

"Thoughts Grow Keen and Clear": A Look at Lampman's Revisions

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I have argued elsewhere¹ that Lampman's disturbing ambivalence toward nature in his early verse (*Among the Millet*, 1888) encouraged him to adopt the Emersonian identification of man and nature in *Lyrics of Earth* (1895), but that, once perceiving the inadequacy and dishonesty of this philosophical position, he turned away from it in order to look directly at the frightening realities of nature and human nature in *Alcyone* (1899). This change in Lampman's visionary outlook can be traced in an examination of revisions he made on two important poems in his manuscript workbook and in printed text.

On 19 November 1892 Lampman published in the *Toronto Globe* a poem which is laden with Emersonian dicta and Thoreauvian sentiment:

Vision

Down a narrow alley blind,
Touch and vision, heart and mind,
Turned sharply inward, still we plod
Till the calmly smiling God
Leaves us and our spirits grow 5
More thin, more acrid, as we go,
Creeping by the sullen wall
We forego the power to see
The threads that bind us to the all,
God or the immensity, 10
Whereof on the eternal road
Man is but a passing mode.
Subtly conscious, all awake,
Let us clear our eyes and break
Through the cloudy chrysalis— 15
See the wonder as it is,

¹ "The Clearer Self": Lampman's Transcendental-Visionary Development" *Canadian Poetry* 8 (1981): 33-55.

Too blind are we, too little see
 Of the magic pageantry,
 Every minute, every hour,
 From the cloud-flake to the flower, 20
 Forever old, forever strange,
 Issuing in perpetual change
 From the rainbow gates of time.
 But he who through this common air
 Surely knows the great and fair, 25
 What is lovely, what sublime,
 Becomes in an increasing span
 One with earth and one with man.
 One, despite these mortal scars.
 With the planets and the stars; 30
 And nature from her holy place,
 Bending with unveiled face,
 Fills him in her divine employ
 With her own majestic joy.

[numbering mine]

A more thoroughly Transcendental poem would be hard to imagine. Like the Sage of Concord, Lampman uses the terms "all" and "immensity" as synonyms for God, and laments that earthlings see life through a glass darkly, never getting "beyond the range of sight." Like Emerson in "Ode to Beauty," Lampman here speaks of seeing "the wonder as it is," and his Transcendental unity of man with the universe in lines 28-29 and 31-34 parallels Emerson's in "Each and All" which, not unlike the experiences in Thoreau's *Walden*, culminates with the speaker's being

Full of light and of deity . . .
 Beauty through my senses stole;
 I yielded myself to the perfect whole.

In fact, on 22 April 1893 Lampman writes in the *Globe* that people outside New England "ought to" read Emerson's poems because "In Emerson there is the freedom, the vitality, the fertility, the inexhaustible permutation, the godlike optimism of nature herself." Lampman's manuscript workbooks for this period contain fragments and jottings from Transcendental philosophy, which pervades his own verse.² The poem "Vision" shows

² One of Lampman's manuscript workbooks from 1888-92 contains the following fragment:

Earth, heaven, and the mighty whole—
 I scan them and forget the strife;

Lampman settling into a philosophical framework that must have been appealing in its optimistic and ameliorative views of man, nature (or god), and the relation between the two.

Significantly, the poem reappears, at greater length, a few years later when Lampman was becoming impatient with the Emersonian vision. This time it is entitled "Winter-Store" and is much longer than the original "Vision." Lampman chose to end his volume *Lyrics of Earth* with this poem,³ which signals the end of his Transcendental phase and a shift to the more realistic, albeit painful, vision of the sordid actuality of *this* world. The first 34 lines of "Winter-Store" (with one minor modification)⁴ constitute the poem "Vision." Then the poet begins to wander in "some low meadow land" and to search "in crannied hollows" "by many a stream" for new impressions of nature. After this lengthy excursion, however, the poet turns his thoughts to "darker days," to "a vision sad and high" that begins to possess his attention and the poem. He sees the "labouring world," people in misery and affliction—realistic perceptions of the human world around him:

a vision sad and high
Of the labouring world down there,
Where the lights burn red and warm,
Pricks my soul with sudden stare,
Glowing through the veils of storm.

