

Sidney Lanier & the American Renaissance: Reflections on his Fellow Poets

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The middle years of the 19th century saw the flowering of many American poets. The best known include Emerson (1803-82), Longfellow (1807-82), and Whitman (1813-92) in the North, and in the South, Poe (1809-49) and eventually Lanier (1842-81). Lanier was a late Romantic, compared with poets of earlier generations, but he maintained many of their ideals. (Dickinson would not be "known" until the 20th century.)

The era from the 1820s ~~and~~ ^{to} the 1860s is called by many the "American Renaissance." [1] Until this period, there was little that was notable from American poets and novelists. All eyes were on European literature. Members of the "American Renaissance" brought American literature into its own. American painters were bringing American painting into its own at the same time. Most of these American poets believed that the purpose of poetry is moral, and that the best poets are seers. Their goal was to raise matter up to the level of the spirit, and to raise the idea of the individual up to the level of the transpersonal. In the poems of Lanier, the ordinary regularly etherealizes into the realm of the infinite.

One of the things these American poets often did was articulate the ongoing tension between the empirical and the ideal, between cognition and feeling; and they favored feeling. No American poet of the 19th century was a greater defender of feeling as the key to our humanness than was Sidney Lanier. In the 1860s, steeped in medieval metaphors, he wrote of the Joust between the Heart and the Brain. He felt the purpose of poets was to teach the world this truth. He regarded the Civil War as a war between the materialist civilization of the North and the feeling-based civilization of the South. He never lost his love for the moral values of the Arthurian legends.

Lanier's favorite poets were the early English, from Chaucer to Spencer and above all Shakespeare. He grew up under the strong influence of Poe's musicality and the fluid rhythms and sensuous textures of Byron, Coleridge, and especially Keats whom he called his "dearest friend." He liked to read both Brownings to his lady friends, especially Elizabeth. He later admired Wordsworth, Shelley, and Tennyson, with whom Lanier has often been compared, even though Lanier did not think Tennyson was as musical as he might have been. [2]

1. Two of the most important books on the American Renaissance in literature are F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art & Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman, which defined the subject half a century ago, and Arthur Versluis, The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance, which recently provided a new understanding of how important Eastern and Western esoteric traditions were to these poets.

2. What Lanier thought of other poets and what they thought of him is discussed in most of the books written on Lanier. See bibliography, especially Anderson, De Bellis, and Parks.

He was less fond of Milton and Goethe. They focused on the "me rather than the not me." They focused on the selfish self, the satanic, while he focused on the higher self in its linkage with the divine. For Lanier the Dryden-Pope era was too wooden. Closer to his heart was Novalis. Lanier translated German Romantic poetry in his early years. Indeed, he had hoped to earn his doctorate in Germany and become a professor, until the Civil War changed his plans.

Lanier's broad range of appreciation included Negro dialect, Blake's illuminated words, Japanese haiku, and South Asian metaphysics (both Hindu and Buddhist). Much to the surprise of many, Lanier could even admire aspects of Whitman, even though Whitman was too "formless" for a poet so steeped in tradition, and too involved with the body for a man of less corporal spirituality. Lanier wrote in 1878: Leaves of Grass was a real refreshment to me - like rude salt spray in the face." [3]

And what did his contemporaries think of Lanier? Tennyson is quoted as saying Lanier "was worth more than a hundred Longfellows," and Swinburne that he was 'one of the only two real poets yet produced in America - the other being Poe.' ... Longfellow praised *The Marshes of Glynn*... Whitman gave voice to several contradictory opinions, the most favorable of which was 'He had genius - a delicate, clairvoyant genius'." [4]

Here is a general summary by Charles Anderson of contemporary opinions of Lanier at the end of his career by Europeans and Americas:

For example, Richard Le Gallienne declared that it was in "The Marshes of Glynn" and "Sunrise" alone that Lanier had succeeded in his high poetic ambition:

In the other poems you see . . . the impassioned observation of nature, the Donne-like "metaphysical" fancy, the religious and somewhat mystic elevation of feeling expressed often in terms of a deep imaginative understanding of modern scientific conceptions; in fact, you find all save the important quality of that ecstasy which in the "Hymns" fuses all into one splendid flame . . .

This ecstasy was the same trance-like state produced in him by music, the critic said, and this "apparently 'loose,' Atlantic-roller metre" was the result of conscious experiments to prove his prosodical theory.¹⁷⁵ If the palm was awarded to any one poem, it was to "Sunrise." Perhaps the greatest triumph was that Lanier's most persistent critic, the *Nation*, was at last won over by this volume, which it found to be of "absorbing interest" and with real proof of promise in that "his latest poems are his best," "Sunrise" being unequalled in its way in all of American literature:

It is especially worth study by the young followers of Whitman, because it seems to be constructed on Whitman's methods; yet what a difference! In affluence, in breadth of handling it goes far beyond Whitman; while, instead of bald and formless iteration, it is everywhere suffused with music as with light; every stanza chants itself, instead of presenting a prosaic huddle of long lines.¹⁷⁶

More even than by the praise, Lanier would have felt his long struggle rewarded by the widespread acclaim of originality. The *Dial* found in him "a new and rare poetic force . . . of unsuspected power"; the *St. John Globe* "a marvellous wealth of new rhythmical effects, sometimes odd, but for the most part of startling loveliness." The *Independent* declared that this individuality, "so marked that it may

be at first mistaken for mannerism," was responsible for the slow growth of his reputation; and the *Critic* and the London *Quarto* agreed that his "exceptional originality" made his work as a whole "so entirely unlike the poems of the day, that one has no standard to judge them by." In spite of this, many attempted a final estimate by making comparisons. Among the critics at home one said he was the best southern poet since Poe, another that he was second only to Poe and Emerson on the American Parnassus, a third that he belonged among the first three or four poets of the century on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁷⁷ Curiously enough the highest rank was assigned to Lanier by the English reviewers. Surveying the post-bellum poets, the London *Times* found him the most considerable of them all, and went further to say: "He remains the most fearless and passionate, the widest in range, the greatest master of melody of any of the American poets."¹⁷⁸ The *Spectator* was even more enthusiastic, contrasting his "vigorous imagination and depth of passion" with the "refinement and fancy" that had chiefly distinguished American poetry in the past and declaring that, though he was cut down in his prime,

As it is, . . . there is more of genius in this volume than in all Poe's poems, or all Longfellow's, or all Lowell's (the humorous poems excepted) . . . Lanier [is] an original poet,—more original, we think, than the United States has ever yet produced, more original than any poet whom England has produced during the last thirty years at least.¹⁷⁹

To this may be added, in conclusion, the prophecy made in the *American Nation* at about the same time:

To some minds he appears obscure; to some he seems like a poet of another age discoursing on modern themes; to others—and this number is growing—he seems a poet of the future •••

[5]

3. Lanier in Charles R. Anderson, ed., Centennial Edition of the Works of Sidney Lanier, vol. 1 Poems & Poems Outlines, 1945, p. lx. See also "A. H. Starke, "Lanier's Appreciation of Whitman," in American Scholar, Oct. 1933, pp. 398-408

4. Ibid., p. lxxxviii, note 180

5. Ibid., pp. lxxxvi-lxxxvii
