L.M. Montgomery's *Anne's house of dreams:* Reworking poetry

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To L.M. Montgomery enthusiasts certain words and expressions have become familiar from long association. Again and again in the twenty L.M. Montgomery novels we find these words and images: spicy scent of ferns, tricksy winds, apple-green sunset skies, the fragrance of trampled mint. In fact, Montgomery, somewhat like her beloved novelist Anthony Trollope,[1] had a penchant for repetition. She had favourite poets she liked to quote: Kipling, Tennyson, Keats, Bliss Carman, Longfellow, Thomas Gray, Milton; favourite situations she loved to conjure — lustrous-eyed, spirited girls struggling against insensitive and unthinking adults or peers. But unlike the prose-minded Trollope, L.M. Montgomery always yearned to be a poet rather than a novelist.[2] This desire shaped her most interesting novels, for the repeated images and allusions that failed her in poetry helped to create atmosphere, enrich character, and generally modulate the tone of her prose.

Some descriptions in her novels are overdrawn or sentimental, but many do achieve a poetic harmony that eluded her successfully in poetry itself. In 1916, L.M. Montgomery published her only book of poetry,[3] *The watchman and other poems*,[4] a tame volume that shows all too clearly that she did, as she freely admitted to Ephraim Weber, fit in the rhymes later with the help of a rhyming dictionary.[5] In 1917, she produced another novel, (what was to be in the completed series the fifth Anne book), *Anne's house of dreams*, potentially the most sentimental of any of her books since it deals with the long-awaited marriage of Anne Shirley and Gilbert Blythe. It is remarkably interesting and readable. Its success as a book is not found in Anne's and Gilbert's honeymoon, nor even primarily in the presence of spry Captain Jim or mysterious Leslie Moore, but in its tone. The same kinds of images and expressions used in numerous poems of *The watchman* reappear in *Anne's house of dreams*, but in the novel, they work.

L.M. Montgomery was passionately fond, as all the *Watchman* poems show, of the colour purple, of skies like cups of flagons, of flowers as cups, of "elfin" and "silver" and "gold" and "crystal." Many of the ninety-three poems, songs to the sea, hills, and woods, are marred by an ill-judged concentration of archaic or descriptive words borrowed liberally from Tennyson and Browning ("flagon," "gramarye," "shallop," "wold," "elfin," "weklin"). In *Anne's house of dreams* a preoccupation with the sea and the woods and hills also produces

descriptions full of colour, jewels, stars, airy wine, and elfin things. Some of the word choices, admittedly, are as irksome as they are in the poems. For example, once when Captain Jim visits Anne, the narrator carols: "The garden was full of moist, scented air of a maritime spring evening. There was a milk-white mist on the edge of the sea, with a young moon kissing it, and a silver gladness of stars over the Glen" (pp. 164-65).[6] More often, however, the love of metaphors, similes, jewels, and colours that stifled her poetry, brings life to the prose.

Four Winds, the Glen, the House of Dreams itself, and the lighthouse have charm because L.M. Montgomery uses vivid language to reveal them. Her fascination with the sea, sunsets, and the music from Tennyson's "horns of Elfland faintly blowing!"[7] is often contagious. The profusion of colour in this early description is typical: "It was a gracious evening, full of delectable lights and shadows. In the west was a sky of mackerel clouds — crimson and amber-tinted, with long strips of apple-green sky between. Beyond was the glimmering radiance of a sunset sea, and the ceaseless voice of many waters came up from the tawny shore" (p. 25). In the prose the jewels and cups and colours of the poetry seem to well up naturally with Anne's enthusiasm for her new life:

> Her new home could not yet be seen; but before her lay Four Winds Harbour like a great, shining mirror of rose and silver. . . Beyond the bar the sea, calm and austere, dreamed in the afterlight. The little fishing village, nestled in the cove where the sand-dunes met the harbour shore, looked like a great opal in the haze. The sky over them was like a jewelled cup from which the dusk was pouring; the air was crisp with the compelling tang of the sea, and the whole landscape was infused with the subtleties of a sea evening. A few dim sails drifted along the darkening, fir-clad harbour shores. A bell was ringing from the tower of a little white church on the far side; mellowly and dreamily sweet, the chime floated across the water blent with the moan of the sea. (pp. 34-35).

