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<th>JOHN HOWARD LAWSON'S COLLEGE ESSAY, &quot;THE POETRY OF ALFRED NOYES&quot; (June 1914)</th>
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In “John Howard Lawson at Williams College,” I summarized John Howard Lawson’s prose writings published in the *Williams Literary Monthly* from late 1910 to mid—1914.

In “John Howard Lawson’s College Essays on ‘John Webster’ and ‘Romantic Comedy’ (c. 1913—1914),” I summarized two other, unpublished, essays written by Lawson, then seventeen or eighteen years old.

In the present article, I summarize another, also unpublished, college essay written by Lawson two or three months before his twentieth birthday. This essay, “The Poetry of Alfred Noyes,” was delivered as a spoken essay by Lawson, in competition for the Arthur B. Graves Prizes, June 22, 1914, two days before he graduated from Williams College.

The following summary of “The Poetry of Alfred Noyes” provides historians of American drama with further information about the early writings of John Howard Lawson that has both historical and biographical importance,

“The Poetry of Alfred Noyes”

Literary criticism tends to go to extremes, particularly when the discussion is concerned with poetry. Few criticisms of individual

1) Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol. 20, No. 1 (September 1979).
3) My summary is based upon a xerox copy of John Howard Lawson’s original manuscript in the Williamsiana Collection at Williams College; the copy was made available to me by Williams College Librarian, Lawrence A. Wikander.
poets or of the poetic art have not contained the utmost extravagance of eulogy or blame, e. g., two magazine articles, one of which characterized Stephen Phillips as a viper of decadence, while the other lauded the same author as the saviour of aesthetic standards. This tendency may explain the fact that the earlier volumes of Alfred Noyes were greeted with storms of appreciation, that he was hailed as “the coming light of literature, the great poet of twentieth century”, while the last two years have seen such a decided falling off of critical interest that, although the young Englishman is vastly and increasingly popular with a mass of readers, literary discussion of his verse has almost ceased. A recent critique of “Modern Poetry” in the Nineteenth Century passes over Noyes with this careless comment: “...his poetry is admittedly sweet and beautiful. And he has in his way a philosophy—it is the outlook of a great child.” Not a scathing indictment—but the words convey the impression that the writer is a person of little consequence. This is typical of the present—day literary opinion of Noyes: he is the poet of the people, the poet of froth and sunshine—music, color, atmosphere—not a spirit of great and abiding power.

This opinion is in a measure Justified. Noyes is not a great poet. He lacks transcending epic grandeur or transcending lyric rapture. He lacks the fierce fire of individual emotion which makes the great lyric artist. Poetry is the most intensely emotional of all arts; it is a truism that the lyric is the expression of the poet’s own feeling—the breath of his own heart. Poets of world-renown and world-influence possess this thrilling dignity and depth of personal feeling—white heat of Shelley’s passion or towering power of Browning’s humanity.

Although Noyes falls short of the first rank of poetic inspiration, his position is one of profound historical and aesthetic significance. This importance is largely and especially due to his not being a poet of sublimest greatness. In what does this paradoxical poetic value consist? What is the poet’s unique contribution to Twentieth Century literature?
Two qualities fundamentally control the value of all literature. The first might best be described as personal inspiration; the direct reaction of the author upon the mind of the reader; the individuality of the author, thrilling and transfiguring the lesser individuality with which it is brought in contact. The other quality vitally connected with literary value is reflection, the author’s ability to express the spirit of the time, to stand as the historical exponent of his age, “hold, as t’were, the mirror up to nature... to show the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”

One or other of these qualities is the informing principle of all lasting literary power. In rare instances the two values have been combined in the achievement of a single man—such gigantic spirits as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, have given intense expression to their individual ideals and passions, at the same time extensively portraying the mental attitudes and physical phenomena of their ages. The “Iliad” reveals in miniature the whole length and breadth of prehistoric Greece. “The Divine Comedy” is the apotheosis of the soul of the Middle Ages. All generations of humanity find expression in Shakespeare.

It generally happens that great poetic figures are more imbued with the power of individual inspiration than with the other quality of literary expression. Over-bearing originality is the characteristic of transcendent genius—it is often the men of smaller and more human mold in whom we find the sensitiveness to outside influence, the variety of unimpassioned sympathy and experience which enable them to reflect “the age and body of the time.” Sometimes a man arises—possessing no surpassing poetic fervor, carrying no earth-shaking message—whose verse embodies an epitome of the thought and soul of his age. Alfred Noyes is such a man. His importance—we might say his greatness—lies in his sensitiveness to the currents of his time.

