Poetic Justice: Rediscovering the Life and Work of Madison Cawein

A thesis submitted to the Miami University Honors Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for University Honors with Distinction

By

Spencer Cawein Pate

April 2011
Oxford, Ohio
Abstract

Poetic Justice: Rediscovering the Life and Work of Madison Cawein

By Spencer Cawein Pate

Madison Julius Cawein (b. March 23, 1865, d. December 8, 1914) was a prolific Kentucky poet – he was known as the “Keats of Kentucky,” as the majority of his work is regional romantic poetry in traditional verse forms – and also a distant relative of the author of this thesis. While Cawein was acclaimed and popular in his day, he is now all but forgotten, save for the recent discovery that T.S. Eliot likely plagiarized from his poetry. It is my contention not only that Cawein’s work is undeservedly neglected by readers and critics, but also that his oeuvre is a mirror to the cultural upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; he provides a missing link between different literary periods. It is thus my intention to examine both Cawein’s life and the vagaries of his poetic career in the service of demonstrating why his quite fine work should be remembered in its own right. Furthermore, I provide a detailed analysis of Cawein’s poetry based upon a careful reading of his collected works, and in doing so, I also offer a concise anthology of some of Cawein’s best poems.
Poetic Justice: Rediscovering the Life and Work of Madison Cawein

By Spencer Cawein Pate

Approved by:

[Signatures]

Dr. Tom Romano, Advisor

Dr. Richard Steven Turner, Reader

Dr. Paul Cawein, Reader
Acknowledgements

This essay is the product of about six years of researching, reading, and writing. Therefore, I have many individuals to thank for their involvement:

Thank you to Dr. Tom Romano for his enthusiasm and cogent advice regarding my paper;

Thank you to Dr. Richard Steven Turner for his perceptive critiques and praise;

Thank you to Dr. Paul Cawein for his continual support and many kind words;

Thank you to Anna Tambour for her encouragement, manuscript help, and true friendship;

And lastly and most importantly, thank you to my parents – for everything.
# Table of Contents

I. Introduction ................................................................. 1

II. Cawein’s Life ............................................................... 9

III. Cawein’s Poetry .......................................................... 19

A. Nature / Love Poetry ...................................................... 24

B. Mythological / Fantastic Poetry ........................................ 31

C. Historical / Nostalgic Poetry .......................................... 35

D. War Poetry .................................................................. 41

E. Spiritual / Transcendental Poetry .................................... 48

IV. Conclusion ................................................................. 56

V. Bibliography ................................................................. 60

Appendix: Cawein Family Tree ........................................... 63
I. Introduction

For those readers who are not related to poets, rest assured that it is a unique and satisfying experience to learn that T.S. Eliot plagiarized from one of your distant relatives. In my case, the relative was Madison Julius Cawein (pronounced “CAW-wine”), a prolific Kentucky poet who was acclaimed and popular in his day (b. March 23, 1865, d. December 8, 1914) but is now all but forgotten. He was known as the “Keats of Kentucky,” and surprisingly, Cawein actually merits this label, if not the stature of Keats – his talent deserves consideration as that of a regional romantic poet who wrote in traditional verse forms but was born one hundred years too late. Eliot swiped and pilfered lines from every source imaginable, and to know that he stole from Madison Cawein has been a continual source of amusement and pleasure for me, an occasional poet. I like to imagine Cawein in the afterlife, smiling broadly upon his chance rediscovery now that Eliot has been outed as a shameless literary kleptomaniac, a magpie that stole whatever glinted and caught his eye. Eliot thieved from countless great writers – just one glimpse into the Norton Critical Edition of “The Waste Land” (which does not mention Cawein) will confirm this; the non-Eliot materials take up many times more pages than Eliot’s slim poem – and it’s poetic justice that the undeservedly neglected Madison Cawein is now among this illustrious group. Cawein’s work is nothing less than a mirror to or a secret history of the tumultuous cultural upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; it is as though he has intentionally been ignored to make our narratives and chronologies more tidy, more linear. He was a missing link, a vital transitional fossil in the archaeology of literary criticism. It is thus my intention to
examine both his life and the vagaries of his poetic career in the service of demonstrating why Cawein’s quite fine work should be remembered in its own right. In doing so, I would also like to provide an introductory sampler of some of Cawein’s best poems.

I had known my entire life that I was related to a poet named Madison Cawein, but I never knew exactly how. My middle name is Cawein (it was my mother’s surname), and in the course of researching this paper, I discovered exactly how we are related, which was previously unknown to my family. Utilizing extensive genealogical research done by relatives, I found that Madison is my third cousin four times removed (see the appendix for a simplified family tree showing the two branches of the Cawein family and my relation to Madison). However, it was not until I learned of the Eliot connection that I first began to seriously read and investigate his verse. Echoes of Cawein’s work in Eliot’s were originally discovered by the Canadian academic Robert Ian Scott in 1995, which were discussed and expanded upon by Bevis Hillier. In a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, Scott noted a number of similarities between Cawein’s poem “Waste Land” (1913) and Eliot’s famous “The Waste Land” (1922) which must be regarded as more than mere coincidence. Cawein’s poem, which is not mentioned in the latter’s infamous and possibly satirical endnotes, appeared in the January 1913 issue of *Poetry*, which Eliot almost certainly read, as it contained an article by Ezra Pound about contemporary London poets (Hillier 1996). Certainly, the striking similarities between the works go beyond the title – Cawein’s poem, about a dead and dusty field where only weeds and a gnarled tree grow, refers to “The cricket’s cry and the locust's whirr, / And the note of a bird's distress, / With the rasping sound of the grasshopper” and trees that
are “Skeletons gaunt, that gnarled the place, / Twisted and torn they rose,” all of which are images in “The Waste Land” (“And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water”). Even more telling, the poem mentions a dead man and a dog, as in the first section of Eliot’s poem: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed? / Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men, / Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!” (Eliot 1936). Here is Cawein’s work in full:

Briar and fennel and chinquapin,  
And rue and ragweed everywhere;  
The field seemed sick as a soul with sin,  
Or dead of an old despair,  
Born of an ancient care.

The cricket’s cry and the locust’s whirr,  
And the note of a bird’s distress,  
With the rasping sound of a grasshopper,  
Clung to the loneliness  
Like burrs to a ragged dress.

So sad the field, so waste the ground,  
So curst with an old despair,  
A woodchuck’s burrow, a blind mole’s mound,  
And a chipmunk’s stony lair,  
Seemed more than it could bear.

So solemn too, so more than sad,  
So droning-lone with bees—  
I wondered what more could Nature add  
To the sum of its miseries—  
And then I saw the trees.

Skeletons gaunt, that gnarled the place,  
Twisted and torn they rose,  
The tortured bones of a perished race  
Of monsters no mortal knows.  
They startled the mind’s repose.
And a man stood there, as still as moss,
   A lichen form that stared;
And an old blind hound, that seemed at loss,
   Forever around him fared
   With a snarling fang half-bared.

I looked at the man. I saw him plain.
   Like a dead weed, gray and wan,
Or a breath of dust.—I looked again—
   And man and dog were gone—
   Like wisps o’ the graying dawn…

Were they part of the grim death there?—
   Ragweed, fennel, and rue?—
Or forms of the mind, an old despair,
   That there into semblance grew
   Out of the grief I knew? (Cawein 1913b)

Besides this fisher king imagery (“The field seemed sick as a soul with sin”),
Eliot’s other most famous poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (which was,
incidentally, also published in Poetry), contains more similarities to Cawein’s work. In
the last few years of his life, Cawein’s poetry underwent a shocking and radical
transformation that none of his previous volumes prefigure even slightly, as documented
in his final, posthumously-published collection, The Cup of Comus. This melancholy
volume – whose incessant, recurring themes of death, ghosts, abandonment, despair,
lovelessness, lost youth, and hellish war seem eerily prescient both of Cawein’s death and
of WWI’s utter devastation – includes a poem titled “On the Road” in which the first,
fourth, and twelfth lines begin with “Let us…”, exactly as in “Prufrock,” which was
published only two years after Cawein’s poem. Another poem in The Cup of Comus,
“The Ghost of Yesterday,” mentions “belle and beau” “Who come and go / around its
ancient portico,” which one cannot help but compare to Eliot’s famous “The women
come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (I also find one section in the poem obliquely reminiscent of Eliot’s famous description of the fog). One poem, “Portents,” even features a horrible vision with images of dead soldiers returning from war, one of the best-known images early in Eliot’s “Waste Land” (“A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many”). Other tempting final points of comparison are several other Cawein poems about droughts and “lonely lands,” which are full of dead gardens, wastelands, crickets and grasshoppers, circling birds, a hot sun beating down, and no sign of water or life (Cawein 1915; Eliot 1936).

Some of these further plagiarisms were discovered by the critic Bevis Hillier, and while I have a slightly more charitable view of Eliot than he does (I still admire his Four Quartets as well as a few other poems and memorable lines), I agree that Eliot does not entirely deserve his fame and influence. I discovered and fell in love with Eliot’s work in my early teen years, as I suspect many Eliot fans do. My disfavor with Eliot began when I realized that he is essentially a gifted teen angst poet, full of chic despair over modern society and melodramatic self-pity. Life in the twentieth century was not quite as barren or bleak as Eliot seems determined to portray; indeed, the more optimistic Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens dwarf Eliot in terms of sheer linguistic talent. Eliot, though, has canonical status as a poet and critic, while Madison Cawein, whom editor Harold Monro called “quite the biggest figure among American poets” in the October 1912 issue of Poetry Review, remains almost completely unknown aside from his connections with Eliot (Hillier 1996). (Interestingly Monro rejected “Prufrock” when Eliot submitted it,
calling it “crazy” – how poetic tastes do change!) I will allow the wonderful, witty Kenneth Koch to deliver the final verdict on Eliot’s stature and influence:

_The Waste Land_ gave the time’s most accurate data,
It seemed, and Eliot was the Great Dictator
Of literature. One hardly dared to wink
Or fool around in any way in poems,
And Critics poured out awful jereboams
To _irony, ambiguity, and tension_—
And other things I do not wish to mention. (Koch 2009)

Eliot’s continued popularity may be due to the fact that plagiarism seems to have acquired a certain cachet in recent years. (Which is not to discount the power of influence or allusion – I think most poets would agree that a phrase or line from another work can, whether intentionally or unconsciously, serve as the grain of sand around which the pearl of a poem grows.) Vladimir Nabokov and Pablo Picasso were both fond of saying that “great artists steal,” that all artists are plagiarists, but I think the artistic process of reappropriation, reinterpretation, and renewal they refer to is qualitatively different than theft. But some contemporary writers, like Jonathan Lethem, have gone so far as to justify outright theft. Using Bob Dylan’s recent song lyrics as an example, Lethem would have us believe that stealing from other sources without citing or otherwise noting them is acceptable and even praiseworthy. (To be fair, Lethem is good at mentioning his own influences.) For any kind of writer or academic to espouse this belief is simply irresponsible when one considers that plagiarism and cheating are endemic in schools and universities today, because it creates a philosophical rationale for these acts. And in a curious way, Eliot was ahead of his time in his stealing; it prefigured an age where many feel as though nothing new or original is possible and where
increasingly many artists opt for bricolage instead of creation. The lengths to which people will go to defend Eliot is interesting as well – in every account of his relationship to Cawein’s work that I’ve read save Hillier’s, Eliot is lauded as a singular, innovative genius in possession of his own distinct voice despite the acknowledged “borrowing,” while Cawein is belittled as a mildly intriguing minor poet at best. Nevertheless, it was Eliot’s plagiarism that has led to a tiny amount of renewed attention for Cawein, so we must credit him for leading us to a rediscovery of Cawein’s work.