The verbs "dreamed," "nestled," "infused," "floated," and "blent" weave together the familiar "rose and silver," "opal," "jewelled cup," and "moan of the sea." The atmosphere of Anne's and Gilbert's first home is completed by more familiar and somehow freshly pleasing expressions: the house itself is like a "creamy seashell" and the sentinel poplars (Montgomery's favourites) stand in "stately, purple silhouette" while the fishing village across the harbour is "gemmed with lights" (p. 38). We interpret the rich tints and images as manifestations of the young married couple, and especially of Anne.

Special events in the novel are marked by appropriately joyous or sombre nature descriptions — Montgomery used pathetic fallacy extensively. For example, the arrival of Anne's first baby is happy (though the infant quickly dies): "One evening, when the sky's limpid bowl was filled with a red glory, and the robins were thrilling the golden twilight with jubilant hymns to the stars of evening, there was a sudden commotion in the little house of dreams" (pp. 172-73). Conversely, when Owen Ford confesses to Anne his (then) hopeless love for Leslie Moore, the very breezes are sorrowful, and yet the aspen (like

Leslie) stands apart as a reminder of nature's healing beauty: "The wind of evening in the poplars sounded like some sad, weird, old rune — some broken dream of old memories. A slender shapely young aspen rose up before them against the fine maize and emerald and paling rose of the western sky, which brought out every leaf and twig in dark, tremulous, elfin loveliness" (p. 230).

Throughout the novel, we respond to a technique of alternating tones in the descriptions. The images are either colourful and vibrant or silvery, starry, and cool: the flames of crimson sunset are off-set by the shadows of stars. The tone or language of the descriptions is meant to enhance characterization, and it is no accident that the passion and coolness of the scenes are reconciled in a chief character in the story. The beautiful Leslie Moore gives mystery and romance to the quiet harbour life. For years she has lived with her imbecile husband, wasting her youth and passion on the moonlit sandshores of Four Winds. Anne is captivated by the contradiction in Leslie's looks and manner — something about the vivid woman exudes warmth, while her gestures are stiff and repelling. The initial description of her incorporates the red and the star: "She was hatless, but heavy braids of burnished hair, the hue of ripe wheat, were twisted about her head like a coronet; her eyes were blue and star-like; her figure, in its plain print gown, was magnificent; and her lips were as crimson as the bunch of blood-red poppies she wore at her belt" (p. 37).

Anne determines to befriend Leslie, and Captain Jim and Miss Cornelia aid the growth of confidence between the fulfilled and the thwarted woman. The semi-tragedy of Leslie's life provides welcome relief from the too nearly perfect happiness of Anne and Gilbert. If we appreciate much of the landscape through Anne's contented eyes, we also feel the undercurrents of sorrow and magic in the sea and shore because of Leslie's more complex life. The description of the sun striking Leslie's house suggests Leslie's importance to the tone of the story: "To the right, it fell on the old house among the willows up the brook, and gave it for a fleeting space casements more splendid than those of an old cathedral. They glowed out of its quiet and grayness like the throbbing, blood-red thoughts of a vivid soul imprisoned in a dull husk of environment" (p. 80).

Bitterness has made Leslie cold; she fears pity more than hatred and from habit retreats from the warmth and gentleness of intimacy. We compare the glare of a winter's day to Leslie's hopeless life when this description is closely followed by the appearance of Venus's shadow:

> The sky was sharp and blue; the snow diamonds sparkled insistently; the stark trees were bare and shameless, with a kind of brazen beauty; the hills shot assaulting lances of crystal. Even the shadows were sharp and stiff and clear-cut, as no proper shadows should be. Everything was either handsome or ugly. There was no soft blending, or kind obscurity, or elusive mistiness in that searching glitter (p. 144).

