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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Charles Roy Morris, Jr., entitled "'The Night of Our Knowledge': Sidney Lanier and the Struggle for Faith." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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Thesis

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"THE NIGHT OF OUR KNOWLEDGE":

SIDNEY LANIER

AND THE STRUGGLE FOR FAITH

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the increasingly troubled religious beliefs of the Southern poet Sidney Lanier, and to place the progress of those beliefs within the larger context of nineteenth-century thought and literature.

Like other sensitive Victorians, Lanier was deeply disturbed by the ongoing controversy between science and religion, particularly the bitter debate over the theory of evolution which culminated in 1859 with the publication of Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species. At the same time, Lanier's experiences as a Confederate soldier in the Civil War caused him to question the validity of organized religion in light of the churches' support of the war, and led him on a quest for personal salvation through the quasi-religions of Art and Love.

Following the lead of such disparate thinkers as Thomas Carlyle, Alfred Tennyson, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lanier attempted to forge, through the bravely determined exertion of his own will, an individualized system of

beliefs capable of reconciling the conflicts between science and religion, war and peace, and public and private responsibilities. The increasing inefficacy of his attempts forced Lanier, at the end of his life, into a spiritual crisis whose climax he poignantly documents in his greatest--and in some ways most misunderstood--poem, "The Marshes of Glynn."

Lanier's constant search for spiritual peace is traced through selections of his poetry, his novel, Tiger-Lilies, his public addresses and private letters. Particular attention has been paid to Lanier's posthumously published poem outlines, many of which indicate more clearly than his completed works the increasing doubt and anxiety he felt over the perceived decline of social, moral, and spiritual values in the years following the Civil War.

More than has been commonly assumed, Lanier was an artist whose life and work placed him at the forefront of his era's most pressing philosophical debate: the growing chasm between scientific discoveries and received religious doctrines. That his efforts to narrow, or at least to account for, this gap were less than completely successful,

either for him or for us, does not detract from the very real courage of his attempts. Lanier's troubled legacy of spiritual doubt, coupled with his lifelong struggle to believe, locates him squarely within the tide of modern American literature, preoccupied as it is by its own unreconciled and perhaps irreconcilable conflict between faith and disbelief.

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CHAPTER I

THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

They sensed that current accounts of the world were inadequate; that they had allowed their windows on reality to become smeared by convention, religion, social stagnation; they knew, in short, that they had things to discover, and that the discovery was of the utmost importance to the future of man.¹

Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined.²

Sidney Lanier came of age--physically, mentally, and emotionally--at the confluence of his era's two most cataclysmic events: the American Civil War and the publication, immediately preceding the war, of Charles Darwin's epochal treatise on evolution, The Origin of Species. These separate and unrelated events, occurring successively at a time when Lanier was most impressionable and open to change, forcibly altered his view of the world, and ultimately led

¹John Fowles, The French Lieutenant's Woman (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 44.

²Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 4.

him to question his most basic assumptions about God and man. A native Southerner, Lanier fought in the war, was captured and held in a Union prison camp, and there contracted a fatal case of tuberculosis which left him weak and in pain for the remainder of his life. In some ways, however, it was Darwin's work, and the social and religious controversy it engendered, which caused Lanier--and other sensitive Victorians--the greater amount of suffering, hastening as it did his progressive disavowal of organized religion and leaving him to confront, troubled and alone, the lengthening shadows of spiritual doubt on the twilight marshes of Glynn in his home state of Georgia.

Like most Southerners, then as now, Lanier sprang from sturdy Protestant roots. His parents, Robert Sampson and Mary Anderson Lanier, were both products of the rich vein of Puritanism running through the South; and his mother, in particular, is remembered as being "peculiarly though not narrowly religious."³ It was her influence which

³Aubrey Starke, Sidney Lanier (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), p. 8. Hereafter cited internally as Starke.

proved to be the strongest on Lanier and his younger brother and sister, and the children were raised as Presbyterians "in the practice of the strictest Christian creed" (Starke, p. 8). By all accounts, the religious atmosphere of their hometown of Macon was solidly orthodox, with the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian congregations sharing the majority of the town's churchgoers. These conservative Protestant sects created, not only in Macon but throughout the South,

a way of living and an attitude toward life that can only be described as Puritan. It was this Puritanism--with its distrust of change, its emphasis on virtue but on sin also, and its encouragement of graciousness and dignity in living--that colored the life of the town (Starke, p. 6).

At the age of fifteen, Lanier, acceding to his mother's fervent wishes, abandoned plans to attend his father's alma mater, Randolph-Macon College in Virginia, and matriculated instead at nearby Oglethorpe University, in Milledgeville, Georgia. Oglethorpe, a staunchly Presbyterian school, was one of many existing in the pre-war South "chiefly because parents demanded for their children orthodox religious education and the cultivation of a strong, unassailable religious faith" (Starke, p. 21). At first, the young Lanier accepted without question the creed of the

school, joining the church in his freshman year and quickly establishing a reputation as a sober, dependable, and serious-minded scholar. An episode during his first year at college is indicative of Lanier's mind-set at this time. In a letter to his father confessing an ill-advised loan from a fellow student, Lanier laments:

My father, I have sinned! Against your law of conduct which you have laid down for my observance I have sinned. . . . O, with what intensity of thoughts, with what deep and earnest reflections have I contemplated this. . . . It is with heart throbbing with intensity of its anguish that I write you this. Not a night passes but the supplication, God bless my parents, ascends to the mercy-seat.⁴

In a diary note from the same period, Lanier is even more explicitly religious:

Liberty, patriotism, and civilization are on their knees before the men of the South, and with clasped hands and straining eyes are begging them to become Christian (Starke, p. 23).

But even at Oglethorpe, Lanier's lifelong habit of self-examination, as well as his surprising tendency toward mysticism and romanticism, began to emerge. To his devout

⁴Charles R. Anderson, ed., The Centennial Edition of the Works of Sidney Lanier (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1945), VII, 5-6. Hereafter cited internally by volume and page number.

and unquestioning mother, Lanier wondered about the denominational differences and feelings of competition between the churches, and also about his father's personal religious beliefs. (It is perhaps suggestive of Mrs. Lanier's pre-eminence in the family's spiritual affairs that Sidney asked her, rather than his father, this question.) Also during his time at Oglethorpe, Lanier began to demonstrate a high degree of talent as a flutist, performing impassioned and impromptu concerts for his roommates which sometimes ended with his falling into a trance-like state, wholly transported by his music. Clearly, Lanier already was developing, by his middle teens, into someone more complex and unusual than the pious young student he was at some pains to appear to be.

The strongest and undoubtedly the most enduring influence on Lanier during his college days was his friendship with Oglethorpe's professor of natural sciences, Dr. James Woodrow. Woodrow was thirty-one when he met Lanier, an ordained Presbyterian minister with degrees from Harvard University and Heidelberg, Germany. Through Woodrow, a charismatic and controversial figure within the Presbyterian

Church, Lanier first became acquainted with the growing controversy between science and religion then spreading from England to the United States. The theory of evolution, with all its attendant ethical and religious implications, was already, by 1859, a much-discussed and highly disputed subject. Almost certainly, Lanier had heard something of the theory prior to meeting Woodrow. Still, it was the young science professor who familiarized Lanier with both the scientific foundations of the theory and the implicit challenge it presented to accepted religious beliefs. Woodrow's position on the matter, according to Edwin Mims, was one in which he

maintained that the science of theology, as a science, is equally human and uninspired with the science of geology. He cited illustrations from the long warfare of science and theology to show that the church would make a great mistake if it attempted to shut-off the human intellect from the search for the truth.⁵

This "long warfare" between science and religion, a tension which resulted in Woodrow's case with his eventual expulsion from the church (Starke, p. 32), came to a head in England, by a curiously apt coincidence of timing,

⁵ Edwin Mims, Sidney Lanier (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), p. 28.

the same autumn that Lanier and Woodrow were becoming acquainted at Oglethorpe. The electrifying appearance of Darwin's Origin of Species, with its emphasis on survival of the fittest, accidental variation of species, and the implacable struggle for life within the animal world, represented to both its supporters and detractors the long-awaited climax to years of controversy between the scientific and religious communities over science's perceived challenge to the church. As A.S.P. Woodhouse has noted, Darwin's work

sharpened the line of cleavage between science and religion. It seemed to dispose once and for all not only of a literal reading of the first chapter of Genesis, already undermined by a study of the geological record, but of the compromises sought in a series of special "creations" which had been advanced to meet the evidence of that record. Further, though Darwin was slow to make the inference specific, it was recognized that, if true at all, his evolutionary theory applied likewise to the descent of man, with a series of disturbing consequences for his dignity and for the soul as an immortal entity.⁶

The Origin of Species, however singular and sensational, was merely the culmination of decades of scientific

⁶A.S.P. Woodhouse, The Poet and His Faith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 208-209.

research and discoveries. Scientists such as Sir Charles Lyell, whose 1830 study, Principles of Geology, anticipated Darwin's with its theories on the supercession of species and the antiquity of the earth, and Herbert Spencer, whose ongoing research into human behavior attempted to suggest an ethical system for that behavior, had laid the groundwork for Darwin's controversial theory. Against this tide of discovery and change, religious leaders in England marshalled their considerable forces, some going to the ludicrous extreme of maintaining that God had created fossils at the same time He created Adam and Eve. As Georg Roppen has noted:

From the very beginning the church leaders decided that on this issue there could be no truce or compromise. It was not a question of defending dogma for the sake of church prestige, but a struggle of life and death for the central truths on which Christian faith rested.⁷

As is usually the case, the tensions and disputes within society were mirrored in the works of the age's leading writers, among them Thomas Carlyle and Alfred Tennyson. In different ways but with similar results, both men

⁷Georg Roppen, Evolution and Poetic Belief (Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Press, 1956), pp. 28-29.

articulated the Victorian struggle to retain religious conviction in the face of scientific encroachment. Their most anguished works, Carlyle's Sartor Resartus and Tennyson's In Memoriam, are powerful testaments of faith overcoming doubt, and their similar solutions, amounting at last to a stubborn assertion of the individual will to believe, would come to have a far-reaching impact on Sidney Lanier when he faced his own dark night of the soul.

It does not seem altogether coincidental, given Lanier's ongoing relationship with Professor Woodrow, that Carlyle and Tennyson had become, by 1859, Lanier's favorite writers (Starke, p. 29). Indeed, it may be possible to infer a new element of doubt and confusion within Lanier from his undergraduate taste in literature. Both Carlyle and Tennyson confronted the desolating sense "that man was displaced from the centre. No longer the lord of creation, he found himself in a rapidly expanding universe with certainty retreating."⁸ For Carlyle, this vision amounted to "The Everlasting No," a devastating negation of faith where

⁸ Raymond Chapman, The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society, 1832-1901 (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 272.

mankind found itself "quite shut-out from Hope; looking not into the golden orient, but vaguely all around into a dim copper firmament, pregnant with earthquake and tornado."⁹ Confronted by the specter of an apparently hostile universe, Carlyle wonders:

Is there no God, then; but at best an absentee God, sitting idle, ever since the first Sabbath, at the outside of his universe, and seeing it go? . . . It is all a grim Desert, this once-fair world of his; wherein is heard only the howling of wild beasts, or the shrieks of despairing, hate-filled men.¹⁰

This vision of the wasteland is vitiated, for Carlyle, by a growing conviction that it exists merely as a temptation, a trial to be welcomed by the true believer:

Name it as we choose: with or without visible Devil, whether in the natural Desert of rocks and sands, or in the populous Desert of selfishness and baseness,--to such Temptation are we called. Unhappy if we are not! Unhappy if we are but Half-men, in whom that divine handwriting has not blazed forth. . . . Our wilderness is the wide World in an Atheistic Century, our Forty Days are long years of suffering and fasting.¹¹

⁹Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, in The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, ed. Frank Kermode and John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), II, 804.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 805-806.