Before I delve into Cawein’s life and literary legacy, let me state that I do not consider Cawein to be a “neglected genius,” as many poets are dubbed upon rediscovery. Genius is predicated upon the original handling of one’s themes, and Cawein was, for most of his life, essentially a regional poet whose work fits squarely within the romantic tradition. We do not like writers and thinkers who contradict our love of a sharply delineated chronological notion of progress; the idea that a liminal figure like Cawein – a talented romantic poet who existed in the uneasy period before World War I and the explosion of modernism, and whose work radically changed toward the end of his life – leaves us with an uncertainty of where to categorize or pigeonhole his work, much like fellow transitional figure and nature poet Gerald Manley Hopkins. In many ways, Cawein is a mirror held up to the changing times and cultural sensibilities of his life. Cawein’s work does indeed feature many similarities with that of Keats and his fellow romantics, but a better point of comparison might be Robert Frost, who championed love of nature and tradition in the face of modernity. Every age has its great nature poet – Frost and Gary Snyder being the two finest of the twentieth century – so Cawein could be
seen as the great nature poet of his day, one whose work was inextricably tied to the flora and fauna of his native Kentucky and to a deep love and appreciation of the same. Aside from romanticism, his acknowledged favorite era in poetry and largest influence, the transcendentalist tradition of Emerson and Thoreau is directly evident in Cawein’s poetry, not to mention many other early American writers.

On the other hand, maybe Clark Ashton Smith is a more accurate parallel – while Smith is remembered for his exotic and gorgeously written fantasy fiction, his strictly metered and rhymed poetry (which also deals with fantastical themes, as does much of Cawein’s poetry) is also neglected, simply because the style in which it was written has fallen out of favor (Smith 2002). No matter to whom Cawein is best compared, however, we should view him on the basis of his poetic talent and not as an unfashionable anachronism or merely as an interesting curiosity. Before I delve into his poetry, I will present a short biography to usefully situate us within the context of his times and career. All of the information and citations herein, unless otherwise noted, were found in Otto A. Rothert’s fascinating and comprehensive biography *The Story of a Poet*, a hugely useful volume containing a “pictureography,” a standard biography, interviews, press clippings, obituaries, letters, appraisals and reminiscences from Cawein’s contemporaries, appreciations, a detailed bibliography, and indices to his poetry and publications (Rothert 1921).
II. Cawein’s Life

Madison Julius Cawein was born March 23, 1865, in Louisville, Kentucky, the youngest of the four sons and one daughter of Dr. William Cawein, a practical herbalist (i.e., he gathered medicinal plants for patent medicine), and Mrs. Christiana Cawein, a deeply eloquent woman, who was interested in psychology and spiritualism. Dr. William Cawein was descended from Jean de Herancour, a French nobleman and Calvinist who relocated to the Rhineland in Germany, which is consistent with my own understanding of the Cawein genealogy, as the name is a Germanization of a French surname following the migration there of French protestants escaping persecution. (This also means that my great-times-eight grandfather was a French nobleman, about whom Cawein would later write a poem.) Madison Cawein later claimed that he first “came in contact with wild nature” at the age of nine, when his parents moved to Rock Springs, a resort east of Louisville. Rock Springs was also the site of an old water mill which was a prominent location in Cawein’s poetry. Cawein’s father managed the Rock Springs Hotel from 1874 to 1875, and Cawein often returned to this boyhood home, where he would wander alone or with his father through beech groves, fields, and streams. From age eleven to thirteen, Cawein lived with his parents in a cottage near New Albany, Indiana, where he “formed [his] great love for nature”; fascinated by the supernatural, nature, and language (he translated poems from both Latin and German), he read, learned, and made up stories constantly for friends and family, although he did not fall in love with poetry until his junior year of high school. The Caweins returned to Louisville in 1879, where Madison graduated from high school in 1884, apparently a very well-liked and much-praised
student. His peers remarked on how studious and serious he was, although they also noted his deep enthusiasm for nature and literature. These extremely careful and diligent work and revision habits continued throughout his adult life, when he spent many hours writing every day. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1886 (as well as being the Class Poet), and in 1887 he began work as a cashier in a pool room which handled transactions for betting on horse races. Cawein worked there for six years while he wrote prolifically in many different verse forms.

Cawein shared a home with his parents, where he wrote nineteen of his books. At the age of twenty-two, his first book, *Blooms of the Berry*, was published in 1887. This first volume netted him the encouragement of the Louisville press, and he eventually gained a reputation among the critics of the Eastern United States and England with the help of William Dean Howells. Cawein became an acquaintance of Howells, as well as Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell. Cawein’s poetry was rather obviously influenced by the romantics – Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron – but also by many other classic British writers and American transcendentalists, early metaphysical and religious poets, nature poets, and “breakfast club poets,” such as Browning, Bryant, Burns, Emerson, Goldsmith, Holmes, Longfellow, Lowell, Malory, Milton, Poe, Riley (one of his best friends among contemporaries), Scott, Shakespeare, Spenser, Swinburne, Tennyson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Whittier, according to his own and others’ estimations (including mine). In fiction, his favorite writers were Cervantes, Goethe, and Hardy, and many other English and French writers, particularly of the Victorian period: Bulwer-Lytton, De Maupassant, Dickens, Fielding, Flaubert, Gautier,
Rousseau, Scott, Smollett, Stevenson, Thackeray, and Zola. Cawein had his dislikes as well – Yeats and especially Ezra Pound. In a hilarious letter to the editor of a poetry magazine, he appraised Pound as follows: “The less of that Ezra Pound stuff you put in your pages the better it will be for the future of Poetry. Walt Whitman gone mad, without the grace and sound common sense of Whitman to redeem the platitude and lack of poetic form and inspiration. A boy could write such stuff by the yard without any mental effort whatever. May God help us, who love real poetry, if this is the kind of verse we are to be doomed to read in the next decade.” Cawein had no idea how right he was about the future of poetry (I do happen to heartily concur with his assessment of Pound); he surely would have detested Eliot’s work too.

Cawein was an extremely prolific poet, and he was popular among critics (though some resented the constant flood of his publications) though most of his books never sold well at all. He published 36 volumes containing 2700 poems (1500 of which are originals; the remaining 1200 are reprints or changed versions) including a five volume Collected Poems (1907) organized by (vague, overlapping) themes and not by chronology. Cawein lamented the public’s preference for flashy and simple popular works like “Casey at the Bat.” He published one or two slim volumes of poems (often culled from magazine publications or from previous books) in small press runs nearly every year from 1887 to 1915, and he promoted them with public readings, one of his strongest talents as a poet. Cawein was a perfectionist, constantly downplaying or revising his earlier work and current poems in progress and overpraising the works of others; he often said that he considered himself a simple craftsman and did not want to be
compared to the classics. Volumes of new poems included *Blooms of the Berry*, *The Triumph of Music*, *Accolon of Gaul*, *Lyrics and Idyls*, *Days and Dreams*, *Red Leaves and Roses*, *Intimations of the Beautiful*, *Undertones*, *The Garden of Dreams*, *Shapes and Shadows*, *Idyllic Monologues*, *Myth and Romance*, *Weeds by the Wall*, *A Voice on the Wind*, *The Vale of Tempe*, *An Ode*, *New Poems*, *The Giant and the Star*, *The Poet, the Fool, and the Faeries*, *The Republic*, *Minions of the Moon*, and *The Cup of Comus*. Of these books, *The Giant and the Star* is devoted entirely to children’s poems and rhymes, which one critic suggested might be one of Cawein’s most remembered works. There is also one volume of translations from German, *The White Snake*; one volume of four plays (not to mention several other poems in dialogue in various books), *The Shadow Garden*; and two volumes of combined prose and poetry, *Nature Notes and Impressions* (essentially a commonplace book of Thoreau-esque nature observations, sketches, and poems) and *The Poet and Nature and the Morning Road* (a fictional children’s story with poems interspersed – a poetic primer or reader of sorts, something of a kunstlerroman).

Reprints and revisions included *Moods and Memories*, *Poems of Nature and Love*, *One Day and Another*, *Kentucky Poems*, and *Poems* (selected). Thank goodness for the public domain – all these books command obscene prices from antiquarian bookstores; my signed copy of *Myth and Romance* cost about $100, while other bookshops carried it for several times that amount.

In the midst of this huge literary output, Cawein found the time to write countless letters and to keep up correspondences with many friends and fellow writers, dishing out both praise and advice for their work. Critics such as William Dean Howells, Harold
Monro, and the literati of both his native state and Europe heaped praise upon Cawein, as the massive amount of effusive material gathered in *The Story of a Poet* can attest. (Although depending on your point of view, it is either sad or funny that other poets or critics repeatedly compare Cawein to yet more poets totally forgotten by literary history, as they did not have the benefit of being plagiarized by T.S. Eliot – at least, none that we know of yet.) The only two counterexamples I can find are both from *The New York Times*, which generally gave good reviews of Cawein’s work (and one of the critiques is of his five volume collected poems – any volume of collected poems is bound to have a lot of mediocre poetry among the gems). Shaemas O’Sheel’s review is particularly interesting because of its snobbish European attitude – he advised Cawein to read the Celtic Revival poets, so as to improve Cawein’s “lush, rank, and entangling” poetry and by extension “the standard of poetry in America.” Cawein’s reply to this critique defends his uniquely Kentuckian poetry, making the highly Whitmanesque statement that he wishes to “leave unsoiled my sane and American soul” (Cawein 1912). In fact, many posthumous appreciations noted that Cawein brought attention to the poetry of the South and destroyed mistaken beliefs about its inferiority to the poetry of New England and the East Coast, where the literary culture of America was and still largely is situated. He liked and appreciated the work of many Southern poets as well as serving as their de facto representative. It could be argued that Cawein’s work rehabilitated and reinvigorated the reputation of American poetry in Britain and the rest of Europe at a time when its influence, recognition, and accomplishment had waned.
The turn of the century saw the beginnings of health problems and a major financial downturn in Cawein’s life; his characteristically buoyant personality turned moody and melancholy as he openly wished for death in letters to friends, complained of the public’s indifference to poetry, and wrote of his weariness toward “the terrible burden of existence, the endless struggle for attainment, the pitiless irony of the actual, and all the misery, uselessness and emptiness of effort.” However, Cawein’s fortunes improved enough that in June of 1903 he was married to Gertrude Foster McKelvey, apparently the great love of his life (a “beautiful, noble” soul who, along with their son, was the greatest comfort in Cawein’s direst straits) and an occasional writer herself. Cawein moved out of his parents’ house and with his new bride moved into a beautiful new home which featured a private library with fifteen hundred volumes. Madison and his wife had only one son, Preston Hamilton Cawein, who was born on March 18, 1904, and who later changed his name to Madison Cawein II after Madison’s death. Cawein wrote for the rest of his life and continued to appreciate the beauty of nature and spend time with his friends, rarely leaving Kentucky, except for trips to Washington D.C. and New England, to visit friends like William Dean Howells. In fact, Cawein was so feted in his lifetime by critics that he met President Theodore Roosevelt and his wife among other government officials, and Roosevelt could quote lines of Cawein’s poetry from memory! The President and his wife were fans of his work and reread it often.

