
AMY
LOWELL
MEN,
WOMEN
AND
GHOSTS

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Men, Women and Ghosts

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Preface

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This is a book of stories. For that reason I have excluded all purely lyrical poems. But the word "stories" has been stretched to its fullest application. It includes both narrative poems, properly so called; tales divided into scenes; and a few pieces of less obvious story-telling import in which one might say that the dramatis personae are air, clouds, trees, houses, streets, and such like things.

It has long been a favourite idea of mine that the rhythms of 'vers libre' have not been sufficiently plumbed, that there is in them a power of variation which has never yet been brought to the light of experiment. I think it was the piano pieces of Debussy, with their strange likeness to short vers libre poems, which first showed me the close kinship of music and poetry, and there flashed into my mind the idea of using the movement of poetry in somewhat the same way that the musician uses the movement of music.

It was quite evident that this could never be done in the strict pattern of a metrical form, but the flowing, fluctuating rhythm of vers libre seemed to open the door to such an experiment. First, however, I considered the same method as applied to the more pronounced movements of natural objects. If the reader will turn to the poem, "A Roxbury Garden", he will find in the first two sections an attempt to give the circular movement of a hoop bowling along the ground, and the up and down, elliptical curve of a flying shuttlecock.

From these experiments, it is but a step to the flowing rhythm of music. In "The Cremona Violin", I have tried to give this flowing, changing rhythm to the parts in which the violin is being played. The effect is farther heightened, because the rest of the poem is written in the seven line Chaucerian stanza; and, by deserting this ordered pattern for the undulating line of vers libre, I hoped to produce something of the suave, continuous tone of a violin. Again, in the violin parts themselves, the movement constantly changes, as will be quite plain to any one reading these passages aloud.

In "The Cremona Violin", however, the rhythms are fairly obvious and regular. I set myself a far harder task in trying to transcribe the various movements of Stravinsky's "Three Pieces 'Grotesques', for String Quartet". Several musicians, who have seen the poem, think the movement accurately given.

These experiments lead me to believe that there is here much food for thought and matter for study, and I hope many poets will follow me in opening up the still hardly explored possibilities of vers libre.

A good many of the poems in this book are written in "polyphonic prose". A form about which I have written and spoken so much that it seems hardly necessary to explain it here. Let me hastily add, however, that the word "prose" in its name refers only to the typographical arrangement, for in no sense is this a prose form. Only read it aloud, Gentle Reader, I beg, and you will see what you will see. For a purely dramatic form, I know none better in the whole range of poetry. It enables the poet to give his characters the

vivid, real effect they have in a play, while at the same time writing in the 'decor'.

One last innovation I have still to mention. It will be found in "Spring Day", and more fully enlarged upon in the series, "Towns in Colour". In these poems, I have endeavoured to give the colour, and light, and shade, of certain places and hours, stressing the purely pictorial effect, and with little or no reference to any other aspect of the places described. It is an enchanting thing to wander through a city looking for its unrelated beauty, the beauty by which it captivates the sensuous sense of seeing.

I have always loved aquariums, but for years I went to them and looked, and looked, at those swirling, shooting, looping patterns of fish, which always defied transcription to paper until I hit upon the "unrelated" method. The result is in "An Aquarium". I think the first thing which turned me in this direction was John Gould Fletcher's "London Excursion", in "Some Imagist Poets". I here record my thanks.

For the substance of the poems—why, the poems are here. No one writing to-day can fail to be affected by the great war raging in Europe at this time. We are too near it to do more than touch upon it. But, obliquely, it is suggested in many of these poems, most notably those in the section, "Bronze Tablets". The Napoleonic Era is an epic subject, and waits a great epic poet. I have only been able to open a few windows upon it here and there. But the scene from the windows is authentic, and the watcher has used eyes, and ears, and heart, in watching.

Amy Lowell

July 10, 1916.

MEN, WOMEN AND GHOSTS

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FIGURINES IN OLD SAXE

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Patterns

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I walk down the garden paths,
And all the daffodils
Are blowing, and the bright blue squills.
I walk down the patterned garden-paths
In my stiff, brocaded gown.
With my powdered hair and jewelled fan,
I too am a rare
Pattern. As I wander down

The garden paths.