¹¹Ibid., p. 810.

Tennyson's crisis, more immediately personal if perhaps less profoundly desperate than Carlyle's, was occasioned by the sudden death of his great friend Arthur Hallam in 1833. For the next seventeen years, Tennyson worked on the sequence of elegies, In Memoriam, which he published anonymously in 1850. In these poems (or poem, since there is a definite sense of progress in the work, charting the poet's passage from grief and doubt to acceptance and renewed belief), Tennyson explores the various responses of one who has suffered a devastating loss, a loss so shocking as to call into question his entire system of religious beliefs. Setting aside the Prologue, which some critics find excessively dogmatic and tendentious, In Memoriam remains a comprehensive examination of the Victorian mind in conflict with itself. In section LV, Tennyson neatly summarizes this conflict, its effect, and resolution:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;

That I, considering everywhere
Her secret meaning in her deeds,
And finding that of fifty seeds
She often brings but one to bear,

I falter where I firmly trod,
 And falling with my weight of cares
 Upon the great world's altar-stairs
 That slope through darkness up to God,

I stretch lame hands of faith and grope,
 And gather dust and chaff, and call
 To what I feel is Lord of all,
 And faintly trust the larger hope.¹²

This rather tentative affirmation Tennyson finds reinforced by his mystic vision of Hallam somehow merged with God and nature, allowing the poet to declare at last that "all is well, though faith and form/Be sundered in the night of fear."¹³ Like Carlyle, Tennyson's resolution of doubt is ultimately negative in effect, more a refusal to abandon hope than a full-hearted acceptance of religious belief. For Tennyson, this unshakable hope is to be found in the creation of a world of love capable of transcending mere mortality:

Far off thou art, but ever nigh:
 I have thee still, and I rejoice;
 I prosper, circled with thy voice;
 I shall not lose thee though I die.¹⁴

¹² Alfred Tennyson, In Memoriam, in The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, II, 1239.

¹³ Ibid., p. 1250.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 1251.

Love, for Tennyson, becomes the basic law of the world, by whose rule the forces of chaos and despair may be held at bay, if not actually defeated. But God, at least the personal, eternally-present God of Christianity, remains for the poet "a fair-off divine event"¹⁵ whose existence must be accepted by faith, but can never be proved. As John D. Jump has pointed out:

There is nothing specifically Christian about the religious faith expressed in the lyrics. . . . The poet's inner experience has led him to accept a form of theism that includes a belief in the immortality of the soul. This falls far short of the full Christian faith, but very seldom does the poet offer anything else.¹⁶

The examples of Carlyle and Tennyson, as well as that of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Lanier had not yet read, would prove to have a lifelong impact on Lanier's own poetry. As for Woodrow, his influence on the still developing young poet seems to have been deep and far-reaching:

Woodrow's liberating influence on Lanier can hardly be overestimated, but his service was

¹⁵Tennyson, p. 1252.

¹⁶John D. Jump, "Tennyson's Religious Faith and Doubt," in Writers and Their Background: Tennyson, ed. D.J. Palmer (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1973), pp. 109-110.

especially this: that he stimulated in Lanier a deep reverence for science, while inspiring him with a fervent religious faith and a broad, liberal outlook on life, emphasizing not any agreement between science and the Bible, but an absence of contradiction (Starke, p. 37).

This may be a trifle disingenuous, since "the absence of contradiction" between science and religion would not necessarily outweigh the absence of agreement between the two camps. Certainly for the seventeen-year-old Lanier, raised and educated in an environment of strict adherence to the Biblical word, the notion that, as many others sensed, there was a fundamental difference of opinion between the findings of science and the tenets of faith must have come as a rather shocking idea. Here, for the first time, Lanier was made aware of the narrow confines of his spiritual and philosophical world. His plans to expand those limits by following Woodrow's lead and continuing his education in Germany were soon cut short by the coming of the Civil War. But it was Woodrow (to whom Lanier later said he was more indebted than to any other person) who first introduced Lanier to the complexities and contradictions of the post-Darwinian world. Lanier's close reading of Carlyle and Tennyson thus would seem to have been an adjunct of his long discussions

with Woodrow, and perhaps also an anodyne for the confusions attendant upon his enlightenment. The responses of Carlyle and Tennyson to the essential problem of belief provided Lanier with a striking example of the painful cost exacted by faith in a world disrupted by scientific upheaval. Their insistence upon the need to believe, and most particularly their emphasis on adherence to an individual creed or vision, made a lasting impression on the young Lanier. From Carlyle he absorbed the notion of the artist-hero, the great man whose life, tempered by pain and temptation, might function as an example for other believers. From Tennyson he acquired the belief in a secularized, if still spiritual, religion of love, in which the doubts and fears of the modern world could be etherealized and so overcome. Both systems of belief would be given a long trial by the mature Lanier. But first he faced a more immediate--and no less profound--challenge to his religious upbringing: the coming of the Civil War.

CHAPTER II

WAR, DEFEAT, AND THE RELIGION OF LOVE

An afflatus of war was breathed upon us. Like a great wind, it drew on and blew upon men, women, and children. Its sound mingled with the solemnity of the church-organs and arose with the earnest words of preachers praying for guidance. . . . This wind blew upon all the vanes of all the churches of the country, and turned them one way--toward war. (Tiger-Lilies, p. 96).

How does God have the heart to allow it? (Tiger-Lilies, p. 138).

For Sidney Lanier, as for millions of other Americans of the North and South, the Civil War was the watershed experience of his life. Never again, after four years of war, was he the same. Disrupting his studies, the war thrust Lanier into a cauldron of death and destruction, devastated his region, and left him crippled by a progressively severe and ultimately fatal disease. Moreover, the virtually unanimous support for the war within Southern churches left Lanier bitter, confused, and disillusioned. His earlier questioning of organized religion, accelerated by his long discussions with Professor Woodrow on the conflict between

science and theology, developed after the war into a life-long rejection of what Lanier contemptuously and habitually referred to as "creeds." Deprived of the spiritual underpinnings of his youth, Lanier would spend the rest of his life seeking a replacement for what he had lost.

The war began for Lanier, as it did for most Southerners, in a spirit of high ideals and even higher enthusiasm. Secession from the union, long-predicted and (by many) long-awaited, seemed to the people of the South not merely inevitable, but also righteous, noble, and pre-ordained by God. A brief war and a glorious victory were forecast by all but the prescient few, and independence, not rebellion, was the watchword of the day.

At the beginning of the war, Lanier was serving as a postgraduate tutor at Oglethorpe, a post secured for him by Woodrow. Like his father, Lanier was not at first an ardent secessionist, but rather hoped that the conflict might be avoided (Starke, p. 44). In a post-war essay, "Bombs from Below," Lanier somewhat ruefully speculates that he caught the contagion of war-fever from the very air he breathed in the first heady days of Southern independence (V, 205). However it was that he came to support the war,

Lanier had become, by the summer of 1861, sufficiently aroused to enlist in the Confederate army. In a hurried note scribbled to his brother on the day of his departure, Lanier declares: "Am just about to start to the scene of hostilities. On to the Field of Glory!" (VII, 42). Like most young men of his ill-starred generation, Lanier subscribed to the romantic dream of a new and shining Confederacy, one which would be the embodiment of all that was most desirable in Southern society. In a speech given--appropriately enough--at Rose Hill Cemetery in Macon four years after war, Lanier describes "the glory of those days when young Liberty sailed in front of our arms, and her radiant eyes beamed upon our victorious armies, as a maiden's upon her lover in the first flush of love" (V, 271).

Lanier's war experiences, prior to 1864, were both typical and at the same time atypical. Lengthy garrison duties on the coast of Virginia (where Lanier and his comrades enjoyed a ringside seat at the famous naval clash between the Monitor and the Merrimac) gave way to active service at some of the war's costliest battles, including the crushing Confederate defeat at Malvern Hill and the

equally decisive victory by Lee and Jackson at Chancellorsville, where Lanier wrestled with his conscience over taking a new shirt from the corpse of a dead Union soldier. (He refrained from doing so.) Dangerous duty aboard blockade-running Southern sloops was interspersed with flute-playing sessions behind the lines; and Lanier even found time to court the beautiful dark-haired daughter of an old-line Virginia family, taking long walks in the woods, writing poetry to the girl, and enjoying her family's comparatively lavish (for wartime) hospitality. These idyllic--and in some ways schizophrenic--experiences ended abruptly in November, 1864, when the ship on which Lanier was serving was captured while on its way to Cuba for supplies. Now began a series of stays in Union prison camps, culminating in a three-month ordeal at the infamous Point Lookout prison on the coast of Maryland. While there, Lanier, whose family had a history of tuberculosis, contracted the deadly disease which was to shorten his life and cause him virtually unrelieved pain for the final sixteen years remaining to him. Securing his release with the help of some gold coins smuggled into the prison by a friend, Lanier made his way home

in March, 1865, only a few weeks prior to Lee's surrender at Appomattox.

The South to which Lanier returned was very different from the gay and confident region he had left behind in the summer of 1861. Reeling from a defeat as total as it was unexpected, the region shivered in a kind of collective shell shock which the increasingly radicalized North did nothing to alleviate--in fact, took steps to worsen. Lanier's brother, Clifford, himself a veteran of the war, recalls the "bitter, terrible peace" which settled over the South in the spring of 1865:

The last suns of April shone pleasantly on the smoking homesteads of the conquered and the glittering bayonets of the conquerors, to grieved and exultant hearts; on soldiers reveling in camp, other soldiers tramping wearily home; on illuminated cities and darkened villages; one section jubilant with victory, the other silent with defeat; on demoralization, triumph, woe, want, and death; pomp and misery, laughter and tears (Starke, p. 72).

For Lanier, attempting to recover his health and to reestablish some semblance of stability in his life, the Reconstruction era was a period of angry despair unequalled by any other period of his life. The bright hopes of Southern independence had given way to the "dark raven days" of

military defeat and occupation. In a series of bitter and sardonic poems, Lanier castigates the North for its total lack of Christian charity, while recognizing at the same time that the South has to shoulder a portion of the blame for its defeat. The poem "Laughter in the Senate" expresses Lanier's contempt for the Northern politicians whose jibes had provoked the South to war, and whose vindictiveness was behind Reconstruction abuses. Here the South is depicted as a heartbroken beggar, tantalized by the sound of distant merrymaking which it takes to be "the cheerful voice of Aid" (I, 14). Instead, the laughter is that of the Northern senators who "chuckle o'er their jest"--Reconstruction--while using their "dainty wit" to make fun of the South's unhappy situation (I, 14). The poem concludes with an image of the Senate, decked out in clown's motley, ignoring the "fast-rising frown" (I, 14) on the faces of the down-trodden people.

"Steel in Soft Hands" continues Lanier's attack on the Senate, raising the level of his contempt for the "rosy-fingered" senators who have (hyperbolically) seized the bayonets of honorable soldiers and are using them to rob

and desecrate the bodies of fallen Southerners, while tormenting the living who have no protection (I, 169). The imagery is ugly, conjuring up the picture of marauding scavengers who followed the armies after battle and murdered the wounded as they lay helpless on the battlefield. It is a sight, Lanier says, that even the dead Union soldiers would "reach up from their graves" (I, 169) to warn against.

"Burn the Stubble," written at the same time, transforms this anger into an acrimonious passivity in which the South expresses the negative wish that renewed warfare would "burn Life off" the face of the defeated land (I, 169). In a world where "griefs sting" and "hungry children die" (I, 169), Lanier can only counsel endurance "till the round earth turn" and "God shall burn" the stubble from the land (I, 169).

"The Raven Days," perhaps Lanier's best-known Reconstruction poem, continues the imagery of blight and despair. Free of the easy irony and anthropomorphized sentimentality that mar many of his protest poems, "The Raven Days" successfully maintains a tone of melancholy helplessness and acceptance. The first stanza presents a vision of the South

as a literal wasteland, haunted by ghosts--the living as well as the dead--and filled with a palpable pain and sorrow:

Our hearths are gone out and our hearts are broken,
And but the ghosts of homes to us remain,
And ghostly eyes and hollow sighs give token
From friend to friend of an unspoken pain (I, 15).