In 1912, Cawein, who was never wealthy (although this did not stop him from having an active bourgeois lifestyle within the cultural scene of wherever he lived), lost money in a stock market crash and was forced to sell his old Louisville home as well as
some of his library. He bemoaned the reading public’s indifference to poetry, and one despairing letter uncharacteristically states that “the trouble about all my books is they sell so few and the royalties are really nothing. A poet ought never to marry. Being a poet, it’s the mistake of my life. Nothing but worry and the grind of keeping a family up and enough money to live respectably on.” Cawein began to write dark, despairing, and powerful war poems in addition to unsparing self-analyses in which he accepts maturity and death. Even the public had begun to take notice of Cawein’s stylistic and thematic shifts; his poem “At the End of the Road” was discussed for how downbeat and morbid it was. Read it alongside the earlier nature poem “The Whippoorwill,” just to see how much his poetry changed in his twilight years, despite some similarities in the repetition and melancholy, recessional tones:
“The Whippoorwill”

I

Above lone woodland ways that led
To dells the stealthy twilights tread
The west was hot geranium red;
   And still, and still,
Along old lanes the locusts sow
With clustered pearls the Maytimes know,
Deep in the crimson afterglow,
We heard the homeward cattle low,
And then the far-off, far-off woe
   Of "whippoorwill!" of "whippoorwill!"

II

Beneath the idle beechen boughs
We heard the far bells of the cows
Come slowly jangling towards the house;
   And still, and still,
Beyond the light that would not die
Out of the scarlet-haunted sky;
Beyond the evening-star's white eye
Of glittering chalcedony,
Drained out of dusk the plaintive cry
   Of "whippoorwill," of "whippoorwill."

III

And in the city oft, when swims
The pale moon o'er the smoke that dims
Its disc, I dream of wildwood limbs;
   And still, and still,
I seem to hear, where shadows grope
Mid ferns and flowers that dewdrops rope,—
Lost in faint deeps of heliotrope
Above the clover-sweetened slope,—
Retreat, despairing, past all hope,
   The whippoorwill, the whippoorwill.
(Cawein 1911)

“At the End of the Road”

This is the truth as I see it, my dear,
Out in the wind and the rain:
They who have nothing have little to fear,—
Nothing to lose or to gain.
Here by the road at the end o' the year,
Let us sit down and drink o' our beer,
Happy-Go-Lucky and her cavalier,
Out in the wind and the rain.

Now we are old, oh isn't it fine
Out in the wind and the rain?
Now we have nothing why snivel and
whine? —
What would it bring us again? —
When I was young I took you like wine,
Held you and kissed you and thought you
divine —
Happy-Go-Lucky, the habit's still mine,
Out in the wind and the rain.

Oh, my old Heart, what a life we have led,
Out in the wind and the rain!
How we have drunken and how we have
fed!
Nothing to lose or to gain! —
Cover the fire now; get we to bed.
Long was the journey and far has it led:
Come, let us sleep, lass, sleep like the dead,
Out in the wind and the rain. (Cawein 1915)
In his rather desperate financial situation, the Authors Club of New York placed him on their relief list in 1914. Cawein tried to secure a government appointment (he did know a few other public figures and major poets of his day) or perhaps a job in journalism, but it was to no avail. He died of apoplexy (an archaic term for a stroke or aneurysm) in the bathtub on December 8, 1914, at the age of 49. Widely lauded and eulogized by friends, fans, and newspapers as one of the greatest living American poets, Cawein was buried in Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, next to his father and wife, the latter of whom died in 1918. In 1921 the tribute volume *The Story of a Poet* was published, and it contains one of the saddest appraisals, at least in retrospect, of Cawein’s work by Rothert himself:

Like Poe and Keats and many other true poets, Cawein did not receive a general recognition while he was still writing. He now awaits the wide and deserved recognition which time alone bestows. That the number of appreciators of Cawein’s works never decreased but slowly increased during his life-time points toward an enduring fame…Cawein’s greatest hope was that his poetry would live.

Other critics took a more balanced view, and said that Cawein’s “spiritual nostalgia” and “creative imagination” were never quite enough to “pierce satisfactorily through the mists of material substance to the essential verities which lay behind them,” making his achievement incomplete (when I first read this quote, Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* and “The Broken Tower” immediately came to mind as similar spiritual struggles). I think this perspective is borne out by my study of Cawein’s later poems, although the brooding maturity on display there is arguably preferable to much of his earlier work. He still mostly fought for art and tradition over modernity but he came to a kind of acceptance of death, a rejection of false innocence and escapism.
Here is another appraisal, which is again either full of humor or bitter irony depending on how you look at it:

[Long after men have forgotten that some flowing-haired, horn-spectacled critic once pronounced Ezra Pound wonderful, or that Ezra Pound ever lived and moved and had his being, a grateful public will rejoice that Madison Cawein sat at the feet of Milton the stately, and Keats the lovely, and hearkened not to the clanging cymbals of some freakish innovator, some stridently clamorous mountebank outside the gates of the sacred temple of Poesy.]

Apparently, critics are not free of a reactionary stance toward innovators and “young turks” either; they continually say that Cawein will be remembered for centuries while other, newer poets will be forgotten. But with the perfect clarity of hindsight, we sometimes see not only how wrong their predictions were, but occasionally also how accurate were their misgivings and honest perspectives on novelty in literature.

(A miscellaneous biographical oddity: Cawein’s son became a doctor and in the 1960s investigated the famous “Blue People” of Kentucky. The Fugate family had a rare genetic blood condition that made their skin appear denim blue. Madison Cawein II was interested in hematology, and he discovered a cure that would return their skin to its normal shade.)
III. Cawein’s Poetry

What, then, are we to make of Cawein’s legacy as a poet? Certainly he is a romantic and perhaps a transcendentalist, but his work is better than most imitators of either of these movements. Of course, much poetry written by the progenitors of these movements – Wordsworth and Emerson to name two – can be very repetitive, clichéd, and dull and plodding in terms of rhymes and imagery, as *The Stuffed Owl*, a famous anthology of “good Bad poetry” can attest. Cawein’s poetry is usually not strikingly original, but his extensive knowledge of nature makes the imagery more concrete and precise, and his love of exploring and wandering through forests and fields imbues his verse with a charming sense of the joy of discovery. And as his late war poems evince, Cawein had a far broader range than the “Keats of Kentucky” label would suggest.

Before I continue, I must briefly digress to deal with a potentially troublesome aspect of Cawein’s work: his attitudes toward race. Five of his poems are titled “The Man Hunt,” “Lynchers,” “Ku Klux,” “The Menace,” and “Riders in the Night”; they seem almost shockingly out of place when surrounded in Cawein’s collections by joyful nature poetry. The first three starkly evoke the hanging of black men by vigilantes; the implicit narrative behind them is that of a black man who allegedly murders (probably after raping) an innocent white woman, who is then swiftly and brutally avenged by a posse of other whites (Cawein 1911). I do not wish to reprint them here, save to say that only “The Menace” contains explicitly racist imagery, dehumanizing and degrading a “negro tramp” and “roustabout” (Cawein 1913a). (Some choice excerpts: “His chance was now, / To serve the Whiteman out somehow” and “And, oh! I wonder, good brother
of mine, / Why God in His Heaven gave never a sign. / Why she, the lovely, the young, the shy, / Like a beast of the field should have to die: / While he, the hideous, kin to the ape, / God, in His Heaven, should let escape.”) In the first three, the KKK and lynchers are neither celebrated (“Ku Klux” contains the line “For a word too much men oft have died”) nor exactly condemned. The lynchings and the crimes they avenge are grim and stark but curiously elided and vague, which is why I referred to an “implicit narrative” above. Point of view flickers between omniscient third person and the first person perspective of the manhunters and KKK. However, the vigilantism of the KKK is strongly denounced in “Riders in the Night,” which uses negative words like “Death,” “Madness,” “Defiance,” “Destruction,” “Violence,” “Crime,” “Hate,” “Doom,” and “Anarchy” and asks angrily why the Law of the Commonwealth cannot or will not do more to combat these horrors (Cawein 1909a).

We cannot merely pass over Cawein’s somewhat ambiguous racial attitudes in silence, but we must remember that Cawein was a product of his time and region. Lest political correctness prejudice us to the quality of Cawein’s entire body of work, we must remember that countless other great poets and writers were racists, anti-semites, or fascists (such as Edgar Allen Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Rudyard Kipling, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and notably T.S. Eliot himself) and clearly expressed these views in their verse, the power of which was often directly fueled by xenophobic beliefs we now find abhorrent, as with so much genre and imaginative fiction. Cawein was merely less circumspect about the violence inherent in racism and prejudice. Surely his poems are no worse than the racist “American classics” Birth of a Nation (which portrays the KKK as
heroes) or even *Gone with the Wind*, released a few scant decades after his productive life. Besides, these are only five poems out of about 1500, or less than one percent of his body of work. All in all, from reading his letters and the glowing reminiscences of others, I get the impression that he was a warm, kind, decent, and intelligent man who was nevertheless not entirely free from the bigoted attitudes typical of his day (he did use the n-word only once in a letter, in a sort of ironic quote, envying blacks’ supposed ignorant, optimistic bliss and lack of fear and worry about tomorrow, which Cawein was riddled with at the time). Although at least we know he was not a disgruntled Confederate apologist, which we might expect from a southern poet – he wrote an elegy in praise of President Lincoln’s greatness. On that note, I end my digression.

