

'Rainbow dreams': the poetry of Lucy Maud Montgomery

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*It came to him in rainbow dreams,
Blent with the wisdom of the sages,
Of spirit and of passion born;
In words as lucent as the morn
He prisoned it, and now it gleams,
A jewel shining through the ages,*

Lucy Maud Montgomery, "The poet's thought," *Canadian Magazine*, XXXII, 6 (April 1909), 511.

Writing in *The Globe and Mail* on May 26, 1984, Judith Finlayson mentioned that Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little women*, was also the author of a neglected, but now republished, feminist novel. Readers of *Canadian Children's Literature* will be equally pleased to learn of another rediscovered work: Lucy Maud Montgomery of *Anne of Green Gables* fame was also the author of over 500 poems.¹ Though many of these poems were published in magazines during Lucy Maud Montgomery's lifetime, yet she only published a slim selection of her verse in *The watchman and other poems* (1916). Kevin McCabe and I have now prepared for publication a much wider selection of L.M. Montgomery's poetic works.

To characterise Lucy Maud Montgomery's poetry briefly is to say that she wrote largely in the Victorian-Edwardian style. Romanticism is strongly present in her work. As one reads through the 500 poems one is reminded often of Wordsworth's ideas, in particular of his concern with the goodness and innocence of childhood, a concern which Lucy Maud Montgomery shares. With Wordsworth, too, she shares a sense that nature has lessons to teach us. Of the other English romantics, her verse is strongly reminiscent of Keats, particularly in her sensuous descriptions of nature. Scott's Gothic narratives and Byron's melancholy lyricism also come to mind in reading her work. For both these poets she reveals an admiration.²

Of the English Victorians, Tennyson (with Keats often mediated through him) is surely the strongest influence, though interestingly her most ambitious poem "The watchman" is a dramatic monologue in Browning's manner. The Pre-Raphaelites were also an influence, as were such American romantic-transcendentalist poets as Longfellow, Whittier and Emerson.

If we accept Roberts, Carman, Lampman and D.C. Scott as our major Confederation poets, reading Lucy Maud Montgomery's poetry is like discovering another Confederation poet even though she is of a slightly later generation. She shares Roberts' Wordsworthianism, his philosophical and moral turn of mind and also his love of Eastern Canadian land — and seascapes. She resembles Carman in her metrical lyricism and Lampman in her Keatsian-sensuous dwelling upon the luxuriance of nature.

Her poems, from which we have chosen about 150 as worthy of republication, fall naturally into sections such as nature poems, poems of morality and religion, sea poems and elegiac and love poems. To attempt to group the poems in the way just described, however, immediately raises the issue of the arbitrariness and limitation of such groupings in that the best of the poems defy them and cry out instead for inclusion in more than one group. To illustrate what I mean — her best poems are often those that speak about nature in the language of religion as was frequently the case in nineteenth-century romantic poetry. Before providing illustrative examples of her best work in each of the groups mentioned, I would like to indicate why it appears best to present her work in this way. Montgomery wrote most of her poetry between the years 1890 and 1915 and then as she wrote more fiction she wrote less poetry. Even within this twenty-five year period, her work does not reveal important changes and developments. Indeed, the central event in the poet's life seems to have been the loss of her mother, who died when Lucy Maud Montgomery was about twenty-one months old. Many of her poems concern loss of a loved one — a theme not directly related to events in her life between 1890 and 1915. Therefore, a thematic rather than a chronological organization of a selection of her poems appears to be most appropriate.

Nature poems certainly constitute the largest section. Her first interest as a poet seems to have been the desire to express her love of the beauty of nature often, as noted, in the language of religion. Her poem "After drought" which appeared in the *Christian Advocate* on October 1, 1908, provides a simple example of what I mean:

Last night all through the darkling hours we heard
 The voices of the rain,
And every languid pulse in nature stirred
 Responsive to the strain;
The morning brought a breath of strong sweet air
 From shadowy pineland blown,
And over field and upland everywhere
 A new-born greenness shone.
The saintly meadow lilies offer up
 Their white hearts to the sun,
And every wildwood blossom lifts its cup
 With incense overrun;
The brook whose voice was silent yestereve

Now sings its old refrain,
And all the world is grateful to receive
The blessing of the rain.