It should be remembered that Lanier was a native of Georgia, the state that Sherman's troops devastated on their march to the sea, and the "ghosts of homes" is a realistic, as well as a metaphorical, image.

The second stanza introduces the image of the raven--the bird of death--giving added emphasis to the title's probably conscious allusion to Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's raven, of course, came to assert the permanent separation of the narrator and his lover; and when one recalls the Southern worship of women, it is no large leap of imagination to see the fallen South as the lost Lenore, whose way of life will return "nevermore."

The third stanza emphasizes the feeling of powerlessness endemic to the South after the war:

Ye float in dusky files, forever croaking--
Ye chill our manhood with your dreary shade.
Pale, in the dark, not even God invoking,
We lie in chains, too weak to be afraid (I, 15).

Thus the Southerner after the Civil War: his manhood chilled, his faith in God severely tested if not shattered--"not even God invoking"--and so reduced in strength and spirit that he is "too weak to be afraid." It should be noted that the South, like other nations in other wars, had been absolutely sure that God was on its side, which made the surrender at Appomattox all the more shattering.

The final stanza is ambiguous, reflecting perhaps the dilemma facing Lanier, a naturally hopeful man, as he sees a present and foresees a future of unrelenting pain and hardship for his stricken region:

O Raven Days, dark Raven Days of sorrow,
Will ever any warm light come again?
Will ever the lit mountains of tomorrow
Begin to gleam across the mournful plain? (I, 15)

The questions at the end of the poem, however rhetorical, nevertheless encourage answers; and the response one makes determines the ultimate meaning of the poem.

Less ambiguous, and less effective, is the last of Lanier's Reconstruction poems, "The Ship of Earth." Here the poet depicts a world where the normal voyage of life, including the primal urges of birth, sex, and death, is menaced by a shipboard mutiny, and "all the deck is wet

with blood and stains the crystal red" (I, 15). What is worse, the ship is pilotless (another example, perhaps, of the loss of faith following the unsuccessful war), and "the helm is left awry" (I, 15). Despite begging God to provide another pilot for the ship, Lanier observes that "the best sailors in the ship lie there among the dead" (I, 15), and the ship founders without direction. For the South, dependent as never before on enlightened leadership, an entire generation of leaders had been decimated by the carnage of war.

Like other soldiers after other wars, Lanier's personal brush with death had the immediate effect of calling into question the moral and spiritual grounds on which his country had made its fight. In his eyes, the South had helped bring about its own destruction by indulging in a false and sinful pride. He speaks mockingly of

this embodiment of a people's egotism: this perpetual arrogant invitation to draw and come on: this eternal posture of insult in which we walked about with our clenched fist thrust in the face of all nations (V, 206).

Such criticism reaches its peak in Tiger-Lilies, the curious and uneven novel Lanier published at his own expense two

years after the end of the war. Here, Lanier makes manifest his disgust with organized religion, the creeds of his youth which he now accuses of complicity in the instigation and prosecution of the war, and holds at least partly responsible for the terrible suffering after defeat. To Lanier, the beginning of the war was like the blooming of "a strange, enormous, and terrible flower" (V, 93) which had been carefully cultivated by supporters of the war and also by "our preachers (who) recommend the use of this plant, and help us rightly to raise it" (V, 95). Those opposing the war--and Lanier does not, in all honesty, include himself in this group--feel that

the preachers should preach about Christ (who) did upon all occasions, not only discourage the resort to this measure, but did inveigh against it more earnestly than anything else. . . . If war was ever right, then Christ was always wrong; and war-flowers and the vine of Christ grow different ways, insomuch that no man may grow with both (V, 95).

But the good counsel of the peacekeepers is to no avail in a region caught up by the enthusiasm for war. The churches themselves, in Lanier's view, are at the front of the agitation for war, and the people, misguided by their own vanity and the abdication of morality on

the part of the churches, are depicted as marching gaily into a debacle whose cost Lanier mordantly totals:

some hundreds of thousands of men killed and hurt: some hundreds of thousands of widows and orphans: some billions of money destroyed by being created: some millions of characters male and female demoralized: some hundreds of thousands of boys doomed to ignorance by their inability to study on account of the noise of the shells: some billions of property burned by the intense heat: and a miscellaneous mass of poverty, starvation, disease and dirt precipitated upon the people . . . beyond all hope of extrication, save by the Good Samaritan--Death, who may pull some out (V, 204).

The debasement of religion by its participation in the war is even more strongly stated by Lanier in a postwar essay, "Retrospects and Prospects":

The union of Church and State threw both of them into the falsest of attitudes; it puffed up the State with a dignity far above its deserving, and it degraded the Church to a station utterly beneath it. . . . Any compromise between these two is simply ruinous to both. And so it is well that the Church has lost or is losing, all temporal dominions and powers (V, 304).

But if the established religion of his youth has proved to be unsatisfactory--if not indeed unsavory--where is Lanier to turn for belief? He gives his answer in Tiger-Lilies: like his mentor Tennyson he will worship love itself.

It is no coincidence that Lanier's epigraph for the

book is taken from Tennyson's In Memoriam; like the stanza quoted, Lanier is determined to "give to earthly love his dues." He states the case explicitly in his introduction, calling for a "love, strong as it is humble, for what is beautiful in God's Nature and in Man's Art" (V, 5). A.S.P. Woodhouse finds a similar philosophy at the center of In Memoriam:

When, confronted by the impossibility of proof, the heart replies, "I have felt," we must not take this to mean, "I have felt the desire for immortality," but "I have had experience beyond the scope of sense perception and reasoned inference"--in a word, the experience of love--and it is in this experience that the belief is grounded not only in immortality but in God as a God of love.¹

The fact that a sizable portion of Tiger-Lilies, a novel professedly devoted to love, is given over to a graphic description of violence, hatred, warfare, and death, may suggest an obvious reason why Lanier feels such a need to locate the "God of love." Like Tennyson, he finds himself confronted on every side by the specter of death and the even-darker shadows of randomness and chance. Even an ideal

¹A.S.P. Woodhouse, The Poet and His Faith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 222.

place such as Valley Beautiful, the mountain home of the book's hero, Philip Sterling, and his family, is not exempt from the poisoned petals of "the blood-red flower of war" (V, 93). Moreover, as Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan has said: Lanier is at some pains in the novel to demonstrate that "the threats come from within the pastoral confines of Thalberg itself as well as from without."² In such a world, it is only love which offers a haven to the imperiled. In a remarkable passage early in the novel--written, significantly, in the authorial rather than the narrative voice--Lanier sums up the meaning of love, as seen through the eyes of the true believer:

I am quite confident that Love is the only rope thrown out by Heaven to us who have fallen overboard into life.

Love for man, love for woman, love for God--these three chime like bells in a steeple and call us to worship, which is, to work. Three notes to a full chord, say the musicians; and this is the three-toned harmony our world should make, in this immense musical festival of the stars.

Inasmuch as we love, in so much do we conquer death and flesh; by as much as we love,

²Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, The Dream of Arcady (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 23.

by so much are we gods. For God is love; and could we love as He does, we could be as He is (V, 26).

The hero's sister, Felix, in the novel's most famous passage, shortens the equation: "Music means harmony, harmony means love, and love means--God" (V, 31).

Yet despite Lanier's avowed intention to worship love and the novel's preposterously Shakespearean ending (the happy couples pair off for marriage even as the flames of defeat are sweeping through Richmond), Tiger-Lilies contains a dark undertone of violence. Soldiers are shot in the mouth or bashed on the head, a dead man's body washes onto a peaceful beach, the villain and his drink-besotted mistress are killed by a stray cannon ball, and even the innocent romantic John Sterling and his wife are shot from ambush at Valley Beautiful itself. In his book on love, Lanier provides graphic descriptions of how it feels "just after you have killed a man, and perhaps felt the sickening warmth of his blood, and turned away from the terrible odor that rises like a curse from the wound" (V, 108). Stretcher-bearers, leaving "a dripping line of blood," (V, 133) are advised to walk more softly, since "easy walking is desirable when each step . . . spurts out the blood afresh, or

grates the rough edge of a shot bone in your leg" (V, 133). More telling, perhaps, as an indictment of war is Philip Sterling's quiet and despairing: "How does God have the heart to allow it?" (V, 138). It is a question that Lanier as an ex-soldier cannot avoid asking, although one may speculate that he wished to avoid it. And despite the implied answer (Philip finds on a dying soldier's face a brief trace of "winged victory"), it seems somehow significant that Philip--who is Lanier's alter-ego in the book--turns away from the soldier and gazes out to sea without further comment. If his question has been answered, Lanier does not bother to elucidate it. According to Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Tennyson felt In Memoriam to be "too hopeful--more than I am myself."³ After reading Tiger-Lilies, one has a similar feeling about the novel. Despite much talk of music, love, friendship, and harmony, Tiger-Lilies' chief power--and its only saving grace for the modern reader--is to be found in its battle scenes. It may be too much to claim, as William J. Kimball does, that "Tiger-Lilies, if carried through, might have introduced the

³Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 113.

public to warfare like The Red Badge of Courage did 30 years later."⁴ Still, as a work of radical pacifism, by a Confederate veteran less than two years removed from the war, Tiger-Lilies is an important way station along Lanier's passage from spiritual certainty to growing doubt. The book both indicts and documents the follies and suffering caused by the war, and implicates the church for a measure of the blame. Given the church's support of the war, it does not seem surprising that Lanier calls, in "Retrospects and Prospects," for a religious revolution in which mankind might, through love, become more perfect, or "etherealized" (V, 304). As Starke has noted, it is difficult to determine exactly what direction Lanier expected his revolution to take; but the significant point is that Lanier, the son of the Puritan South, was sufficiently disenchanted by his religion to look forward to its ultimate disintegration (V, 305). It is also worth noting that, in the testimony of Lanier's wife, Mary, her husband had ceased to be a regular churchgoer and was "not in accord with any of

⁴William J. Kimball, "Realism in Sidney Lanier's Tiger-Lilies," South Atlantic Bulletin, 36 (1971), 18.

the established forms of worship" (I, 1x).

The religion of love, arising from the despair and disorientation of a lost and in some ways misguided war, was a faith without a church or a congregation. Its call, as expressed in Lanier's poem, "Nirvana," was to a "calm sublime" and "inner contemplation long" (I, 20), in which old hatreds and excesses might be left behind by the solitary poet on his isolated mountaintop. Yet this ideal existence, even in Lanier's hopelessly mistaken reading of Buddhism, is felt to be somehow incomplete, because it implicitly denies individual responsibility; and Lanier, who had defined love as, among other things, work, could not accept the lure of the totally independent and selfish life. Philip Sterling, in Tiger-Lilies, had felt a similar temptation while camping out on a mountaintop, but had returned to earth after realizing that "I'm ready for work, and it's all a dream and a play up here in the mountains" (V, 13). Likewise, the spiritually struggling Lanier, disillusioned by organized religion but perhaps not quite believing in the efficacy of a faith founded wholly on love, would for a time exchange his religion of

love for the public role of the artist-hero, whose mission he took from Thomas Carlyle. He would, for a time, attempt to speak a more universal language, to bring the hard but necessary truths to his history-ridden nation. But the dream of the perfectly isolated soul, floating lotus-like in a sea of its own immortality, would never entirely disappear. When all his other systems of belief had failed, Lanier would turn again to his ineradicable faith in the individual soul as the only immortality a person was likely to find.