In addition to the qualities enumerated above before the detour into racial issues, the famous writer William Dean Howells (an extremely important writer and critic during his day – he was known as the Dean of American Letters) identifies several characteristics of Cawein’s poetry that are consistent with “Keats and Shelley and Wordsworth and Coleridge” in his excellent introduction to Cawein’s *Selected Poems* of 1911 – a pantheistic, pagan celebration of nature, an interest in Germanic and English mythology, a light sense of melancholy, themes of romantic love, and an appreciation for youth. Howells does a fine job of explaining the importance and salient features of Cawein’s nature poetry, and he goes on to praise his uniquely Kentuckian themes:

I said to myself, “This applausive silence has gone on long enough. It is time to break it with open appreciation. Still,” I said, “I must guard against too great appreciation; I must mix in a little depreciation, to show that I have read attentively, critically, authoritatively.” So I applied myself to the cheapest and easiest means of depreciation, and asked, “Why do you always write Nature poems? Why not Human Nature poems?” or
the like. But in seizing upon an objection so obvious that I ought to have
known it was superficial, I had wronged a poet, who had never done me
harm, but only good, in the very terms and conditions of his being a poet.
I had not stayed to see that his nature poetry was instinct with human
poetry, with his human poetry, with mine, with yours. I had made his
reproach what ought to have been his finest praise, what is always the
praise of poetry when it is not artificial and formal. I ought to have said, as
I had seen, that not one of his lovely landscapes in which I could discover
no human figure, but thrilled with a human presence penetrating to it from
his most sensitive and subtle spirit until it was all but painfully alive with
memories, with regrets, with longings, with hopes, with all that from time
to time mutably constitutes us men and women, and yet keeps us children.
He has the gift, in a measure that I do not think surpassed in any poet, of
touching some smallest or commonest thing in nature, and making it live
from the manifold associations in which we have our being, and glow
thereafter with an inextinguishable beauty. His felicities do not seem
sought; rather they seem to seek him, and to surprise him with the delight
they impart through him. He has the inspiration of the right word, and the
courage of it, so that though in the first instant you may be challenged, you
may be revolted, by something that you might have thought uncouth, you
are presently overcome by the happy bravery of it, and gladly recognize
that no other word of those verbal saints or aristocrats, dedicated to the
worship or service of beauty, would at all so well have conveyed the sense
of it as this or that plebeian. (Cawein 1911)

To analyze Cawein’s poetry, I skimmed or read his entire oeuvre in chronological
order (I concentrated less on the first half of his career and more on the latter half and
especially on his selected volume, Poems), an experience which was alternately
enjoyable and fascinating or monotonously boring. Although the quality of each volume
is uneven and inconsistent, the general similarity of each book concealed the fact that he
did improve drastically throughout his career. He gradually abandoned long narratives
for imagistic lyrics and became increasingly more smooth, natural, and direct and ever
less awkward and flowery in phrasing, rhyme, and diction. In fact, the cumulative effect
of his growth as a writer is so astonishing and radical, especially considered in parallel to
his life, that were a prospective reader to pick up an early book, she would conclude that
Cawein is best left forgotten, while a reader of a later volume might form the opposite opinion. Cawein’s worst poems were generally the dull, ponderous epics and ballads in archaic language like many poems – failed experiments, really – in the first half of his career, where his exposition tended to tell the reader more than he showed him (a tension he eventually resolved). Of course, his work frequently suffered from the creeping sameness and repetition of his rather insular themes and images. (Unfortunately, Cawein’s tendency to group his poems thematically in collections exacerbated this problem.) The earlier books would feature much contorted syntax and far too many vague modifiers to make Cawein’s stiff rhymes work; high cosmic rhetoric and obligatory moral messages; irritating and tiresome apostrophes and allusions to nature and the gods; and archaicisms and anachronisms that made the powerful sound of his fine meters and rhythms seize up. Even then, there were glimmers of what Cawein would become – a flash of unexpected keen detail, a demonstration of his growing range with a fine Kentucky poem, or a humorous work in dialogue or dialect. The later books let sharp visual images and plaintive rhythms speak for themselves, cut out modifiers that weighed down his lines, and tone down the rhetoric, as in the very best romantic poetry or even Asian and imagist modernist verse. Generally, his shorter lyrics were his best, and unlike many other poets, such as Auden, Whitman, and Wordsworth, his revisions were almost always tighter improvements upon the original, often in terms of better and more original diction. The first worthwhile volumes seem to me to be *Myth and Romance* and *Weeds by the Wall*, although the volumes of reprints and revisions are also worth checking out.
Thankfully, Google Books and a few other public domain text websites made my read-through immeasurably easier, as I was able to download a .pdf file of every book in full except for one, which I found and read in the special collections of King Library at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Using some of Howells’ suggestions along with my own classifications derived from said reading, I will use the following schema to divide Cawein’s poetry into thematic groupings: nature / love poetry, mythological / fantastical poetry, historical / nostalgic poetry, war poetry, and spiritual / transcendental poetry. In turn I will analyze the verse, point out possible influences, and compare it to contemporaries and modern writers so as to argue for the quality of his poetry. If the length of my quotations seems excessive at times, this is because I want Cawein’s work to speak for itself: there are few flaws more irritating in a work of literary criticism than unsupported assertions or value judgments about aesthetic merit without giving the reader the opportunity to decide for herself. Think of it as an introductory anthology of some of Cawein’s best poems.

A. Nature / Love Poetry

As Howells so perfectly puts it, it is the quality of “touching some smallest or commonest thing in nature, and making it live from the manifold associations in which we have our being, and glow thereafter with an inextinguishable beauty” that makes nature poetry truly memorable, and we find it often in Cawein’s poetry (Cawein 1911). This subgenre forms the bulk of his work and is inarguably his strongest suit. It is highly musical, as many poems resemble actual songs with refrains and choruses. His poetry is full of pleasant rhymes, assonance, and alliteration, with evocative diction and figurative
language, but it is also as visual as it is auditory; I find his personifications, metaphors, and descriptions often to be quite memorable. There is a frequent tone of breathless excitement, or conversely of dreamy reveries and still, meditative memories.

Cawein’s love poetry ought to be considered in the same category as his nature poems because they are inseparable – the romances are nearly all pastoral, and young, beautiful women are continually identified with nature and the seasons. Love and longing, desire and despair are probably the most universal themes in poetry, and Cawein’s work is no exception. There is a nice vital and sensual quality to his best verse in this vein, although the majority of the duller poems about romance deal with unrequited love, lost lovers, lovers who never meet, ghosts and memories, etc. In some way, their morbidity and melancholy might prefigure his later work, and there is a curious permeating downbeat feeling and hopelessness that can be sensed every now and then in all of Cawein’s poetry. It is as though his mournful rhetorical pose or persona were by accident revealing instead of concealing his true emotions, his despair, disgust, and tiredness about life.

Some quotations to demonstrate his talent are in order, but he wrote such a vast quantity of good nature poems that it can be hard to choose, and I am tempted to reprint many. One of my favorite Cawein poems, though, is “A Niello” (a specimen of his love poetry as well) which is a terrific example of his exquisite personification of the seasons, melancholy sense of time and death, and linguistic beauty. It is quoted in full below:

I

It is not early spring and yet
Of bloodroot blooms along the stream,
And blotted banks of violet,  
   My heart will dream.

Is it because the windflower apes  
The beauty that was once her brow,  
That the white memory of it shapes  
The April now?

Because the wild-rose wears the blush  
That once made sweet her maidenhood,  
Its thought makes June of barren bush  
   And empty wood?

And then I think how young she died--  
Straight, barren Death stalks down the trees,  
The hard-eyed Hours by his side,  
   That kill and freeze.

II

When orchards are in bloom again  
My heart will bound, my blood will beat,  
To hear the redbird so repeat,  
   On boughs of rosy stain,  
His blithe, loud song,—like some far strain  
From out the past,—among the bloom,—  
(Where bee and wasp and hornet boom)——  
   Fresh, redolent of rain.

When orchards are in bloom once more,  
Invasions of lost dreams will draw  
My feet, like some insistent law,  
   Through blossoms to her door:  
In dreams I'll ask her, as before,  
To let me help her at the well;  
And fill her pail; and long to tell  
   My love as once of yore.

I shall not speak until we quit  
The farm-gate, leading to the lane  
And orchard, all in bloom again,  
   Mid which the bluebirds sit  
And sing; and through whose blossoms flit  
The catbirds crying while they fly:
Then tenderly I'll speak, and try
   To tell her all of it.

And in my dream again she'll place
Her hand in mine, as oft before,--
When orchards are in bloom once more,--
   With all her young-girl grace:
And we shall tarry till a trace
Of sunset dyes the heav'n; and then--
We'll part; and, parting, I again
   Shall bend and kiss her face.

And homeward, singing, I shall go
Along the cricket-chirring ways,
While sunset, one long crimson blaze
   Of orchards, lingers low:
And my dead youth again I'll know,
And all her love, when spring is here--
Whose memory holds me many a year,
   Whose love still haunts me so!

III

I would not die when Springtime lifts
   The white world to her maiden mouth,
And heaps its cradle with gay gifts,
   Breeze-blown from out the singing South:
Too full of life and loves that cling;
Too heedless of all mortal woe,
The young, unsympathetic Spring,
   That Death should never know.

I would not die when Summer shakes
   Her daisied locks below her hips,
And naked as a star that takes
   A cloud, into the silence slips:
Too rich is Summer; poor in needs;
   In egotism of loveliness
Her pomp goes by, and never heeds
   One life the more or less.

But I would die when Autumn goes,
   The dark rain dripping from her hair,
Through forests where the wild wind blows
Death and the red wreck everywhere:
Sweet as love’s last farewells and tears
To fall asleep when skies are gray,
In the old autumn of my years,
Like a dead leaf borne far away. (Cawein 1911)

Many of Cawein’s best nature poems dealt with animals, usually insects or all manner of
birds. Again, one gets the sense that Cawein is writing directly from memory of his
wanderings over the forests and fields of Kentucky. Here is his wonderful “The Rain-
Crow” – as with “A Niello,” observe his lyrical use of the senses, the keen specific detail
and personification, the alliteration and assonance, and the unexpected word choices.
(Below is the far superior revised version, which is especially instructive to compare
against Cawein’s earlier version in Accolon of Gaul.) I find it one of Cawein’s most
Keatsian poems, with its smooth yet muscular rhythm and perfect rhymes driving the
reader onward.

I
Can freckled August,--drowsing warm and blond
Beside a wheat-shock in the white-topped mead,
In her hot hair the yellow daisies wound,--
O bird of rain, lend aught but sleepy heed
To thee? when no plumed weed, no feathered seed
Blows by her; and no ripple breaks the pond,
That gleams like flint within its rim of grasses,
Through which the dragonfly forever passes
Like splintered diamond.

II
Drouth weights the trees; and from the farmhouse eaves
The locust, pulse-beat of the summer day,
Throbs; and the lane, that shambles under leaves
Limp with the heat--a league of rutty way--
Is lost in dust; and sultry scents of hay
Breathe from the panting meadows heaped with sheaves--
Now, now, O bird, what hint is there of rain,
In thirsty meadow or on burning plain,
That thy keen eye perceives?

III
But thou art right. Thou prophesiest true.
For hardly hast thou ceased thy forecasting,
When, up the western fierceness of scorched blue,
Great water-carrier winds their buckets bring
Brimming with freshness. How their dippers ring
And flash and rumble! lavishing large dew
On corn and forest land, that, streaming wet,
Their hilly backs against the downpour set,
Like giants, loom in view.

