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A Neglected Colby Poet: Harry Lyman Koopman

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His instinctive interest was in the intellectual concerns of his time": thus did the Providence (Rhode Island) Journal summarize the career of Harry Lyman Koopman whose life began in the little Maine shipping town of Freeport during Lincoln’s first presidential campaign and ended over three quarters of a century later as the nation emerged from its greatest depression. One of America’s foremost librarians, Koopman had devoted most of his crowded hours to the craft of books, but he was ever a faithful student of the literary, political, and scientific movements of the day. A great university library took form under his direction; nearly a dozen volumes of poetry earned him a place in America’s literary scene; a distinguished New England newspaper sought his pen for its editorial page; and several colleges and universities honored his scholarship and his humanity: there is indeed ample cause for retracing the steps of Harry Lyman Koopman—an explorer of many byways of American thought in one of the nation’s most vital periods. There is particular cause for the graduates of Colby College to recall the career of an alumnus whose devotion to free inquiry and to the discovery of truth must reaffirm their own faith in the liberal arts tradition.

Near the end of his life, Koopman wrote an autobiographical article for a Portland newspaper to accompany a tribute piece to his beloved Mount Desert Island where he
passed many of his summers. Really an unabbreviated Who's Who account, the statement itemized the factual record and left the reader to restore the full portrait of a most remarkable New Englander. Behind the names and the places and the dates is the story of a man who was absorbed in the New England that one associates with Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Emily Dickinson. Koopman awakened early to the regional heritage that was reflected in his parentage—his father was a farmer and a ship joiner; his mother, a descendent of one of the earliest settlers of Duxbury, Massachusetts. After his graduation from the Freeport High School, Koopman entered Colby College in 1876, the same year in which his first piece of writing—a poem written the year before—was published in the Portland Transcript. Confirmed in his love of books by new reading experiences and new associations, Koopman responded with a series of tribute poems to his college. In his contributions to The Colby Echo and finally in a commencement poem, he began what was to be a lifelong pleasure and duty: to thank Colby College for its key to a vocation and an avocation.

Koopman had experimented with school teaching while he was an undergraduate at Colby, and after his graduation in 1880 he accepted several teaching positions before deciding upon a career in library work. Before the day of professional library schools, he served his apprenticeship at the Astor Library in New York and successively, as cataloguer, at Cornell, Columbia, and Rutgers. From 1886 to 1892 he was at the University of Vermont where he first earned scholarly distinction for his bibliographical study of the private library of George Perkins Marsh. He spent the academic year 1892-93 at Harvard working for a Master of Arts degree: at the end of his life he recalled the classes with Francis Child and George Lyman Kittredge.

1 Portland (Maine) Sunday Telegram, January 24, 1937.
2 Harry Lyman Koopman, Catalogue of the Marsh Library at the University of Vermont, Burlington, 1892.
and remembered the Yard where he saw President Eliot, John Fiske, Charles Eliot Norton, Nathaniel Shaler, William James, and Josiah Royce. In 1893 Brown University called him to Providence to take charge of its John Hay Library. Both as Librarian and Professor of Bibliography for the next thirty-odd years (he retired in 1930), Koopman served the university and American scholarship with skill and imagination. Under his direction, the John Hay Library grew from 80,000 to 400,000 volumes, but, characteristically, Koopman took more pride in the fact that he had innovated open shelves for students. During these years he added to his reputation as essayist, poet, and scholar with a series of publications that reflected his manifold interests. He brought out a historical catalog of Brown University, became a specialist in printing, edited the Brown alumni magazine for a dozen years, contributed articles on Lincolnalia, and found time to write several books of poems. Scholarship was the key to his lifelong activities, but for this defender of the full and free life there had to be a time to admire the New England that Thoreau had analyzed and apotheosized, a time to climb its hills and mountains, and a time to enjoy its ocean and its sky. After his retirement from this librarianship, Koopman joined the staff of the Providence Journal and wrote daily editorials that found their core in the New England that he had studied and loved for half a century.

The qualities of Harry Lyman Koopman that most impress a student of American thought are his critical awareness and his intellectual honesty. His life's work had brought him in contact with the greatest minds and he was ever sensitive to the necessity of freedom of thought and speech. His distaste of literary censorship was publicized

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in 1929 when he balked at a government order that was to forbid the importation of certain volumes of classical literature, among them Voltaire's *Candide*. Koopman angrily spoke out in behalf of the mature reader:

Every college in this country will have to "shut up shop" if this continues. Every self respecting citizen should revolt against being classified as an infant, a baby which is exactly the classification being assigned to him, as a reader, by those who are responsible for this censorship.

We are being made the laughing stock of every European nation. If these books are going to be banned, they ought to go through with it and bar the Old Testament. It contains passages to which customs officials must find objections if they apply the same standards of judgement by which they have been guided in the past.  

