The University of Akron

From the SelectedWorks of Jon Miller

Spring 2016

Sarah Hall's 1806 poem, "Sketch of a landscape in Cecil county, Maryland, at the junction of the Octorora creek with the Susquehanna, suggested by hearing the birds sing during the remarkably warm weather in February 1806."

Jon Miller

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jon_miller/8/
What joyous notes are those, so soft, so sweet,  
That unexpected, strike my charmed ear!  
They are the Robin’s song! This genial morn,  
Deceives the feathered tribe: for yet the sun  
In Pisces holds his course; nor yet has Spring  
Advanc’d one legal claim; but though oblique,  
So mild, so warm, descend his cheering rays,  
Impris’ning winter seems subdued. No dread  
Of change retards their wing; but off they soar  
Triumphant in the fancied dawn of Spring.

Advent’rous birds, and rash! ye little think,  
Though lilacs bud, and early willows burst,  
How soon the blasts of March—the snowy sleets,  
May turn your hasty flight, to seek again  
Your wonted warm abodes. Thus prone is youth,  
Thus easily allured, to put his trust  
In fair appearance; and with hope elate,  
And nought suspecting, thus he sallies forth,  
To earn experience in the storms of life!

But why thus chide—why not with gratitude  
Receive and cherish ev’ry gleam of joy?  
For many an hour can witness, that not oft,  
My solitude is cheered by feelings such,  
So blithe—so pleasurable as thy song  
Sweet Robin, gives. Yet on thy graceful banks,  
Majestic Susquehanna—joy might dwell!  
For whether bounteous Summer sport her stores,  
Or niggard Winter bind them—still the forms  
Most grand, most elegant, that Nature wears  
Beneath Columbia’s skies, are here combin’d.
The wide extended landscape glows with more
Than common beauty. Hills rise on hills—
An amphitheatre, whose lofty top,
The spreading oak, or stately poplar crowns—
Whose ever-varying sides present such scenes
Smooth or precipitous—harmonious still—
Mild or sublime,—as wake the poet’s lay;
Nor aught is wanting to delight the sense;
The gifts of Ceres, or Diana’s shades.
The eye enraptur’d roves o’er woods and dells,
Or dwells complacent on the numerous signs
Of cultivated life. The laborer’s decent cot,
Marks the clear spring, or bubbling rill.
The lowlier hut hard by the river’s edge,
The boat, the seine suspended, tell the place
Where in his season hardy fishers toil.
More elevated on the grassy slope,
The farmer’s mansion rises mid his trees;
Thence, o’er his fields the master’s watchful eye
Surveys the whole. He sees his flocks, his herds,
Excluded from the grain-built cone; all else,
While rigid winter reigns, their free domain!
Range through the pastures, crop the tender root,
Or climbing heights abrupt, search careful out,
The welcome herb,—now prematurely sprung
Through half-thawed earth. Beside him spreading elms
His friendly barrier from th’ invading north,
Contrast their shields defensive with the willow
Whose flexile drapery sweeps his rustic lawn.
Before him lie his vegetable stores,
His garden, orchards, meadows—all his hopes—
Now bound in icy chains: but ripening suns
Shall bring their treasures to his plenteous board.
Soon too, the hum of busy man shall wake
Th’ adjacent shores. The baited hook, the net,
Drawn skilful round the wat’ry cove, shall bring
Their prize delicious to the rural feast.
   Here blooms the laurel on the rugged breaks,
Umbrageous, verdant, through the circling year
His bushy mantle scorning winds or snows—
While there—two ample streams confluent grace—
Complete the picture—animate the whole!
   Broad o’er the plain the Susquehanna rolls,
His rapid waves far sounding as he comes.
Through many a distant clime and verdant vale,
A thousand springy caverns yield their rills,
Augmenting still his force. The torrent grows,
Spreads deep and wide, till braving all restraint
Ev’n mountain ridges feel the imperious press;
Forced from their ancient rock-bound base—they leave
Their monumental sides, erect, to guard
The pass—and tell to future days, and years,
The wond’rous tale! Meanwhile,
The conqueror flood holds on his course,
Resistless ever—sinuous, or direct.
Unconscious tribes beneath his surface play,
Nor heed the laden barques, his surface bear;
Now gliding swiftly by the threat’ning rocks,
Now swimming smoothly to the distant bay.
To meet and bring his liberal tribute too,
The modest Octorara winds his way—
Not ostentatious like a boasting world
Their little charities proclaiming loud—
But silent through the glade retir’d and wild,
Between the shaded banks on either hand,
Till circling yonder mead—he yields his name.
Nor proudly, Susquehanna! boast thy gain,
For thence, not far, thou too, like him shall give
Thy congregated waters, title—all,
To swell the nobler name of Chesapeake!

And is not such a scene as this the spell,
That lulls the restless passions into peace?
Yes. Cold must be the sordid heart, unmov’d
By Nature’s bounties: but they cannot fill,
That ardent craving in the mind of man,
For social intercourse,—the healthful play—
The moral gem—the light of intellect—
Communion sweet with those we love!

Constantia.

Octorara.

Note on the text: This text of this poem was prepared by Jon Miller in Spring 2016 for American Literature 1 at The University of Akron from the following source: Constantia. [Sarah Hall]. “Sketch of a Landscape.” The Port Folio 8 (1819) 81-83. Print. In line 96, the modest river circles “yonder meed” in the original. “Mead” could mean “reward” here, I suppose. Since I think it’s more likely that this is a typographical error for “mead,” meaning “meadow,” I have made that substitution. The rest of the text is faithful to this 1819 version.


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