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Madison Cawein: A Landscape Poet

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From the beginning the poems of Madison Cawein were striking for the landscapes they created. Descriptions of woods, fields, creeks, and springs, usually devoid of persons except for the observing poet and occasional berriers, harvesters, milkmaids, etc., led William Dean Howells in a review of Cawein's second book, *The Triumph of Music*, to place the writer, along with other Southerners such as Robert Burns Wilson and Lizette Reese, in what "might almost be called a landscape school of poetry." As the years went on the landscapes of Cawein became increasingly idiosyncratic. Animated by creatures like water-sprites, nymphs, dryads, and fairies, they prompted Louis Untermeyer in 1919 to judge them as "somehow unreal, prettified, remote." He identified instead another strain in Cawein's work dealing "with the scenes and incidents of his mountain environment: the sag of an old house in the hills, the echoes of a feud, rumblings of the Ku Klux Klan, the ghastly details of a lynching." Such subject matter never became dominant in Cawein's poetry and may have attracted him chiefly by its potential for narrative and drama. An element of drama is in fact normative in Cawein's landscapes, for eloquently pictorial, pastoral at times, they nevertheless insist on telling a story, recreating a myth, establishing the locus of fancy and the hidden life.

The happy accident for us is that the basis for this personal landscape is ever the local one, the knobs of southern Indiana, the environs of Brownsboro, Kentucky, or, in Louisville, the beech groves and lovely vistas of Iroquois and Cherokee parks. As a landscape poet Cawein, giving rich attention to the flora and fauna of Kentucky, succeeded so well that he attracted the attention of the English critic Edmund Gosse, who wished to publish a selection of the poems. In the introduction to the resulting volume, *Kentucky Poems* (1902), Gosse recalls that "the solemn books of history tell us that Kentucky was discovered in 1769, by Daniel Boone, a hunter" and suggests that Cawein, too, is a discoverer who has made the beauty of Kentucky visible to the world.

The publication of *Kentucky Poems* was a high point, attained
Madison Cawein. Frontispiece from *The White Snake*, 1895
about midway in Cawein’s poetic career,\(^8\) providing him with the chance for a European audience. Naturally honored by Gosse’s attention, Cawein hoped as well to bring out an American edition of *Kentucky Poems* to be called *In the Garden of Polymina* with an introduction by W. D. Howells. It was never published but the poems for the text had obviously been selected and what Cawein says about them is instructive for understanding his work:

I like it [i.e., *In the Garden of Polymina*] even better than I do the English Selection (*Kentucky Poems*). It is larger and, moreover, contains other poems than nature ones.\(^9\)

“Other poems than nature ones” is important: Cawein had been nourished by narrative and romance, Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Aeneid*, *Don Quixote*, which he called “my first love,”\(^10\) and, in his adolescence, stacks and stacks of half-dime novels.\(^11\) In a letter of 28 October 1906 to R. E. Lee Gibson he remarks poignantly about his own attempts at narrative:

It seems that no one cares for those things in my poetry which I care most for—*Accolon of Gaul*, *An Old Tale Retold*, *Gloramone*, *Lyanna*, *The Lady of Verne*, etc., etc. I wonder why? Are they not worthy of consideration? Do you think so?\(^12\)

Cawein saw Kentucky with a naturalist’s eye but he organized that vision in terms of his European heritage. As Gosse pointed out in his introduction to *Kentucky Poems*, “he brings the ancient gods to Kentucky, and it is marvelous how quickly they learn to be at home there.”\(^13\) His third book, *Accolon of Gaul*, an Arthurian romance, was not well received, so that by the time *Kentucky Poems* appeared his hopes for becoming a narrative poet like Tennyson, for example, were considerably diminished. From the outset, however, mythology and romance dominated his poems and provided him a world-view he was never able to change. Celebrating the Big Eddy in “Ohio Falls,”\(^14\) from his first book, *Blooms of the Berry*, he indulged his taste for mythology and classical allusion, linking the old world and the new in a prodigal way. Though we detect Milton and Spenser behind the similes, the combination of youthful awkwardness and an actual landscape creates a direct and fresh experience. The Big Eddy is “like a huge
giant, wily in its strength.” Our eyes then are focused on the sycamores along the bank with their white and brown peeling trunks:

and bending from the shore
The spotted sycamores have looked and looked,
Watching his motions as a schoolboy might
A sleeping serpent coiled upon his path.

