902) he shows himself to be a transcendentalist but not a believer in immortality, asserting in the former that "material objects [are] . . . symbols of the infinite" and in the latter that arguments for the "survival of the soul" on the basis of natural processes are invalid (Westbrook 12, 116).

5 See Bentley, "Threefold in Wonder: Bliss Carman's *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics*."

6 If the relationship between the following passages is not coincidental, then Carman's understanding of "nature religion" was indebted to Müller:

> The changes of nature . . . must have been considered [by the ancient Greeks] as typifying the changes in the lot of man. . . . [W]hen the goddess of inanimate nature had become the queen of the dead, it was a natural analogy which must have early suggested itself, that the return of Persephone to the world of light also denoted a renovation of life and a new birth to men. Hence the Mysteries of Demeter, and especially those celebrated at Eleusis, . . . inspired the most elevated and animating hopes with regard to the condition of the soul after death. (Müller 1:305-06)

> [The ancient Greeks and Britons] would grasp quickly at the poetic analogy between the life and man and the life of nature through the season's progress. Seeing all nature die down and revive, they would eagerly guess at a future for the soul, an eternal springtime supervening upon the autumn of mortality. (Carman, *The Friendship of Art* 258-59)

Other sources of Carman's knowledge of "natural religion" might have included Andrew Lang's *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (1887) and the essay entitled "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone" in Walter Pater's *Greek Studies* (1895).

7 See also Lampman's heavily Wordsworthian "Winter-Store" (1895) for Spring and Summer as seasons for gathering and storing materials (memories) for later use (*Poems* 165-73).

8 This information is given in the "Chit-Chat and Chuckles" column of *The Critic* (Halifax) on January 25, 1889 (3). In a letter of April 9, 1889 to Horace E. Scudder, Carman describes the poem as a "trilogy" that would include "six lyric interludes and preludes" (*Letters* 26).

9 No doubt, Roberts, whose essay on "Pastoral Elegies" was published in the *New Princeton Review* in May 1883, greatly aided Carman in his understanding of the components of the pastoral elegy.

10 Doubtless one reason for Carman's failure to complete "Corydon" was the poor reception of "Corydon: an Elegy" in England. As Muriel Miller puts it, "*The Spectator* (London) and *The Academy* (London) . . . reviews" that followed "in [the] train" of its publication in *The Universal Review* "dashed Carman's spirit to the ground. *The Spectator*'s critic 'pulled it to pieces . . .,' charging the author with every crime in the literary decalogue [and] . . . in his review of it in . . . [*The*] *Academy* [William] Sharp admitted that there was a certain 'baleful obscurity' in the poem which the gifted young Canadian had not yet disciplined out of his work" (62).

11 "The first part is mournful merely, and pretends to offer no escape for emotion," Carman told Scudder. "Th[e] second part suggests satisfaction in the power of the spirit to mould itself with art, and the final return to nature—sleep, oblivion. It ends, however, . . . with some slight desire for more than this" (*Letters* 26).

12 The terminology of the passages quoted is as complex as it is awkward: "gold-mouthed" is a translation of "Chrysostom" and an "essoiner" is "one who offers an excuse for the absence of another" in court (*OED*). Carman's reference to "the High Court of Night" and his use of the term "*de servitio Regis*" in the lines surrounding "essoiner" provide the word with the legal context that it requires. Among Carman's many occupations after his return to Fredericton in the Summer of 1883 was a brief stint in the Fall of 1884 as an articling student in a law firm (see Roberts, *Collected Letters* 45).

13 These quotations are taken from trial sheets for the projected book in the Rufus Hathaway Collection at the University of New Brunswick.

14 See Westbrook 17-19 for a discussion of the relationship between the thrushes of Burroughs and Whitman based on the fact that the two men became friends in 1863 and "Whitman gave credit to Burroughs not only for the idea of using the thrush [in the elegy] but also for information about its habits and the quality of its song" (19).

15 In *The Rough Rider and Other Poems*, the final two lines of the poem read: "Our minister here, entrenched in doctrine, may know no doubt upon Easter Eve. / And when it comes to the crucial question, Doctor, you skeptic, you too believe!" (36) In a letter of January 30, 1917, Carman told Odell Shepherd that he considered "'On Ponus Ridge,' 'Resurgam,' and 'Easter Eve' in . . . *The Rough Rider* . . . the most definite presentations of what [he had] come to hold concerning the high (and dark) themes of man and nature and human fate. As poems, too, they are as good as any of the nature things, with the possible exception of some brief lyrics" (*Letters* 241-242). "How do you like the new ending of 'Easter Eve'?" he asked Rufus Hathaway on April 15, 1922; "I always disliked the old ending—too much in the familiar Vagabondia manner" (*Letters* 286).

16 Carman's letters of 1927-29 to Margaret Lawrence (1896-1973) provide a good window into his later ideas.

15

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