'Tis when I read the human soul
A darkness passes upon life.

Lampman adopts Emerson's ontology here and his belief that all's right with the world if only one can see past its transient particulars. In another notebook (1894-99) Lampman has jotted down some terms from Hindu religion and Vedantic mysticism, terms that Emerson would have been familiar with:

Mir-han-o-ya - final complete self
self consciousness

Manvantara - the great process
of expansion & concentration
- the day of Brahma

Pralaya - the period of concentration
the night of Brahma

³ In the introduction to his *Archibald Lampman, Lyrics of Earth* (Ottawa: 1978) D.M.R. Bentley explains how "The Sun Cup" accidentally came to be placed at the end of the volume. Whether because of "Lampman's own carelessness, or Thomson's editing, or merely a printer's error," the poem did not find its proper intended place—which was between "In May" and "Life and Nature." It was omitted. Lampman, wanting it included, allowed it to be placed at the end of the volume. Nevertheless, his intention was to end the volume with "Winter-Store."

⁴ "Winter-Store" puts these lines,

Subtly conscious, all awake,
Let us clear our eyes and break
Through the cloudy chrysalis,
See the wonder as it is,

first (they are 13-16 in "Vision"). The rest of the poem is identical to "Vision" as published in the *Globe* on 19 November 1892.

In the city yonder sleep
Those who smile and those who weep,
Those whose lips are set with care,
Those whose brows are smooth and fair;
Mourners whom the dawning light
Shall grapple with an old distress . . .⁵

The poem has come a long way from the "majestic joy" and "magic pageantry" of its first sections. It now begins to concentrate on the "evil thoughts" which are "shade by shade and line by line, / Refashioning what was once divine." This replacing of the vision of "all, / God or the immensity" with that of "old men with the mask of death" possesses the poet fully; it is, he says, "A something I cannot control, / A nameless hunger of the soul. It holds me fast." Against this his former vision of beauty and perfection is vain:

In vain, in vain,
I remember how of old
I saw the ruddy race of men,
Through the glittering world outrolled,
A gay-smiling multitude,
All immortal, all divine
Treading in a wreathed line
By a pathway through a wood.

Ending like this, in all its inconclusiveness, the poem embodies a movement away from Emersonian Transcendentalism, though it does reaffirm Lampman's belief in the dignity of man. On this note Lampman ends his affair with Transcendentalism, and the volume. His next (and final) volume would be quite different: he would concentrate upon "The City of the End of Things," the horrible vision of "Chione," the cruel martyrdom of "Vivia Perpetua." In March 1894 Lampman writes to his friend E.W. Thomson: "I suppose I am passing through some spiritual revolution—in fact I know I am, and some things have caused me unusual agonies."⁶ One of the agonies was probably that his imaginative vision was bursting the boundaries of Transcendentalism.

Indeed, Lampman's last mention of the vital "all" or Emersonian wholeness toward which he strives is made in "Peccavi, Domine," a poem to the "Power" or "Energy, serene and pure."

⁵ The text of "Winter-Store" is from Bentley's edition of *Lyrics of Earth* 88-63.

⁶ Lampman to E.W. Thomson, 5 March 1894. Cited in *Archibald Lampman's Letters to Edward William Thomson (1890-1898)*, ed. A.S. Bourinot (Montreal: 1956) 24.