That might be enough but Cawein catches their reflection startlingly:

So long they’ve watched that their old
   backs have grown
Hump’d, gnarl’d, and crooked, nor seem
   they this to heed,
But gaze and gaze, and from the glossy waves
Their images stare back their wonderment.

And still the picture expands as we return to the Eddy and its “guardian Genius” like a river god from The Faerie Queene, “his fishy eyes / Dull with the monotony of his aqueous realms.” The poem ends with a scene on Goose Island. We are given a study in red and gray, an Indian on whose “ruddy cheek” the “deep flamingo-colored West / Flamed . . . its airy fire.” Then the action shifts to the “gray wild goose, / That rose with clamor from the rushy pool,” shot by the arrow that perhaps bore the quill from “its dead mate’s gray wing.” Its cry died out “while the glad brave / Whooped to the sunset” and the hills echoed his triumph. Cawein could not resist the urge to drama and narrative, nor be satisfied with the world simply observed.

In a continuing procession of poems on the months, the seasons, weather—a plein-air series, so to speak—Cawein revels in image making. He had obviously taken Keats’s “To Autumn” to heart, using the technique of personification full-strength in the same way he used the expanded allusion in “Ohio Falls.” For him it is an enlarged focus, a way of dramatizing nature’s active presence. That presence in Cawein’s poems is almost always a female figure and vibrantly symbolic like, let us say, Botticelli’s Primavera or Milton’s Eve in Paradise Lost. And his painter’s eye is superb. The “Rain Crow” shows us August. The month dozes “hot and
blonde . . . 'neath a wheat-stack in the white-topped mead," her hair with "brown ox-eyed daisies wound," while across her sleepy "half-lidded eyes a purple iron-weed / Blows slimly o'er." Beyond her is a pond

. . . hedged with pink-plumed pepper-grasses,
A coigne for vainest dragonflies, which glasses
Their blue in diamond

when

. . . from some dusty locust, that thick weaves
With crescent pulse-pods its thin foliage gray

comes the sound of the rain crow. In this description the poet captures exactly the colors of the dry season, e.g., the look of the locust tree, but in an orderly fashion, from patches of pale wheat and daisy tones to purple and blue speckled over a ring of pink, at the same time enlivening the scene with presence. While it rains, the bird sits "safe-housed in some pawpaw bower / Of close, broad, gold-green leaves" and the poem closes with the favorite Cawein combination of the actual and the imagined:

beneath the cart
Droop pompous barnyard cocks damped by
the shower:
And deep-eyed August, bonnetless, a beech
Hugs in disheveled beauty, safe from reach
On starry moss and flower.

"The Grasshopper,"17 from the 1901 volume Weeds by the Wall, recalls a classical model, Aesop's "Grasshopper and the Ant," which Cawein has shaped into a personal fable. Tracing the progress of the grasshopper's dry singing through the season—a "bur of sound caught in the Summer's hair," a "brier-like voice that clings in idleness / To Summer's drowsy dress!"—the poet seeks, in two extended similes, to capture the insect's heedless way of life:

as urchins
A stagnant pond whereon the bubbles gasp,—
Your switch-like music whips the midday heat

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like to tomboy truants, at their play
With noisy mirth among the barn's deep straw,—
You sing away the careless summer-day.

Naturally he takes the grasshopper's side, the
tramp of insects, vagrant and unheeding,
Improvident, who of the summer make[s]
One long green mealtime, and for winter take[s]
No care, aye singing. . . .

In spite of winter, he counsels:
—let no song be lost,
But as you lived into your grave go down—
Like some small poet with his little rhyme,
Forgotten of all time.

The suggestion of melancholy, the probable self-portrait as grasshopper, signals a change in the landscape. In a letter of 5 January 1901 to R. E. Lee Gibson, Cawein writes that one of his books, very likely One Day and Another, has not yet appeared and when it does:

Its fate will be the fate of all the rest of my books—failure is printed on and over its title page. It too will receive a few good notices and bad perhaps, and then drop into oblivion like all the rest.¹⁸

An early scene from Blooms of the Berry pictures a heron at sunset, one leg lifted, "Neck-shrunken, flame-gilded with the West, / Stark-stately he the evening wears." At moonrise this "melancholy heron . . . / . . . clamoring, dives into the stars," an exciting and dramatic symbol of the young song-striked poet.¹⁹ By 1901 we find in "Drouth,"²⁰ once more from Weeds by the Wall, "the green-blue heron, famine weak,— / Searching . . . the minnowless creek" and "the rain-crow, too, / False prophet now, croaks to the stagnant air." The shift in tone from the exultant cry of the heron and the oracular success of the rain-crow to their
weakness and failure, the change in persona to that of the grasshopper, seems both ironic and prophetic.

