

# Life "Only Sweet": the Significance of the Sequence in Lampman's *Lyrics of Earth*

by Eric Ball

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## Part 2

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### III

In his Introduction to his working text edition of the book, D.M.R. Bentley suggests that the sequence in *Lyrics of Earth* is multi-faceted and complex, having significance at once on many levels. He identifies a parallel between annual and diurnal time, one which explains "why, for instance, 'Sunset' and 'Winter-Store' are the last two poems in the sequence". In addition, he sees a "correspondence" between annual and diurnal time and the linear progress of life from birth to death. "As he moves through the day, through the seasons, and through life", Bentley suggests, "the speaker of *Lyrics of Earth* explores both his environment and himself, searching for many things: for relief from personal remorse and unhappiness ('In May,' 'With the Night'), for escape from the oppressive, hostile world of the city ('Life and Nature,' 'At the Ferry'), for intimations of Arcadia in the Canadian forest ('The Return of the Year,' 'June'), and for the means to transcend the inexorable passage of time ('The Poet's Possession,' 'Winter-Store')." Finally, Bentley points to a possible parallel between "the annual movement of the seasons" and "the perennial movement of history".<sup>1</sup>

It is certainly true that Lampman, though he confines himself to the lyrical mode and to nature as subject matter, presents in *Lyrics of Earth* a variety of poems in terms of the speaker's motivation and achievement as well as of poetic form. At the same time, there is a circumscribed quality about the poems, for whichever of the "many things" the speaker may be searching for, and whatever particular goals he may attain, almost invariably he discovers beauty in nature, and this gives rise to happiness, either joyful or melancholy, exuberant or restrained, depending on the "mood" of the season at the time of observation. Still, the multiplicity of experiences suggested by the poems would have been important to Lampman, as is implied by his statement, cited earlier, that for the lover of beauty in nature "life is full of variety". It seems doubtful, however, that Lampman had in mind the complex set of parallels between cycles and progressions of time described by Bentley. At any rate, the book itself is inconsistent in its support of such a view. It may be true, for example, that the juxtaposition of a poem descriptive of a sunset (end of the day) with one set in winter (end of the year) is potentially meaningful, but "Sunset" is, itself, a winter poem, and its placement is therefore consistent with a pattern of organization based solely on the movement of the seasons through the year. Moreover, there are two poems in *Lyrics of Earth* — "With the Night" and "The Moon-Path" — whose temporal setting is night. By having these poems appear in the sequence next to poems of spring and summer respectively, the poet effectively undermines any correspondence between night and winter which the example of "Sunset" and "Winter-Store" might seem to suggest. To take another example, an association undoubtedly existed for Lampman between spring and the mythical early days of human existence in Arcady, and this association is evident in such poems as "The Return of the Year", "Favorites of Pan", and "June" in *Lyrics of Earth*. Autumn, however, is not evoked by the poet with language descriptive of the later stages in the development of Western civilization, either in *Lyrics of Earth* or elsewhere. Accordingly, one hesitates to go along with the idea that the sequence in *Lyrics of Earth* implies a parallel between historical and seasonal time.<sup>2</sup>

An alternative view is that the significance of the sequence in *Lyrics of Earth* is simple rather than complex. In Part II of this essay an attempt was made to show that, from the time of its inception, the sequence was consistently a feature of *Lyrics of Earth* while its composition was subject to alterations over time. From this — and from the fact that Lampman constructed several different sequences on the same pattern, another example being the group of forty-seven nature sonnets intended for inclusion in "A Century of Sonnets" — it follows that the idea of the sequence is more crucial to its meaning than the interrelation of its various component parts.<sup>3</sup> It is appropriate, therefore, to consider what it may have meant to Lampman to construct "a collection of poems following the sequence of the seasons". As has already been observed, Lampman believed that beauty was pervasive in nature, despite the variety of nature's "moods" evident in such diverse poems as "Heat", "In November", "April", and "In October". In his words, "there is nothing fashioned by nature herself that is not beautiful, either in itself or in its relation to its surroundings." A corollary to this statement is that there exists in nature an infinite potential for dream consciousness, the state of mind in which a sense of immediacy or oneness — a merging of thought and sensory awareness achieved through identification with nature — is experienced by the observer. The argument of this essay is that these ideas are implicit in the sequence in *Lyrics of Earth* and serve as the underlying theme of the book. The quality of the speaker's encounters with the landscape throughout the collection lends support to this interpretation. Our discussion focuses on eight poems. Three of these — "The Sweetness of Life", "Forest Moods", and "The Sun Cup" (which is discussed last and in the context of its place in the sequence) express, indirectly, the theme of the book. Four — "After Rain", "By an Autumn Stream", "The Bird and the Hour", and "In November" — demonstrate the crucial point that beauty is ever-present in nature. "Winter-Store," finally, is examined because of its exceptional quality in the sequence.

It is appropriate that we "begin at the beginning" with a consideration of "The Sweetness of Life" (*LE*, pp. 24-25) for two main reasons. Most obviously, it functions as an introduction to the sequence. Thomson's recommendation that it be placed first, it will be recalled, was heartily endorsed by Lampman. One reason for Lampman's enthusiasm, we may conjecture, was that the theme of the poem as made evident in its title — a kind of nominal reiteration of the closing statement of "The Frogs": "life is only sweet" — stood as well as the theme of the entire collection. In addition, "The Sweetness of Life" differs from most of the poems in *Lyrics of Earth* in that it deals with nature in the abstract rather than with a particular scene or set of objects within nature. This is so even though its temporal setting, a summer's day, remains fixed, as is consistent with its original role as only one component of a sequence tracing the progress of the seasons. In the statement "I stretched my hands to the meadow, / To the bird, the beast, the tree" (ll. 5-6), for example, the speaker would appear to be gesturing to nature as a whole rather than to specific aspects of his actual surroundings. The broader application of this poem allows for a general statement about contact with nature to be made, one which illuminates the meaning of the more narrowly focused poems.

In "The Sweetness of Life", as in "The Old House", consciousness of the brevity of life and the inevitability of death is seen as having no compromising effect on the happiness of the person able fully to enter into the experience of life in the present. In this instance, however, the point is made over the course of a fanciful dialogue between the speaker and nature, presented in language of Blakean simplicity. Attributing emotion as well as intelligence to the various manifestations of nature he sees around him (and imagines), the speaker asks, "Why are ye all so happy?" (l. 7). Nature's response, delivered in one of two similarly phrased passages, is as follows:

"We are born, we are reared, and we linger  
A various space and die;  
We dream, and are bright and happy,  
But we cannot answer why."

(ll. 17-20)

Despite being aware of their own mortality, the speakers here — an anthropomorphized meadow and trellis display of roses — remain untroubled and aloof. In like fashion, the speaker's realization that the conditions of life are the same for him leaves his dream unimpeded and his happiness intact.

This is made clear in the closing stanza of the poem. Having received nature's enigmatic reply, the speaker directs his question to himself, conceived as "a ghost" which "the while / Stood from me" (ll. 34-35). The answer provided by the speaker's "self", spoken with a "slow and curious smile" (l. 25), is essentially the same as nature's:

"Thou art born as the flowers, and wilt linger  
Thine own short space and die;  
Thou dream'st and art strangely happy,  
But thou canst not answer why."