CHAPTER III

THE ARTIST AS HERO

The Poet is a heroic figure belonging to all ages; whom all ages possess, when once he is produced, whom the newest age as the oldest may produce. . . . Let Nature send a Hero-soul; in no age is it other than possible that he may be shaped into a Poet.¹

As the grim pall of Reconstruction continued to hang over the South, Lanier put aside the ideality of Valley Beautiful for the more mundane responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood. Certainly the postwar South, with its legacy of shattered glories and ruined farms, was a poor climate for nurturing a new religion of love; and Lanier turned away from his literary efforts for a reluctant career with his father's legal firm (Starke, p. 141). In the years between 1868 and 1874, Lanier produced few new poems, but the ones he did write, coupled with a pair of important public addresses, reveal a new direction in his

¹Thomas Carlyle, "On Heroes and Hero Worship," in The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, ed. Frank Kermode and John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), II, 804.

thinking, a high seriousness of which even Carlyle might have approved. The prophet of love, for a time, had exchanged places with the social realist.

In a speech to the 1869 graduating class of Furrow Masonic Female College in Americus, Georgia, Lanier presents his first large-scale analysis of the conditions existing in the South after the war. Lanier castigates "the hideous clamor of corruption, of extravagant rascality" (V, 248), spreading across the land. Noting the region's propensity for self-delusion, he cautions against hasty conclusions and over-optimism, while also denouncing "the small malignities of our conquerors" (V, 257). In the face of such oppression, Lanier counsels patience, which he feels must be cultivated as carefully as the arts of poetry, music, painting, sculpture, and architecture. At the same time, he worries about

a certain insidious evil, which, especially since the war, has been the very bane and poison of all our humble artistic endeavor here in the South. I mean, the habit of inviting purchasers to buy artists' works, simply because they happen to be Southern. . . . and the habit of regarding our literature as Southern literature, our poetry as Southern poetry, our pictures as Southern pictures (V, 260).

This patronization of all things Southern, Lanier believes, is antithetical to true art, since "the basis of it is hate, and Art will have nothing to do with hate" (V, 260). Instead, since art is created by men, and God as creator was the first artist, Lanier sees the duty of all artists to be the cultivation of love, in order that they might be more fully creative:

If then we would be genuine artists, let us love true Love, let us hate false Hate. If we sing, let us sing for the ear of the whole world; if we write, let us write for all nations of all the ages; if we paint, let us paint for the eye of time; if we build, let us build for the cosmopolitan taste of the myriad diverse peoples whom destiny will speedily pour into the length and breadth of our land (V, 261).

The Furlow College address is important in Lanier's ongoing development as a social critic, since it marks the first time that he advocates a national, rather than a regional, outlook, and implicitly calls for the reconciliation of the two war-ravaged regions. Coming at a time when the tendency in the South was toward insularity and self-protection, Lanier's speech represents perhaps the first statement by a prominent Southerner of the need to look outward rather than inward for recovery.

Lanier further elaborates the need for reconciliation in a speech given on April 26, 1870, to the Ladies Memorial Association at Rose Hill Cemetery in Macon. There, beside the graves of fallen Confederate soldiers (among whom he numbered several friends), Lanier calls on Southerners to rise above the pettiness and bigotry of the era in order to achieve a greater tranquility of spirit. Looking ahead to a time when "we are risen immeasurably above all vengeance" (V, 271), Lanier couples his call for sectional forgiveness with a curious attack on the noise and boisterousness of "the false God of Trade" (V, 266), a concern which would come to occupy an increasing amount of Lanier's time. But for now, Lanier is chiefly concerned with the ideal of reconciliation, or at least the lessening of hostilities, between the two regions. In counseling such an effort, Lanier was following the lead of such Southern heroes as Robert E. Lee, who believed that the chief concern of the South should be preparing the young for the future, rather than perpetuating the hostilities of the past. More importantly, Lanier was casting himself--consciously or not--in the role of the poet-hero, the prophet telling harsh

but essential truths to his people. In this way, he was offering himself as an embodiment of Carlyle's call for a dramatic, larger-than-life hero to step forward and lead his troubled countrymen:

It is the poet who must sit at the centre of things here, as surely as some great One sits at the centre of things Yonder, and who must teach us how to control, with temperance and perfect art and unforgetfulness of detail, all our oppositions (IV, 136).

A hero, by definition, needs a cause, and for Lanier the task immediately facing his region seemed to be the business of learning how to live in a new and radically different South. Increasingly, Lanier perceived this new life as being tied to the proper husbandry of the land, which he believed to be the South's most precious resource. In keeping with this perception, Lanier produced in 1871 a series of dialect poems which, though frequently humorous, are distinguished more by their moral seriousness than by their local color. In such poems as "Jones's Private Argument," "9 from 8," "Them Ku Klux," and most importantly, "Thar's More in the Man than Thar Is in the Land," Lanier attempts to instruct, through the lighter touch of parody and comedy, his developing gospel of self-respect through

self-sufficiency. Like a nineteenth-century *Candide*, he advises his kinsmen to tend their gardens--and to watch more carefully what they plant in them. Specifically, he advises the small farmers to spurn the dangerous gamble of cotton-growing for the more ennobling cultivation of food crops such as corn and wheat, which Lanier maintains will make the farmers independent of the crass commercialism and exploitative business practices of the North. As Starke notes:

Lanier saw . . . that the outcome of the Civil War meant above everything else the break-up of the old plantations into small farms, and that a group of successful small farmers is a group of contented men. The problem of the South, as he saw it, was to induce the poor whites to cultivate the land intelligently and with a view to economic independence of foreign markets. The over-production of cotton, then as now, was bringing bankruptcy to the South (Starke, p. 149).

But sound as this advice may have been, Lanier was not at heart a social critic, and certainly not an agronomist. One senses that the dialect poems, however well-motivated, are somewhat patronizing in their tone and simplistic in their message. With Carlyle in mind, Lanier was seeking actively to be a leader, but the agricultural

well-being of the South, though crucially important in and of itself, was not a large enough cause for the heroic soul to champion. Moreover, by the end of 1873 Lanier had left his native region to accept a position as first flutist with the Peabody Orchestra in Baltimore, and the simple homilies of the dialect poems were no longer sufficiently interesting to him, either as poetry or as philosophy.

A transitional poem from 1874, "Corn," finds Lanier rather unsuccessfully attempting to balance between his self-appointed roles. Like the dialect poems, "Corn" concerns itself with the plight of the Southern farmer, who, ignoring the virtues of self-sufficiency, has erected his flimsy home "on the shifting sands/Of trade" (I, 37), thus risking his farm on "the incalculable tides/Whereon capricious Commerce rides" (I, 37). In lush and sometimes egregiously inappropriate verse, Lanier rebukes the farmer for neglecting his land and falling victim to the siren call of "coquette Cotton":

Yea, gathering crops whose worth no man might
 tell,
 He staked his life on games of Buy-and-Sell,
 And turned each field into a gambler's hell.

 In dust, in rain, with might and main,

He nursed his cotton, cursed his grain,
 Fretted for news that made him fret again,
 Snatched at each telegram of Future Sale,
 And thrilled with Bull's or Bear's alternate
 wail (I, 38).

As poetry, "Corn" is not one of Lanier's better performances, reflecting in part the difficult transition he was making in his life and thought. The romantic idealist within him conflicted with the social realist, and the homely lesson of crop rotation and economic independence was sometimes expressed in such comical ways as comparing the hillside to a "gashed and hairy Lear" (I, 39). Nevertheless, the poem was important to Lanier's career, bringing him to the attention of northern poets and editors such as Bayard Taylor, who found Lanier's work a welcome breath of fresh air (Starke, p. 190). Lanier himself felt "Corn" was a good poem, and in a revealing letter to his friend, Georgia Chief Justice Logan Bleckley, he defends the poem's message and reiterates his call for a prophet-poet to lead the fight against "religious fanaticism, frantic patriotism, and rascality" (Starke, p. 195):

I have been wondering where we are going to get a Great Man that will be tall enough to see over the whole country and to direct that vast undoing of things which has got to be accomplished. . . . It is time for a man to arise who is a man (Starke, p. 196).

Lanier is too modest to nominate himself for the post, at least in print, but it is clear, through his call for the overthrow of trade and the introduction of a more humane system of commerce, that Lanier is prepared to accept his own challenge. The language of the letter is revealing, as well, of Lanier's religious opinions at this time, with its call for a leader capable of acting upon "the splendid indignations which are also tender compassion, and which will in one moment be hurling money changers out of the Temple, and in the next preaching Love to them from the steps of it" (Starke, p. 196). This confusion of the poet-hero with Christ is not arrogance on Lanier's part, but rather an expression of his still-evolving sense of the poet's role in the postwar world. The emerging hero is not to be a religious figure; although, given the void left by the now-discredited church, he must embody some of the larger values of religion. Rather, in Lanier's view as it was in Carlyle's, the hero should be an artist in the way that Shakespeare was an artist, capable of reconciling the opposite necessities of the secular and the spiritual worlds.²

²Carlyle, p. 836.

Increasingly during this period, and owing no doubt to his work with the symphony orchestra, Lanier had come to believe that music was the highest form of art. Charles R. Anderson, in the introduction to the centennial edition of Lanier's works, finds that "next to love, and making an equation with it, music was to him the religion of the new age" (I, lxiii). In "The Symphony," Lanier's most ambitious work to date, he attempts to combine the various directions of his philosophy into one titanic poem of protest. Here the artist-hero attempts, through the symbolic and functional uses of music, to lead the world out of the foul clutches of the false god of trade and into a more humane and ethical future. In a letter to his wife written two weeks before the poem, Lanier cites his "fair dreams and hopes" for his music:

It is a gospel whereof the people are in great need. As Christ gathered up the ten commandments and re-distilled them into the clear liquid of that wondrous eleventh--love God utterly and thy neighbor as thyself--so I think the time will come when music, rightly developed to its now-little-foreseen grandeur, will be found to be a later revelation of all gospels in one (VIII, 113).

"The Symphony," is arranged, as Jack De Bellis has

pointed out--³ into four major sections designed to represent different musical instruments: the violin, the flute, the clarinet, the french horn, the oboe, and the bassoon. Each of these instruments speaks a piece attacking what Lanier sees as the worst current abuses in the world. The violins, beginning the movement, denounce trade--Lanier's particular hobby-horse--which he associates with the evils of selfishness, greed, and exploitation.

"O Trade! O Trade! Would thou wert dead!
The Time needs heart--'tis tired of head:
We're all for love," the violins said (I, 46).

The strings take up the defense of the poor, who "Stand/
Wedged by the pressing of Trade's hand/Against an inward-
opening door" (I, 47). These exploited poor work in the mills and mines, reduced to the level of beasts not only by their physical wants but also by their spiritual impoverishment: "The world's a sty" (I, 47). Trade is seen as a lie, or at best a euphemism--"'Tis only war grown miserly" (I, 48), leaving the same widows and orphans.

In the second section, the flute (Lanier's instrument) comes forward and speaks in behalf of the virtues

³Jack De Bellis, Sidney Lanier (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), p. 83.

of human love:

Sweet friends,
 Man's love ascends
 To finer and diviner ends
 Than man's mere thought e'er comprehends (I, 49).

The flute urges mankind to return to the beauties of nature and the gospel of Christ which nature seems to represent:

Later a sweet Voice Love thy neighbor said;
 Then first the bonds of neighborhood outspread
 Beyond all confines of old ethnic dread.
All men are neighbors, so the sweet Voice said
 (I, 51).

The section concludes with the flute urging trade to change its ways and allow the poor to enjoy the mercies and ministry of nature.

The third section, the clarinet's and horn's, takes up a rather tenuously connected lament for trade's supposed mistreatment of women, which Lanier suggests has led some women into a life of prostitution:

O purchased lips that kiss with pain!
 O cheeks coin-spotted with smirch and stain!
 O trafficked hearts that break in twain! (I, 52)

The ladylike clarinet complains that men no longer love women in the same high ways of chivalry, but merely use them as commercial items to be bought and discarded: Here, you Lady, if you'll sell, I'll buy" (I, 52). De Bellis

believes that Lanier intends here to suggest the ultimate victory of love over trade;⁴ but the end of the section seems unfocused--and not a little absurd. One recognizes that there have been prostitutes throughout history, not merely in the commerce-minded nineteenth century, and the poem, even by its own internal logic, falters badly on this point.