Perhaps it is the Biblical subject of drought or the Christian idea of rebirth that provokes the increasing use of religious language as the poem proceeds. "Darkling" is a word typical of nineteenth-century verse. Its use by Keats ("Ode to a nightingale"), Arnold ("Dover Beach") and Hardy ("The darkling thrush") will be familiar to most readers. Indeed, the lines "And every languid pulse in nature stirred / Responsive to the strain" are further reminiscent of Hardy's poem ("The ancient pulse of germ and birth / Was shrunken hard and dry.") though we have no certainty that Lucy Maud Montgomery could have read it. The mysterious (possibly divine) source of the "breath of strong sweet air" is a further possible source of the germination of religious language in the poem. Certain it is (whatever the source) that religious language grows as the poem develops. "The saintly meadow lilies," "wildwood blossom lifts its cup / With incense overrun," the brook hymn-like "Now sings its old refrain" and "The blessing of the rain" confirms this. Indeed, the metaphoric expression of one order of experience in terms of another lies at the root of poetry as an art of language.

Further instances of Lucy Maud Montgomery's use of this technique in some of her best poems can be found in poems like "The gable window" (which appeared originally in the April 1897 issue of *Ladies Journal*) or "Night in the pastures" (*New England Farmer*, October, 1898). Or we find the technique reversed in a poem like "In planting time" in which natural imagery is used to express religious-moral sentiments and ideas. The first two stanzas of the poem depict the end of winter and the preparation of the land for sowing in the spring. The idea of sowing is then linked to moral living through the remaining five stanzas of the poem. Here is the third stanza:

Now, here's a thought for you and me: our planting time is here,
In this bright spring of youth and hope, the best time of the year!
And don't you think that we should be most careful what we sow,
Since in the fair, wide fields of life our seeds will surely grow?

"The gable window" which appeared in the April 1897 issue of *Ladies' Journal* is as characteristic an example as there is of a nature poem that, in its Bliss Carman and Pre-Raphaelite reminiscences, again employs the language of religion. Indeed, Lucy Maud Montgomery seems to read nature for religious significances as Jerome Bump in his recent study indicates that Gerard Manley Hopkins did:³

It opened on a world of wonder,
When summer days were sweet and long,
A world of light, a world of splendor,

A world of song.
 Twas there I passed my hours of dreaming,
 "Twas there I knelt at night to pray;
 And when the rose-lit dawn was streaming
 Across the day.
 I bent from it to catch the glory
 Of all those radiant silver skies —
 A resurrection allegory
 For human eyes!
 The summer raindrops on it beating,
 The swallows clinging 'neath the eaves,
 The wayward shaddows [sic] by it fleeting
 The whispering leaves;
 The birds that passed in joyous vigrance,
 The echoes of the golden moon,
 The drifting in of subtle fragrance
 The wind's low croon;
 Held each a message and a token
 In every hour of day and night;
 A meaning wordless and unspoken,
 Yet read aright.
 I looked from it o'er bloomy meadows
 Where idle breezes lost their way
 To solemn hills whose purple shadows
 About them lay.
 I saw the sunshine stream in splendour
 O'er heaven's utmost azure bars,
 At eve the radiance, pure and tender
 Of white-browed stars.
 I carried there my childish sorrows,
 I wept my little griefs away;
 I pictured there my glad to-morrows
 In bright array.
 The airy dreams of child and maiden
 Hang round that gable window still
 As cling the vines, green and leaf-laden
 About the sill.
 And though I lean no longer from it,
 To gaze with loving reverent eyes,
 On clouds and amethystine summit,
 And star-sown skies,
 The lessons at its casement taught me,
 My life with rich fruition fill;
 The rapture of the peace they brought me
 Are with me still!

The poem in its form, imagery, style and tone is a direct result of Tennyson's dominance in nineteenth-century poetry.