(ll. 37-40)

The language and thought here, as Early has pointed out, echo those of Psalm 103: "As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more" (verses 15-16).<sup>4</sup>

Through the similarity of the responses provided by nature and the speaker's "self", a correspondence is established between human life and life in nature. Despite the existence of this association, however, Early, in his analysis of the poem, characterizes the speaker of these lines — the speaker's ghost-like "self" — as "a subversive figure in [Lampman's] realm of dreams", one whose revelations disturb the poet's reverie with "self-consciousness" and "awareness of mortality". In the same vein Early detects in the poem's opening line — "It fell on a day I was happy" — and elsewhere a "melancholy undertone" associated with the speaker's recognition of "an inexplicable randomness in human life"; in the use of the verb "to seem" — "The flowers and the beasts in the meadow / Seemed happy even as I" — "an uncertain note"; and in "gleam", used to describe the quality of the light at noon, connotations of "inconstancy, brevity, and illusion".<sup>5</sup> One could perhaps take issue with each of these points. It is only reasonable, for example, to describe nature as seeming rather than being "happy". Apart from quibbles, however, one must ask, is the tone of this poem one of compromised or uncertain happiness? And if not — for the speaker does not "seem" happy but is so — then what interpretation can be given to the persistent references to the brevity of life, and to death?

Rather than subverting the evident intention of the poem, these references can be seen as supporting it by showing how dream consciousness, giving rise to the feeling of happiness, is impervious to the destructive influence of thought. In "The Lesson of the Trees", the trees themselves "stand . . . straight and free" because they "know" that all life, experienced only for what it is in the present, is "gain". Likewise, in "The Old House", "The Frogs", and "The Sweetness of Life", those who dream are happy because, appreciative of beauty in the present, they are undisturbed by the abstract notion of transience: they "care no jot for death". Since all life exists in the present, by responding to the present an individual becomes one with all life and, as one might say, temporarily immortal. Such a person sees death, however "real", as distant and unthreatening, and experiences a joy which is the opposite of the despair to which some people, preoccupied with their own mortality, might be prone.

It is not just because the shadow of death is obscured by the bright light of present happiness, however, that the mutable quality of all life can be blithely acknowledged in the poem. A second point is that the happiness of which the poem is a celebration is, and must be, a function of life, time-bound and mortal. Here we encounter a kind of earth-contained metaphysics at the heart of Lampman's world view and fundamental to the meaning of the sequence in *Lyrics of Earth*. It is an outlook which, though "pagan", has also its modern context. One is reminded, for example, of Wallace Stevens' meditation on spiritual meaning in

a perishable world, "Sunday Morning".<sup>6</sup> The statement

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,  
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams  
And our desires . . .

(ll. 63-65)

goes a long way to capturing in plain language the thought implicit in the response of the speaker's "self" in "The Sweetness of Life". It is interesting to note that the early Stevens, like Lampman, admired and borrowed from Keats and, secondly, that both New World poets departed from their Romantic predecessor's ideological outlook on the same ground. The narrator of "Sunday Morning" asks rhetorically,

Is there no change of death in paradise?  
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs  
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,  
Unchanged . . . ?

(ll. 76-79)

Lampman in "The Frogs" may have — for the frogs themselves, not the listeners — "the sun / But ever sunken half-way toward the west" (ll. 7-8), but even in this poem the focus is fixed on temporal change. The point is not that time stands still but that it is composed (for the dreamer) of a series of endless moments, endless in the sense of being at one with the on-going present. And certainly the typical Lampman landscape, strewn with ruined roses, dead leaves, rotting stumps, and the like, makes clear that for him, as for Stevens, beauty is to be found in the real world, not the world of the imagination or of art. Lampman may depict on one level, often metaphorical, a tragic view of life in nature besieged, for example, by the cruel armies of winter. Ironically, however, what he captures in such depictions is the beauty of the season described. Life, he implies, can be hard, but life is good and, for the true happiness of human beings, sufficient.<sup>7</sup>

A final point about "The Sweetness of Life" has to do with the relation between thought and feeling in the poem. About the reason for their happiness, nature's representatives declare, "we cannot answer why", and the speaker's "self" echoes this statement, informing the speaker at the end of the poem, "thou canst not answer why". What the speaker discovers through this revelation, which likens his experience to the imagined experience of nature, is that his happiness is unrelated to the world of "thought". To think (exercise the mind at the level of mundane consciousness) would be to contemplate time and mortality, with negative results, whereas to enter fully into an awareness of the present — "[n]or think but only dream" — is to render these aspects of "reality" benign.<sup>8</sup> (The speaker's "thoughts" which "grow keen and clear" in "Heat" must be seen, in this context, as belonging to a different level of consciousness.) The reason for the smile attributed to the speaker's "self", then, is that he is glad not to know. He realizes that simply to live, conscious of the moment, is to be happy, whereas to follow the "pathways of unbound thought", as in "Among the Timothy" (l. 34), is to pass happiness by. He has come to appreciate, in other words, the nature of dream.

To reiterate the main conclusion of this analysis of "The Sweetness of Life", an equation is drawn in the poem between what it means to live and to be happy. All of life, accordingly, is conducive to the attainment of dream consciousness, making life, indeed, for the dreamer, "only sweet". This point is emphasized by the juxtaposition of the statement describing the entirety of life from birth until death (ll. 37-38) with that in which the happiness of the dreamer is confirmed (l. 39). In *Lyrics of Earth* the entirety of life is represented by the four seasons. By placing "The Sweetness of Life" at the beginning of the sequence, Lampman implies that the poems which follow will demonstrate in terms of evocations of nature throughout the year the validity of the claim put forward in that poem: that there exists in nature an endless potential for dream, giving rise to happiness. That nature is

seen to be beautiful in all its aspects, whether mild or harsh, in the various poems of the sequence confirms this view.

In "Forest Moods" (*LE*, p. 27), the second of the poems with a general application, the point that nature is entirely beautiful is once again made, though not in terms of the seasons or of time. This poem, it will be recalled, was one of three written in 1893 and therefore not included in the original compilation of the sequence. Possibly it was inserted later because of its particular relevance to the meaning of the book as a whole. A brief discussion will suffice to show how the larger theme is reflected in this poem. The speaker, already present in the woods and observant, takes note of the variety of birds and flowers within the reach of his perception. The "moods" with which he associates his subjects vary, but his response remains consistently affirmative. The songs of some birds strike him as nostalgic (ll. 5-6), while those of others seem to express a gleeful contentment with "the present and here" (ll. 7-8). To the speaker, however, "all the notes of their throats are true" (l. 4). Likewise, the speaker's love for all things in nature is evident in his description of the flowers. Although "the pale wood-daffodil covers her face, / Agloom with the doom of a sorrowful race" (ll. 15-16), the speaker is able to say of the flowers in general that "every leaf of their sheaf is fair" (l. 12). The effect of suggesting that both the truth and the beauty of nature are constant despite the variety of "moods" which are manifest in nature is to affirm that nature is the embodiment of perfection. As it is the variety of nature's "moods" to which the seasons, like the flowers and birds of "Forest Moods", give expression, it makes sense that the purpose of the sequence in *Lyrics of Earth* is to embody the same belief.

We turn now to "After Rain" and "By an Autumn Stream", poems which, though very different in terms of mood, are alike in other respects. As was the case with "Heat" and "In November" and again with "April" and "In October", a comparison of these poems will demonstrate the consistency with which Lampman recognizes beauty in nature, however various its quality, and the similarity of his responses to beauty in nature throughout the year. In developing this comparison, we will focus on the relation between the quality of a particular inspiration and the crafting of the poem which is meant to capture that inspiration.