My dress is richly figured,
And the train
Makes a pink and silver stain
On the gravel, and the thrift
Of the borders.
Just a plate of current fashion,
Tripping by in high-heeled, ribboned shoes.
Not a softness anywhere about me,
Only whalebone and brocade.
And I sink on a seat in the shade
Of a lime tree. For my passion
Wars against the stiff brocade.
The daffodils and squills
Flutter in the breeze
As they please.
And I weep;
For the lime-tree is in blossom
And one small flower has dropped upon my bosom.

And the plashing of waterdrops
In the marble fountain
Comes down the garden-paths.
The dripping never stops.
Underneath my stiffened gown
Is the softness of a woman bathing in a marble basin,
A basin in the midst of hedges grown
So thick, she cannot see her lover hiding,
But she guesses he is near,
And the sliding of the water
Seems the stroking of a dear
Hand upon her.
What is Summer in a fine brocaded gown!
I should like to see it lying in a heap upon the ground.
All the pink and silver crumpled up on the ground.

I would be the pink and silver as I ran along the paths,
And he would stumble after,
Bewildered by my laughter.
I should see the sun flashing from his sword-hilt and the buckles
on his shoes.
I would choose
To lead him in a maze along the patterned paths,
A bright and laughing maze for my heavy-booted lover,
Till he caught me in the shade,
And the buttons of his waistcoat bruised my body as he clasped me,
Aching, melting, unafraid.
With the shadows of the leaves and the sundrops,
And the plopping of the waterdrops,
All about us in the open afternoon—
I am very like to swoon
With the weight of this brocade,
For the sun sifts through the shade.

Underneath the fallen blossom
In my bosom,
Is a letter I have hid.
It was brought to me this morning by a rider from the Duke.
"Madam, we regret to inform you that Lord Hartwell
Died in action Thursday se'nnight."
As I read it in the white, morning sunlight,
The letters squirmed like snakes.
"Any answer, Madam," said my footman.
"No," I told him.
"See that the messenger takes some refreshment.
No, no answer."
And I walked into the garden,
Up and down the patterned paths,
In my stiff, correct brocade.

The blue and yellow flowers stood up proudly in the sun,
Each one.
I stood upright too,
Held rigid to the pattern
By the stiffness of my gown.
Up and down I walked,
Up and down.

In a month he would have been my husband.
In a month, here, underneath this lime,
We would have broke the pattern;
He for me, and I for him,
He as Colonel, I as Lady,
On this shady seat.
He had a whim
That sunlight carried blessing.
And I answered, "It shall be as you have said."
Now he is dead.

In Summer and in Winter I shall walk
Up and down
The patterned garden-paths
In my stiff, brocaded gown.
The squills and daffodils
Will give place to pillared roses, and to asters, and to snow.
I shall go
Up and down,
In my gown.
Gorgeously arrayed,
Boned and stayed.
And the softness of my body will be guarded from embrace
By each button, hook, and lace.
For the man who should loose me is dead,
Fighting with the Duke in Flanders,
In a pattern called a war.
Christ! What are patterns for?

Pickthorn Manor

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I

How fresh the Dartle's little waves that day!
A steely silver, underlined with blue,
And flashing where the round clouds, blown away,
Let drop the yellow sunshine to gleam through
And tip the edges of the waves with shifts
And spots of whitest fire, hard like gems
Cut from the midnight moon they were, and sharp
As wind through leafless stems.
The Lady Eunice walked between the drifts
Of blooming cherry-trees, and watched the rifts
Of clouds drawn through the river's azure warp.

II

Her little feet tapped softly down the path.
Her soul was listless; even the morning breeze
Fluttering the trees and strewing a light swath
Of fallen petals on the grass, could please
Her not at all. She brushed a hair aside
With a swift move, and a half-angry frown.
She stopped to pull a daffodil or two,
And held them to her gown
To test the colours; put them at her side,
Then at her breast, then loosened them and tried
Some new arrangement, but it would not do.