The harsh, piercing crystal is then mellowed by "Venus, glorious and golden," the "brilliant star of evening" (p. 145). Anne exclaims over the beauty of the

star's shadow, and Leslie herself interprets its significance: "'I have heard that you can see the shadow of Venus only once in a lifetime, and that within a year of seeing it your life's most wonderful gift will come to you,' said Leslie. But she spoke rather hardly; perhaps she thought that even the shadow of Venus could bring her no gift of life"' (pp. 145-46). The gift of life does come to Leslie, first in Owen Ford's love and then in freedom from her marriage when an operation reveals that Leslie's "husband" is really a look-alike cousin (who had been on his way to tell Leslie of her real husband's death when he was overtaken in a brawl and then by fever). Leslie belongs to the warm star of Venus, not to the frigid glints of snow, and Owen Ford, a sensitive writer, is the one to appreciate her kinship to the beauty of the harbour: "'And her eyes — they are as deep and blue as the gulf out there. I never saw such blueness — and gold! Did you ever see her hair down, Mrs. Blythe?"' (p. 229). Leslie's suppressed passion can now become the warmth of fulfillment, bringing her closer to Anne and restoring a down-to-earth normalness to the story.

Glimpses of Leslie's hidden warmth, and indeed the protective warmth of the entire story, are found through Captain Jim and the lighthouse beacon, emblem of his cheerful vigilance. This lighthouse has none of the subtle artistic power of Virginia Woolf, but it does serve to unify our impressions of the human revolvings within its ken. When Gilbert first describes the house to Anne, he tells of the beacon: "'You'll love that Four Winds light, Anne. It's a revolving one, and it flashes like a magnificent star through the twilights. We can see it from our living room windows and our front door"' (p. 15). Anne's first view of Four Winds is under its light: "The great revolving light on the cliff at the channel flashed warm and golden against the clear northern sky, a trembling, quivering star of good hope" (p. 35). The similarities between the beacon and Captain Jim's spiritual flame are deliberate. A few pages later he and Anne meet, and "Kindred spirit flashed recognition to kindred spirit" (p. 41). Captain Jim is homely, but no one ever thinks of his looks, for "the spirit shining through that rugged tenement beautified it so wholly" (p. 42). Through their first winter Captain Jim becomes a close friend and the lighthouse, its beacon dark during months when the harbor is frozen, is the center for Anne's and Leslie's growing intimacy.

For a while, the mysterious shadow of Venus takes the beacon's place as a force in the characters' lives. But in the spring, "again the Four Winds light begemmed the twilights" (p. 161) and Anne and Leslie are finally bound together when Anne's baby dies. The baby's death initiates Anne into adult grief, and she is then able to share Leslie's love and to hear the story of Captain Jim's sad romance, "Lost Margaret." As the benevolent light revolves, Captain Jim's life wish comes true, his life-book is written by Owen Ford; Anne bears a healthy baby; Leslie is released from her "dull husk of environment" to join Owen Ford. On the night before Owen comes to tell his love to Leslie, Anne reminds Leslie that "The omen of the shadow of Venus did come true for you" and Leslie

"watched the great revolving light bestarring the short hours of the summer night, and her eyes grew soft and bright and young once more" (p. 315).

Toward the end of the novel, when Captain Jim (having read the completed life-book Owen Ford sends him), "crosses the bar" (allusion to another favourite Tennyson poem), the lighthouse is again our focus: "The long fields by the shore were dewy and fresh in that first fine, purely-tinted light. The wind came dancing and whistling up the channel to replace the beautiful silence with a music more beautiful still. Had it not been for the baleful star on the white tower that early walk would have been a delight to Anne and Gilbert. But they went softly with fear" (pp. 333-34). Captain Jim's gentle spirit, like the lighthouse, continues to influence the harbour and Four Winds people. Anne hates to leave the house of dreams for the larger, more convenient home Gilbert has bought in the Glen, and uses as her reason "'You can't see the lighthouse star from it'" (p. 339). It is as though she identifies the beacon with all the joys she has known during her newlywed years. Owen and Leslie decide to buy the House of Dreams as a summer home, and Anne leaves for her new house assured that the spirit of the Four Winds life will be preserved. On the last page, the narrator says: "She went out, closing and locking the door behind her. Gilbert was waiting for her with a smile. The lighthouse star was gleaming northward. The little garden, where only marigolds still bloomed, was already hooding itself in shadows" (p. 346). Anne and Gilbert thus set out to greet a new life with their own "little Jem."