One of Lucy Maud Montgomery's best poems finds its place in the section of moral religious poems. "What know we?" appeared in *Churchman, Christian Advocate* for August 21, 1902, and was also reprinted in the *First Baptist Monthly*. The poem shows Lucy Maud Montgomery's characteristic preference for stanzaic forms. Again the poem emerges directly from the popular tradition of Victorian religious verse that often took the form of hymn writing:

What know we of the gnawing grief
That dims perchance our neighbor's way,
The fretting worry, secret pain
That may be his from day to day?
Then let no idle word of ours
Sting to his heart with more dismay.

What know we of temptations deep
That hover round him like the night?
What bitter struggles may be his,
What evil influences blight?
Then be not hasty to condemn,
If he have strayed from paths of right.

We know so little of the hearts
That everywhere around us beat,
So little of the inner lives
Of those whom day by day we greet,
Oh, it behooves us one and all
Gently to deal with those we meet!

Gently to deal and gently judge,
With that divinest charity
That thinks no evil but would seek
The good in every soul to see,
Measuring not by what it is
But by that which it strives to be.

Lucy Montgomery's nature poetry is written frequently in a Tennysonian-Keatsian ornate style that derives from Shakespeare and Spenser. Her moral and religious poetry by contrast is often written (as here) in a plainer style which we can trace back through eighteenth-century poetry to Ben Jonson. Here, in "What know we?", we feel the anguish of human isolation, our inability often to recognise or fully sympathise with the sufferings of others. We sense here Lucy Maud Montgomery's moral feeling for the lot of other human beings. This is what gives strength to the poem.

Other moral and religious poems of interest include "I asked of God", "Could we but know", "One of the shepherds", "The only way", "A prayer", "The revelation" and, of course, "The watchman" which is, in many ways, her most ambitious single poem and which gave its title to and held first place in her only volume of verse. It is a dramatic monologue that uses the method so frequently employed by Robert Browning. A Roman soldier, Maximus, speaks to his lover Claudia about how he stood guard over Christ's tomb and witnessed

the resurrection. The result is that his pride in battle has changed to a desire to protect the suffering and weak. We are reminded strongly of Browning's "Epistle of Karshish" in which Karshish longs for belief like the Christian belief in life after death. Maximus concludes:

I care no more for glory; all desire
For honor and for strife is gone from me,
All eagerness for war. I only care
To help and save bruised beings, and to give
Some comfort to the weak and suffering;
I cannot even hate those Jews; my lips
Speak harshly of them, but within my heart
I only feel compassion; and I love
All creatures, to the vilest of the slaves,
Who seem to me as brothers. Claudia,
Scorn me not for this weakness; it will pass —
Surely 'twill pass in time and I shall be
Maximus strong and valiant once again,
Forgetting that slain god. And yet. . . and yet. . .
He looked as one who could not be forgot!

The final irony is that Maximus is not yet fully aware of his Christian conversion. When we take this poem together with "The gable window" we see the extent of Lucy Maud Montgomery's debt to Tennyson and Browning and to the conventions of Victorian verse. Lucy Maud Montgomery was no poetic innovator like Gerard Manley Hopkins. A major writer of Canadian children's fiction she was, but in her adherence to convention, a minor poet. She neither altered her style nor broke new poetic ground.

Although Lucy Maud Montgomery grew up on Prince Edward Island and knew the countryside and the sea at first hand, she writes more convincingly, and consequently better, about fields and woods than she does about the sea. Perhaps this is because she found the countryside more attractive and secure. It was a womb that Lucy Maud Montgomery could retreat into, in which she could find escape and peace. The sea, in contrast, was dangerous, associated with death and with her central obsessional subject — the loss of her mother. Her sea poems include "Before storm", "Along shore", "On Cape Le Force", "On the gulf shore", "Out o' doors", "The sandshore in September", "Sea song", "When the fishing boats go out", "When the tide goes out" and "The wreck of the 'Marco Polo' — 1883," a remarkable early poem, written in August 1891, when Lucy Maud Montgomery was only seventeen. Typically enough (and to prove the point about the sea's association with loss) it concerns marine disaster.