Particularly evident in both "After Rain" and "By an Autumn Stream" is Lampman's practice of using language and poetic technique to evoke as precisely as possible the actual impression created by the scenes described. Lampman himself describes this practice in his discussion of the primary goal of poetry in "Poetic Interpretation". Elaborating on the previously quoted statement about the variety of equally beautiful impressions produced by "a May day sunrise", "an October sunset", "a full-blown rose", and "a bunch of sedge", he states,

The poet's reproduction of any impression must be effected not by a vivid picture only, or by a merely accurate description, but also by such a subtle arrangement of word and phrase, such a marshalling of verbal sound, as may exactly arouse, through the listening ear, the strange stirring of the soul, involved in every beautiful emotion, which we feel to be akin to the effect of music. If the poet should undertake to reproduce the impression of the summer sunrise, the October sunset, the rose, and the bunch of sedge, not only must the pictures be different, but the tones must be different too. <sup>9</sup>

To recreate precisely a given impression from nature (all four examples cited are from nature), Lampman goes on to suggest, would be to achieve perfection in poetry, the "perfect poet" being one who could weave into each of the "pictures of life" he chose to focus on "its own peculiar harmony so perfectly that we should have no doubt whatever as to its degree of truth, but we should know it instantly for what it is" <sup>10</sup> In "After Rain" and "By an Autumn Stream" Lampman comes close to achieving this goal. The subject matter of the one contrasts sharply with that of the other, as is reflected in his responses. By effectively reproducing impressions which are different but equally evocative of a "peculiar harmony", however,

Lampman demonstrates that, while change characterizes nature, the diminution of beauty — and the dream it inspires — does not.

In "After Rain" (*LE*, pp. 40-41), the speaker describes, first, the appearance and sound of a rainfall which lasts for three days, and second, the change in the landscape brought about by the passing of the storm. At both stages, as he recalls, he was attuned to the beauty of nature as it presented itself at the time. Having watched the "columns" of rain (l. 4) as they moved in "sullen packs" (l. 2) across the sky, and listened to the rain "drumming on the roof" at night "till ear and sense were full" (ll. 11-12), he observes the change when, on the fourth day, "The darkness and the rain were by" (l. 16) and "all the world was flecked and strewn / With shadows from a fleecy sky" (ll. 18-19). In each of the passages quoted, the imagery effectively conveys an impression of the object or phenomenon described. The designation of the "columns" of rain as "sullen packs", for example, aptly suggests both the gloomy grayness and the closely-knit appearance of the vertical waves of rain created by the wind, as unlikely as the implied comparison with wolves might be. (The contrast between wolves and sheep suggested by "packs" and "fleecy" captures the transformation from stormy to clear with particular felicity.) Similarly, the verb "drumming" used to describe the raindrops hitting the roof successfully evokes an impression of the heavy rainfall familiar to the residents of central Canada.

The speaker's response to the clearing of the weather is recounted in stanza four:

Then, too, on me that loved so well  
The world, despairing in her blight,  
Uplifted with her least delight,  
On me, as on the earth, there fell  
New happiness of mirth and might;  
    I strode the valleys pied and still;  
    I climbed upon the breezy hill.

(ll. 22-28)

As if he himself had been nourished by the rain, the speaker feels a surge of energy and vitality to which he gives expression by striding the valleys and climbing the hills. The figurative reference to the world's "blight" and "delight", it should be observed, applies to the mood of nature and not to its essential beauty. The speaker's mood shifts not because his attitude to nature changes but, on the contrary, because he consistently identifies with the beauty of nature as he finds it. Accordingly, a light and spirited mood is preserved through to the last stanza of the poem, at which point, having mentioned the songs of various birds, he declares, "And as I went I sang with them" (l. 42), affirming once again his oneness with the world of nature.

In terms of form, Lampman uses poetic devices which help to suggest the active quality of both the rainstorm and its aftermath. The dynamism of the storm, first of all, is evident in the descriptions of the clouds of rain that "loomed and broke" as they travelled "across the sky" with "flying fringes" (ll. 1-3); the "great drops" of water that "rattled" at the windows (l. 7); and the previously mentioned "drumming" of the rain on the roof, augmented and diminished "with rush and lull" (ll. 10-11). In the stanzas dealing with the passing of the storm, the roofs of the houses are "steaming dry" (l. 17), "haymakers" are busy at work (l. 20), and a "gray hawk" is seen to "wheel and drop" (l. 29) while other birds sing (ll. 39-41). Indeed, even the "river's length", described as "unfurled" (l. 33), is invested with a kind of dynamism. Literally, what is meant is that the expanse of the river, previously obscured by the rain, has once again become visible. The verbal "unfurled", however, suggests movement, thus helping to generalize the sense of action in the poem. The ringing *abbabcc* rhyme scheme, the regular line lengths, and the "marching" iambic meter of the verse (altered only occasionally, as in "and soft heat" [l. 36], for poetic effect) all serve to reinforce the dynamic quality of "After Rain".

In "By an Autumn Stream" (*LE*, p. 54), the focus is much more intimate, the atmosphere

quieter. Here the poet describes in the present tense only the sights and sounds which he detects from his vantage point beside a slow-moving stream. "Flickering light", he observes, "Come the last of the leaves down borne" (ll. 13-14). The time of year is late fall, as is consistent with the position of the poem in the sequence between "In November" and "Snow". Sensitive to the absence of summer's vitality, its vigour and sap, in nature, he continues: "And patches of pale white corn / In the wind complain" (ll. 15-16). In a similar vein, he notes how

Withered and thinned,  
The sentinel mullein looms,  
With the pale gray shadowy plumes  
Of the goldenrod. . . .

(ll. 19-20)

Not all of the poem's images are as dolorous as these. Mentioned as well, for example, are the "snowbirds" likened to "fringes of spray"

That vanish and gleam on the gray  
Field of the sea.

(ll. 10-12)

Primarily, however, the mood of the poem, reflecting nature's mood, is one of sadness. Even the sunlight which appears for a moment at the speaker's feet is described as "a sad, silvery sheet, / Utterly still" (ll. 29-30). Nevertheless, the speaker's response is not to turn away from the scene in quest of more cheerful surroundings but, again, to identify with nature as he finds it. It is for this reason he dwells with tenderness, even with yearning, on the landscape confronting him, seeking to capture in words the essence of its beauty, regardless of whether this will render him doleful or gay.

In the closing stanza of "By an Autumn Stream" the speaker describes his identification with nature as follows:

All things that be  
Seem plunged into silence, distraught,  
By some stern, some necessitous thought:  
It wraps and enthralls  
Marsh, meadow, and forest; and falls  
Also on me.