The final section has the oboe and bassoon reiterating the call for a saving love which alone can resolve the discords and brutalities of modern life:

And ever Love hears the poor-folks' crying,
And ever Love hears the women's sighing,
And ever sweet knighthood's death-defying,
And ever wise childhood's deep implying,
But never a trader's glozing and lying (I, 56).

The poem concludes with an assurance that love, like the dove of peace, will pass over the modern wasteland, bringing with it a message of hope and redemption, an ideal vision summarized a little vaguely but still beautifully by Lanier's famous concluding line: "Music is Love in search of a word" (I, 56).

⁴De Bellis, p. 91.

For all its absurdities and unresolved weaknesses, "The Symphony" is a crucial poem in Lanier's development as an artist. It is, simultaneously, a recapitulation of his call for a religion of love, acquired from Tennyson and stressed at great length in Tiger-Lilies; and a vision of hope for the future expressed through the words of the artist-hero warning mankind to reject the heartless philistinism of trade. As such, the poem represents the zenith of Lanier's commitment to public life and the role of the modern-day prophet.

Unfortunately for Lanier, his heroic pose soon led to an avalanche of criticism in the wake of two well-intentioned but probably ill-advised attempts to function as a conciliator between the two regions by writing (on commission) the nationalistic poems, "The Centennial Meditation of Columbia" and "The Psalm of the West." As with his earlier speeches to Furlow College and the Confederate womens club, Lanier apparently hoped the poems, marking the country's 100th anniversary, would help to bridge the gap still existing between the North and the South. "The Centennial Meditation," which was intended to be sung

to a score by Dudley Buck at the opening ceremonies of the gala Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia on July 4, was published mistakenly without the music a few days before the planned event. Reviews were swift and merciless, with the northern magazine, Nation, in particular, singling out the poem for brutal derision. Lanier's poem, said the magazine, was "a communication from the spirit of Nat Lee, rendered through a Bedlamite medium."⁵ Judgment of "The Psalm of the West," which had been commissioned by Lanier's long-time publisher, Lippincott, for its magazine, was less severe, but only slightly; and the net effect of the dual criticism on Lanier seems to have been an immediate and permanent disabusal of his self-confidence in the role of the poet-hero. In a somewhat self-pitying letter to his wife, Lanier magnanimously writes:

I do not hate the people who have so cruelly maltreated me; they know not what they did; and my life will be of some avail if it shall teach even one of them a consideration that may bloom in tenderer treatment of any future young artist (IX, 374).

This implied connection with Christ, occasioned by the

⁵De Bellis, p. 91.

criticism of two uninspired and rather minor poems, marks something of a nadir for Lanier's personal and artistic judgment.

Like his earlier dreams of Southern statehood and the self-ministering potentialities of a religion founded on human love, Lanier's efforts to function as an artist-hero ultimately proved to be inadequate and frustrating. The dizzying rush for commercial success--in Mark Twain's phrase, The Gilded Age--was not to be overcome by a few well-meaning poems or speeches; sectional differences, based ineradicably on four bitter and bloody years of war, were not to be forgotten overnight; and the ruins of the Southern economy would not be restored by reliance on an antiquated system of agriculture. (When the South came to rebuild, it would follow Henry Grady's famous blueprint for "The New South," based on the industrialization of the region by northern business concerns.) Moreover, Lanier failed to recognize the implicit contradiction between the social realist and the visionary artist, and he himself, at any rate, was poor material for the role of the artist-hero: talented and heroic as he was in many ways, Lanier's dislike for the

notion of art for art's sake, which he contemptuously called "bohemianism" (Starke, p. 171), made the life of the profligate artist distasteful to him--to say nothing of the less-than-enthusiastic response his efforts had won him from the masses. The remaining five years of his life would find Lanier seeking, with increasing desperation, for an individualized salvation founded not on a societal or organized basis, but on the immortal essence of his solitary soul.

CHAPTER IV

ABROAD IN THE MARSH

Surely there is an inherent inconsistency in the proposition that Lanier's woods can simultaneously symbolize the cosmic doubts inferred, say, from Darwin or Lyell and the characteristic Wordsworthian concept of nature as healer. The poet cannot have it both ways. . . . Perhaps not even Emerson can fuse Darwin with Wordsworth.¹

Oh, what is abroad in the marsh and the terminal sea? ("The Marshes of Glynn," I, 77)

Following the disastrous response to his centennial poems, as well as a succession of other personal and artistic disappointments, Lanier traveled to Florida in December 1876 to recuperate from another onslaught of tuberculosis. During the winter of that year, he read the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson for the first time,² citing with approval, "Emerson, whom I have been reading all the winter, and who gives me immeasurable delight because he does not propound

¹Robert H. Ross, "'The Marshes of Glynn': A Study in Symbolic Obscurity," American Literature, 32 (1961), 406.

²Jack De Bellis, Sidney Lanier (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), p. 110.

to me disagreeable systems and hideous creeds" (IX, 446). Although it is a little surprising that Lanier had not become acquainted with Emerson before now, it is easy to appreciate the qualities Lanier must have found attractive in Emerson's work, particularly in light of Lanier's own recent forays into public opinion. As De Bellis has noted, Lanier maintained throughout his career a stubborn belief in the "innate and original faculty" of the individual soul, which allowed a person, if he would only trust his instincts, to make the proper moral choice.³ In Emerson, this facility for right thinking is refined, in "The Divinity School Address," as the "sentiment of virtue."⁴ The virtuous man, for Emerson, is the one who can recognize the divine laws operating behind the "homely game of life," and can properly intuit the subtle relationship between man and God:

A more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty appears to a man when his heart and mind open to the sentiments of virtue. Thus he is instructed in what is above him. He learns that

³De Bellis, p. 21.

⁴Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," in Anthology of American Literature, second edition, ed. George McMichael (New York: Macmillan, 1980), I, 1037.

his being is without bound; that to the good, to the perfect, he is born, low as he now lies in evil and weakness. That which he venerates is still his own, though he has not realized it yet.⁵

To Lanier, dependent as he was throughout his life on the essential rightness of his vision, Emerson's gospel of self-reliant goodness must have had a tonic effect. With all his previous assumptions--on politics, religion, the role of the artist--proving to be insufficient, Lanier found Emerson's unshakable optimism an inspiration during his efforts to construct yet another systems of beliefs. These latest efforts centered on a return to nature, whose healing properties Lanier had stressed before, in "The Symphony." If God were felt to be missing from society, and peace and love remained illusive in a world given over to commerce and trade, then might not He be found in nature itself? Here was a church as wide as the world, where a man might worship alone and free, unentangled by creeds or petty distractions.

In turning away from public commitments and back to nature, Lanier was embarking on the prototypical American

⁵Emerson, p. 1037.

quest. From Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* and James Fenimore Cooper's *Deerslayer*, to Herman Melville's *Ishmael* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and continuing into the twentieth century with Ernest Hemingway's *Nick Adams* and a score of other disillusioned heroes, American writers have presented a remarkably consistent critique on the failure of modern society to guide and assist its wounded members in their search for values and meaning in life. The end result, also remarkably consistent, has been to stress the need for individual salvation, based not on society's terms, which are changeable and therefore untrustworthy, but on a personalized vision acquired, often at great cost, by the hero's passage through a corrupt and corrupting world into the ministry of nature. The celebration of nature is not, of course, a purely American invention; world literature in general and English literature in particular provide countless examples of nature worship. But the American variation on this theme has been a particularly intensive focus on the religious aspects of nature and its importance to the troubled and often antisocial individual. When *Huck Finn*, alone on his raft on the Father of Waters, declares,

"All right, then, I'll go to hell,"⁶ we are meant to understand that Huck's decision, flying in the face of all he has been taught by society, is actually his salvation, not his doom; and it has been his liberating experience on the river which has given him the clearness of vision to realize this truth.

The American transcendentalist movement, of which Emerson was the greatest advocate, may be seen as another expression of the need for an individual moral solution based on the healing precepts of nature. Thoreau's years at Walden Pond were no less a flight from society's laws than Hick Finn's trip down the Mississippi with a fugitive slave. To the transcendentalists, however, the flight from society back to nature was less a rejection of organized values than a private visit to church to reflect. An important forerunner of the movement, William Cullen Bryant, speaks of the primeval forest as a "fit shrine for humble worshipper to hold/Communion with his Maker."⁷ Thoreau,

⁶Samuel L. Clemens, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, 2nd ed., ed. Sculley Bradley et. al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 169.

⁷William Cullen Bryant, "A Forest Hymn," in Anthology of American Literature, I, 901.

urging, "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity,"⁸ declares:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach."⁹

To Emerson, what nature has to teach--or at any rate what man has to learn--is the intimate connection between the outside world and the inner self, or soul. Nature, he says, "always wears the color of the spirit."¹⁰ Believing this, Emerson also takes the position

that every man has an inward and immediate access to that Being for whom he found the word "God" inadequate and whom he preferred to designate as the "Over-soul." He believed that this Over-soul, this dread universal essence, which is beauty, love, wisdom, and power all in one, is present in Nature and throughout Nature.¹¹

In response to a question from a college student about the meaning of transcendentalism, Emerson further amplifies

⁸Henry David Thoreau, Walden, in Anthology of American Literature, I, 1539.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in Anthology of American Literature, I, 1000.

¹¹Perry Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson," in Interpretations of American Literature, ed. Charles Feidelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 114.

his vision of nature:

If we will only see that which is about us, we shall see also above. Is God far from any of us? . . . You shall find God in the unchanged essence of the universe, the air, the river, the leaf; and in the subjective unfolding of your nature, the determination of the private spirit.¹²

This "determination of the private spirit" was precisely what Lanier, in the short time remaining to him, set out to make. The disabusal of his feeling of community, at least as expressed in standard political or religious terms, left him with only his increasingly fragile sense of self. This feeling of precariousness, of having somehow slipped away from one's moorings--so familiar to the existential (and now post-existential) twentieth century--was to Lanier and other men of the nineteenth century a frightening adjunct of the turbulent intellectual climate after Darwin and the Civil War. For this reason, as well as for reasons of his taste in literature, Lanier eventually rejected the example of Emerson and of Emerson's erstwhile disciple, Walt Whitman. To a man with a growing sense of isolation and doubt,

¹²Howard Mumford Jones, Belief and Disbelief in American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 64.

Emerson's placid adherence to the theory of a collective, rather than individual, immortality was unacceptable. Lanier refers specifically to this divergence of views in his series of essays on the English novel. Speaking of Emerson's many attributes, Lanier interjects a criticism of "that most marvelous delusion of his--the strange wise man--that personality is to die away into the first cause" (IV, 165-166). To Lanier (as will be seen), it was the individual soul that mattered, not the broader concept of a collective and expansive Over-soul. As Frederick Conner has noted, Lanier consistently expresses a "jealous guardianship of personal identity and autonomy,"¹³ a sense of final privacy which Lanier describes as "this sacred difference between man and man, by virtue of which I am I and you are you, this marvelous separation" (IV, 5). The darker implications of this isolation Lanier reflects upon later in the same essay, when he notes that

each is indissolubly bound to each . . . and yet
how each is discretely parted and impassably
separated from each . . . by a gulf which is

¹³William Frederick Conner, Cosmic Optimism (Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 1949), p. 203.

simply no less deep than the width between the finite and the infinite (IV, 7).