III

A lady in a Manor-house, alone,
Whose husband is in Flanders with the Duke
Of Marlborough and Prince Eugene, she's grown
Too apathetic even to rebuke
Her idleness. What is she on this Earth?
No woman surely, since she neither can
Be wed nor single, must not let her mind
Build thoughts upon a man
Except for hers. Indeed that were no dearth
Were her Lord here, for well she knew his worth,
And when she thought of him her eyes were kind.
IV

Too lately wed to have forgot the wooing.
Too unaccustomed as a bride to feel
Other than strange delight at her wife's doing.
Even at the thought a gentle blush would steal
Over her face, and then her lips would frame
Some little word of loving, and her eyes
Would brim and spill their tears, when all they saw
Was the bright sun, slantwise
Through burgeoning trees, and all the morning's flame
Burning and quivering round her. With quick shame
She shut her heart and bent before the law.
V

He was a soldier, she was proud of that.
This was his house and she would keep it well.
His honour was in fighting, hers in what
He'd left her here in charge of. Then a spell
Of conscience sent her through the orchard spying
Upon the gardeners. Were their tools about?
Were any branches broken? Had the weeds
Been duly taken out

Under the 'spaliered pears, and were these lying
Nailed snug against the sunny bricks and drying
Their leaves and satisfying all their needs?
VI

She picked a stone up with a little pout,
Stones looked so ill in well-kept flower-borders.
Where should she put it? All the paths about
Were strewn with fair, red gravel by her orders.
No stone could mar their sifted smoothness. So
She hurried to the river. At the edge
She stood a moment charmed by the swift blue
Beyond the river sedge.
She watched it curdling, crinkling, and the snow
Purfled upon its wave-tops. Then, "Hullo,
My Beauty, gently, or you'll wriggle through."
VII

The Lady Eunice caught a willow spray
To save herself from tumbling in the shallows
Which rippled to her feet. Then straight away
She peered down stream among the budding sallows.
A youth in leather breeches and a shirt
Of finest broidered lawn lay out upon
An overhanging bole and deftly swayed
A well-hooked fish which shone
In the pale lemon sunshine like a spurt
Of silver, bowed and damascened, and girt
With crimson spots and moons which waned and played.
VIII

The fish hung circled for a moment, ringed
And bright; then flung itself out, a thin blade
Of spotted lightning, and its tail was winged
With chipped and sparkled sunshine. And the shade
Broke up and splintered into shafts of light

Wheeling about the fish, who churned the air
And made the fish-line hum, and bent the rod
Almost to snapping. Care
The young man took against the twigs, with slight,
Deft movements he kept fish and line in tight
Obedience to his will with every prod.
IX

He lay there, and the fish hung just beyond.
He seemed uncertain what more he should do.
He drew back, pulled the rod to correspond,
Tossed it and caught it; every time he threw,
He caught it nearer to the point. At last
The fish was near enough to touch. He paused.
Eunice knew well the craft—"What's got the thing!"
She cried. "What can have caused—
Where is his net? The moment will be past.
The fish will wriggle free." She stopped aghast.
He turned and bowed. One arm was in a sling.
X

The broad, black ribbon she had thought his basket
Must hang from, held instead a useless arm.
"I do not wonder, Madam, that you ask it."
He smiled, for she had spoke aloud. "The charm
Of trout fishing is in my eyes enhanced
When you must play your fish on land as well."
"How will you take him?" Eunice asked. "In truth
I really cannot tell.
'Twas stupid of me, but it simply chanced
I never thought of that until he glanced
Into the branches. 'Tis a bit uncouth."
XI

He watched the fish against the blowing sky,
Writhing and glittering, pulling at the line.

"The hook is fast, I might just let him die,"
He mused. "But that would jar against your fine
Sense of true sportsmanship, I know it would,"
Cried Eunice. "Let me do it." Swift and light
She ran towards him. "It is so long now
Since I have felt a bite,
I lost all heart for everything." She stood,
Supple and strong, beside him, and her blood
Tingled her lissom body to a glow.
XII

She quickly seized the fish and with a stone
Ended its flurry, then removed the hook,
Untied the fly with well-poised fingers. Done,
She asked him where he kept his fishing-book.
He pointed to a coat flung on the ground.
She searched the pockets, found a shagreen case,
Replaced the fly, noticed a golden stamp
Filling the middle space.
Two letters half rubbed out were there, and round
About them gay rococo flowers wound
And tossed a spray of roses to the clamp.
XIII

The Lady Eunice puzzled over these.
"G. D." the young man gravely said. "My name
Is Gervase Deane. Your servant, if you please."
"Oh, Sir, indeed I know you, for your fame
For exploits in the field has reached my ears.
I did not know you wounded and returned."
"But just come back, Madam. A silly prick
To gain me such unearned
Holiday making. And you, it appears,
Must be Sir Everard's lady. And my fears
At being caught a-trespassing were quick."