(ll. 31-36)

Here, as in "After Rain", the poet proclaims his oneness with nature by indicating that he is subject to the same influences as nature is. The similarity between the experiences described in the two poems is further emphasized by Lampman's use of the same terms — the words "and falls/ Also on me" recall "On me, as on the earth, there fell" — to express the same idea in the two full stanzas quoted. Because of the difference in nature's mood, however, the effect of the scene on the observer in "By an Autumn Stream" bears little resemblance to that of the storm and its passing in "After Rain", as is evident in Lampman's handling of form. The variations in the durations of the verse lines (lines one, four, and six in each stanza have two stressed syllables while the remaining lines have three) and in meter (the pattern is anapestic, but there are almost as many exceptions to the rule as there are examples of it) create a halting rhythm appropriate to the sad and contemplative tone of the poem. Particularly effective in terms of metrical variation is the stress pattern of the second-to-last line of the passage just quoted. According to normal patterns of speech, "Marsh" should receive stress. The pattern established in the poem, however, suggests that the line should be scanned as follows:

The clash between the two patterns, natural and set, serves to retard the progress of the verse and thus reinforce the impression of a brooding stillness which the words themselves convey. This impression is further strengthened by the *abbcca* rhyme scheme, the separation of the *a* rhymes serving to emphasize the silence of the day into which a sound intrudes only now and then. What these examples of Lampman's handling of poetic technique indicate is that in "By an Autumn Stream", as in "After Rain", form has been determined by what is observed rather than by the fact that the speaker identifies with nature. At the same time, the two poems are thematically similar, the speaker's positive response to beauty in nature and his own involvement with the scenes described being common to both.

In "After Rain" and "By an Autumn Stream", by means of "subtle arrangement of word and phrase" and "a marshalling of verbal sound", Lampman has succeeded in capturing the moods of two very different scenes in nature. Moreover, he has shown that both scenes reflect the beauty of nature which, though various in terms of mood, may be found to exist in all manifestations of nature. Finally, he has made clear that his identification with nature is not dependent on balmy weather or the presence of the picturesque, for, just as nature is entirely beautiful, so dream consciousness can always be achieved by those who are receptive to beauty in nature. The attitude to nature evident in these poems is evident, as well, in "The Bird and the Hour" and "In November". In looking at these poems, our purpose will not be to make comparisons. By observing how different kinds of beauty in nature are variously interpreted by the speaker and, at the same time, how his response is consistently affirmative, however, we hope to give further support to our main argument, namely, that the sequence in *Lyrics of Earth* depicts the shifting moods of nature within the compass of a unified, positive vision.

In "The Bird and the Hour" (*LE*, p. 40), originally called "The Hermit Thrush", the speaker associates the song of a thrush with the beauty of a sunset, the effect of the song being to heighten his awareness of the moment and thus to allow him a brief apprehension of perfect beauty. In the first six lines of the poem, he confines himself to a depiction of the scene before his eyes. The dazzling effect of the sunlight is suggested by the description of the valley as flooded with a "torrent of gold" (l. 3) and a cloud as "glowing molten and bright" (l. 6). No sooner has he noted the effect of the light on the landscape and the sky, however, than he begins to anticipate the coming darkness:

And soon the hill, and the valley and all,  
                     With a quiet fall,  
 Shall be gathered into the night.

(II. 7-

9)

The effect of this observation is not just to emphasize the ephemeral nature of the experience but also to show how the mind, by jumping ahead, tends to undermine even the momentary pleasure of watching the sun go down. It is at this point that the song of the "hermit" is heard:

And yet a moment more,  
                     Out of the silent wood,  
 As if from the closing door  
 Of another world and another lovelier mood,  
 Hear'st thou the hermit pour—  
                     So sweet! so magical!—  
 His golden music, ghostly beautiful.

(II. 10-16)



As the phrase "And yet a moment more" implies, the speaker sees himself as having been granted a kind of brief mental reprieve. Inspired by the song of the bird, he returns to a contemplation of the moment and experiences a kind of epiphany. The effect of the adjective "golden", used here to describe the song of the thrush, is to recall the appearance of the sunset. Thus the two subjects, "the bird" and "the hour", are merged, creating a unified impression of the experience, both visual and auditory.

In another poem included in *Lyrics of Earth*, "Cloud-Break" (*LE*, pp. 41-42), an experience similar to the one related in "The Bird and the Hour" is described. In the closing stanza of this poem, noting the brevity of the experience, the speaker comments,

Only a moment! — and then  
The chill and the shadow decline,  
On the eyes of rejuvenate men  
That were wide and divine.

(11. 21-24)

This passage, it is worth noting, appears in Lampman's final notebook (the one in which Scott discovered Lampman's last poem, "Winter Uplands") independently of the rest of the poem.<sup>11</sup> Possibly, then, it held meaning for the poet on its own. The idea conveyed in the passage is that, through momentary insights, human beings are able to participate in the timelessness or the eternal present of nature and hence to experience oneness with the divine, identified with nature. Although the focus of these lines is on the fleeting quality of this experience, the passage nevertheless captures succinctly the paradox according to which the ephemeral and the eternal come to be one. At the same time, it does not convey a sense of the actual experience of involvement with landscape. In contrast, Lampman's achievement in "The Bird and the Hour" stems from his success in putting across the same idea exclusively in terms of the beauty of the phenomena described, allowing language and tone to imply rather than state what is meant.

It is of interest to note that Lampman had a particular fondness for "The Bird and the Hour", one which reflected his increasing preference for his shorter lyrics over his longer descriptive poems. This fondness is evident in his responses to the acceptance of "Comfort of the Fields", typical of the descriptive mode, by *Scribner's Magazine*, and to the rejection of "The Bird and the Hour" (referred to as "The Hermit Thrush") by the *Youth's Companion*, the magazine for which Thomson was serving as editor at the time. Writing to Thomson on October 28, 1891, Lampman states,

I have recently sold quite a decent sized poem to Scribners, and I expect to receive something respectable for it. This will please you I think. I do not know if you remember it. It is called "Comfort of the Fields." & is written out in six or seven long heavy stanzas. I do not know what they took it for. They have refused and sent me back many a better piece of work.<sup>12</sup>

The tone of self-deprecation in this passage contrasts sharply with the way in which Lampman responds to the rejection of "The Hermit Thrush" by the *Youth's Companion*. As he relates to Thomson in a letter dated October 21, 1893,

I sent that Hermit Thrush poem with the other one beginning "There is singing of birds in the deep wet woods" ["Forest Moods"] to the Y.C. some time ago, but they were rejected, as have been some others since, which it seems to me they ought to have taken. I do not see why these pieces should not suit them.<sup>13</sup>

In a postscript to a subsequent letter dated November 6, 1893 Lampman adds, "Your Y.C. readers have gone below zero in my estimation since they rejected the 'Hermit Thrush', which was one of the best things I have ever offered to any publication. They must be a set of

block heads." <sup>14</sup> It was probably soon after this — in time for Christmas 1893 — that Lampman had the poem published privately for distribution amongst his friends "with the compliments of the season". <sup>15</sup>

Of all the poems in *Lyrics of Earth* which deal with the experience of involvement with landscape, perhaps the most revealing of the ways in which Lampman's response to nature is tied to particulars is the highly regarded "In November" (*LE*, pp. 52-53), one of the poet's most frequently anthologized productions. In this poem, the lyrical qualities evident in "The Bird and the Hour" are successfully merged with original and evocative descriptive writing, with the result that Lampman's primary strengths are united in a single piece. Effectively incorporated into the narrative structure of the poem, moreover, are the poet's efforts to discover the meaning of the experience described. It is this quality that has led more than one commentator to view "In November" as Lampman's finest poem. <sup>16</sup>

Following the pattern established in "Among the Timothy", the speaker begins by giving an account of his discovery of the scene of his meditation:

I wandered in the woods, and found  
A clearing, where the broken ground  
Was scattered with black stumps and briars,  
And the old wreck of forest fires.