Such a viewpoint, obviously, is miles apart from the cosmic democracy of Whitman's poetry. Despite admitting a certain grudging admiration for Whitman on various occasions, Lanier was unable finally to accept the rough completeness of Whitman's embrace. Furthermore, as De Bellis points out:

Whitman's persona, the autobiographical character in his poems . . . must have struck Lanier as threatening because of its completeness and its simplicity. Whitman could use his "I" of "Song of Myself" in at least four separate ways--as Walt the actual man, as a representative of humanity, as a natural man, and as the cosmic man of the future. Each of these is worlds apart from the anxious, doubting, pious, isolated persona Lanier uses in his "Marsh" poems.¹⁴

Despite his differences with Emerson and Whitman, Lanier gleaned something from both of them in writing his best-known and by most accounts finest poem, "The Marshes of Glynn," in 1878. From Emerson, he learned to approach the natural world with a heightened attentiveness to detail and nuance, and to see nature as a symbolic depiction of his inner being. From Whitman he adopted the sensuous,

¹⁴De Bellis, p. 112.

loosened rhythms of free verse, and thus was able at last to extricate himself from the conventional poetic meters of his youth. In poem as strange and unconventional as "The Marshes of Glynn," this new-found freedom was essential--if also rather ironic, given the poem's ultimate message.

The seaward marshes of Glynn County, Georgia, were well-known to Lanier from early in life, and he visited them again in 1877, after his winter in Florida which he spent reading Emerson and struggling vainly with his illness (I, 358). Charles R. Anderson finds evidence of the poem's genesis in an unpublished jotting in Lanier's ledger dating from his sojourn in Florida. In the ledger, Lanier describes the sensations experienced in walking through a forest of trees, where he was struck by a sense of a certain unfamiliarity behind the commonplace experience:

One glides out of the idea that this multiform beauty is familiar, that it is a clump of trees and vines and flowers: No, it is Silence, which, denied access to man's ear, has caught form, and set forth its fervent appeal to man's eye: it is Music, as in a siesta; it is Conflict, dead, and reappearing as Beauty: it is amiable Mystery, grown communicative: it is Nature, with her finger on her lip . . . it is Tranquility, suavely waving aside men's excuses

for wars. . . . It is Trade done into a flower.
. . . It is a Reply, in all languages, but
untranslatable in any, to the multitudinous
interrogations of students who dimly behold
the unknowable world of the something unex-
plainably sweet beyond the immediate field
of thought (I, 359).

A closer examination of the word-clusters in this appar-
ently casual note reveals the deep duality which Lanier
has exhibited throughout his career, and which he would
bring with him to his quietly desperate search of nature
documented, for the careful reader, in "The Marshes of
Glynn." On one side there are the negatives of silence,
conflict, death, denial, mystery, war, trade, and the
untranslatable, unknowable, inexplicable mystery behind
the wood's appearance. On the other side, there are the
words with a positive connotation: beauty, music, siesta,
tranquility, suavely, flower, sweet. Like a telegram from
the troubled reaches of his mind, these contrasting words
reveal simultaneously the forces Lanier is fleeing and the
world he hopes to find in nature. Lest this construction
appear far-fetched, it should be remembered that a large
part of Lanier's life has been given over to a search for
reconciliation of just such dualities: science and faith,

war and peace, North and South, public responsibilities and the private self. On the "emerald twilights" (I, 119) of the marshes of Glynn, Lanier attempts--yet again and for the last time--to bridge the gaps between these gulfs.

Obviously, Lanier is asking here for a great deal, both from himself and from nature; and as Robert H. Ross has noted, in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, there is an inherent contradiction operating at the heart of the poem. To Ross,

Lanier was a nature poet without a consistent philosophy of nature. On the one hand he tried to accommodate himself intellectually to the concept of nature as an amoral, impersonal force which was implied, he thought, by the discoveries of nineteenth century science; but at the same time he was never quite able to cast off his inherent romantic belief in a sentient nature, the benign healer of man's torn spirit.¹⁵

Immediately, then, Lanier places himself in a quandary. If, as Emerson maintains, nature is the direct revelation of God, then it must of necessity contradict all the great advances of modern science which Lanier has been led to accept by Professor Woodrow and by his own observations.

¹⁵Ross, p. 404.

If, on the other hand, nature is the amoral environment suggested by the evolutionists, a mere battleground for struggling, randomly evolved species, then all that Lanier has been taught to believe (and has fought so hard to hang onto through a willed devotion to love) is rendered moot. Either way, the restful, soul-healing return to nature which Lanier describes in "The Symphony" will not be so reassuring, after all.

Roy Harvey Pearce finds the physical location of the poem suggestive of the conflict at work within Lanier:

Why marshes, one asks; and concludes that it is because above all in the marshes that the tangled, involuted, surging forms of nature most obviously exhibit to man's view the processes which make them what they are and so challenge him to ask himself what he is that he can ask what they are.¹⁶

Thus, on the edge of a marsh that is not quite land and not quite sea, Lanier locates himself to ask his great questions. It is no wonder they go unanswered.

To many readers, "The Marshes of Glynn" is a deeply moving religious poem with an ultimately happy ending.

¹⁶Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 245.

Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan finds the poem to be a testament to the

process by which the poet discovers nature to be the foundation of his religious belief, not through any mystical sensations of purgation and ecstasy, but through the conscious use of all the senses to go beyond forms into the heart of spiritual reality. This is Lanier's answer to materialism and to time--a love of nature so complete that it triumphs over all.¹⁷

Louis D. Rubin says the poem is a representation of the "transcendentalist view of nature that erases the barrier between it and man and places man at home in nature as a refuge from society."¹⁸ A closer reading of the poem, however, reveals that both MacKethan and Rubin are guilty of confusing Lanier's aims with his final product. (Or perhaps, like so many others, they have fallen under the sway of Lanier's undeniably winning personality, and have thus attempted to grant him a measure of the peace he desperately

¹⁷ Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, The Dream of Arcady (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 23.

¹⁸ Louis D. Rubin Jr., "The Passion of Sidney Lanier," in his William Elliott Shoots a Bear: Essays in the Southern Literary Imagination (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), p. 140.

sought, but was brave enough to admit in this poem that he had not found.)

The poem begins with Lanier in "the dear dark woods" (I, 119) he had mentioned earlier in his ledger notes. Here, from noon until sunset, he has waited in the shade of the trees, which he compares to the "cells for the passionate pleasure of prayer to the soul that grieves," (I, 119), while weighing matters of good and bad. At dusk, with the glimmering sunlight appearing to "a lane into heaven that leads from a dream," (I, 119), Lanier makes the sudden assertion that has caused so many readers to misinterpret the poem as a hymn of faith: "belief overmasters doubt, and I know that I know" (I, 119). Read out of context, the line would indeed appear to be an assertion of faith--however tentative--since belief has had to overmaster doubt, not simply transcend it, as MacKethan and Rubin would have us believe. But in relation to the lines that immediately follow it, the statement loses much of its confident authority. For some unexplained reason, the poet has been afraid of something which he now obscurely relates to "the breadth and the sweep of the marshes of

Glynn" (I, 119). This fear--"terror and shrinking and dreary unnamable pain" (I, 119)--has somehow been replaced with a new confidence, and Lanier presents himself now as stepping lightly from the trees onto the beach beyond. The curious construction of this stanza, with Lanier's famous assertion of faith being followed hard by five lines citing his fear (twice), fatigue, bitterness, terror, pain, and the "merciless miles" of the plain, has the effect of superceding his declaration with a catalog of his ills; and the final impression is rather like that of a man whistling past the graveyard.

But what is troubling Lanier, or more specifically, why is he afraid of the marsh beyond the woods? Ross suggests that the physical landscape of the marsh frightens Lanier by reminding him of the symbolic implications of the open reaces beyond the sheltering woods:

The very openness and spaciousness of the marsh makes it a particularly apt symbol for much that the poets found distressing in nineteenth-century science. . . . In the very sweep and immensity of his marsh Lanier saw a natural symbol for many of the profoundly disquieting doubts raised by mechanistic science.¹⁹

¹⁹Ross, p. 409.

As if to take his mind from the vastness and dread of the marsh, Lanier follows with a lyrical description of the beaches and grass, in language suggesting a conscious attempt to reassure himself that the world is beautiful and benign:

Sinuous southward and sinuous northward the
shimmering band
Of the sand-beach fastens the fringe of the
marsh to the folds of the land.
Inward and outward to northward and southward
the beach-lines linger and curl
As a silver-wrought garment that clings to and
follows the firm sweet limbs of a girl (I, 120).

Here nature is the adorer and protector, not a menacing, brooding presence. Moreover, nature is seen to be clothing the land, literally dressing the openness of the marsh with a semblance of order and beauty. His confidence now buoyed, Lanier declares that "Somehow my soul seems suddenly free/From the weighing of fate and the sad discussion of sin" (I, 120-121).

Thus, obliquely, Lanier reveals what has been troubling him: it is fate and sin--rather weighty concerns for a summer visit to the beach--unless one has been reading Emerson and is searching for a divine signal from nature of its intent and plan. Lanier makes a curious comparison

of the marsh plains to a "catholic man who has mightily won/
 God out of knowledge and good out of infinite pain/And
 sight out of blindness and purity out of a stain" (I, 121).
 Again, the language is that of pain and strife, suggesting
 a great battle which, in its sheer difficulty, may not yet
 be over. A man who has "won" God in a mighty struggle with
 pain and blindness is not necessarily a man who is capable
 feeling at ease in his victory. What is more, the battle
 has been with "knowledge," which the wording suggests has
 caused a stain to the divine purity of faith; and nothing
 can be more easily substituted for "knowledge" than the
 word "science," with all its attendant implications.

To Ross, there is an organic inconsistency in the
 poem between the symbols of the marsh and the wood, since
 "each seems to represent, at some point, the principle of
 cosmic doubt, the woods after the poet is standing on the
 beach, the marsh before."²⁰ This ambiguity, to Ross, sug-
 gests that "Lanier had not yet reached a wholly satisfac-
 tory resolution to the perennial late nineteenth-century
 problem"²¹ of science versus religion. Ross wonders also

²⁰Ross, p. 410.

²¹Ibid., p. 416.

"whether the transcendental view of nature was wholly convincing for Lanier and whether it enabled him to resolve all his doubts about nature's beneficence."²² The standard answer to Ross's question has been to quote what are perhaps the poem's best-known lines:

As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery
sod,
Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness
of God:
I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh-
hen flies
In the freedom that fills all the space 'twixt
the marsh and the skies (I, 121).

This would seem to be a positive enough, if perhaps rather homely, declaration of faith. But once again Lanier undercuts his positivism. No sooner has the bird constructed its nest of faith than the sea pours--"fast"--into the marsh. To MacKethan, this in-pouring sea represents "a symbolic baptism of the poet's soul, through which he at last witnesses God transcendent and immanent in all creation."²³ Yet even if one interprets the sea this way, as a sort of Matthew Arnold-like "sea of faith," the sense of the passage fails to support MacKethan's view. The sea

²²Ross, p. 415.

²³MacKethan, p. 31.

floods the marsh, all right, but the poet cries out, not welcome, but "Farewell, my lord Sun!" (I, 121). Even more crucially, Lanier notes the passing of "a hurrying sound of wings that westward whirr" (I, 121). This sound is presumably the marsh-hen, fleeing--"hurrying"--westward, which is to say, away from the sea and toward the setting sun. The implication of this action would seem to be that the bird (or poet) is rather less eager for its supposed baptism than MacKethan and other critics have maintained; in which case, the poem founders as a joyous portrait of faith and becomes, more darkly and more importantly, a depiction of stubbornly persistent doubt. Even crediting Lanier with an attempt to believe, the very fact that his faith has been founded--literally--on the shifting sands of the marsh would seem to suggest that his is a distinctly tentative and rootless faith. Ross finds the contrary forces of Darwinian evolution and romanticized nature forcing Lanier to temporize and to try "to maintain in uneasy suspension the best of both worlds."²⁴

²⁴Ross, p. 414.