IV
The butterfly, safe under leaf and flower,
Has found a roof, knowing how true thou art;
The bumblebee, within the last half-hour,
Has ceased to hug the honey to its heart;
While in the barnyard, under shed and cart,
Brood-hens have housed.--But I, who scorned thy power,
Barometer of birds,--like August there,--
Beneath a beech, dripping from foot to hair,
Like some drenched truant, cower. (Cawein 1911)

Lastly, here is an example of Cawein’s love poetry, which is inextricably tied to his nature verse. Notice how all the lovely descriptions of the lover’s thoughts and body are plant metaphors, unifying her with the “Maytime woods” and making the forest an extension of her dreaming mind. This causes the poem to feel organic and fresh with new life, as just a few selected instances of figurative language will attest: “Some tremor of your gown: a velvet leaf’s / Unfolding to caresses of the spring,” “the dew / Syllabling avowal on a tulip’s lips / Of odorous scarlet: or the whispered word / Of something lovelier than new leaf or rose-- / The word young lips half murmur in a dream,” and “the virgin grace / Of every bud abashed before the white, / Pure passion-flower of her
sleeping face.” It is an excerpt from “Wild Thorn and Lily,” Cawein’s most successful long poem:

O Maytime woods! O Maytime lanes and hours!
And stars, that knew how often there at night
Beside the path, where woodbine odors blew
Between the drowsy eyelids of the dusk,--
When, like a great, white, pearly moth, the moon
Hung silverying long windows of your room,--
I stood among the shrubs! The dark house slept.
I watched and waited for--I know not what!--
Some tremor of your gown: a velvet leaf's
Unfolding to caresses of the Spring:
The rustle of your footsteps: or the dew
Syllabling avowal on a tulip's lips
Of odorous scarlet: or the whispered word
Of something lovelier than new leaf or rose--
The word young lips half murmur in a dream:
Serene with sleep, light visions weigh her eyes:
   And underneath her window blooms a quince.
The night is a sultana who doth rise
   In slippered caution, to admit a prince,
Love, who her eunuchs and her lord defies.

Are these her dreams? or is it that the breeze
   Pelts me with petals of the quince, and lifts
The Balm-o'-Gilead buds? and seems to squeeze
   Aroma on aroma through sweet rifts
Of Eden, dripping through the rainy trees.

Along the path the buckeye trees begin
   To heap their hills of blossoms.--Oh, that they
Were Romeo ladders, whereby I might win
   Her chamber's sanctity!--where dreams must pray
About her soul!--That I might enter in!--

A dream,--and see the balsam scent erase
   Its dim intrusion; and the starry night
Conclude majestic pomp; the virgin grace
   Of every bud abashed before the white,
Pure passion-flower of her sleeping face. (Cawein 1911)
As far as nature and love poetry go, I would rate Cawein very highly, as his finest work easily earns its place among the best romantic and Victorian nature poetry. Cawein, of course, usually lacks the solidity, the music, and the haunting melancholy beauty of Keat’s best work, but this is surely an unfair comparison, as Keats is quite possibly the greatest of all British poets (Keats 1988). Nevertheless the resemblance of Cawein’s best work to the sequence of great romantic poetry is so unmistakable that there is no real need to present excerpts from the latter to make my case. In fact, Cawein did for Kentucky what the romantics did for England. Many modern poets, by comparison, seem to give no indication that they are actually intimately familiar with the natural world in all its diversity and specificity.

B. Mythological / Fantastic Poetry

Cawein wrote many poems about Faeries or mythology; his poems are replete with ghosts, witches, magic, Arthurian legends, chivalrous knights, Greek / Roman gods, nature spirits, and Norse myths. Such poems are often reminiscent of early Yeats or perhaps Joyce’s Chamber Music (although with a less controlled use of imagery, and a more celebratory tone). It is interesting to compare him to Eliot in that both writers were extremely learned men, drawing upon mythological and classical sources, but Eliot sought to revolutionize poetry while Cawein chose to maintain a traditional approach – a fact that probably doomed him to obscurity in the twentieth century. There is also one crucial difference: Cawein actually believed in ghosts and faeries (though some of his friends doubted and denied this). If it seems remarkable for a grown man in the twentieth century to believe in faeries, we must remember this was not uncommon or embarrassing
in the early years of the century; there were many faery hoaxes and stories that convinced such people as Arthur Conan Doyle (who, like Cawein, had a background in spiritualism) of their existence. His poetry is full of reassuring statements outlining his belief in magic and the supernatural, which suggests to me more that Cawein was trying to preserve mystery, fantastical stories, and dreams in the modern world rather than declaring a literal belief in them. In fact, many of such poems were written for his young son and for children in general. Cawein continually exalts the power of dreams and the imagination, saying that “The only real wealth of the world is its dreams. These, and not our material possessions, make for the greatness of a nation. Ours is a material nation…[and] the spiritual, the intellectual, must accept second place. And yet the latter only are the things that endure” (Rothert 1921). Here are some representative excerpts from this dreamer and storyteller’s pen. First is “There Are Faeries,” which contains clever, pleasant imagery typical of Cawein’s work in this vein.

I

There are faeries, bright of eye,
   Who the wildflowers’ warders are:
Ouphes, that chase the firefly;
   Elves, that ride the shooting-star:
Fays, who in a cobweb lie,
   Swinging on a moonbeam bar;
Or who harness bumblebees,
Grumbling on the clover leas,
To a blossom or a breeze--
   That's their faery car.
If you care, you too may see
There are faeries.--Verily,
   There are faeries.
II

There are faeries. I could swear
I have seen them busy, where
Roses loose their scented hair,
   In the moonlight weaving, weaving,
Out of starlight and the dew,
Glinting gown and shimmering shoe;
Or, within a glowworm lair,
   From the dark earth slowly heaving
Mushrooms whiter than the moon,
On whose tops they sit and croon,
With their grig-like mandolins,
To fair faery ladykins,
Leaning from the windowsill
Of a rose or daffodil,
Listening to their serenade
All of cricket-music made.
Follow me, oh, follow me!
Ho! away to Faërie!
Where your eyes like mine may see
There are faeries.--Verily,
   There are faeries.

III

There are faeries. Elves that swing
In a wild and rainbow ring
Through the air; or mount the wing
Of a bat to courier news
To the faery King and Queen:
Fays, who stretch the gossamers
On which twilight hangs the dews;
Who, within the moonlight sheen,
Whisper dimly in the ears
Of the flowers words so sweet
That their hearts are turned to musk
And to honey; things that beat
In their veins of gold and blue:
Ouphes, that shepherd moths of dusk--
Soft of wing and gray of hue--
Forth to pasture on the dew. (Cawein 1911)
Next is Cawein’s “Beauty and Art,” which alludes to Greek mythology and Christian theology instead of faeries:

The gods are dead; but still for me
   Lives on in wildwood brook and tree
Each myth, each old divinity.

For me still laughs among the rocks
   The Naiad; and the Dryad's locks
Drop perfume on the wildflower flocks.

The Satyr's hoof still prints the loam;
   And, whiter than the wind-blown foam,
The Oread haunts her mountain home.

To him, whose mind is fain to dwell
   With loveliness no time can quell,
All things are real, imperishable.

To him--whatever facts may say--
   Who sees the soul beneath the clay,
Is proof of a diviner day.

The very stars and flowers preach
   A gospel old as God, and teach
Philosophy a child may reach;

That cannot die; that shall not cease;
   That lives through idealities
Of Beauty, ev'n as Rome and Greece.

That lifts the soul above the clod,
   And, working out some period
Of art, is part and proof of God. (Cawein 1911)

Among other fantastical and mythological poets, Yeats is the best and best-known. His dark, strange vision of faery is highly different from Cawein’s celebration of magic and wonder. Compared to Yeats and Lord Dunsany, Cawein’s fantastical work often comes off as boring and clichéd when he writes about mythological deities and
spirits, even faintly embarrassing in his reams of faery poems (although his rhymes specifically for children are often rather good within that specific subgenre). His best work in this genre is probably in his four plays, which are more like closet dramas or dramatic conversations. The finest fantastic poets have always been those with a surreal, visionary, horrific, or decadent approach, such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, various other symbolists, and Clark Ashton Smith. Smith, the author of some of the greatest and weirdest fantasy, science fiction, and horror fiction of the early twentieth century, also wrote poetry as beautiful, exotic, and lavish as his prose, which writer and critic Harlan Ellison once observed is so purple that it goes into the ultraviolet. Smith’s fine oeuvre was as drastically different from Cawein’s as Smith’s California poetry scene (which was dedicated to the fantastic and decadent) was from Cawein’s Kentucky milieu. But unlike Cawein, Smith has already been “rediscovered”: he has a large cult following and receives attention and academic studies from scholars of fantastic writing (Smith 2002).

C. Historical / Nostalgic Poetry

Cawein continually celebrates his youthful wonderings around various Midwestern locales. The following is what may be Cawein’s single best poem, “The Old Water Mill,” a perfect example of his celebration of youth and plainspoken pantheistic nature imagery and a charming portrait of his Kentucky upbringing. In terms of quality, I would set it aside some of Robert Frost’s finest and most memorable work:

Wild ridge on ridge the wooded hills arise,
Between whose breezy vistas gulls of skies
Pilot great clouds like towering argosies,
And hawk and buzzard breast the azure breeze.
With many a foaming fall and glimmering reach
Of placid murmur, under elm and beech,
The creek goes twinkling through long gleams and glooms
Of woodland quiet, summered with perfumes:
The creek, in whose clear shallows minnow-schools
Glitter or dart; and by whose deeper pools
The blue kingfishers and the herons haunt;
That, often startled from the freckled flaunt
Of blackberry-lilies--where they feed or hide--
Trail a lank flight along the forestside
With eery clangor. Here a sycamore
Smooth, wave-uprooted, builds from shore to shore
A headlong bridge; and there, a storm-hurled oak
Lays a long dam, where sand and gravel choke
The water's lazy way. Here mistflower blurs
Its bit of heaven; there the ox-eye stirs
Its gloaming hues of pearl and gold; and here,
A gray, cool stain, like dawn's own atmosphere,
The dim wild carrot lifts its crumpled crest:
And over all, at slender flight or rest,
The dragonflies, like coruscating rays
Of lapis-lazuli and chrysoprase,
Drowsily sparkle through the summer days:
And, dewlap-deep, here from the noontide heat
The bell-hung cattle find a cool retreat;
And through the willows girdling the hill,
Now far, now near, borne as the soft winds will,
Comes the low rushing of the water-mill.

Ah, lovely to me from a little child,
How changed the place! wherein once, undefiled,
The glad communion of the sky and stream
Went with me like a presence and a dream.
Where once the brambled meads and orchardlands,
Poured ripe abundance down with mellow hands
Of summer; and the birds of field and wood
Called to me in a tongue I understood;
And in the tangles of the old rail-fence
Even the insect tumult had some sense,
And every sound a happy eloquence:
And more to me than wisest books can teach
The wind and water said; whose words did reach
My soul, addressing their magnificent speech,--
Raucous and rushing,--from the old mill-wheel,
That made the rolling mill-cogs snore and reel,
Like some old ogre in a faerytale
Nodding above his meat and mug of ale.