It is such an attitude that saves a number of Koopman's poems from the limbo of "the genteel tradition" under whose influence he began his creative work. There are obviously many phases of Koopman's work which are attractive to students of the American mind: this article will concentrate on his place in the American literary scene as determined by his several volumes of poetry and his critical work. Koopman published over a dozen collections of verse during his lifetime, an assortment of poetry that included the best and the most regrettable features of the metrical offerings of the period which he embraced. He began writing verse during the 1880's at a time when American poets found their themes in the "household editions"

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4 Quoted from the *Providence* (Rhode Island) *Journal*, December 29, 1937, p. 10.

of Longfellow and Whittier, their settings in Tennyson's rose garden, and their stanzas in the miniature forms of the French poets. The pattern of his aesthetic was set out early and followed down to his final collections. The hasty reader will put aside these volumes with the remark that they are the typical production of a part-time poet; a few readers will be grateful for the intellectual strength which marks not a few of his many poems. Like so many American—and English—poets, Koopman would profit from a highly selected edition of his poetry. In the meantime, one may grasp the character of his verse from his best volume—the *Morrow-Songs* which appeared in 1898—and a few other works which came out during the 1890's. The poetry of this decade is particularly pertinent as a background for Koopman's verse, for under the stimulus of the forces that were reshaping so many parts of the American life, Koopman wrote his most interesting lines.

The poetry of the 1890's can tell a reader much about the New England mind as it entered the modern world. The decade was a troubled one in the economic and political life of the region, but New Englanders generally looked confidently and optimistically to the new century that held, they believed, the answers to their worries about religion, democracy, and industry. Not so the poets of New England. There was little talk among them of twentieth-century cure-alls: the idea of progress had been carried on to a new frontier in the West. The old school of poets continued to smile at the "new decade" and to ridicule the necessity of any change in the old ways. Most of the younger poets saw that some changes had to be made, but they were agreed in their respect for traditional values. They were skeptical and despairing in much of their expression, but along with Edwin Arlington Robinson they saw that a new faith had to take the place of the lost one. The rediscovery of spiritual values and personal faiths was their achievement. Their common tone was a perplexed one, but their final mood was one of affirmation. The ideals, the traditions, the
expressions of their predecessors in America and Europe were called up anew by the best of the New England poets in an attempt to create a philosophy and an aesthetic which would be meaningful to the modern world. This willingness to reexamine the past was the characteristic that separated New England poetry from that of the other regions of America during the 1890's. In such a devotion to self-analysis the poets were not merely reflecting the background of the Puritans; they were concerned with finding the values upon which a new society would rest, and they were trying to establish a place for themselves, as poets, in a society that was turning more and more to men of fact.

Among these New England poets, there was no one more sensitive to a heritage nor more aware of how it might be used to awaken men to a new faith than Harry Lyman Koopman. And there are many more justifications for a critical reappraisal of his achievement. We search for a New Englander who frankly spoke his own mind about the problems of the day, and we find that Koopman did; we hope for a poet who felt the significance of the poetry of Emerson, Thoreau, and Emily Dickinson, and we find that Koopman was the poet; we know that there must have been some writers who knew the value of irony and satire, and we discover that Koopman was one of them. Such characteristics sanction his inclusion among the important poets of the era. The intellectual content of his poetry is its prime justification, but even in this early period of Koopman's writing career there are enough revelations of a poet's regard for language and form to warrant a closer study.

cepting Ruskin's concept of a cathedral as a varied symbol of the exaltation of common lives by the union of faith and art, Koopman leads his reader rather gingerly to the observation that "Men build no more cathedrals." The beauty of the old cathedrals served as a link between the human and the divine, but the day when religion was the "mastering motive" of men's lives has passed. Man's art and work have been divorced; faith "is dead on earth, never to live again." Until this point in the poem, the reader's reaction has been conditioned by the tone and mood which implied the poet's regret at the loss of the old faith. But the mood changes with the assertion that indeed the old faith is gone, for "light slew it":

That faith is dead which made the earth a waste,
And man's life but a desert pilgrimage
O'er burning sands and flinty shards to find
Beyond its bounds a Paradise and rest.6

Some people, he continues, may regret the disappearance of the creative geniuses who were inspired by the old faith, but their efforts did not balance the pessimism which weighed down the mass of men. Even now, the poet feels the "dark influence" of religion and urges man to a "bold research in room of cringing awe." The new religion requires no man-made symbols of the unseen, churches of stone; civilized man needs only the lessons of humanity and a willingness to play his part in order to defy dread and hope.