"Before storm" is one of the most successful of Lucy Maud Montgomery's sea poems:

There's a grayness over the harbour like fear on the face of a woman.

The sob of the waves has a sound akin to a woman's cry,
And deeps beyond the bar are moaning with evil presage
Of a storm that will leap from its lair in that dour northeastern sky.

Slowly the pale mists rise, like ghosts of the sea, in the offing,
Creeping all wan and chilly by headland and sunken reef,
And a wind is wailing and keening like a lost thing 'mid the islands,
Boding of wreck and tempest, plaining of dolour and grief.

Swiftly the boats come homeward, over the grim bar crowding,
Like birds that flee to their shelter in a hurry and affright,
Only the wild gray gulls that love the cloud and the clamour
Will dare to tempt the ways of the ravening sea to-night.

But the ship that sailed at the dawning, manned by the lads that love us,
God help and pity her when the storm is loosed on her track!
Oh, women, we pray tonight and keep a vigil of sorrow
For those we sped at the dawning and may never welcome back!

The storm in stanza one is presented as a wild animal and the sea in stanza three is described as "ravening." Central to the poem's structure and meaning, however, is the use of simile which in its incomplete comparison adds to the poem's sense of division, the separation between the praying women on shore and "the lads that love us," who are at sea. In these similes we see further the way in which Lucy Maud Montgomery associated the sea with danger and loss. Immediately, in stanza one, the ominous grayness of the approaching storm is likened to "fear on the face of a woman." The same technique is repeated in stanza two in which "the pale mists rise, like ghosts of the sea, in the offing," and in the third line of the same stanza "a wind is wailing and keening like a lost thing 'mid the islands." In stanza three Montgomery again uses simile to draw her picture yet enforce a sense of separateness even in comparison, "Swiftly the boats come homeward, over the grim bar crowding, / Like birds that flee to their shelter in a hurry and affright." However, in stanza four simile is absent. Its place is taken by prayer, "God help and pity her [the ship] when the storm is loosed on her track." This is one of Lucy Maud Montgomery's most successful poems because in it she writes simply, directly and with feeling. She avoids the Victorian Romantic diction, the "adorns," "athwards" and "amethystines" that in their archaic literariness clot and muffle her less successful poems.

The fourth and final section into which Lucy Maud Montgomery's selected poems can, for convenience, be placed is a section of poems that concern loss and love. In many ways loss and love are Lucy Maud Montgomery's central subjects. When she writes of nature, for example, her most frequent subject, she often writes indirectly of the pain-filled realities of losing and loving. Lucy Maud Montgomery's poems of loss are more particularly poems of mother loss. As already mentioned, the early loss of her mother seems to have been the most important formative event in her life, more important to her inner life

than the later success of *Anne of Green Gables*. Doubtless, that was a wonderful confirmation, bringing popularity to off-set, to a degree, her life-long sense of loneliness. But in terms of the formation of Lucy Maud Montgomery's essential character, inseparable from her work as a writer, the loss of her mother is more important. In her poems she writes continuously (directly or indirectly) of this experience.

In "Down home" the mother's presence is imagined:

Down home to-night the moonshine falls
Across a hill with daisies pied,
The pear-tree by the garden gate
Beckons with white arms like a bride.
A savor as of trampled fern
Along the whispering meadow stirs
And, beacon of immortal love,
A light is shining through the firs.
To my old gable-window creeps
The night wind with a sigh and song,
And, weaving ancient sorceries
Thereto the gleeful moonbeams throng.
Beside the open kitchen door
My mother stands, all longingly,
And o'er the pathways of the dark
She sends a yearning thought to me.
It seeks and finds my answering heart
Which shall no more be peace-possessed
Until I reach her empty arms
And lay my head upon her breast.