An uneasy suspension is, of course, precisely the physical state in which a marsh-hen's nest--or the very marsh itself--exists, and it is also the state in which Lanier concludes the poem. The coming of night and "the waters of sleep" (I, 122) presage, not illumination and the easing of doubt, but a darker state of confusion and anxiety. In a poem whose first word is "glooms," and which has celebrated for a time the poet's leaving behind of the shadowy woods, the flooding darkness in no way can be accepted as a reassuring event. Lanier's supposed paean of faith thus ends on a somber note of unease:

But who will reveal to our waking ken
 The forms that swim and the shapes that creep
 Under the waters of sleep?
 And I would I could know what swimmeth below
 when the tide comes in
 On the length and the breadth of the marvelous
 marshes of Glynn (I, 122).

Returning to Ross's question about the degree to which Lanier is able to accept a transcendental view of nature, it would appear, on the evidence of "The Marshes of Glynn," that his experience has been less than transcendental. The poet has looked hard at nature, he has stared for hours at the marsh and sea, obeying Emerson's

injunction to look for God in the air, the river, and the leaf. Indeed, it is a function of Lanier's perennial seriousness that he should give transcendentalism, as he has given his other substitute religions, a long and honest trial. But the end of "The Marshes of Glynn," with its unanswered questions and underlying anxieties, is also the end, in an orthodox sense, of Lanier's attempted reconciliation with the Christianity of his youth. The thrust of his final poems will be away from, not back to, an essentially Christian interpretation of religion. In "The Crystal," "The Cloud," "Sunrise," and even "A Ballad of Trees and the Master," Lanier will commemorate the passing of his various faiths in art, in nature, and in the divinity of Christ. In the end, there will only be himself and the sun.

CHAPTER V

LIT WITH THE SUN

But it is with man's Soul as it was with Nature:
the beginning of Creation is--Light. Till the
eye have vision, the whole members are in bonds.
Divine moment, when over the tempest-tost Soul,
as once over the wild-weltering Chaos, it is
spoken: Let there be light.¹

But I fear not, nay, and I fear not the thing
to be done;
I am strong with the strength of my lord the
Sun:
How dark, how dark soever the race that must
needs be run,
I am lit with the Sun. ("Sunrise," I, 149)

In the three years of life remaining to him after
"The Marshes of Glynn," Lanier completed few new poems.
Financial and professional disappointments preceded his
final, year-long illness; and plans for a book of poems
centered on the themes expressed in "The Marshes of Glynn"
were left unfinished. Nevertheless, and almost to the
very last, Lanier continued working and planning. The

¹Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, in The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, ed. Frank Kermode and John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), II, 816.

poems written during this final year, "The Cloud," "The Crystal," "A Ballad of Trees and the Master," and "Sunrise," and most particularly the poem outlines he left behind for other works in his projected volume, reveal the continuing and unresolved conflict he felt between science and religion, and also his frank disavowal of orthodox religious doctrine, especially his disbelief in the divinity of Christ. At the same time, Lanier's confidence in a purely artistic resolution of his doubts is seen to be flagging, as well as his trust in the healing properties of nature. Still, with a last great effort of will, Lanier finally achieves, in "Sunrise," a measure of that peace for which he searched so long.

It would be unfair to portray Lanier, in his final days, as a beaten man; to the end, he remained a remarkably cheerful individual, full of plans for new projects which even his increasingly debilitating disease could not extinguish. Nevertheless, there is something a little forlorn about Lanier, particularly when one recalls the bright young student, or the eager soldier on his way to the front, or the apostle preaching love and reconciliation between the divided regions. All his stratagems

ultimately seemed to fail him. As Jack De Bellis sums up: "Lanier progressively narrowed his view of life so that he could squeeze from a few basic ideas enough faith to continue."² The final picture of Lanier, at least from a spiritual and philosophical viewpoint, is of a sort of reverse Sartor Resartus; unlike Carlyle, he has been taking off his protective clothing and not replacing it with anything new. Certainly, the poem outlines he left behind seem to support this point of view. A series of 189 randomly connected snatches of verse, prose, and philosophy, the outlines reveal more clearly than many have supposed the mental anguish Lanier continued to feel over his progressive lessening of faith. Even Charles Anderson, whose introduction to the Centennial Edition of Lanier's works tends to downplay the difficulties Lanier encountered in matters of a theological cast, is forced to concede:

Like other sensitive Victorians he was swept into the controversy between science and religion, excited by the widening of the

²Jack De Bellis, Sidney Lanier (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), p. 112.

boundaries of the mind but disturbed by the doubts that were unsettling old beliefs. One result . . . was that it hastened the development of his unorthodoxy. The progress of his disillusionment can be traced in the outlines which reproach the church for its temporizing institutionalism and its members for their indifference or hypocrisy. Declaring that the true church was in each man's heart, he threw overboard the whole body of theological dogma (I, lxvii).

This is fine, as far as it goes, but Anderson seems to contradict himself a little later when he rather cavalierly declares:

In problems of a purely theological cast Lanier had little difficulty in reaching conclusions satisfying to himself. None of the new thought seems to have shaken his belief in personal immortality. Positive science broke down rather painlessly the dogmatic definitions of his early religious creed. But some of its broader philosophic implications were not accepted into his practical thinking without a real struggle (I, lxix).

The obvious question suggest itself, that if Lanier "had little difficulty" in reaching satisfying theological conclusions, then why were the "painless" redefinitions of science accepted into his beliefs only after "a real struggle"? And why would another respected critic make the incredible assertion that "Lanier was not troubled by the philosophical doubts that Darwinian science cast

over many poets"?³ The answer would seem to be that the critics were unwilling to take Lanier seriously as a thinker, even given the evidence of his continuous and lifelong search for the truth--about himself, his faith, and the world in which he lived. In terms of Lanier's modern reputation this is a serious misunderstanding, since it is as a spiritual adventurer, much more than as a poet, that Lanier lays claim to an enduring importance.

The poem outlines reveal Lanier's continuing antipathy toward organized religion, his fluctuating trust in scientific knowledge, and his unambiguous refusal to accept the divinity of Christ, although still viewing Him as the paragon of moral human behavior. On the one hand, Lanier feels free to assert: "Our beliefs needed pruning, that they might bring forth more fruit, and so Science came" (I, 263); only to lament, in the very next outline, "O Science, wilt thou take my Christ?" (I, 263). He wonders whether or not "it would seem that faith must

³Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 207.

center upon Christ" (I, 263), but then asserts his contradictory belief "that Christ is not God but the sweetest man who ever lived" (I, 264). Attacks on the organized church are coupled with praise for Christ's moral teachings:

So far from founding a church, Christ's whole labor seems to me to have been to render all future organizations of church-followers unnecessary. He made an altar in each man's heart, . . . he showed that every man's bosom was a possible church where every function could be carried on without those terrible outgrowths and ingrowths of corruption which we see successively attaching to and destroying organizations which depend upon human administration. . . . Accordingly, he proposed no creed and no form of worship; he appointed no Sabbath (I, 266).

In a particularly revealing outline, Lanier attempts to explain the importance of art in his life:

The Church is too hot, and Nothing is too cold. I find my proper Temperature in Art. Art offers to me a method of adoring the sweet master Jesus Christ, the beautiful souled One, without the straitness of a Creed which confines my genuflections, a Church which confines my limbs, and without the vacuity of the doubt which numbs them. . . . For in art there is no doubt. (I, 266)

Finally, he speaks of the need and the difficulty of retaining his religious convictions in the face of

the world's ongoing barbarities. "It may be that the world can get along without God; but I cannot" (I, 267). "But it is in the dust that goes up from the unending Battle of Things that we lose Him" (I, 267). Lanier continues:

Forever through the ferocity of storms, the malice of the never-glutted oceans, the savagery of human wars, the inexorable barbarities of Accident, of Earthquake, and of mysterious Disease, one hears the voice of man crying, where art thou, my dear Lord and Master? (I, 267).

This scarcely sounds like a man untroubled by religious doubts, or one who could write: "So pray we to the God we dimly hope/Against calamities we clearly know" (I, 269).

The poem outlines are merely that--outlines--and it is impossible to know what Lanier might have made of them had he lived beyond his fortieth year. Still, as Anderson concedes, "had he lived to resolve this discordant note the result might have been stronger if less harmonious music than the concord of his more confident songs" (I, lvii).

The poems Lanier did leave behind from his final year are, like so much of his life and work, mixed in

tone and contradictory in meaning. "The Crystal," one of Lanier's least-successful works, seems to contradict both his belief in the efficacy of art and his Carlylean trust in the concept of the great man. In rather unconvincing fashion, Lanier addresses the "holy malcontents, sweet seers, and stellar visionaries" (I, 136) who have been the world's greatest artists, and finds each of them lacking in various ways. Shakespeare, Homer, Socrates, Buddha, Dante, Milton, Aeschylus, Emerson, Keats, Tennyson, and several other lesser poets come in for Lanier's self-appointed criticism and "forgiveness." Only Christ is exempt from blame, and even He is seen as something less--or at least something different--than the commonly accepted wisdom has it:

But Thee, but Thee, O Sovereign Seer of time,
 But Thee, O poets' Poet, Wisdom's Tongue,
 But Thee, O man's best Man, O love's best Love,
 O perfect life in perfect labor writ,
 O all men's Comrade, Servant, King, or Priest--

 Oh, what amiss may I forgive in Thee,
 Jesus, sweet Paragon, thou Crystal Christ? (I, 138)

Thankfully, Lanier spares Christ--and us--any portion of criticism, but even here it is obvious that Lanier's "Crystal Christ" is a good deal less adamant than his

contemporary Hopkins' "immortal diamond."

"The Cloud," as De Bellis has noted, seems to be an admission of the limits of art, and of the frightening vistas exposed to the artist's sight. The poem indicts a cloud for its seeming indifference to earthly suffering, then acquits it on the grounds that a cloud cannot be held responsible for its actions, since "what the cloud doeth/The Lord knoweth/The cloud knoweth not" (I, 140). The artist, on the other hand, has an autonomy which Lanier finds rather terrifying: "Awful is Art, because 'tis free./The artist trembles o'er his his plan,/Where men his Self must see" (I, 141). Roy Harvey Pearce says that Lanier

discovers that, unlike the cloud, he is master of his own fate. To the degree man is set apart from that Nature to which he must relate himself, man's burden, the artist's burden, is his freedom. . . . This was Lanier's terrifying discovery.⁵

This rather existential determination Lanier describes as meaning that "each artist--gift of terror!--owns his

⁴De Bellis, p. 139.

⁵Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 242.

will" (I, 141), which is a far cry from Lanier's earlier confidence in the role of the artist and his meaning to society.

This feeling of separation from nature is further expressed in one of Lanier's best--and least understood--poems, "A Ballad of Trees and the Master." Standard interpretations of the poem, with its sympathetic portrayal of Christ's last hours, have held it to be an orthodox hymn of belief. As already noted, however, Lanier's feelings about Christ were decidedly unorthodox; and even Starke concedes that "it is . . . not so much a Christian poem as a pagan one" (Starke, p. 402). Lanier envisions Christ's torment in the garden of Gethsemane as a time of deep communion with nature:

Into the woods my Master went,
 Clean forspent, forspent.
 Into the woods my Master came,
 Forspent with love and shame.
 But the olives they were not blind to Him,
 The little gray leaves were kind to Him:
 The thorn-tree had a mind to Him
 When into the woods He came (I, 144).

Edd Winfield Parks interprets the ballad as "Lanier's most extreme statement that God reveals himself to man

not through the church but through nature."⁶ This would seem, however, to overlook the contrast between Christ's extreme passivity and the active role nature seems to take in consoling Him. It is nature, not Christ, which is active in the first stanza, with the trees expressing a sympathetic notice of His suffering.

The second stanza seems to verify Pearce's supposition about "The Cloud," that is, that man has somehow become separated from nature:

Out of the woods my Master went,
And He was well content.
Out of the woods my Master came,
Content with death and shame.
When Death and Shame would woo Him last,
From under the trees they drew Him last:
'Twas on a tree they slew Him--last
When out of the woods He came (I, 144).