(II. 3-6)

While this "clearing" may have little in common with the "circle clean and gray" of the earlier poem, the speaker's purpose in pausing to observe it is the same, that is, to contemplate the unique beauty of a particular scene in nature.

It is at this point that the speaker takes notice of the "scores of mulleins long since dead" (l. 10) which "inhabited" (l. 9) the clearing. In an extended metaphor not dissimilar to that of the "giant" in "Morning on the Li 鑽res", he goes on to compare these plants to the human participants in what might be described as a spontaneous myth of his own creation. The passage in which this comparison is developed reads as follows:

A silent and forsaken brood  
In that mute opening of the wood,  
So shrivelled and so thin they were,  
So gray, so haggard, and austere,  
Not plants at all they seemed to me,  
But rather some spare company  
Of hermit folk, who long ago,  
Wandering in bodies to and fro,  
Had chanced upon this lonely way,  
And rested thus, till death one day  
Surprised them at their compline prayer,  
And left them standing lifeless there.

(II.

11-20)

According to one school of thought, the effect of the morbid imagery of this passage is to compromise Lampman's positive view of nature and to mark the limitations, so to speak, of the poet's involvement with nature. Kathy Mezei, for example, speaking in general about the negative in Lampman's interpretation of nature, has commented that "[h]orror is augmented by associating the anatomy of the landscape with a ravaged human form as in . . . Lampman's 'In November' where the mulleins are 'so shrivelled and thin'". <sup>17</sup> Early goes further, proposing that "these mullein-hermits represent Romantic nature poets whose reclusive worship estranges them from one another and is ironically confuted by death". <sup>18</sup> This interpretation is consistent with Early's view that "In November", while not "a wholesale repudiation by

Lampman of his visionary nature poetry", is fraught with sinister associations, striking "a contrary note" and reinforcing a "counter point of doubt" in *Lyrics of Earth*. To him, "the steady verse-rhythms [of 'In November'] provide a ritual charm against the menacing elements in the landscape."<sup>19</sup>

What is lost sight of in these interpretations is the distinction between the metaphorical and the literal and, specifically, the role of metaphor in helping to capture experience precisely. In the passage under consideration it is clearly the physical appearance of the mulleins — how they look themselves and in the context of the overall atmosphere described — that gives rise to the comparison, as is made clear by the use of the word "so" at the beginnings of lines thirteen and fourteen (in combination with an understood "that" at the beginning of line fifteen) to suggest cause and effect. One is not meant, in reading this passage, to forget about the actual mulleins while dwelling on the unfortunate fates of the hermit folk, but to see the dead plants more clearly through, as it were, the language of the comparison. There is even a kind of linguistic link connecting the literal and figurative meanings which serves to reinforce the association and thus to keep the scene itself in focus. The words "shrivelled" and "thin" in the context of the description, while they could refer to people, apply more readily to the mulleins; the word "gray", on the other hand, connotes the human process of ageing as much as the colour of the plants, while "haggard" and "austere" have even stronger human associations. The lack of a sudden break keeps the two levels of meaning tied together. The reader experiences close observation, a bringing of the mulleins themselves sharply into focus.

The principal mood to which the contemplation of the scene gives rise in the speaker is not one of "horror" but of solemn sadness, reinforced by the cumulative effect of such words as "austere", "lonely", "sombre", "sober", and "melancholy" scattered throughout the poem. Sadness, it could be argued, is a negative emotion, the opposite of happiness. One takes from its use, however, not any kind of repudiation of nature but rather a close appreciation of the sad beauty of nature as manifest in a woodland clearing on a cloudy November day. It is this appreciation that the metaphor of the mulleins enhances.

The second stanza describes in the simplest possible terms the only event (excluding the speaker's arrival at the "clearing") that takes place in the poem:

And as I stood, quite suddenly,  
Down from a furrow in the sky  
The sun shone out a little space  
Across that silent sober place . . . .

(ll. 29-32)

Early sees this passage as initiating "the epiphany of the poem". (He acknowledges a "transformation of landscape" but finds it "curiously qualified", leading to separation from rather than involvement with the scene.)<sup>20</sup> Certainly the speaker's meditation is affected, perhaps deepened, by the sun's appearance. At the same time, it must not be forgotten that the earlier passage in which the speaker describes himself as standing

Among the mullein-stalks as still  
As if myself had grown to be  
One of their sombre company,  
A body without wish or will . . . .

(ll. 25-28)

conveys subtly, through the language of the metaphor, a sense of the speaker's already-established involvement with the scene. The focus here, it should be stressed, is on the poet's stillness: he resembles the mulleins (and, by implication, the hermits) in that he is standing motionless and absorbed. The phrase "[a] body without wish or will", however, is suggestive. The point is not that the speaker imagines himself, like the mulleins, dead, but

that through his meditation he has entered into a state of oneness with the object perceived.

The function of the third and final stanza is to describe the change in the prevailing mood of nature brought about by the sunburst and then to explain its effect on the speaker. Having referred to the sunlight as "thin", "sere", and "melancholy bright" (ll. 39-40)—words which suggest a muted or subdued quality of light characteristic of the time of year and type of day depicted—the speaker goes on to say that it

Fell like the half-reflected gleam  
Or shadow of some former dream . . . .

(ll. 41-42)

The language here is deliberately tentative and obscure. Surely the point is not, however, as Early would have it, that "[t]his nebulous transfiguration is only a dim likeness of 'some former dream'—the triumphant vision of 'Among the Timothy,' for example", as if the profundity and positive value of a meditation were dependent on the relative brightness of the sun.<sup>21</sup> What seems more likely is that the simile serves to convey an accurate impression of the present scene and to come closer to defining the particular mood which the combination of the starkness of the clearing and the pale sunlight creates.

The effect of the sunlight on the landscape is further described as follows:

A moment's golden revery  
Poured out on every plant and tree  
A semblance of weird joy, or less,  
A sort of spectral happiness. . . .

(ll. 43-46)

Here too the language is tentative as Lampman incorporates into the poem his efforts to find the right words. The reassessment implied by the phrase "or less" recalls stanza one of "Heat" where the speaker describes the position of the hay-cart climbing the hill as "Upward half-way, or it may be / Nearer the summit" (ll. 5-6). One imagines the speaker of "Heat" squinting in the sunlight in an effort to see more clearly, and the effect is for the reader to fine-tune his own imaginative perception of the scene. Similarly the reader is encouraged by the reassessment of nature's mood in "In November" to try, with the speaker, to reach a clearer understanding of the phenomenon described. Ironically, it is the uncertainty of the language, embodying the process of striving for accuracy, that brings the objects of concern into focus for the reader.<sup>22</sup> The tentative tone also serves to emphasize the uniqueness of the scene and of the speaker's response to it by suggesting a sense of discovery.

A further irony may be found in the speaker's use of the word "less" in the passage under consideration. There is no obvious reason why "spectral happiness" should be something "less" than "weird joy". If we accept the speaker's authority about his own experience, however, we will allow that the second of the two conditions referred to is in some way not as large or, perhaps, insistent, as the first. And by following this process of striving for exactitude (at the expense of magnitude), we understand the importance of coming to terms with the precise truth of the case. The irony is that, despite the sense of something diminished (softer, more minor key) implied by "less", the preferred "spectral happiness" of line forty-six seems clearer, better, and of greater significance precisely because it corresponds more closely to what the speaker implies is correct.