Nothing strikes the casual reader of Noyes more forcefully than his lack of truly big originality; and, in conjunction with this lack, an astonishing power of adaptability of the thoughts of others
to his own usages. This is not a matter of plagiarism but of skillful and highly legitimate adaptation. There is no other poet so much of whose inspiration can be traced to sources outside himself. Yet Noyes cannot be accused of servile imitation. His power might be best described as—sensitiveness. He is strongly susceptible to literary influences as well as to the thought and the facts of life immediately surrounding him. His verse reveals an astonishing breadth of subject matter—a field almost as variegated as that of Shakespearian drama, but without the transfiguration of Shakespeare’s burning personality. The two volumes of “Collected Poems” are concerned with the whole field of human endeavor—Japan and Greece, Elizabethan England and the streets of modern London, “Dashed with sun and splashed with tears, / Wan with revel, red with wine”—sailor and soldier, merchant and priest, all humanity, “so teased with thorns, bullied with briars, baffled with stars.” But, in the entire range of this poetic effort, there is not a single line of really overwhelming power, no line of “bursting rapture or of winged glory.” It is poetry of grace and breadth and of an inclusive humanity—but not of transcending force.

When we consider these two volumes of “Collected Poems” from the point of view of literary indebtedness, we find that Noyes has drawn freely from a variety of sources. There is a thrilling imitation of the romantic ballad in the tale of the Highwayman and “the landlord’s black-eyed daughter” Classical inspiration permeates the gloriously beautiful “Acteaon”—

Lo, in the violets lazily dreaming
Young Diana, the Huntress, lies:
One white side through the violets gleaming
Heaves and sinks with her golden sighs,
One white breast like a diamond crownet
Couched in a velvet casket glows,
One white arm, tho’ the violets drown it,
Thrills their purple with rose.
The very next poem shifts to the modern picture of the "Electric Tram":

Bluff and burly and splendid
Thro' roaring traffic-tides,
By secret lightnings attended
The land-ship hisses and glides.

Imitation of the sonorous blank verse of Elizabethan drama appears side by side with a clever reproduction of the mystic madness of Baudelaire—a poem rich in perfumed revery.

Most interesting of all is the manner in which Noyes, with his peculiarly supple adaptability, concocts a child's poem of really enduring sweetness from a bundle of nursery rhymes. "The Forest of wild Thyme" tells of two children's dream adventures in a fairy forest, wherein they meet the notorious spider of the "walk into my Parlor" story in the guise of a "Hideous Hermit"—where "Little Boy Blue," "Margery Daw," "Little Miss Muffett" and all the other characters of immortal legend gather in a connected allegory. There is another child-poem, "The Flower of Old Japan," wherein is narrated the mystical quest for

The flower above all flowers,
The flower that never dies,
Before whose throne the scented hours
Offer their sacrifice—

Here again the childish freshness of "Alice in Wonderland" mingles with nonsense and imagery to form a story of beauty and power.

Enough has been said to illustrate that the chief value of the poetry of Noyes lies in its versatile power of imitation. Here we have the root of the importance of Noyes as a poet—his sensitiveness. This quality, without any great originality, makes him par excellence the exponent of his era. This quality makes him the spirit of the literary Twentieth Century, the poet of the people. Other lyric writers have attained greater power in special fields: Masefield has
perfected his peculiarly original peetry of slang; Ernest Dowson has wonderfully portrayed the passion of a fettered and baffled soul; Bridges has obtained a polished lucidity of style. But Alfred Noyes has a breadth and representativeness of viewpoint which these poets lack.

The very personality of Noyes suggests the modern touch. He is not the vision-haunted seeker after "Joy,/Whose hand is ever at his lips,/Bidding adieu." He is not the world-sated and suicidal dreamer. His type is that of the practical man of affairs—scholar, college professor, lecturer. He points with pride to the fact that he is the only living poet who has maintained himself entirely on the profits of his verse. This is the modernism of the man's personality. His work is permeated with the same spirit, the spirit of the age. The breadth of his achievement is typical of the variety of modern life. His interests are indicative of the literary attitude of today which embodies "an aesthetic breadth of sympathy not known in any other period of history." It is characteristic of modern literature that it draws its inspiration from all eras. We are neither predominantly Classical nor Romantic; we have passed the days of Teutonic periods and Oriental reactions. Ours is the time of inclusive literary humanity. Noyes is representative of this breadth. Classic incident loses with him its unnaturally marble simplicity; it becomes suffused with romantic color. His is an artistic balance of historical appreciation.