Nature, then, is ambivalent (or powerless) in the face of Christ's betrayal. What is worse, it can even be perverted to the evil uses of man: "'Twas on a tree they slew Him." Far from being a positive expression of piety, "A Ballad of Trees and the Master" can be read as

⁶Edd Winfield Parks, "Lanier as Poet," in his Essays on American Literature (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1967), p. 199.

a subtly pessimistic vision of nature as distant and corruptible.

But nothing in Lanier had prepared him to accept such a stark, conclusive view of nature. His entire adult experience had been, in a way, a reluctant progression to this vision of cosmic aloneness. In the end he could not make that last leap into the void--as who could in the nineteenth century? Carlyle had peered over the edge, only to withdraw, shaken to his core. Tennyson, stunned and grieving, struggled to construct about himself a fortress based on love. Emerson, inheritor of the Puritan spirit, if not its dogma, comprehended in the Over-soul a divinity of all. Even Whitman accepted rather blithely the concept of an Almighty Being whose essence he located variously in man, in nature, or in himself. And now Lanier, faced with the inexorable logic of his lifelong examination into the spiritual mysteries, withdrew to his last unshakable belief: the immortality of the individual soul.

This core of belief, as has been seen already, is at the heart of Lanier's emphasis on worldly love, his

championing of the concept of the artist-hero, and his ultimately unsatisfying flirtation with Emersonian transcendentalism. Anderson finds Lanier, at the end of his life, "working out a moral doctrine of his own--that the sacredness of the modern personality was the most significant phenomenon of human history" (I, lxxi). Starke says the poem outlines reveal Lanier in the process of "threshing out to a final solution the problem of selfhood--the individuality of man, sacred and not to be violated by union with other self, or with God" (Starke, p. 426). Put another way, in "The Cloud," Lanier firmly declares: "My me is mine" (I, 141).

But it is in "Sunrise," the last poem that Lanier completed (Starke, p. 422), that the poet manages to fuse his belief in personal immortality with the life-giving actuality of the sun. Here, as it is throughout world literature, the protean power of the sun may symbolize many things: God, Christ, nature, art, love, strength, wisdom. Chiefly, it seems to represent for Lanier the changeless continuity of life, the beating engine whose strength quickens every heart.

As many have noted, the poem is in a way an extension of "The Marshes of Glynn," and was intended to be included in the projected volume, "Hymns of the Marshes" (I, 136), along with the earlier poem. Written during Lanier's final illness, while he had a temperature of 104 degrees, "Sunrise" begins where "The Marshes of Glynn" leaves off: with the darkness flooding over the marsh, like sleep. This sleep, into which Lanier has fallen, is interrupted by his dream (or remembrance) of the marsh, the woods, and the sea. Coming awake after a struggle, Lanier returns in spirit to the marsh, where he hopes to "hide/In your gospelling glooms" (I, 145). But the questions troubling Lanier at the end of "The Marshes of Glynn" recur, risen "not from reason, but deeper inconsequent deeps" (I, 145). More pressing now, these questions center on "the vague blackness of night" (I, 145) and "the dark of the question of man" (I, 145). Lanier exclaims: "But would I could know, but would I could know"(I, 145), and remains confused and misdirected in "the night of our knowledge" (I, 145).

Passing again to the marsh, Lanier finds that the

"old chemist" (I, 145) has somehow discovered an answer to "that which our father-age had died to know" (I, 146). The answer, which "solves us all" (I, 146), is undeclared, but presumably it is evolution--or at least the massed discoveries of modern science. But by comparing the scientist to the medieval alchemist searching for a way to dissolve matter into gold, Lanier seems to imply that the scientific answer of evolution, like the search for the universal alloy, is a fool's errand or a delusion. At any rate, this answer is "too clear" (I, 146), and "the blackest night could bring us brighter news" (I, 146). Moreover, a world that is "over-freighted with light" (I, 147) is a world in danger of bursting like "a bubble that broke in a dream" (I, 147).

In contrast to both the puzzling dark and the too-bright artificial light of science, Lanier hastens to welcome the coming of dawn over the marsh. This new light, unlike the fleeing darkness and the flashing glimmer of fool's gold, is eternal and trustworthy: "'tis abiding, 'tis unwithdrawn" (I, 147). The promise of such a constant source of comfort, to a man who has

suffered as many disillusionments as Lanier, cannot be overestimated. In rapturous language, he celebrates the dawn:

Now in each pettiest personal sphere of dew
 The summ'd morn shines complete as in the blue
 Big dew-drop of all heaven: with these lit shrines
 O'er-silvered to the farthest sea-confines,
 The sacramental marsh one pious plain
 Of worship lies. Peace to the ante-reign
 Of Mary Morning, blissful mother mild,
 Minded of nought but peace, and of a Child.
 (I, 148)

The religious phraseology indicates the importance to Lanier of this vision of dawn, but it should not be confused with a strictly Christian interpretation. "Mary Morning, blissful mother mild," has given birth to the sun, not the Son; and it is to that elemental power that Lanier announces his song of welcome:

Good-morrow, lord Sun!
 With several voice, with ascription one,
 The woods and the marsh and the sea and my soul
 Unto thee, whence the glittering streams of all
 morrrows doth roll,
 Cry good and past-good and most heavenly morrow,
 lord Sun (I, 148).

It is, of course, this same "lord Sun" whose passing, in "The Marshes of Glynn," occasioned the coming of doubt at the end of that poem. Now, the doubt has been erased,

the morning "summ'd." The sun assumes the powers previously ascribed by Lanier to the creeds of his youth, the religion of love, and the artist-hero:

It is thine, it is thine,
 Thou chemist of storms, whether driving the winds
 a-swirl
 Or a-flicker the subtiler essences polar that
 whirl
 In the magnet earth,--yea, thou with a storm
 for a heart,
 Rent with debate, many-spotted with question,
 part
 From part asundered, yet ever a globed light,
 Yet ever the artist, ever more large and bright
 Than the eye of a man may avail of: manifold
 One (I, 149).

This joyous vision of reconciliation, of peace coming after a storm, sustains Lanier, even as he realizes he must return, for a time, to the world, where "old Want is awake and agog, every wrinkle a-frown" (I, 149). He knows now, at last, that "how dark, how dark soever the race that must needs be run/I am lit with the Sun" (I, 149). Nothing will hide that supernal light--not "the seas of traffic," or "the fen-polities" (I, 149). In a light at once creative and consuming, the poet's immortal soul will "labor, at leisure, in art" (I, 149), until at last, "my soul shall float, friend Sun/The day

being done" (I, 149). For Lanier--wounded veteran, frustrated artist, disabused believer--this promised reunion with the light is, as it was for another puzzled and much-put-upon young man, "a consummation devoutly to be wished."

CHAPTER VI

LANIER'S POSTHUMOUS REPUTATION

We prefer to regard Lanier from the point of view of the progressive thinker, rather than merely as the poet. Judged from the spiritual development of the inner man, his repeated questionings are indicative of a restless spirit, not struggling against expansion, but subjected to that travail which comes to those who would change the formal plan of religion without altering the fundamental faith.¹

Since his death in 1881 at the age of 39, Sidney Lanier has come to occupy a singular, if not necessarily a prominent, place in American literature. The pathos of his troubled life and the courageous optimism with which he faced his hardships have combined to give him something of the aura of the doomed Romantic poets, while his unchallenged position as the only Southern poet of national reputation in the latter half of the nineteenth century continues to insure him of at least passing mention in all the major anthologies.

¹Montrose J. Moses, The Literature of the South (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1910), pp. 358-359.

But despite such extra-literary attention, Lanier remains a curiously misunderstood poet whose very real contributions, however slight in comparison with those of his contemporaries, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, have often been overshadowed by the dramatic elements of his personal life. When the ten-volume Centennial Edition of Lanier's works was published in 1945, it was a historian, not a literary scholar, who reviewed it for The New York Times Book Review; and Henry Steele Commager's assessment that "no other figure in American literature is more gallant, more knightly"² than Lanier, while no doubt accurate from a purely personal standpoint, ignores what after all was Lanier's life-blood, his poetry. Even so sympathetic a critic as Jack De Bellis has felt it necessary to concede that

there is a growing feeling that Lanier has received enough attention to substantiate the belief that he is a minor figure who never achieved full promise and whose art was never fully unified or defined.³

²Henry Steele Commager, "A Gallant and Heroic Figure," New York Times Book Review (Oct. 20, 1946), p. 6.

³Jack De Bellis, Sidney Lanier, Henry Timrod, and Paul Hamilton Hayne: A Reference Guide (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1978), p. 6.

Judged purely as a poet, Lanier does fall short of the towering achievements of Whitman and Dickinson--in the prose-dominated America of the late nineteenth century, who does not? But such mean-spirited attacks on Lanier as those by the Fugitive-Agrarian critics such as John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Allen Tate, may be seen more clearly as a defense of their own less-than-cogent economic and social views than as an honest appraisal of Lanier's poetic accomplishments; and Ransom, in particular, is simply wrong to assert that Lanier's "resistance was over"⁴ after the Civil War. At the same time, Lewis Leary's blanket declaration that "Lanier's life was incomparably his greatest poem"⁵ does little to advance Lanier's critical reputation in the modern age. The easy forays against Lanier's often clumsy poetic style, and the equally easy praise of his unquestionably

⁴John Crowe Ransom, "Hearts and Heads," American Review, 2 (1934), 556. For the best summary of, and defense against, the Fugitives' view of Lanier, see J. Atkins Shackford's "Sidney Lanier as a Southerner," Sewanee Review, 48 (1940), 153-173.

⁵Lewis Leary, "The Forlorn Hope of Sidney Lanier," South Atlantic Quarterly, 46 (1947), 268.

gallant life, have had a similarly obfuscating effect; and the poet's chief claim for enduring importance--as a spiritual seeker whose questioning life anticipates much that is yet ongoing in modern American literature--remains unnoticed or unrecognized. Montrose J. Moses' generally favorable assessment of Lanier at the beginning of this chapter is illustrative of the continuing misperception of Lanier as a fundamentally orthodox Christian whose undeniable travail was more the result of the debate between science and religion than what, on a larger scale, it really was: the unsettling realization that, as Matthew Arnold says in "To Marguerite--Continued": "We mortal millions live alone."⁶ This isolating sense of aloneness Lanier shared with other eminent Victorians. But unlike such artists as Carlyle, Tennyson, and Emerson, Lanier did not submerge his anxieties beneath the comforting sense of a greater collective power, whether it be Christian religion or mystic expansiveness. His final

⁶Matthew Arnold, "To Marguerite--Continued," in The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, ed. Frank Kermode and John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), II, 1374.

belief, which he was absolutely unable to relinquish, was of the immortality of the individual soul; remove the emphasis on immortality and Lanier's values are not much different from those of the existential philosophers of the mid-twentieth century. In one of his last letters, Lanier expresses a humanistic stoicism which is closer to Albert Camus than it is to Alfred Tennyson:

But perhaps it is here that the significance of The Individual and of The Spirit of Man, comes in and solves life for us. I am conscious of a certain sense of exultation in the very bigness and pitilessness of these blows; looking upon Moral Greatness as a Miranda who cannot be attained except by shipwreck and suffering (X, 235-236).

It was this search for individual morality which led Lanier to exchange the easy assurances of his youth for the more difficult responsibilities of personal choice; and this retreat from the comforting embrace of society's truths--as American as a raft trip down the Mississippi River--led in turn to the frightening openness of the marshes of Glynn. With the woods behind him and the sea in front, Lanier had nowhere to look but up. And if, dying slowly and dying young, he found at last a sort of faith in the strength of the sun, it is nevertheless

the courage of his questions that endures. A line in his notebooks summarizes all--and it is enough--that Lanier discovered in his long spiritual quest through the world:

Cut the Cord, Doctor! quoth the baby, man, in the nineteenth century. I am ready to draw my own breath (I, 246).

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