And yet many positive things developed for Cawein after 1900. First came the offer from Gosse in 1901 to sponsor the publication of Kentucky Poems and in 1907 a five-volume edition of all his work appeared. There were trips to New York and the east for literary meetings, a visit in Washington with President and Mrs. Roosevelt, the invitation to compose and read an ode in commemoration of the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and local honors such as the presentation of a silver loving cup on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Blooms of the Berry. Most significant of all was marriage in 1903 to Gertrude McKelvey and the birth of their son Preston Hamilton in 1904.

Until his marriage Cawein had lived in his parents' home and, after an early period of working for six years in a local poolroom, he had even managed to support himself as a poet, chiefly through investments. With a wife and child to maintain he found that he needed more money. When in 1912 he lost "thousands" in a stock-market crash, his situation became desperate. Forced to move from his handsome St. James Court house to an apartment, to sell portions of his library, and to seek some sort of employment, he observed, "I can write poetry—God, what a commentary on inability that is!" Another letter tells us that he hoped Preston would always love poetry but write none. In September of 1914 he was placed on the relief list of the Authors Club of New York City and awarded a monthly check. In December of 1914 he died from a fall apparently brought on by an attack of apoplexy.

As a man he was caught in midlife by heavy demands and few material resources. As a poet he was working in an uncongenial period, those years before World War I when the course of contemporary culture was radically changing. The new style was completely alien to his concept of poetry, and he roundly chastised Harriet Monroe for publishing the works of the likes of Ezra Pound. Out of the great western tradition he had fashioned his own style, becoming what we might call a nature poet with a difference. In the years from the publication of Kentucky Poems to his early death at forty-nine he seems to have intensified this style in an environment quite different from that of his youth, with the result that we have shapes and shadows, in his own phrase, which against the look of the world in 1900-1914 appear fanciful and strange.
His sensitivity to the hiatus between youth and age prompted the evolution of two landscapes which we may name the "wasteland" and the "fairyland." Though this dichotomy suggests Untermeier's thesis, cited earlier, of two variant strains in Cawein's work, the wasteland is not a setting based on romantic local color such as night-riders or the Ku Klux Klan. It is a spiritual landscape. Especially representative are "The Old Herb Man" and "The Herb-Gatherer," "sang [ginseng] diggers" of the countryside whom Cawein would have actually seen. "On the barren hillside" is the Old Herb Man, poorly dressed, carrying in his pack the "roots and simples" he can sell, those herbs and wildflowers that elsewhere are adornments to Cawein's poems:

Roots of twisted twin-leaf; sassafras;
Bloodroot, tightly whipped 'round with grass;
Adder's-tongue; and, tipped brown and black,
Yellowroot and snakeroot filled his pack,
On the barren hillside, winter-stripped.

The poet then observes decisively, "There is nothing sadder than old age." The Herb-Gatherer is identified even more strongly with the landscape: "A grey, bald hillside, bristling here and there / With leprous-looking grass" where "every bush seems tortured to despair / And shows its teeth of thorns as if to tear / All things to pieces." Finally we meet the man himself, "Unspeakably old, a man, the colour of clay, / Sorting damp roots and herbs into a bag / With trembling hands purple and stiff with cold." A figure like this, subverting the myths that usually people Cawein's landscapes, becomes "the presence of the place."

And never more strongly than in "The Wasteland." We begin with natural detail, "Briar and fennel and chinquapin, / And rue and ragweed everywhere," the sounds of the cricket, the locust, the grasshopper, "the note of a bird's distress" and trees, "skeletons gaunt, that gnarled the place, / Twisted and torn . . . / . . . / They startled the mind's repose." Disturbed, we are surprised in this wasteland by the figure of a man "as still as moss, / A lichen form . . . / And an old blind hound . . . / With a snarling fang half-bared." Then the poet centers his vision:
I looked at the man. I saw him plain.
Like a dead weed, gray and wan,
Or a breath of dust.