Noyes is a modernist in the thought that he expresses. Politically he is the exponent of world-peace, of woman-suffrage, of a finer equality of human rights. He does not trumpet forth the liberty of man with the unbridled enthusiasm of earlier days. His is the doctrine of deeper equality, the freedom of social cooperation and service, the orderly march of the

Unregarded imperial regiments,
White from the roaring intricate places,
Deep in the maw of the world's machine
If we approach Noyes from the philosophers' point of view, he has the modern skepticism regarding conventional religion:

Do you believe that We must taste of death
Because God set a foolish naked wench
Too near an apple-tree, how long ago?
Five thousand years?

The question has been less happily stated in many solemn textbooks. But, with his cynicism, Noyes combines a deeper faith—a God of paradoxical unity and multiplicity. Perhaps these are the greatest lines he ever penned:

I am that I am,
Ye are evil and good,
Saith the Lord;
With color and glory and story and song ye are fed as with food:
The cold and the heat,
The bitter and the sweet.
The calm and the tempest fulfill my word;
Yet will ye complain of the two-edged sword
That has fashioned the finite and mortal and given you the sweetness of strife,

The blackness and whiteness,
The darkness and brightness,
Which sever your souls from the formless and void and hold you fast-fettered to life?

Noyes has evolved a complicated philosophy of existence; an harmonious structure of love, beauty, sorrow—a philosophy which, essentially and humanly, belongs to the Twentieth Century.

It is natural that Noyes, in his endeavor to depict the full, fresh life of his own time, should turn to the freshest and most colorful period of his nation's history—the golden age of Elizabeth. His most sustained long production, "The Tales of the Mermaid Tavern," transports us magically from the London of today to the ancient Inn where gathered Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Marlowe and
their merry company. The poet dreams of himself as the servant of the hostelry. He tells nine separate adventures of the tavern. Dusty critics have pointed out that the idealized portraits in no way conform to the historical characters whom they represent. But such critics fail to recognize the higher reality that permeates the work—far more vital than accuracy of detail. The poet has caught the pulse and spirit of England's epic age, and he has made it living and vital to modern time. The dreamer who portrays the soul of a past era is prone to lose touch with the realities of his own. Noyes does not fall into this error: his picture of bustle and hurry and glory, the myriad fervor of Elizabethan life, is always modern. Anyone reading these poems must be impressed with a strange bond of kinship between the Seventeenth and the Twentieth Centuries. It breathes in the very melody of the verse—a transfiguring connection between the London of the present and the city of the past. Noyes himself has dimly expressed this relation:

But through the brain of London
The mystic fragrance grows,
Each foggy cell remembers,
Each ragged alley knows—

Yet the truly marvelous verses of the "Mermaid Tavern" never attain the height of really great poetry. They lack the thrill of lyric individuality.

The wholesale charge of unoriginality made against Noyes must be qualified in one particular—there is a certain variety of poetry which Noyes has in large measure himself created; which does not show any great indebtedness. This type might best be described as the imaginative burlesque, the highly colored sea-story of nonsense and magic, rollicking absurdity and dainty imagery.

Across the seas of Wonderland to Mogadore we plodded,
Forty singing seamen in an old black barque,
And we landed in the twilight where a Polyphemus nodded
With his battered moon-eye winking red and yellow in the dark!
For his eye was growing mellow,
Rich and ripe and red and yellow,
As was time since old Ulysses made him bellow in the dark.
Since Ulysses bunged his eye up with a pine-torch in the dark.

The idea of this sort of verse may be easily traced to its literary forebears but its full charm is original with Noyes. The fifteen or twenty poems of this variety stand alone in his work as productions of a special individuality.

A poet's full achievement cannot be estimated during his lifetime. Lack of perspective and lack of complete data make a reckoning of his powers impossible. It may yet happen that Alfred Noyes will transcend himself in some majestic torrent of lyric song, or attain an epic grandeur that will give him place among the poets of all time. So far he seems to have produced nothing to merit such expectation. He has been notably successful as a representative poet of his era. Suavely, melodiously, forcefully, he has expressed the life and the philosophy of the Anglo-Saxon Twentieth Century. *4*

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*4) "The Poetry of Alfred Noyes" is signed: John Howard Lawson.