How memory takes me back the ways that lead--
As when a boy--through woodland and through mead!
To orchards fruited; or to fields in bloom;
Or briery fallows, like a mighty room,
Through which the winds swing censers of perfume,
And where deep blackberries spread miles of fruit;--
A wildwood feast, that stayed the plowboy's foot
When to the tasseling acres of the corn
He drove his team, fresh in the primrose morn;
And from the liberal banquet, nature lent,
Plucked dewy handfuls as he whistling went.--

A boy once more, I stand with sunburnt feet
And watch the harvester sweep down the wheat;
Or laze with warm limbs in the unstacked straw
Near by the thresher, whose insatiate maw
Devours the sheaves, hot-drawling out its hum--
Like some great sleepy bee, above a bloom,
Made drunk with honey--while, grown big with grain,
The bulging sacks receive the golden rain.
Again I tread the valley, sweet with hay,
And hear the bobwhite calling far away,
Or wood-dove cooing in the elder-brake;
Or see the sassafras bushes madly shake
As swift, a rufous instant, in the glen
The red fox leaps and gallops to his den:
Or, standing in the violet-colored gloam,
Hear roadways sound with holiday riding home
From church or fair, or country barbecue,
Which half the county to some village drew.

How spilled with berries were its summer hills,
And strewn with walnuts all its autumn rills!--
And chestnuts too! burred from the spring's long flowers;
June's, when their tree-tops streamed delirious showers
Of blossoming silver, cool, crepuscular,
And like a nebulous radiance shone afar.--
And maples! how their sappy hearts would pour
Rude troughs of syrup, when the winter hoar
Steamed with the sugar-kettle, day and night,
And, red, the snow was streaked with firelight.
Then it was glorious! the mill-dam's edge
One slope of frosty crystal, laid a ledge
Of pearl across; above which, sleeted trees
Tossed arms of ice, that, clashing in the breeze,
Tinkled the ringing creek with icicles,
Thin as the peal of far-off elfin bells:
A sound that in my city dreams I hear,
That brings before me, under skies that clear,
The old mill in its winter garb of snow,
Its frozen wheel like a hoar beard below,
And its west windows, two deep eyes aglow.

Ah, ancient mill, still do I picture o'er
Thy cobwebbed stairs and loft and grain-strewn floor;
Thy door,--like some brown, honest hand of toil,
And honorable with service of the soil,--
Forever open; to which, on his back
The prosperous farmer bears his bursting sack,
And while the miller measures out his toll,
Again I hear, above the cogs' loud roll,--
That makes stout joist and rafter groan and sway,--
The harmless gossip of the passing day:
Good country talk, that says how so-and-so
Lived, died, or wedded: how curculio
And codling-moth play havoc with the fruit,
Smut ruins the corn and blight the grapes to boot:
Or what is news from town: next county fair:
How well the crops are looking everywhere:--
Now this, now that, on which their interests fix,
Prospects for rain or frost, and politics.
While, all around, the sweet smell of the meal
Filters, warm-pouring from the rolling wheel
Into the bin; beside which, mealy white,
The miller looms, dim in the dusty light.

Again I see the miller's home between
The crinkling creek and hills of beechen green:
Again the miller greets me, gaunt and brown,
Who oft o'erawed my boyhood with his frown
And gray-browed mien: again he tries to reach
My youthful soul with fervid scriptural speech.--
For he, of all the countryside confessed,
The most religious was and goodliest;
A Methodist, who at all meetings led;
Prayed with his family ere they went to bed.
No books except the Bible had he read--
At least so seemed it to my younger head.--
All things of Heaven and Earth he'd prove by this,
Be it a fact or mere hypothesis:
For to his simple wisdom, reverent,
"The Bible says" was all of argument.--
God keep his soul! his bones were long since laid
Among the sunken gravestones in the shade
Of those dark-lichened rocks, that wall around
The family burying-ground with cedars crowned:
Where bristling teasel and the brier combine
With clambering wood-rose and the wildgrape-vine
To hide the stone whereon his name and dates
Neglect, with mossy hand, obliterates. (Cawein 1911)

Cawein was as much a distinctively American poet as he was unmistakably a Kentucky poet, with a sharp command of local dialect (see his collection *The Republic* for examples); he was a patriot and an avid reader of history. His long “Ode” in commemoration of the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony excerpted below is one of the best examples of this Whitmanesque subgenre:

The morn that breaks its heart of gold
Above the purple hills;
The eve, that spills
Its nautilus splendor where the sea is rolled;
The night, that leads the vast procession in
Of stars and dreams,--
The beauty that shall never die or pass:--
The winds, that spin
Of rain the misty mantles of the grass,
And thunder raiment of the mountain-streams;
The sunbeams, penciling with gold the dusk
Green cowls of ancient woods;
The shadows, thridding, veiled with musk,
The moon-pathed solitudes,
Call to my Fancy, saying, "Follow! follow!"
Till, following, I see,--
Fair as a cascade in a rainbowed hollow,--
A dream, a shape, take form,
Clad on with every charm,
The vision of that Ideality,  
Which lured the pioneer in wood and hill,  
And beckoned him from earth and sky;  
The dream that cannot die,  
Their children's children did fulfill,  
In stone and iron and wood,  
Out of the solitude,  
And by a stalwart act  
Create a mighty fact--  
A Nation, now that stands  
Clad on with hope and beauty, strength and song,  
Eternal, young and strong,  
Planting her heel on wrong,  
Her starry banner in triumphant hands....

Within her face the rose  
Of Alleghany dawns;  
Limbed with Alaskan snows,  
Floridian starlight in her eyes,--  
Eyes stern as steel yet tender as a fawn's,--  
And in her hair  
The rapture of her rivers; and the dare,  
As perishless as truth,  
That o'er the crags of her Sierras flies,  
Urging the eagle ardor through her veins,  
Behold her where,  
Around her radiant youth,  
The spirits of the cataracts and plains,  
The genii of the floods and forests, meet,  
In rainbow mists circling her brow and feet:  
The forces vast that sit  
In session round her; powers paraclete,  
That guard her presence; awful forms and fair,  
Making secure her place;  
Guiding her surely as the worlds through space  
Do laws sidereal; edicts, thunder-lit,  
Of skyped eternity, in splendor borne  
On planetary wings of night and morn.

       *       *       *       *       *

From her high place she sees  
Her long procession of accomplished acts,  
Cloud-winged refulgences
Of thoughts in steel and stone, of marble dreams,
Lift up tremendous battlements,
Sun-blinding, built of facts;
While in her soul she seems,
Listening, to hear, as from innumerable tents,
Æonian thunder, wonder, and applause
Of all the heroic ages that are gone;
Feeling secure
That, as her Past, her Future shall endure,
As did her Cause
When redly broke the dawn
Of fierce rebellion, and, beneath its star,
The firmaments of war
Poured down infernal rain,
And North and South lay bleeding mid their slain.
And now, no less, shall her great Cause prevail,
More so in peace than war,
Through the thrilled wire and electric rail,
Carrying her message far:
Shaping her dream
Within the brain of steam,
That, with a myriad hands,
Labors unceasingly, and knits her lands
In firmer union; joining plain and stream
With steel; and binding shore to shore
With bands of iron;--nerves and arteries,
Along whose adamant forever pour
Her concrete thoughts, her tireless energies. (Cawein 1911)

What I like about Cawein’s historical and patriotic work is that he hymns America’s
greatness in terms of her natural splendor. In places, it takes on nearly environmentalist
tones that are arguably present in his nature poetry as well.

D. War Poetry

Cawein is surprisingly talented in this subgenre, and he deserves to be considered
alongside the most famous poets of the Great War – Wilfred Owen and Siegfried
Sassoon. I would like to examine Cawein’s work in comparison to specific excerpts from
Owen, the greatest of all war poets. First of all, here is an excerpt from one of Cawein’s
letters written during the final year of his life, which shows how deeply WWI affected him. It demonstrates his antiwar stance, which came as an abrupt shift after a few jingoistic Spanish-American War poems that in turn took a different view of war than Cawein’s writings on the Civil War:

If there is a God, which I am beginning to doubt, he should take cognizance of humanity. The destruction of so many lives in Europe should make him wake up to the fact that his children are suffering. For my part I would be just as well off dead as living. It is terrible and there seems little hope of its ever being better. What I want, as you, too, want, is peace, unbroken and unending. (Rothert 1921)

This pessimism is somewhat prefigured by the title poem of *The Republic*, but there is really nothing in Cawein’s oeuvre with which to compare it.

*The Cup of Comus* is an appropriate title for this slim posthumous volume, as Comus was a Greco-Roman god of not only revelry and feasting but also of the flipside of those attributes – anarchy and chaos; he personified excess. The love poems are about death, ghosts, and memories; the war poems (less than half the collection) seem to represent nothing more than the hellish, violent end of civilization itself. An atmosphere of nightmare and desperation hangs over many verses, and one gets the sense that Cawein was saying goodbye to childish things, rejecting escapism, and reluctantly embracing maturity and the unenchanted real world, including his own death. The sentences become shorter, the images more plainspoken; one often thinks of the school of terse, dark, and blackly humorous postwar British poets who were no longer in the grip of modernism. The recurring Dante-esque (or maybe Boschian) images besides armies and empires are blood, iron, fire, and Christ on the cross. This latter image of the dead or resurrected Christ distraught over the world’s sins and violence, betrayed by the world’s
unconcern for universal love and brotherhood, and incarnated during war, perhaps in the form of a soldier, reminds me of Walt Whitman’s “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim.” Although the title may have come from elsewhere, Eliot’s wastelands started here, with The Cup of Comus.

Wilfred Owen was a pacifist soldier and poet whose life was tragically and senselessly cut short at the very end of the war. He had written some verse before entering combat, but – like Cawein! – it was pseudo-Keatsian and -Shelleyan nature poetry. It was only during the war and with the influence of Siegfried Sassoon that he came into his own as a memorable poet and bitter denouncer of violence and power. The only difference is that he actually saw battle, which makes his poems much darker, more visceral, and more pessimistic than Cawein’s, and he did not have a lifetime of nature verse behind him when he made his sudden stylistic rupture with the past. But before I quote some of his haunting poetry in conjunction with Cawein’s, I would like to present a few excerpts from his letters, which show how close his pacifist interpretation of Christianity (not to mention his embrace of “the enemy” soldiers instead of his own leaders) was to Cawein’s visions of Christ in the poems below:

> Already I have comprehended a light which will never filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that one of Christ’s essential commands was, Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill…Christ is literally in no man’s land. There men often hear his voice. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life—for a friend. (Owen 1965)

> Now here is his most famous poem, “Dulce and Decorum Est.” Compare its imagery and its venomous final lines (which translate as “It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country”) with the last quoted stanza of Cawein’s “Chant Before Battle”:
from “Dulce and Decorum Est” (Owen)

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.*

from “Chant Before Battle” (Cawein)

Ever since man was man a Fiend has stood
Outside his House of Good,—
War, with his terrible toys, that win men’s hearts
To follow murderous arts.

His spurs, death-won, are but of little use,
Except as old refuse
Of Life; to hang and testify with rust
Of deeds, long one with dust.