And in the same way that the gods, fauns, and satyrs disappear in the woodland poems, "I looked again— / And man and dog were gone." Were they, Cawein asks, "forms of the mind, an old despair, / That there into semblance grew / Out of the grief I knew?" This poem, published one year before his death, is perhaps Cawein's best landscape of the mind. Letters from this period reiterate his anguish at his financial plight, his disappointment in his career as a poet, his anger at being out of fashion.28

The outbreak of World War I provided an immediate channel for this anger and despair, the sense that life itself had gone mad. To Clinton Scollard he wrote: "I have no heart, like yourself, for this dreadful war and its butchery. I think it forebodes the end of the world."29 Already in "A.D. 1900,"30 from Weeds by the Wall, he had pictured the four horsemen "shaking their tremendous plumes / Above the world!" and identified:

a sense
Cadaverous, of corpses and of tombs
Predestined; while—like monsters
   in the glooms,—
   Bristling with battle, shadowy and immense,
   The Nations rise in wild apocalypse.—

Later in his posthumous volume, The Cup of Comus, we find several war poems. A landscape painted in drab tones like "The Wasteland" describes "Where the Battle Passed":31:

Gaunt weeds: and here a bayonet or pouch,
Rusty and rotting . . .
Bald, trampled paths that seem with fear
to crouch,
   Feeling a bloody dew.

In the nature poems we usually come upon the month or season personified. Here:
Death leans upon the battered door, at gaze—
The house is silent where there once was stir
Of husbandry . . .
War left it empty as his vacant mind . . .

Nevertheless, although he was horrified by war and in a grave situation personally, and although in more than one letter to friends he gave way to extreme despondency, he wrote in “Where the Battle Passed” of a sign of life from nature: “One blossoming rose-tree, like a beautiful thought / Nursed in a broken mind . . . / Survives.” A letter of 25 September 1914 to Clinton Scollard saying “Life is a terrible thing, I am beginning to believe,” ended, “But cheer up! Let us be glad in spite of the War and bad times . . . Yours for keeps. Madison Cawein.” He found it very difficult to give up his hopes and ideals. In what I have referred to as an intensification of his style he created ever more persistently landscapes of fairyland. Titles of books published after *Kentucky Poems* demonstrate this: *The Poet, the Fool and the Faeries, Minions of the Moon*, and *The Giant and the Star*, the last written for his little son whose childhood surely encouraged his own predisposition toward the fanciful. There is, too, a poignant logic in the parallel existence of the wasteland and of fairyland, the latter perhaps easing the *horror vacui* of the former.

Testimony to the impact of this landscape on Cawein’s painter friends is *The Enchanted Tree* by Paul Plaschke, *The Gossamer Thread* by John Bernard Alberts, both done as memorials to the poet as late as 1918, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Blooms of the Berry*, showing Cawein inspired by winged creatures. What this landscape really represented was, of course, a faith in life itself as animus, spirit. If Cawein stubbornly professed to believe in such folklore, it was his way of identifying with the earth against the mechanized world of the new century, another way of seeking after “the beautiful.”

An important source for Cawein’s fairy landscape is his German ancestry. Fairly early in his career he had published *The White Snake* (1895), a collection of translations from poets like Heine and Goethe, Mirza-Schaffy and Geibel. A later poem of his own, “The Willow Water,” shows us a wild rose “deep in the hollow wood” dropping two red petals “where rose-gray, / The shadow of a willow dimmed the stream.” To the onlooking poet the leaves
become lips and then the figure of a "shadowy girl" develops, beckoning him "to her home / . . . / Where the pale mermaids never cease to comb / Their weed-green hair with fingers crystal-cold." But as he is lured to her, a wind rises and

when it did pass
The rose-leaves lay and shadow, dimly seen;
The willow's shadow and no thing between.

The vision disappears but the poet is saved. Geibel's "The Forest Pool,"36 translated for The White Snake, tells us that in the wake of the wind and mermaid "A rustling serpent flieth, / A corpse lies in the wood." In fact, in Cawein's work the mortal may harm the spirit-creature. "A Faery Burial,"37 describing the rites for a fairy maid who loved a mortal, cautions:

Leave no token
Here to draw a human eye:
None must know that faeries die!