The opening stanzas seem to hark back to Lampman's Transcendental phase, or even to Emerson himself:

O Power to whom this earthly clime
 Is but an atom in the whole,
 O Poet-heart of Space and Time,
 O Maker and immortal Soul
 Within whose glowing rings are bound,
 Out of whose sleepless heart had birth
 The cloudy blue, the starry round,
 And this small miracle of earth:
 Who liv'st in every living thing,
 And all things are thy script and chart,
 Who rid'st upon the eagle's wing,
 And yearnest in the human heart⁷

The poem is an Emersonian prayer, packed with proper Transcendental terminology, and seems strangely inconsistent with the temper and visionary stance of *Alcyone* as a whole.

A look at Lampman's manuscript workbooks, however, shows that this poem was written for probable inclusion in *Lyrics of Earth* of 1895 rather than *Alcyone* of 1899. The poem is dated 1894 in the workbook, and the later printed version in *Alcyone* is significantly revised. In the 1894 version the "Power" or "Energy serene" is hailed as "O Spirit of the grand and true,"⁸ whereas in 1899 it is "O Riddle with a single clue." The Oversoul or All, if it even exists, has become for Lampman unknowable and uncertain. In the published version he goes on to admit that the Emersonian Oversoul is *not* a reality as Emerson thought; rather, it is the stuff of dreams: a "Vision of the Ought-to-be/ O Memory of the Might-have-been"

Later in the poem, he refers to his "aching heart," "burning brow," "sorrow," and groaning helplessness, and he concludes with an admission of his total weakness in the scheme of things:

O Spirit, passionless, but kind
 Is there in all the world, I cry,
 Another one so base and blind,
 Another one so weak as I?
 O Power, unchangeable, but just,
 Impute this one good thing to me,
 I sink my spirit to the dust

⁷ Text is from *The Poems of Archibald Lampman*, ed., D.C. Scott (Toronto: 1900)

⁸ Lampman MS. Papers, MG29 D59 Vol. 6, Public Archives, Ottawa, Canada.

In utter dumb humility.

Emphasizing his baseness and hopelessness, this ending to the poem is the inverse of the Emersonian temperament of optimism and communion with the "perfect whole."

Moreover, in the earlier workbook version of 1894 there is another stanza after this one. It reads:

My soul is like a famished plot
Of barren shrub and [bunched] weed
Which I, with tears, have burned, God not,
And tilled it for thy sacred seed
[So] let thy fearful presence fall,
Now, Master, while the soil is bare;
O Spirit of the sleepless All
Enfold it in thy lucid air.⁹

Though this conclusion, like the other, emphasizes the speaker's spiritual desperation, it is a much more hopeful ending than that of the final version. Here the speaker has made ready his soul for the All: he is willing and receptive to the power that will fertilize his spirit. In the final version, however, there is no mention of his soul being "tilled" and made ready to be "enfolded"—there is no appeal for the "Power" to come to his aid in any way. He simply looks about in desperation for a soul as "base and blind" as his own and then sinks to the dust in "utter dumb humility."

These two different conclusions to a poem written in 1894 and revised for publication in 1897-98 show quite graphically the evolution of Lampman's metaphysical thinking. The early nineties was his Transcendental phase, and the 1894 "Peccavi, Domine" emphasizes the perfection of the "All," the baseness of himself, and the possible communion between the two. The final version emphasizes the perfection of the "All," the baseness of himself, and the unbridgeable gap or void between the two: the "All" has become a "Riddle;" there is little hope for revivifying communion between soul and "All," man and universe, at least not in the Transcendental sense. He now sinks in awe and insignificance in the face of the huge universe, rather than preparing the way of the lord. The Transcendental vision is no longer a comfort. Unlike Emerson, whose Transcendentalism narrowed his poetic vision and confined it to the shallows of evolutionary ameliorism and uncomplicated optimism, Lampman, by *examining* Transcendentalism and then revising his view of its validity,

⁹ Lampman MS. Papers. MG29 D89 Vol. 6, Public Archives, Ottawa, Canada.

widened and deepened his poetic vision: he began to see only too clearly—and could henceforth never avoid seeing clearly—the unsettling complexity of the world and himself.

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