A rotting fungus on a log, a tree,
A toiling worm, a bee,
Serves God’s high purpose here on Earth to build
More than War’s maimed and killed.

The Hebetude of asses, following still
Some Emperor’s will to kill,
Is that of men who gave their lives— for what?—
The privilege to be shot!
Compare Owen’s “Strange Meeting,” with its surrealism and mystical embrace of the enemy, to Cawein’s “The Wanderer”:

“Strange Meeting” (Owen)

It seemed that out of the battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall;
With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange friend," I said, "Here is no cause to mourn."
"None," said the other, "Save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, griefs richer than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something has been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery;
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint,
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now . . .”

“The Wanderer” (Cawein)

Between the death of day and birth of night,
    By War’s red light,
I met with one in trailing sorrows clad,
    Whose features had
The look of Him who died to set men right.
Around him many horrors, like great worms,
    Terrific forms,
Crawled, helmed like hippogriff and rosemarine,—
    Gaunt and obscene,
Urged on to battle with a thousand arms.
Columns of steel, and iron belching flame,
    Before them came:
And cities crumbled; and amid them trod
    Havoc, their god,
With Desolation that no tongue may name.
And out of Heaven came a burning breath,
    And on it Death,
Riding: before him, huge and bellowing herds
    Of beasts, like birds,
Bat-winged and demon, nothing conquereth.
Hag-lights went by, and Fear that shrieks and dies,
    And mouths, with cries
Of famine; and the madness of Despair;
    And everywhere
Curses, like kings, with ever-burning eyes.
And, lo! the shadow shook and cried a name,
    That grew a flame
Above the world, and said, “Give heed! give heed!
    See how they bleed!
My wounds! my wounds!—Was it for this I came?
“Where is the love for which I shed my blood?
    And where the good
I preached and died for?—Lo! ye have denied
    And crucified
Me here again, who swore me brotherhood!”
Then overhead the vault of night was rent:
    The firmament
Winged thunder over of aerial craft;
    And Battle laughed
Titanic laughter as its way it went.
Take a look at “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo” and its echoes of Cawein’s sentiments in the bleakly unforgettable “The Old Dreamer,” which is one of my favorite poems of his:

“Apologia Pro Poemate Meo” (Owen)

I, too, saw God through mud,—
The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.
War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,
And gave their laughs more glee than shocks a child.

Merry it was to laugh there—
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
For power was on us as we slashed bones bare
Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.

I, too, have dropped off Fear—
Behind the barrage, dead as my platoon,
And sailed my spirit surging, light and clear
Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn;

And witnessed exultation—
Faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl,
Shine and lift up with passion of oblation,
Seraphic for an hour; though they were foul.

I have made fellowships—
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By Joy, whose ribbon slips,—
But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

I have perceived much beauty
In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
Heard music in the silentness of duty;
Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate.

Nevertheless, except you share
With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell,
Whose world is but the trembling of a flare,
And heaven but as the highway for a shell,

You shall not hear their mirth:
You shall not come to think them well content
By any jest of mine. These men are worth
Your tears: You are not worth their merriment.

“The Old Dreamer” (Cawein)

Come, let’s climb into our attic,
In our house that’s old and gray!
Life, you’re old and I’m rheumatic,
And—it’s close of day.

Lay aside your rags and tatters,
Shirt and shoes so soiled with clay!
They’re no use now. Nothing matters—
It is close of day.

Let’s to bed. It’s cold. No fire.
And no lamp to make a ray.—
Where’s our servant, young Desire?—
Gone at close of day.

Oft she served us with fine glances,
Helped us out at work and play:
She is gone now; better chances;
And it’s close of day.

Where is Hope, who flaunted scarlet?
Hope who led us oft astray?
Has she proved herself a harlot
At the close of day?

What’s become of Dream and Vision?
Friends we thought were here to stay?
Has life clapped the two in prison
At the close of day?...

Where’s friend Love now?—Who supposes?—
Has he flung himself away?
Left us for a wreath of roses
At the close of day?

And where’s Song? the soul elected—
Has he quit us too for aye?—
Was it poverty he suspected
Near the close of day?...

We have done the best we could do.
Let us kneel awhile and pray.
Now, no matter what we would do,
It is close of day.

Let’s to bed then! It’s December.
Long enough since it was May!—
Let’s forget it, and remember
Now, ‘tis close of day.
Examine “1914” and “The Next War” alongside Cawein’s poems, especially “Nearing Christmas,” and Cawein’s letters quoted above:

“1914” (Owen)

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
With perishing great darkness closes in.
The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,
Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin
Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.
The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.

For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,
And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.

“The Next War” (Owen)

"War's a joke for me and you,
While we know such dreams are true."
_Siegfried Sassoon_

Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death,-
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,-
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We've sniffs the green thick odour of his breath,-
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed Shrapnel. We chorused when he sang aloft,
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
No soldier's paid to kick against His powers.
We laughed, -knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars: when each proud fighter brags
He wars on Death, for lives; not men, for flags.

“Nearing Christmas” (Cawein)

The season of the rose and peace is past:
It could not last.
There's heartbreaking in the hills and stormy sighs
Of sorrow in the rain-lashed plains and skies,
While Earth regards, aghast,
The last red leaf that flies.

The world is cringing in the darkness where War left his lair,
And everything takes on a lupine look,
Baring gaunt teeth at every peaceful nook,
And shaking torrent hair
At every little brook.

Cancers of ulcerous flame his eyes, and—hark!
There in the dark
The ponderous stir of metal, iron feet;
And with it, heard around the world, the beat
Of Battle; sounds that mark
His heart's advance, retreat.

With shrapnel pipes he goes his monstrous ways;
And, screeching, plays
The hell-born music Havoc dances to;
And, following with his skeleton-headed crew
Of ravening Nights and Days,
Horror invades the blue.

Against the Heaven he lifts a mailed fist
And writes a list
Of beautiful cities on the ghastly sky:
And underneath them, with no reason why,
In blood and tears and mist,
The postscript, “These must die!”

Change is the portion and chief heritage
Of every Age.
The spirit of God still waits its time.—And War May blur His message for a while, and mar
The writing on His page,
To this our sorrowful star.

But there above the conflict, orbed is rays,
Is drawn the face
Of Peace; at last who comes into her own;
Peace, from whose tomb the world shall roll the stone,
And give her highest place
In the human heart alone.
It may seem excessive to spend so much time on such a small fraction of Cawein’s oeuvre and thus to de-emphasize the reams of nature poetry, but I feel that his unsparing self-analyses and war poetry may be among his most accomplished work, recalling Owen’s huge, snuffed-out talent, his pacifist Christian stance, and even the progression of his writing styles. Had Cawein lived to write more in this vein, I suspect he might be widely remembered today.

E. Spiritual / Transcendental Poetry

In almost every remembrance of Cawein I have read, he was identified as a pantheist. He may have believed in God (often in terms of Emerson’s concept of the “over-soul”) and possibly somewhat in Spiritualism and the afterlife, but he claimed not to believe in the divinity of Christ (though he was a Christian in the moral sense) nor in the stories of the Bible (he did not read it often nor did he attend Sunday School). We can be certain, however, that Cawein had no particular religious beliefs “expressible in any other way than in wonder and reverence for all nature that unrolled before him in life,” which is essentially the definition of pantheism. It was said that “He admired the poetry of religion, its symbolism, the beauty of its ritual and ceremonials and associations, just as he did the poetry in everything else, but the dogmatic facts did not appeal to him at all” (Rothert 1921). Thus, his poetry is full of references and apostrophes to God and the over-soul, but usually only in a vague, pagan, or pantheist / humanist way, as in references to the books and tabernacles of the natural world, the cycles of life, or to a universal sense of spiritual love. A sense of praise and thanks is omnipresent, as is an optimistic faith in the human condition (from his play “The Witch”):
“A mite of good / within a soul outweighs a ton of evil”); his sensibilities would probably appeal to modern readers (Cawein 1910). Cawein’s poetry could be didactic, but more often it was genuinely moving, as in such poems as “A Prayer for Old Age”:

I
These are the things which I would ask of Time:
When I am old,
Never to feel in soul doubt's spiritual rime;
The heart grow cold
With self; but in me that which warms my time.
II
Never to feel the drouth, the dearth that kills,
Before one dies,
Of mind, full-flowering on thought's fertile hills;
But, in my skies,
The falcon, Fancy, that no season kills.
III
Never to see the shadow at my door,
Nor fear its fall;
But wait serenely, whether rich or poor,
Nor care at all,
So Love sits with me at my open door.
IV
Never to have a dream I dreamed destroyed:
And towards the last
Live o'er again all that I have enjoyed, —
The happy Past, —
Through these, the dreams, no time has yet destroyed.
V
Never to lose my love for lowly things;
To feel the need
For simple beauty still: each bird that sings,
Each flower and weed
That looks its message of unguessed-at things.
VI
Never to lose my faith in Nature, God:
But still to find
Worship in trees; religion in each sod;
And in the wind
Sermons that breathe the universal God.
VII
Never to age in mind; much less in heart;
But keep them young
With song, glad song, that still shall have its part, —
Sung or unsung,—
Within the inmost temple of my heart.
VIII
That I may lose not all my trust in men!
And, through it, grow
Nearer to Heaven and God: and softly then
Meet Death and know
He has no terrors for my soul. Amen. (Cawein 1909a)

Here is a more general spiritual poem in a transcendentalist vein, “Penetralia,” which overlaps with his nature poetry and argues for a mystic identification with all of nature and “the love at the world-heart’s core.” It is somewhat reminiscent of Dylan Thomas’s work in this vein:

I am a part of all you see
In Nature; part of all you feel:
I am the impact of the bee
Upon the blossom; in the tree
I am the sap,—that shall reveal
The leaf, the bloom,—that flows and flutes
Up from the darkness through its roots.

I am the vermeil of the rose,
The perfume breathing in its veins;
The gold within the mist that glows
Along the west and overflows
With light the heaven; the dew that rains
Its freshness down and strings with spheres
Of wet the webs and oaten ears.

I am the egg that folds the bird;
The song that beaks and breaks its shell;
The laughter and the wandering word
The water says; and, dimly heard,
The music of the blossom's bell
When soft winds swing it; and the sound
Of grass slow-creeping o'er the ground.

I am the warmth, the honey-scent
That throats with spice each lily-bud
That opens, white with wonderment,
Beneath the moon; or, downward bent,
Sleeps with a moth beneath its hood:
I am the dream that haunts it too,
That crystallizes into dew.