"The pear-tree by the garden gate" is reminiscent of "holds the pear to the gable wall" in Tennyson's "Mariana." The similarity of the poem to Tennyson's *In memoriam* is particularly striking. Both are poems of yearning. Throughout, Lucy Maud Montgomery's elegiac and love poems are intimately related, because the love she feels for her mother is simultaneously associated with both loss and love. Thus, one of her more moving love poems is called "The light in mother's eyes." Written in April 1897, it appeared in the *Family Story Paper* for December 1898. In this poem the lost mother is first recreated by Montgomery then her loss is described. It is as if poetry provides a means through which Lucy Maud Montgomery can wrestle with the problem of grief that obsesses her:

. . . In hours when all life's sweetest buds
Burst into dewy bloom;
In hours when cherished hopes lay dead
In sorrow and in gloom;
In evening's hush, or morning's glow,

Or in the solemn night
Those mother eyes still shed on me
Their calm, unchanging light.

In this poem Lucy Maud Montgomery first attempts to escape from and then confronts the problem of her grief. The critic Andrew Brink contends that poetry provides “symbolic repair” for loss, and that creativity is reparative.⁴ We indeed see the writing of poetry as providing for Montgomery “help for pain” in that relief is found through writing the grief out. But, finally, in the poem’s last stanza the mother’s death is accepted and consolation found in the Christian idea of reunion beyond death in “fields of Paradise.”

In conclusion, I would like to consider three further poems by Lucy Maud Montgomery: “In church” as an example of a poem in which all her concerns come together, “The first snowfall” as an instance of the way in which her preoccupation with death and loss is shot through her nature poetry, and finally “The piper” one of her last poems which was first published after her death.

“In church” was published in *Ladies’ Journal* in March, 1898:

The wind blew in at the open window,
Sweet with the breath of the field’s perfume,
And the sunlight showered its benediction
Till the dim air burst into golden bloom.
Far up, we caught a blue glimpse of heaven
And fancied we saw as we knelt in prayer,
The white-winged angels coming and going
In the infinite deeps of untroubled air.
Our mother sat in the old dim corner
With a holy light in her gentle eyes
As though she, too, saw with clearer vision
The silver wings on the far-off skies
And as we sat with our small hands folded
In the strange hushed calm of the sacred place
Dreaming of angels astray from heaven
We always gave them our mother’s face.
The choir sang and the music drifted
Over our heads like a wordless prayer —
We knew it floated to pearly portals
And left the praise of our spirits there.
Little recked we of the preacher’s sermon.
It was for people old and grown
But the mother-smile and the sunshine blessing
And our dreamy fancies were all our own.
And ours were the voices that always whispered
Softly above us of wondrous things
We knew that the angels were hovering near us
Poised on the sweep of their shining wings.
Ah! we are never so near to heaven
Now we are grown, as in days of yore;

We are wiser, perhaps, than in childhood's moments
But the visions come to us nevermore.

The poem combines Lucy Maud Montgomery's love of nature, her interest in religion and her pre-occupation with mother-loss. Indeed, it brings together all her concerns. The poem concludes with a strong reminiscence of Wordsworth's "Immortality ode" in its expression of the loss of childhood vision. We recall, of course, that Wordsworth lost his parents at an early age. The way in which Lucy Maud Montgomery associates her mother and the angels is particularly striking, "Dreaming of angels astray from heaven / We always gave them our mother's face."

In "The first snowfall" which in many respects is a representative nature poem we can see the way that Lucy Maud Montgomery's preoccupation with death and loss suffuses a poem in which we do not immediately expect their presence:

A bitter chill has fallen o'er the land
In this dull breathlessness of afternoon:
Voiceless and motionless the maples stand,
Heart-broken, with each other to commune
In silent hopelessness. The cold grey sky
Has blotted out the mountain's misty blue,
The nearer hills are palled in sombre guise
Where shivering gleams of fitful light fall through.
Then comes the snowfall, as pale Autumn folds
A misty bridal veil about her hair,
And lingers waiting in the yellowed wolds
Until her wintry bridegroom greet her there.
The hills are hidden and we see the woods
Like hosts of phantoms in the waning light.
The grassless fields, the leaf-strewn solitudes
Grow dim before the fast oncoming night.
The lovely meadows pale and whiten swift,
The trees their tracery of ermine weave,
Like larger flakes dim flocks of snowbirds drift
Across the fading landscape of the eve.
Darkness comes early and beneath its wings
We see a wraith-like world with spectres filled —
Naught but cold semblances of real things
As though Earth's breathing were forever stilled.