In the closing lines of the poem the speaker tells of his own reaction to the sunburst:

And I, too, standing idly there,  
With muffled hands in the chill air,  
Felt the warm glow about my feet,  
And shuddering betwixt cold and heat,

Drew my thoughts closer, like a cloak,  
While something in my blood awoke,  
A nameless and unnatural cheer,  
A pleasure secret and austere.

(ll. 47-54)

A key word here is "too", implying as it does that the speaker sees himself as experiencing in human terms the phenomenon he observes. As always, it is nature which has inspired the particular quality of the speaker's mood and not the speaker who has imposed on nature his own inner feelings. In response to the chill of the atmosphere — ironically accentuated by the "warm glow" of the sun — the speaker recalls having drawn his "thoughts closer, like a cloak" to protect himself and, simultaneously, facilitate his involvement with the scene. As W.J. Keith has pointed out, this image recalls the passage in the sonnet "In November" where the speaker is likewise protected: "Wrapped round with thought, content to watch and dream".<sup>23</sup> The parallel draws attention to the similarity of Lampman's responses to nature at the same time of year. On the other hand, these poems are clearly distinct, each based on an actual and unique encounter with nature, and individual images, overall mood, and language serve to reinforce the difference. Cold weather may always require a coat, metaphorical or real, but because the thought-wrapped speaker of Lampman's "In November" poems is sensitive to particulars and a close observer, each depiction has a quality entirely its own.

Of the twenty-nine poems included in *Lyrics of Earth*, perhaps the most perplexing in terms of its relevance to the sequence is "Winter-Store" (*LE*, pp. 58-63). The poem consists of three sections: stanzas one to three (ll. 1-34), philosophical in tone; stanzas four to eleven (ll. 35-192), descriptive of the "store" of summer memories the speaker anticipates recalling indoors during the winter; and stanzas twelve and thirteen (ll. 193-236), telling in the present tense of the speaker's nocturnal vision of "the laboring world" of human beings, all those who, asleep in their beds, do not heed — as in a poem which this passage anticipates — his craft or art. The consistent trochaic tetrameter and loose pattern of twin rhymes (*aabb*, *abab*, *abba*) unify the poem formally. Because of the differences in tone, argument, and point of view, however, the three parts do not marry well. As Barrie Davies has observed, "Winter-Store" is marred by Lampman's having tried to do with it too many things at once.<sup>24</sup> In relation to the rest of the sequence, the first section is out-of-place because it is neither essentially lyrical nor descriptive but exhortative, and the last is inconsistent because of its human focus as well as its argument — that the speaker's recollections of summer's pleasures have lost place to his present preoccupation with the human condition. The long middle section fits in well enough if Lampman may be understood as meaning by including it that Wordsworth-like recollections of a summer past are part of the dreamer's experience of winter. The inclusion of three other winter poems (and, in "Afoot with the Year", six others, three to either side of "Winter-Store"), all of which are descriptive of nature itself during the winter months, serves to offset the suggestion that winter does not have a beauty of its own to be admired.

The internal and contextual inconsistencies can partly be explained by what Early has called the "piecemeal composition" of "Winter-Store".<sup>25</sup> The three stanzas of the first section were published by Lampman (with some of the lines in a different order) in the "Mermaid Inn" for November 19, 1892 under the title "Vision".<sup>26</sup> This poem, conveying the message of and using the first person plural of such poetic statements about human contact with nature as "Sight" and "On the Companionship with Nature" but employing the science-related imagery of "Alcyone", constitutes an important statement about Lampman's world view in the early 1890s. That Lampman thought it was of some importance is indicated by the fact that it is the only poem he published in the "Mermaid Inn" column, excluding those used to illustrate an argument (four) and those reprinted from other publications (two). The composition of at least the first two stanzas of "Vision" appears to have been coincident with but independent of the writing of the memory section of "Winter-Store". Three pages into an early rough version of "Winter-Store" a draft of what was to become the second stanza of "Vision" appears, and five pages later, after the concluding line ("I shall feed on memory")

and a noting of the date of composition (November 26, 1889), a draft of the first.<sup>27</sup> The two stanzas of section three do not appear in this version of "Winter-Store". In another notebook the two "Vision" stanzas just referred to appear together and independently of "Winter-Store". These are not dated, but the poem which follows them in the notebook is dated May 1892. A more finished version of "Winter-Store" is included in the manuscript book held by the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto — Lampman's "gift of love" to Katherine Waddell. This version, dated December 1889, omits both the "Vision" stanzas and those of section three dealing with the speaker's vision of the "laboring world", and includes an alternative introductory passage of twenty-eight lines.

What seems likely is that, from the time of its composition at least until the end of 1892, when "Vision" appeared in the "Mermaid Inn", "Winter-Store" consisted essentially of the long middle section of the published version of the poem, with an alternative introduction. As noted in Part II of this study, it was in 1892 that Lampman submitted his early version of *Lyrics of Earth*, "Pictures and Meditations", to the publishers Houghton and Mifflin. In all probability, then, the version of "Winter-Store" originally deemed appropriate for inclusion in Lampman's "collection of poems following the sequence of the seasons" did not include the first and third sections of the published version and, because of not being complicated by these additions, fitted better the original design of the sequence. It is worth noting in this context that, although the idea in "Winter-Store" is that the speaker during the winter will take solace from his memories of summer, in the original introductory passage he speaks of consolidating his memories of all the seasons:

Ere the faltering year be gray,  
Brothers let us seize the day —  
Spring with all her golden gleams,  
Summer's languid weight of dreams,  
And with silent step austere,  
Pacing in the sombre rear,  
Autumn's melancholy mood,  
Winter's whitened solitude.<sup>66</sup>

This passage, though inconsistent with the focus on summer in the poem, is more in keeping with the focus of the collection as a whole than the "Vision" stanzas that took its place. Perhaps it was omitted precisely because, written with the sequence in mind, it did not work well with the rest of the poem.

The two questions that arise are these: why did Lampman graft the first and third sections to the second in the published version of "Winter-Store", and how do these affect the meaning of the poem and the sequence? Let us take the second question first. According to Early, "Winter-Store" — primarily because of the additions — "stands as the major poem of Lampman's second volume" although, as he points out earlier in his analysis, it is one "that yields its full meaning only in the light of its author's whole body of work, and perhaps only in the wider light of the [Romantic] tradition in which his poetry participates". This is so because "in 'Winter-Store' Lampman confronts a crucial problem in his vision of nature". Early identifies this problem in his discussion of "Among the Timothy". "Human relations", he writes, "are all but absent from the vision, and sexuality wholly sublimated. The realities of ego, erotic desire, and personal mortality perplex and limit Lampman's landscapes of spiritual fulfillment." "Winter-Store", in Early's estimation, shows Lampman acknowledging a loss of faith and breaking free of a no-longer-adequate form of expression: "it is an admission of the limitations of his central mode of poetry, the Romantic nature lyric."<sup>29</sup>

There are several objections that may be raised to this analysis. First, the concepts of self ("ego") and death ("personal mortality") do not confine Lampman's nature verse but rather are successfully dealt with, as we have attempted to make clear in our discussion of such poems as "The Old House" and "The Sweetness of Life" in this essay. That "erotic desire"

is missing from the nature lyrics, or present only in "wholly sublimated" form, seems logical enough. An orange should not be faulted because it is not, as well, an apple. Second, it is incorrect to say that the third section of "Winter-Store" constitutes a repudiation of nature verse. The speaker's vision of "the laboring world" does not interrupt his contemplation of an actual scene in nature but rather interferes with (to follow the logic of the poem) his ability to anticipate finding comfort during the winter in the recollection of summer pleasures as, in the present, he hears "a cry" from "across the windy night" (ll. 193-94). It also contradicts a view of humanity he recalls having had in the past:

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 wreath line  
By a pathway through a wood.