Untermeyer comments on the "irritating frequency" with which Cawein "tries to transport his audience to a literary fairyland."38 The fact is that these scenes of wasteland and fairyland are landscapes of crisis. Always a plein-air poet, in these later years he needed the woods more and more: "If I can not get out into the hills, among the trees, I can do nothing—my brain is blank."39 Gazing at nature opened his imagination and offered him at least the comfort of his fancy but it had an obverse effect, too, in that it showed him the limits of his knowledge. In "The Speckled Trout"40 we find the water sheltering not a mermaid, of course, but the fish itself "stretched out above a rocky shelf, / A shadow sleeping mockingly." The fisherman is frustrated, at the trout's mercy:

"He does not know the magic word,
The word that changes everything,
And brings all Nature to his hand:
That makes of this great trout a king,
And opes the way to Faeryland."

"Late October Woods"41 has the usual rich detail: crows cawing
loudly in the beech tree’s top, beech-nuts that “crowd / The mossy
cirque with neutral tints / Of gray,” while bush-clover, jewel-weed,
and “Slim, white-ribbed cones of fungi” decorate the ground:

And, lo! yon rock of fern and flower,
That heaves its height from bramble deeps,
All on a sudden seems the tower
Wherein the Sleeping Beauty sleeps:
And that red vine, the fire-drake,
The flaming dragon, seems, that keeps
The world from her no man may wake.

“In the Beech Woods” 42 gives much the same picture, the wahoo
bush, the aster-stalk, the pawpaw “great-leaved and beryl-green”
and “like some Indian queen . . . / Flaming the gum-tree
stands. . . .” Here:

... the beeches rise, tree upon golden tree,
That, with each wind that blows, sound like
a summer sea.

These are the woods of gold; forests our
childhood knew,
Where the Enchanted dwelt. . .

We might like to speculate whether in later years Cawein could
have rescued the Enchanted Maiden or wakened the Sleeping Beauty
in the daring way of Stravinsky or Prokofiev, or survived the
Wasteland, like Eliot, by some new development in his style and
philosophy. All we know is that he believed “through . . . all
Evil / Is Good evolved,” a line from The Witch, 43 a very Faustian
play in which the witch herself is redeemed and which closes with
these stage directions:

The hut flames up: the Fiends busy themselves here and there.
In the midst of all the Spirit of Evil towers with baffled but
imposing majesty.

A hint of Milton’s Satan in a scene that recalls the end of Goethe’s
Faust, Part II, 44 indicates both courage and vitality. For Cawein’s
work, though uneven, bears the personal stamp of one who
suffered for and with it. In the bulk of his poems he does not paint merely picturesque landscapes. The youthful desire to write romance and narrative never completely died down but surfaced in personification, allegory, rich classical and folklore allusions. These move naturally in the landscape, animating it and suggesting both mystery and meaning.

Kentucky is indeed the setting of his poems but transformed, absorbed into world culture. As early as 1886, Cawein, while yielding the point that American subjects have a novelty "alien to the Old World," identified himself with the European tradition:

But, however this may be, one, who has delved in the classics as I have—surely, it is true, superficially—may find them at times very enticing and fascinating, and wielding a power over you like that of the wand of Prospero.\(^\text{45}\)

A poem from *Accolon of Gaul* testifies to that magic power. In "Genius Loci"\(^\text{46}\) the poet-wanderer senses the presence of a god "who left the shadow warm / As a wood-rose, and filled the air with balm / Of his wild breath as with ethereal sap." He asks, "Does not the moss retain some slight impress, / Green-dented down, of where he lay or trod?" He is moved "to lie down / Here on the spot his god-head sanctified" and hope for a dream of poetry:

For, all around me, upon field and hill,  
Enchantment lies as of mysterious flutes;  
As if the music of a god's goodwill  
Had taken on material attributes  

\[\text{Inaudible tunes, blown on the pipes of Pan,} \]
\[\text{That have assumed a visible entity,} \]
\[\text{And drugged the air with beauty so, a Faun,} \]
\[\text{Behold, I seem, and am no more a man.} \]

The *Courier-Journal*, reporting on the 14 November 1908 meeting of the Louisville Literary Club, called Madison Cawein "Kentucky poet and world poet."\(^\text{47}\) While there is both extravagance and justification in such a statement, for Kentuckians, and Louisvillians especially, he is surely a "genius loci."