Anne's house of dreams is not wholly made up of starshine, vibrant colours, and beacon flashes, nor is it merely a prettily illustrated tale of love and fulfillment. In it, as in all of her good novels, L.M. Montgomery catches life. She heightens the colours occasionally and indulges in favourite images and elements, but she knows how to make the characters breathe. In this book the rapturous songs of sea, wood, and hill are balanced by humorous characters and incidents so that poetry and everyday life rest comfortably together. The characters themselves are frequently laughing, and two sober-faced ones, Susan Baker and Miss Cornelia Bryant, unconsciously provide mirth for other characters and for the reader. In her descriptions of them, Montgomery makes fun of her own self-conscious style and keeps her writing from becoming embarrassingly sentimental or self-indulgent.

Susan Baker with her "that you may tie to" and "Susan is at the helm" is a welcome Dickensian comic relief figure. She bustles around Anne, and when waiting to hear how Anne fares in her first difficult delivery: ". . . Marilla paced the garden walks between the quahog shells, murmuring prayers between her set lips, and Susan sat in the kitchen with cotton wool in her ears and her apron over her head. . ." (p. 173).

It is Miss Cornelia, however, who insistently brings reality to the fancy and the romance. She is a homespun Betsey Trotwood and takes great delight in puncturing the male ego. Walking into the garden after Owen has tearfully

confessed to Anne his love for Leslie, she overhears the end of Owen's inspired observations about our "prisoned infinite" and the "kindred infinite" and remarks: "'You seem to have a cold in the head. Better rub some tallow on your nose when you go to bed. . .'" (p. 231). Her language is peppered with lively expressions: of an offended church member, she says "'But that family always thought they were much bigger potatoes than they really were'" (p. 137); over the likelihood that Dick Moore did *not* get his head injured in a drunken brawl, "'Pigs *may* whistle, but they've poor mouths for it'" (p. 266).

Best of all is that L.M. Montgomery can use matter-of-fact Miss Cornelia, who "personates the comedy that ever peeps around the corner at the tragedy of life" (p. 231), to smile at her own effusiveness:

> Miss Cornelia sailed down to the little house one drowsy afternoon, when the gulf was the faint, bleached blue of hot August seas, and the orange lilies at the gate of Anne's garden held up their imperial cups to be filled with the molten gold of August sunshine. Not that Miss Cornelia concerned herself with painted oceans or sun-thirsty lilies. She sat in her favourite rocker in unusual idleness. She sewed not, neither did she spin (p. 316).

The vague allusions to Coleridge and the Bible give the irony a double edge, commenting playfully on the straightforward character and the fanciful narrator.

Anne's house of dreams, potentially mawkish because of its subject, works as a novel because L.M. Montgomery is able to control its tone throughout. The familiar poetic expressions and favourite pictures of nature help to unite the characters with their physical surroundings. Leslie is the sea mists and red poppies; Captain Jim is the lighthouse beacon and the gentle harbour sunsets; Anne is the brilliant colours and the quiet shadows. At the same time, Cornelia Bryant, Susan Baker, and steady young Dr. Blythe himself are constant reminders that prose, too, has its advantages.

NOTES

[1]L.M. Montgomery, *My dear Mr. M.: letters from L.M. Montgomery to G.B. MacMillan,* edited by F.W.P. Bolger and Elizabeth R. Epperly (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1980), p. 161.

[2]Francis W.P. Bolger, *The years before "Anne"* (The Prince Edward Island Heritage Foundation, 1974), p. 160.

[3]She wrote hundreds of poems in her career (many of which may be seen in her scrapbooks at the birthplace in New London), but only one volume of collected poetry has ever been published.

[4]Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild, & Stewart, 1916.

[5]*The Green Gables letters from L.M. Montgomery to Ephraim Weber 1905-1909,* edited by Wilfred Eggleston (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1960), p. 34.

[6]The page numbers throughout refer to the first edition of *Anne's house of dreams* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1917).

[7]Her love of Tennyson's *The princess* is best revealed in Emily's discovery of the poem in *Emily of New Moon,* Chapter IX, "A special providence."

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