XIV

He looked so rueful that she laughed out loud.
"You are forgiven, Mr. Deane. Even more,
I offer you the fishing, and am proud
That you should find it pleasant from this shore.
Nobody fishes now, my husband used
To angle daily, and I too with him.
He loved the spotted trout, and pike, and dace.
He even had a whim
That flies my fingers tied swiftly confused
The greater fish. And he must be excused,
Love weaves odd fancies in a lonely place."
XV

She sighed because it seemed so long ago,
Those days with Everard; unthinking took
The path back to the orchard. Strolling so
She walked, and he beside her. In a nook
Where a stone seat withdrew beneath low boughs,
Full-blossomed, hummed with bees, they sat them down.
She questioned him about the war, the share
Her husband had, and grown
Eager by his clear answers, straight allows
Her hidden hopes and fears to speak, and rouse
Her numbed love, which had slumbered unaware.
XVI

Under the orchard trees daffodils danced
And jostled, turning sideways to the wind.
A dropping cherry petal softly glanced
Over her hair, and slid away behind.
At the far end through twisted cherry-trees
The old house glowed, geranium-hued, with bricks
Bloomed in the sun like roses, low and long,
Gabled, and with quaint tricks

Of chimneys carved and fretted. Out of these
Grey smoke was shaken, which the faint Spring breeze
Tossed into nothing. Then a thrush's song
XVII

Needled its way through sound of bees and river.
The notes fell, round and starred, between young leaves,
Trilled to a spiral lilt, stopped on a quiver.
The Lady Eunice listens and believes.
Gervase has many tales of her dear Lord,
His bravery, his knowledge, his charmed life.
She quite forgets who's speaking in the gladness
Of being this man's wife.
Gervase is wounded, grave indeed, the word
Is kindly said, but to a softer chord
She strings her voice to ask with wistful sadness,
XVIII

"And is Sir Everard still unscathed? I fain
Would know the truth." "Quite well, dear Lady, quite."
She smiled in her content. "So many slain,
You must forgive me for a little fright."
And he forgave her, not alone for that,
But because she was fingering his heart,
Pressing and squeezing it, and thinking so
Only to ease her smart
Of painful, apprehensive longing. At
Their feet the river swirled and chucked. They sat
An hour there. The thrush flew to and fro.
XIX

The Lady Eunice supped alone that day,
As always since Sir Everard had gone,
In the oak-panelled parlour, whose array
Of faded portraits in carved mouldings shone.
Warriors and ladies, armoured, ruffed, peruked.

Van Dykes with long, slim fingers; Holbeins, stout
And heavy-featured; and one Rubens dame,
A peony just burst out,
With flaunting, crimson flesh. Eunice rebuked
Her thoughts of gentler blood, when these had duked
It with the best, and scorned to change their name.
XX

A sturdy family, and old besides,
Much older than her own, the Earls of Crowe.
Since Saxon days, these men had sought their brides
Among the highest born, but always so,
Taking them to themselves, their wealth, their lands,
But never their titles. Stern perhaps, but strong,
The Framptons fed their blood from richest streams,
Scorning the common throng.
Gazing upon these men, she understands
The toughness of the web wrought from such strands
And pride of Everard colours all her dreams.
XXI

Eunice forgets to eat, watching their faces
Flickering in the wind-blown candle's shine.
Blue-coated lackeys tiptoe to their places,
And set out plates of fruit and jugs of wine.
The table glitters black like Winter ice.
The Dartle's rushing, and the gentle clash
Of blossomed branches, drifts into her ears.
And through the casement sash
She sees each cherry stem a pointed slice
Of splintered moonlight, topped with all the spice
And shimmer of the blossoms it uprears.
XXII

"In such a night—" she laid the book aside,
She could outnight the poet by thinking back.