Such words as "Heart-broken," "palled," "sombre" in stanza one, phrases such as "the woods / Like hosts of phantoms and "a wraith-like world with spectres filled" in stanzas two and three suggest suffering and death. Indeed, at the end of the poem the earth covered with the first snowfall is likened to a dead body, "Naught but cold semblances of real things / As though Earth's breathing were forever stilled." So in the midst of nature we are in death. In fact, a strik-

ingly large number of Lucy Maud Montgomery's five-hundred poems concern loss and death either directly or indirectly.

In *Saturday Night* volume 57 for May 2, 1942, a poem called "The piper" appeared. It was prefaced by a brief article under the caption "L.M. Montgomery's last poem" which ran as follows:

The sudden and lamented death of L.M. Montgomery (Mrs. Ewan Macdonald), the beloved author of "Anne of Green Gables," lends a poignant additional interest to the verses which *Saturday Night* received from her only three weeks before her death, and which were scheduled for publication in this issue before her death was announced. In the letter which forwarded them the author wrote:

In one of my books, "Rilla of Ingleside," a poem is mentioned, supposed to have been written and published by Walter Blythe before his death in the Great War. Although the poem had no real existence hundreds of people have written me asking me where they could get it. It has been written but recently, but seems to me even more appropriate now than then."

This is not the place to investigate the relation between Lucy Maud Montgomery's verse and prose, though no doubt the relationship would provide a subject for fruitful study. "The piper" is printed immediately beneath the brief article:

One day the Piper came down the glen,
Sweet and long and low played he . . .
The children followed from door to door
No matter how those who loved might implore,
So wiling the song of his melody
As the song of a woodland rill.
Some day the Piper will come again
To pipe to the sons of the maple tree . . .
You and I will follow from door to door,
Many of us will come back no more!
What matter that if Freedom still
Be the crown of each native hill?

We believe that a judicious selection of Lucy Maud Montgomery's poems on nature, morality and religion, the sea, and on loss and love are worthy of publication as "Selected Poems." The poems discussed here offer readers of *CCL* a preliminary basis for assessing her claims as a poet.

NOTES

¹Rea Wilmshurst, who is gathering and editing Lucy Maud Montgomery's short stories, generously supplied me with a box of the poems which she had carefully photocopied from Lucy Maud Montgomery's albums in Prince Edward Island and from magazine sources.

²In June 1984 at the University of Guelph I had the opportunity, through the kindness of Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, to consult the editions of Byron, Longfellow,

Scott, Whittier and Wordsworth that Lucy Maud Montgomery owned. They include frequent underlinings and also annotations. She was clearly thoroughly familiar with the work of these poets.

³Jerome Bump, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982)

⁴Andrew Brink, *Loss and symbolic repair: some English poets* (Hamilton: Cromlech Press, 1977) and *Creativity as repair: bipolarity and its closure* (Hamilton: Cromlech Press, 1982).

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1987 ChLA Paper and Program Call

The theme of the 1987 Children's Literature Association Conference, May 14-17, at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, is "Cross-Culturalism in Children's Literature." The deadline for submitting papers and proposals for workshops or panel discussions is January 10, 1987. Submissions postmarked later than January 10, 1987, will not be considered.

Persons giving papers, workshops or panel discussions should be ChLA members. They are required to arrange their own expenses and to make their presentations in person.

Members wishing to present workshops or panel discussions should send a short but detailed proposal — listing all participants, topic, purpose and intended audience — to Barbara Garner, Department of English, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, K1S 5B6.

Papers should be sent to Ben Jones, Department of English, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, K1S 5B6. Papers should be approximately 8-10 pages doublespaced or 20 minutes reading time. Send three copies, accurately typed, accompanied by a half-page abstract and a SASE. Place author's name on title page only; papers will be coded and sent without author's names to readers for evaluation. Papers submitted should not have been read elsewhere; they will be published in the Annual Proceedings of the Conference. All papers dealing with children's literature from a critical perspective will receive careful consideration.

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