I am the seed within the pod;
The worm within its closed cocoon:
The wings within the circling clod,
The germ, that gropes through soil and sod
To beauty, radiant in the noon:
I am all these, behold! and more--
I am the love at the world-heart's core. (Cawein 1911)

I sometimes wonder if Cawein, like Yeats, would have turned to a more modernist idiom as the times changed. I’m sure the classical elements of his poetry would have persisted – Cawein cared too much about nature and the imagination to stop writing about them – although his late work suggests that he might have become known for powerful war poetry. The different strands of his work became intertwined toward the end; in a poem essentially in praise of death, he ends with the hopeful lines “Be taken back, in amplitudes of grace, / To Nature's heart, and so be lost in her” and in another poem, he talks hopefully about God being “above the storm” of war (Cawein 1915). Furthermore, Cawein might have written about redemption from the madness of the twentieth century through tradition, art, or “spiritual desire” much as Eliot did, even changing to a free verse style to do so, as he increasingly did in his final books. I was astonished to find an example that seems to hint at this, “The Song of Songs” from The Cup of Comus, a taste of what Cawein’s poetry might have developed into. It is not a great poem because of its stiffness in diction and syntax, but an excerpt demands to be reprinted – the echoes of Whitman and the themes of Eliot’s later work, such as Four Quartets or Ash Wednesday, are unmistakable, particularly in the fifth stanza (Eliot 1943). Along with a handful of other poems in the same collection, it can be seen as the optimistic counterpart to
Cawein’s frequent secular and religious visions of war and the apocalypse, aiming for a reenchantment of the world:

I heard a Spirit singing as, beyond the morning winging,
Its radiant form went swinging like a star:
In its song prophetic voices mixed their sounds with trumpet-noises,
As when, loud, the World rejoices after war.
And it said:

I
Hear me!
Above the roar of cities,
The clamor and conflict of trade,
The frenzy and fury of commercialism,
Is heard my voice, chanting, intoning.—
Down the long corridors of time it comes,
Bearing my message, bidding the soul of man arise
To the realization of his dream.
Now and then discords seem to intrude,
And tones that are false and feeble —
Beginnings of the perfect chord
From which is evolved the ideal, the unattainable.
Hear me!
Ever and ever,
Above the tumult of the years,
The blatant cacophonies of war,
The wrangling of politics,
Demons and spirits of unrest,
My song persists,
Addressing the soul
With the urge of an astral something,
Supernal,
Elemental,
Promethean,
Instinct with an everlasting fire.

IV
Fragmentary,
Out of the Past,
Down the long aisles of the Centuries,
Uncertain at first and uneasy,
Hesitant, harsh of expression,
My song was heard,
Stammering, appealing,
A murmur merely:
Coherent then,
Singing into form,
Assertive,
Ecstatic,
Louder, lovelier, and more insistent,
Sonorous, proclaiming;
Clearer and surer and stronger,
Attaining expression, evermore truer and clearer:
Masterful, mighty at last,
Committed to conquest,
And with Beauty coeval;
Part of the wonder of life,
The triumph of light over darkness:
Taking the form of Art —
Art, that is voice and vision of the soul of man.—
Hear me!
Confident ever,
One with the Loveliness song shall evolve,
My voice is become as an army of banners,
Marching irresistibly forward,
With the roll of the drums of attainment,
The blare of the bugles of fame:
Tramping, tramping, evermore advancing,
Till the last redoubt of prejudice is down,
And the Eagles and Fasces of Learning
Make glorious the van o' the world.

V
They who are deaf to my singing,
Who disregard me,—
Let them beware lest the splendor escape them,
The glory of light that is back o' the darkness of life,
And with it —
The blindness of spirit o'erwhelm them.—
They who reject me,
Reject the gleam
That goes to the making of Beauty;
And put away
The loftier impulses of heart and of mind.
They shall not possess the dream, the ideal,
Of ultimate worlds,
That is part of the soul that aspires;
That sits with the Spirit of Thought,
The radiant presence who weaves,
Directed of Destiny,
There in the Universe,
At its infinite pattern of stars.
They shall not know,
Not they,
The exaltations that make endurable here on the Earth
The ponderable curtain of flesh.
Not they! Not they!

VI
Hear me!
I control, and direct;
I wound and heal,
Elevate and subdue
The vaulting energies of Man.
I am part of the cosmic strain o’ the Universe:
I captain the thoughts that grow to deeds,
Material and spiritual facts,
Pointing the world to greater and nobler things.—
Hear me!
My dædal expression peoples the Past and Present
With forms of ethereal thought
That symbolize Beauty:
The Beauty expressing itself now,
As Poetry,
As Philosophy:
As Truth and Religion now,
And now,
As science and Law,
Vaunt couriers of Civilization. (Cawein 1915)

I would hope these examples show the range of Cawein’s talent – during his best,
latter period, he never wrote about generic cheerful birds and babbling brooks, but rather
chose to directly base his poems on the landscapes and sights he encountered throughout
his life and to broaden his focus to the outside world. My only regret is that I do not have
the space to share more of Cawein’s work. In no way is his verse as drowsiness-inducing
as much romantic poetry is; I believe it is lyrical specificity and the sheer joy Cawein
feels in sharing nature with all of us that animates his poems. And as his final book

demonstrates, Cawein’s work has a greater range than we might initially suspect – it is

hard to pin him down with just one label. It is a pleasure to read his verse and appreciate

its beautiful music and linguistic density. To read Madison Cawein is to delight in
discovery and the beauties of the natural world.
IV. Conclusion

Poetry is a small world, and as the late great Tom Disch pointed out, it is “balkanized into dozens of hostile or indifferent clans” (Disch 1998). The effect of this is that while any one particular poet might find compatriots and acknowledgement in his lifetime, he has a very low chance of being remembered (aside from a few anthology appearances if he is lucky) among centuries of great poetry. Only forgotten writers of speculative and genre fiction, in which a writer must keep up a high rate of production to remain solvent and recognized, come close to the vast hosts of forgotten poets. Indeed, they are surely the great majority of all poets who have ever been published. One can be ignored by history in countless contingent ways, even if one is popular and acclaimed in one’s lifetime (as Cawein was) – by not being part of one of the dominant movements or styles of the time, by writing in an outdated idiom and not progressing / growing as a writer, by not having a great enough range, by not being part of the poetry community, by writing too little, by writing too much, by only publishing in the small press and not through major magazines and publishers, by not influencing any contemporaries or descendants, by having unfashionable political and personal attitudes, by not being good enough to be more than a minor poet, by not being memorably awful, by not being “rediscovered” by later generations, by being too original and idiosyncratic or ahead of one’s times, or by sheer bad luck. Surely many of these are unjust ways to go into the good night, and Cawein was subject to several. (In fact, he seemed far more aware that he would be relegated to literary oblivion than his contemporaries were, as he wrote several poems about people who rejected society and fame for the love of nature and
poetry and who eventually died in the midst of what they loved. Cawein largely seemed accepting of this posthumous verdict on his work.) But if there is room enough in the modern world for both John Ashbery and Ted Kooser, two massively dissimilar writers whom I nevertheless consider to be America’s finest living poets, then there is room enough in poetry for, say, T.S. Eliot and Madison Cawein. In much the same way that we need to be mature enough to deal with prejudiced attitudes among older poets, we must also be mature enough to appreciate a diversity of styles and modes of poetry.

Cawein’s neglected poetry is surely far better than the self-pitying confessional drivel, ranting, and utter nonsense that have passed as poetry during various literary movements in the twentieth century, and it’s refreshing to read someone who can appreciate the simple things in life – nature, love, and youth – in addition to writing powerful war poems. At moments, his work seems almost timeless, and I cannot recommend *Poems* and the following books highly enough. But poetry, like politics, goes through phases, swinging back and forth between extremes, and fame is fleeting, as Shelley’s “traveller from antique lands” would surely tell us about Ozymandias. All writers will be forgotten one day, but their words will live on – perhaps in the form of passing reference (as with Eliot) or through a chance rediscovery. Maybe one day Madison Cawein will be rediscovered and held up as an example of a unique nature poet, one who stubbornly clung to tradition while poetry was rapidly changing into something more fragmented, allusive, intellectual, and far less populist. Much like in rock music, one could construct an alternative history of poetry to the accepted mainstream versions, consisting entirely of talented, interesting, and idiosyncratic writers who have ultimately
been forgotten or suppressed in favor of another narrative. Even if Cawein were a minor poet, he was minor in philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s sense of the term – disavowed, marginalized, oppositional, hidden – and I believe this study of his life and work demonstrates that an understanding or appreciation of minor writers is vital to a fuller, more accurate view of literary history. As Cawein himself said,

The dreams which any true poet presents to the world may not be of that imperishable stuff that makes for immortality, but they help humanity for the time being, and that is sufficient, is all he hoped for them; dreams of a beauty that has never died, and that will never utterly perish from the earth, as long as the aesthetic sense is a part of the spiritual nature of man. (Rothert 1921)

Cawein’s fine poem “Our Dreams,” whose final two lines are referred to in The Story of a Poet as some of his most-quoted, seems to be an expression of this hope for the immortality of beauty, of love, of youth, of life itself:

Spare us our Dreams, O God! —The dream we dreamed  
When we were children and dwelt near the Land  
Of Faery, which our Childhood often planned  
To reach, beholding where its towers gleamed:  
The dream our Youth put seaward with; that streamed  
With Love's wild hair, or beckoned with the hand  
Of stout Adventure: Then that dream which spanned  
Our Manhood's skies with fame; that shone, it seemed,  
The one fixed star of purpose, fair and far,  
The dream of great achievement, in the heaven  
Of our desire, and gave the soul strong wings:  
Then that last dream, through which these others are  
Made true: The dream that holds us at Life's even,  
The mortal hope of far immortal things. (Cawein 1909a)

Until he is rediscovered by the reading public and not just by a tiny group of academics, we luckily have access to many of Cawein’s best poems online (since his body of work is in the public domain) and in a few anthologies. Fourteen of Cawein’s poems (rather atypical ones not found in his Selected volume – a series of quatrains all
compiled in *Kentucky Poems*) were selected for inclusion in the canonical Library of America two-volume collection of nineteenth-century poetry, where they fit in well with all of the other forgotten gems of verse from that century. In addition to nearly every one of his volumes archived at the indispensable Google Books (as well as *The Story of a Poet*), the American Verse Project website has twelve books of Cawein’s poetry. Project Gutenberg has, among other Cawein volumes, the entire text of his brilliant 1911 *Poems*, in which all of the poems were selected by Cawein himself. One day, maybe, we’ll see a new Library of America (LOA) edition of this book, with selections from his later collections of poetry and perhaps a few of his plays. Cawein would then officially be part of the literary canon, his black LOA volume sharing a shelf with T.S. Eliot; until then, I’ll content myself with having a lovely signed copy of *Myth and Romance* sitting next to Eliot’s selected poems on my bookshelves. And that, of course, is poetic justice.
V. Bibliography


Appendix:

Cawein Family Tree

Jean de Herancour ---?

Paul Herancour ---?

William Herancour ---?

? Kern ---? Herancour

Anna Marie Herancour --- Jacob Bargert

Daniel Cawein --- Anna Marie Kern

Peter Cawein

Henry Cawein

Carl Cawein

Robert Cawein

Tari Cawein

Spencer Cawein Pate

Catherine Bargert --- Daniel Cawein

William Cawein

Madison Cawein

Note: The two Daniel Cawein’s are separate individuals, as they have different birth and death dates. My guess is that they were cousins of some sort.