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NOTES

3Untermeyer, p. 97.
I wish to thank an editorial reader for the Kentucky Review who very correctly noted the importance of Untermeyer's point of view and called it to my attention. My paper indicates the development of two poetic landscapes in Cawein's work which, while they may reflect the concept of the romantic and the realistic, do not altogether illustrate Untermeyer's thesis.

I am very grateful to Mrs. Mildred Susemichel for bringing the item cited above to my attention. Here Rothert, in a manuscript read before the Louisville Literary Club on 27 September 1915, observes: "No Kentucky epic has yet been written. Cawein, shortly before his death, which occurred December 8, 1914, had decided to attempt a poem of that character. In the fall of 1914, in company with Young E. Allison and the writer of this paper, he visited Muhlenberg County to familiarize himself with its history and scenes, expecting to use that county as part of a background for a Kentucky epic."

Cawein himself says, in a letter of 16 October 1914, to his friend R. E. Lee Gibson: "I have just returned from Muhlenberg County where I had some interesting experiences and met some queer characters. . . . Out on Rothert's tract of timber land, where we spent most of our time, we went on a fox hunt. We visited a number of old Indian mounds, old farms and old graveyards. It was a fine trip." Quoted in Rothert's The Story of a Poet: Madison Cawein (Louisville: John P. Morton, 1921), p. 327.

This latter book by Rothert is the only comprehensive work on Cawein and is an invaluable collection of photographs, letters, reminiscences, some critical appreciation of the poetry, bibliographical references up to 1920 and indices of published books, brochures and poems. All subsequent Rothert references are to this book.

5My approach in this article was stimulated by the view of Arthur F. Jones and Bruce Weber in their recent catalogue, The Kentucky Painter from the Frontier Era to the Great War (Lexington: University of Kentucky Art Museum, 1981), that Cawein's work in the area of fantasy influenced the painters John Bernard Alberts (pp. 38-39) and Paul Plaschke (p. 62).
6Edwin Markham recognized Cawein's environment better than Untermeyer: "Mr. Cawein's landscape is not the sea, nor the desert, nor the mountain, but the lovely inland levels of his Kentucky." Quoted in Rose de Vaux-Royer's foreword to Madison Cawein, The Cup of Comus (New York: Cameo Press, 1915), p. 6.

Letter to R. E. Lee Gibson, 8 June 1902, quoted in Rothert, p. 234.

Cawein in response to Thum’s questionnaire, quoted in Rothert, p. 123. See also his poem “Don Quixote,” *The Cup of Comus*, p. 82.

James B. Hebden, quoted in Rothert, p. 77.

Quoted in Rothert, p. 257.


Cawein, *Blooms of the Berry*, pp. 75-80.

In his own “To Autumn” (*Blooms of the Berry*, pp. 104-05), Cawein seems to be answering Keats’s “Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?,” describing, throughout four stanzas, various instances of autumn’s presence, ending:

And where within the woodland’s twilight path,
The cloud-winged skies did peep all speechless down,
And stirred the gaudy leaves with fragrant breath
I’ve seen thee walk, nor fear the Winter’s wrath;
There drop asleep clad in thy gipsy gown,
While Echo bending o’er dropp’d tears upon thy wreath.

(The poem was reprinted in an altered version as “October” in *Kentucky Poems*, pp. 52-55.)


Quoted in Rothert, p. 222.


Letter to Walter Malone, 16 April 1913, quoted in Rothert, p. 312.


Letters to Harriet Monroe, 4 and 12 June 1913, quoted in Rothert, p. 316.


Professor Clubbe has pointed out Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence” as a source for this poem. Dr. Henry Cottell, in a

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reminiscence, notes that “The Old Leech Gatherer” (sic) was one of Cawein’s favorite Wordsworth poems (Rothert, p. 442). At the poem’s appearance in Poetry, Harriet Monroe observed that though Cawein’s work “is landscape poetry chiefly . . . sometimes, as in Wordsworth, figures blend with the scene and become a part of nature” [Poetry 1 (1913): 134-35].

I wish in particular to thank Dr. Susan Grove Hall, who has kindly given me access to materials she has collected on Cawein, for calling to my attention Richard F. Patteson’s “An Additional Source for ‘The Wasteland’,” Notes and Queries 23 (1976): 300-01. Patteson notes similarities of tone and imagery in the two poems and maintains that Eliot would surely have seen Cawein’s “Wasteland” in the January 1913 number of Poetry.