(ll. 229-

36)

There is, however, nothing in "Winter-Store" or Lampman's nature poems in general that reflects this vision of a happy train of human beings; therefore this statement can hardly be seen as a rejection of what those poems represent.

A third objection has to do with whether or not there is a context within *Lyrics of Earth* to support the interpretation of "Winter-Store" put forward by Early. That is, can exposing the limitations of his nature verse have been part of Lampman's purpose in compiling his lyrics of earth? According to Early there is such a context. Lampman, he argues, "was too good a poet . . . to avoid [the realities of ego, erotic desire, and personal mortality] altogether, and he acknowledges their stubborn presence at three points" in *Lyrics of Earth*, namely, in "The Sweetness of Life", "In November", and "Winter-Store". It is, of course, up to the individual reader to decide whether Lampman's dream in nature is undermined by thoughts of mortality and consciousness of self in "The Sweetness of Life" and "In November". In this essay it is argued that such is emphatically not the case: life is sweet in the former poem despite the acknowledged reality of death, and in the latter the speaker identifies with nature as he finds it, matching nature's "spectral happiness" with the "pleasure secret and austere" he experiences himself. If this interpretation is accepted, then "Winter-Store" must be viewed as the lone exception in *Lyrics of Earth* — the only poem in which the focus is shifted from nature (or thoughts of nature) to the human condition. It is also the one poem Lampman tampered with, upsetting its internal unity and making it inconsistent with the rest of the sequence. To see "Winter-Store" as "the major poem" of the collection is to elevate an anomaly to the position of exemplar.

What these objections obviously suggest is that the additions made by Lampman to the earlier version of "Winter-Store" did not enhance either the poem or the collection as a whole. Their effect, instead, was to mar the poem and upset the symmetry of the sequence. This brings us back to our first question: why did Lampman make the additions? More than with anything else, the answer may have to do with the long lag — over three years — between the time Lampman pieced together the first version of his "collection of poems following the sequence of the seasons" and the time when *Lyrics of Earth* was finally published, and secondly, with his impatience to see represented in a book of poems the social and philosophical writing with which he was becoming, during this same period, increasingly engaged. By 1895 Lampman had ceased to be closely involved with his "lyrics of earth", although his comments to Thomson show that he still was pleased with the book. And he was anxious to represent himself as the poet he now felt himself to be. In this state of mind, he took the opportunity to tack on to the beginning of "Winter-Store" the philosophical "Vision" stanzas, and to the end of the poem a revelation of social conscience. Thus the additions are indicative of a shift of focus in Lampman's writing and constitute an attempt by the poet to

be seen, in 1895, in a different light. This, at least, is a plausible explanation for what were, in terms of both the poem and the sequence, detrimental modifications.

To conclude this discussion of the poems in *Lyrics of Earth*, it is appropriate to consider the question of where "The Sun Cup" might best be placed within the sequence. Lampman's response to the omission of this poem from the proofs of the book was to request that it be reinserted where it originally belonged, between "In May" and "Life and Nature", or, if that was "inconvenient", placed at the end where "it would do just as well".<sup>30</sup> From this it appears the second option was merely an expedient, Lampman's main concern being that the poem not be excluded from the volume. On the other hand, given that in "The Sun Cup" no reference is made to a particular time of year, it may be that Lampman saw some virtue in its coming at the end. Certainly one doubts he would have approved of placing "In May" or "September" in that position. It is true, moreover, that Scott, in his role as Lampman's editor, persisted in following the pattern established in the published version of *Lyrics of Earth* not only in the "Lyrics of Earth" section of *Poems* (1900) but also in the "Lyrics of Earth" sequences he himself compiled for inclusion in *Lyrics of Earth: Sonnets and Ballads* (1925) and *Selected Poems* (1947). Presumably Scott would not have followed a practice he believed his friend would have opposed. Whether or not Scott knew of the last-minute change or of Lampman's final thoughts on the subject, however, is not known. Finally, there is a sense in which "The Sun Cup" reinforces the meaning of the sequence by appearing at the end. To appreciate this we need to examine the poem itself.

The pivotal metaphor of "The Sun Cup" (*LE*, p. 35) is that of the sun which fills the earth with divine essence just as Apollo (according to the fiction of the poem) fills his cup with "the warm, strong wine of his might" (l. 3). The idea is not that only daylight inspires (ironically) reverie but rather that the sun makes nature "divine" — the inspiration of dream — by making it visible. That it does so every day and all year long implies a second level of meaning, namely, that life is "divine" in every season. In addition to this, the image of a day embodied by the poem may be seen as representing life itself, with emphasis on its brevity. In this sense, "The Sun Cup" in its position as the final poem of the sequence serves the same purpose as the closing stanza of "The Old House", where the house (life) is destined to flourish only "for its day". In both cases, the effect of acknowledging the transience of existence is not to undermine the speaker's celebration of life but to reinforce the idea that, for those who appreciate life in the present, death loses its sting.

Because "The Sun Cup" has a general application to *Lyrics of Earth*, much as "The Sweetness of Life" does, it works well as the final poem of the sequence. To this it might be added that the central images of stanzas two and three in the poem are fitting ones with which to bring the book to a close. The first is of a sunset, conveyed in terms of Apollo drinking from his cup:

He setteth his lips to the brim,  
With a long last look of his eye,  
And lifts it and draineth it dry. . . .

(ll. 8-10)

The bright sky fades as Apollo, having arrived at his "radiant hall" (l. 7), downs his wine on the threshold. Following this the sun disappears and the night sky comes into view:

And then, as he passes to sleep,  
Still full of the feats that he did,  
Long ago in Olympian wars,  
He closes it down with the sweep  
Of its slow-turning luminous lid,  
Its cover of darkness and stars,  
Wrought once by Hephaestus of old  
With violet and vastness and gold.



The sweeping down of the lid of Apollo's cup could be the closing of any of the days commemorated in *Lyrics of Earth*, or of all days that the seasons, in all their variety, provide. Given that these images strike such an apt note on which to close the sequence, one is inclined to agree with Bentley that "The Sun Cup", despite Lampman's original intention, does serve as a pleasing "coda" to the collection,<sup>31</sup> and to wonder whether Lampman, when he wrote that "it would do just as well at the end", did not think so too.