By the time that Koopman collected his early poems in *Morrow-Songs*, the Christian Church and its priests were established in his mind as the forces which retarded man's progress. He ridicules the idea of a progressive church:

The Church advances; to each new position
Man's marching spirit takes she hobbles fast,
Asserting shrill the hour she finds admission,
That here she had her home through all the past.7

6 Koopman's "The Gothic Minster" was reprinted in *Morrow-Songs*. The quotation is from this volume, p. 15.
and he scorns the office of the priest:

At Bruno's, Lessing's, Rousseau's monument
Priests glower aloof, their sullen spite to vent
Against those Sons of Dawn; for well they wot
When priestcraft dies its memory shall rot.

Civilization, he affirms, can advance only when man has outgrown law ("custom armed"), custom ("that levelling instinct of the commonplace"), and righteousness ("the cramped cocoon | Wherein man's soul bred wings"):

Then love shoots forth, fragrant and white, from lust,
As from its root in mud the water-lily.
Man's long, long term of barbarism ends,
Civilization and true life begin.

Working most easily in the quatrain, Koopman wrote a poetry at this time which relied chiefly on his combination of literary language and modern idiom. His best poetry was in the manner of the classicists who sought an effect in restrained and concentrated expression; it was the poetry of a long distillation of reading and observation. His imagery was bookish, but its reflection of the wide reading of a liberal mind saved it from conventionality. The alternation of standard similes and metaphors with a colloquial diction gave many of his poems a quality novel enough at the end of the century. A satire, "The Outlook (By a Conservative)," made clear his ability to fuse common language and social commentary in one of the few ironical poems of the decade. Koopman could be as traditional as the commonplace poet in his choice of subject and in his technique. Such a poem as "The Wail of the Wounded," which reviews the aftermath of Gettysburg, was in two-thirds of its images a kind of catalog of stock figures of speech and was relieved only by the final view of "that landscape of wounded men." In a few poems, even when his form was stereotyped, Koopman showed some insight in his selection

8 Page 42.
9 Page 50.
10 Pages 34-37.
11 Page 45.
of native material for treatment. A sonnet tribute to John Brown was one of the few recognitions received by the man who was in the process of becoming an American myth.12

In December, 1896, Koopman wrote a critical article on the poetry of Emily Dickinson and became one of the few writers of the decade to take notice of America’s finest woman poet. Writing at the time of the appearance of her third volume of poems, Koopman did much more than merely notice her; he recognized a “rare and striking genius” and predicted that she would “hold a place in any list of the great woman writers of the world, and in any list of the great poets of her own country.”13 Koopman’s analysis of Emily Dickinson’s poetry was amazingly modern in its study of the four influences which inspired her revolt: her heredity, her sex, her solitude and reading, and the “same recoil from Puritanism that appears in Emerson and Thoreau.” Finding the key to her form in her reaction to traditional verse forms, Koopman acknowledged the influence of Browning but found a greater similarity to the poems of Emerson and Thoreau (“there are passages that are almost interchangeable”). Emily Dickinson, he concluded, was “a freethinker, but a free thinker on puritan premises.” The poetry of Emily Dickinson appeared too late for Koopman to assimilate it in his own expression during these years; yet, even in this early volume there are tones and methods which he shared with her if he did not inherit them. The skeptical tone, the condensed forms and imagery, and especially the attitudes of his verse frequently remind one of Emily Dickinson’s. His lines on “Dust” are close to the spirit of her poetry:

Satanic Science, to reveal
A speck of dust the snowflake’s core!
Well, bravo, dust! If you could steal
Angelic plumes, we’ll mope no more.14

12 Page 21.
14 Morrow-Songs, p. 72.
A freethinker in his own right there was more intellectual honesty in the *Morrow-Songs* than a reader could find in a hundred books by the average poets of the day. The college library was no safe retreat for the mind of Koopman: he read far beyond the bibliographies of his trade; he thought his own thoughts about some of the real problems of his age; and he expressed himself in poetry which fulfilled its purpose of communication. Too often, perhaps, he fell back on the poetry of the past for his language and his images, but frequently he made his poetry a testing ground for the actualities of life. Skeptic and idealist, satirist and sentimentalist, traditionalist and modernist, Harry Lyman Koopman was finally an intellectual who was beginning to sense at the end of the century that the road out was the one traveled by the great poets of his own region: Thoreau, Emerson, and Emily Dickinson. The qualities of this poetry were the qualities of the man: the man who was so well characterized by a fellow editorial writer at the time of his death: “Dr. Koopman was a philosopher as well as a student. His sympathies were broad and based on careful reflection. He was a generous estimator of others’ opinions but a faithful adherent to his own basic convictions. He was a kindly critic and a generous-minded friend. All in all, he lived a rounded life and a happy one. The State and community to which he gave unsparingly of his strength and affection will long remember him for what he did—and for what he was.”

Colby College, in like manner, will remember with pride the “strength and affection” which Harry Lyman Koopman reserved for his *alma mater* and the example which his life affords of a liberal education in action.

15 From an editorial in the *Providence Journal*, December 29, 1937. This quotation also appeared in *The Colby Alumnus*, March, 1938.