I am grateful to Mr. Frank K. Lorenz, Reference Librarian at Hamilton and Kirkland Colleges, Clinton, New York, for making available to me in 1973 photocopies of the correspondence, preserved there, between Cawein and the American poet Clinton Scollard.

Most of the letters date from 1914 and voice Cawein’s frustration at the direction his life has taken. He asks Scollard to help him find work—“I am in desperation as to where to turn” (28 February). As his needs mount, he wonders, “Isn’t there any more money in the world?” (7 March). Though he goes on writing poetry, “after it is written,” he complains, “I don’t know how or where to sell it” (28 March). Watching his literary fortunes wane, he confesses, “I can’t understand why the American public makes so much over Yeats and Noyes” (7 March). And when he cannot find a publisher for The Cup of Comus, he concedes in weary anger to James B. Kenyon, a mutual friend of his and Scollard’s, “I don’t happen to be an English poet, you see . . . .” (23 July).

Letter to Clinton Scollard, 28 August 1914, courtesy, Hamilton and Kirkland Colleges.

Cawein, Weeds by the Wall, p. 81.
Cawein, The Cup of Comus, p. 73.
Letter to Clinton Scollard, 25 September 1914, courtesy, Hamilton and Kirkland Colleges.

All three are reproduced in Rothert, pp. 36, 37, 50, respectively.

In a recent article, “Madison Cawein as an Exponent of German Culture,” Filson Club History Quarterly 51, No. 1 (1977): 5-16, John Rutledge discusses the considerable and persistent influence this German heritage had on Cawein’s poetry.

Cawein’s father, the descendant of a French Huguenot family which had emigrated to Germany in 1685, was born in Mühlhohen in 1827. His mother, born in Louisville in 1839, was the daughter of German immigrant parents, John and Rosina Stelsly of Württemberg (cf. Rothert, pp. 165-66). As a child Cawein had heard his maternal grandmother “improvising poems in German to her delightful old-world garden” (Rothert, p. 98).

Cawein, The Vale of Tempe, pp. 159-62.
Cawein, The Poet, the Fool and the Faeries (Boston: Small, Maynard,
I am indebted to Professor Clubbe for noting Matthew Arnold's "the Forsaken Merman" where the "kings of the sea," deserted by a mortal woman, are "left lonely forever."

38Untermeyer, p. 97.
39Letter to Stark Young, 10 November 1912, quoted in Rothert, p. 309.
40Cawein, The Poet and Nature and the Morning Road, pp. 193-94.
41Cawein, The Vale of Tempe, pp. 172-73.
42Cawein, The Vale of Tempe, pp. 174-76.

The beech woods around Louisville provided constant inspiration for Cawein. Remarking on "The Dryads" from The Poet, the Fool and the Faeries, he writes in the letter to Stark Young cited above, "You must, some time, see the beech forest, wild and primeval, in which I wrote the greater part of that little play" (Rothert, p. 310). These woods were equally celebrated by the painters, notably Carl Brenner (1838-1888), who is said to have "loved these trees and was never happier than when he went out... to study them with their drooping boughs, their clinging leaves and great boles flecked with moss and lichens" (unidentified newspaper clipping from a Brenner family scrapbook as quoted in The Kentucky Painter, p. 44).


This is Cawein's only volume of plays, three of which, The Shadow Garden, The House of Fear, and The Witch, are allegories of good and evil, and the fourth, Cabestaing, is a tragedy set in troubadour times. In 1901 the poet had published One Day and Another (Boston: Richard G. Badger) which he called "A Lyrical Eclogue," tracing the day-to-day and up-and-down course of a love affair in a kind of dramatic "duologue." He claimed to "know of nothing in modern poetical literature that is exactly like it" (letter to R. E. Lee Gibson, 13 March 1900, quoted in Rothert, p. 217). He also termed "The Poet, the Fool and the Faeries" of 1912 a "lyrical eclogue" and included in the volume of that name two other masque-like suites, "The Dryads" and "A Faery Burial." Such works indicate that the urge which had created Accolon of Gaul in 1889 was hard to deny.

45Letter to Elvira Sydnor Miller, 28 September 1886, quoted in Rothert, p. 176.
47Courier-Journal, 14 November 1908, as quoted in Rothert, p. 106.