It now remains only to summarize the main points covered in this essay. Central to Lampman's interpretation of nature is his view that the regenerative power of nature, stemming from the presence of beauty, is a constant feature, remaining unaltered by the changes in nature's "moods", and undiminished by the shifting of seasons. Although prevailing conditions may be "sharp" or "bleak", nevertheless there exists in nature a beauty capable of inspiring in the sensitive observer a profound appreciation and involvement, termed "dream". This paradoxical idea is the thematic burden of such poems as "Heat" and "In November" in *Among the Millet*. In *Lyrics of Earth*, it is argued, Lampman makes use of an image of nature in its entirety — the cycle of seasons throughout the year — to convey the same point. Had Lampman himself not been responsible for the sequence in *Lyrics of Earth*, of course, this argument might be difficult to make. But as we have seen, Lampman was the originator of the sequence. At the same time, the actual contents of the sequence were not fixed but rather subject to modifications over time. What this suggests is that the idea of assembling "a collection of poems following the sequence of the seasons", and not a particular compilation, was of prime importance to Lampman. (The poet's attitude to nature and his beliefs about the benefits to be derived from contact with nature would automatically be reflected in such a collection.) The conclusion suggested by both external and internal evidence (comparison of the collection with similarly oriented single poems and analysis of poems included in the sequence) is that Lampman's purpose was to demonstrate the following fundamental ideas: that the potential for dream consciousness is perpetual, contact with nature being the only requirement, and hence that "the sweetness of life" is not a relative condition — that "life is only sweet". As one is born into life, Lampman implies, one enters paradoxically, through time, the realm of eternity or the eternal present. Instead of finding salvation in an afterlife beyond time, one discovers by becoming alive to the moment the nowness of all time. One becomes, in the quasi-mystical language Lampman himself sometimes employed, "one with God", "one with the All", "divine". However, it is not by such statements but by the actual evocations of particular scenes, and of perception, in Lampman's poems that we are, as readers, moved. To be told of involvement is to be informed but left outside; to see the poet alert and observant "in" and "among" the various manifestations he depicts, on the other hand, and to see what he sees, is to share and so, directly, be convinced. *Lyrics of Earth* offers numerous occasions for such direct involvement.

It has not been the purpose of this essay to touch on every aspect of Lampman's poetics or even to elucidate all of the various issues raised in *Lyrics of Earth*. How to interpret the "Arcadianism" of such poems as "Favorites of Pan" and "June" in relation to Lampman's meliorism, and what conclusions to draw about the development of Lampman's descriptive verse in poems like "The Meadow" and "Comfort of the Fields" compared with, for example, "Freedom" and "Among the Timothy", are just two of many questions which would reward investigations going beyond those put forward to date. What has been attempted, rather, is to explain the significance of the sequence in *Lyrics of Earth* and to show how this relates to an important aspect of Lampman's thought — his interpretation of variety and change within nature. The position that Lampman was entirely positive in his response to nature developed in these pages, it will be observed, is opposed to the widely accepted view that Lampman's attitude to nature was, despite surface appearances, ambivalent. This essay will have achieved a large part of its goal if it serves to offset that view to any substantial degree. In addition to this, the arguments presented here may be seen to have some application to another area of interest to students of Lampman, that is, the portrayal of nature as moral exemplar in such poems as "Earth — the Stoic", "An Ode to the Hills", and "Sapphics". (An element of this approach to nature is evident in "The Lesson of the Trees".) If, however, the meaning of the

sequence in *Lyrics of Earth* — by far the most fascinating of Lampman's various collections, published and unpublished—has been clarified, then the primary aim of this study will have been met.

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## Notes to Part 2

1. Bentley, Introduction, *LE*, pp. 15-16. [\[back\]](#)
2. The idea that, in Lampman's poems in general, a parallel exists between historical and seasonal time is elaborated by Bentley in his "Watchful Dreams and Sweet Unrest: An Essay on the Vision of Archibald Lampman", *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 6 (1981), p. 204, where he states, "There is a sense in which both 'In November' and 'In October' are not merely poems of the Fall but also, consistent with the quadrant [one of four sets of 'correspondences'] in which they locate themselves, poems of the late-nineteenth century, of the twilight of civilization, the 'transit age, the age of brass. . . ' as Lampman calls his own times in 'The Modern Politician'. . . ." [\[back\]](#)
3. The titles of the sonnets included in this sequence appear in the list of the contents of "A Century of Sonnets" in the manuscript book *Miscellaneous Poems* held by the Library of Parliament, Ottawa. See n. 28. [\[back\]](#)
4. Early, *AL*, p. 78. [\[back\]](#)
5. Early, *AL*, pp. 76-78. [\[back\]](#)
6. Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning", in *The Norton Introduction to Poetry*, ed. J. Paul Hunter, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), pp. 453-55. [\[back\]](#)
7. See, in this context, Lampman's "Peace" (*PAL*, pp. 310-11) where "Life's never-flagging tale, / An infinite pursuit, a vast employ" is seen as providing "wonder and sufficient joy." [\[back\]](#)
8. The quotation is from "Among the Timothy" (*AM*, pp. 14-17). [\[back\]](#)
9. Lampman, "Poetic Interpretation", pp. 87-88. [\[back\]](#)
10. Lampman, "Poetic Interpretation", p. 88. [\[back\]](#)
11. Public Archives of Canada, Lampman Papers, Vol. 2, p. 959. [\[back\]](#)
12. *AEC*, p. 22. [\[back\]](#)
13. *AEC*, p. 96. [\[back\]](#)
14. *AEC*, p. 97. [\[back\]](#)
15. Lampman, "The Hermit Thrush", rpt. in *Canada, the Printed Record: A Bibliographic Register with Indexes to the Microfiche Series of the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions* (Ottawa: Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions, 1985), one page. [\[back\]](#)
16. See, for example, R.E. Rashley, *Poetry in Canada: The First Three Steps* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1958), pp. 80-81, and W.J. Keith, "Archibald Lampman", in *Profiles in Canadian Literature* 1, ed. Jeffrey M. Heath (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1980), pp. 21-22. [\[back\]](#)

17. Kathy Mezei, "Lampman and Nelligan: Dream Landscapes", *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 6 (Spring 1979), p. 165. [\[back\]](#)
18. Early, *AL*, p. 79. [\[back\]](#)
19. Early, *AL*, pp. 80-81. [\[back\]](#)
20. Early, *AL*, p. 80. [\[back\]](#)
21. Early, *AL*, p. 80. [\[back\]](#)
22. In "Archibald Lampman" (see n. 54), p. 22, Keith notes the effectiveness of this passage. As he suggests, "we share with the poet his insistence on finding the right words for a complex experience (one of the chief functions of poetry, we might say, is to do just this)." [\[back\]](#)
23. Keith, p. 22. [\[back\]](#)
24. Barrie Davies, "The Forms of Nature: Some Philosophic and Aesthetic Bases of Lampman's Nature Poetry", in *The Lampman Symposium*, ed. Lorraine McMullen (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1976), p. 79. [\[back\]](#)
25. Early, *AL*, p. 81. [\[back\]](#)
26. Lampman, "Vision", in "At the Mermaid Inn", November 19, 1892, rpt. in *AMI*, pp. 191-92. [\[back\]](#)
27. Public Archives of Canada, Lampman Papers, Vol. 3, pp. 1441-49. [\[back\]](#)
28. Lampman, "Winter-Store", untitled manuscript book, Lampman Collection, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, p. 57. [\[back\]](#)
29. Early, *AL*, pp. 85 and 81, 82, 75, and 85. [\[back\]](#)
30. Reproduced in Greig, p. 16. [\[back\]](#)
31. Bentley, "The Same Unnamed Delight: Lampman's Essay on Happiness and *Lyrics of Earth*", *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 5 (Fall, 1976), pp. 33-34. [\[back\]](#)