"The last letter of all"

Reese, Stedman, and Poetry in Late-Nineteenth-Century America

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In 1887 Lizette Woodworth Reese (1856–1935), a high school English teacher in Baltimore, contracted with a local firm, Cushing and Bailey, to publish her first book of poems, *A Branch of May*. Of the run of three hundred copies, she secured commitments from one hundred subscribers, sent twenty to potential reviewers and other important “literary men and women,” and sold the rest, enabling her to come out slightly ahead on expenses (*Victorian Village* 245). Commenting on the historic significance of this “obscure publication,” Louise Bogan wrote in 1951 that “the first signs of feminine song from a true source were so fragile that they were easily overlooked,” but Reese’s book “announced the new feminine sincerity of emotion and approach. Miss Reese . . . wrote her lyrics well outside the conventional literary scene, in what were then rural and provincial surroundings. She conveyed her emotions by means of an almost weightless diction and by a syntax so natural that its art was very nearly imperceptible” (21). Reese would spend the rest of her life in Baltimore, but her decision to send the book to certain of the nation’s important literary figures reflected her understanding that, if she were to sustain a career, she would need their criticism and support.

Like many other aspiring poets during these years, Reese sent a copy of her book to Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833–1908), the New York poet, anthologist, and critic, who in 1885 had published his comprehensive critical history, *Poets of America*. The leading critic and champion of poetry in his day, Stedman used his influence with editors and publishers to support younger writers. Reese recalled that he responded to her with a letter that was so “kind and sympathetic” that she wrote him that “If I ever succeed in making something of myself—as you seem to think I can—I will always count your letter as one of the principal means to that end” (*Victorian Village* 246). Stedman became Reese’s literary advisor and guide; their close, intimate friendship ended only with his death in 1908. An examination of their correspondence, which has been preserved at Columbia University, sheds light on the career of this early modern poet; on the difficult situation for poetry when Reese came of age, a period that Stedman had called “the twilight of the poets”; and on the dynamics of the mentoring relationship (*Poets of America* 475). Why did that initial letter from Stedman mean so much to Reese? In what ways did his support make a difference for her career? Why did he devote so much energy to her? Why did he find the relationship with Reese so satisfying that, as he wrote her shortly before he died, he counted her among his “most beloved friends”?

Born in rural Waverly, outside Baltimore, Reese did not have the benefit of higher education. Never married, she supported herself by teaching, first in a private country school and then in the Baltimore public high schools. Not until 1921, after forty-eight years, was she able to leave the classroom. But she saw the value of having been, in her words, “a working woman for so long, for having been a part of the common lot, for reaping experiences which a thousand others were reaping alongside of me; best of all, for making and keeping a good many secure friendships” (*Victorian Village* 235).

The author of fourteen books of poetry in all, Reese was the oldest of an accomplished generation of women poets that includes Louise Guiney (1861–1920), Adelaide Crapsey (1878–1914), Sara Teasdale (1884–1933), Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950), and Louise Bogan (1897–1970). Alicia Suskin Ostriker has characterized the work of these poets as “artistically self-conscious, highly crafted, and musical. Abstractions wane . . . Clarity and irony replace the ornate fogginess of the mid-century. Much of this poetry is, of course, about love, but love now includes passion and physical sensation. The world itself now is seen as irreducibly physical, and the self is no longer identified as undefined yearning spirit.” Ostriker credited these poets with having produced “the first substantial body of lyric poetry which is worth anything in the United States” (44, 46).

As Bogan recognized, Reese’s mature style was evident early on, in *A Branch of May*, where she brought precision and objectivity to the study of the natural world, which she explored in both its fecundity and destructiveness, its beauty and even its terror. Eschewing sentimentality, she broke with the convention that the contemplation of nature leads directly to God. Further, she found fresh ways to speak of women’s experience, as in “A Song,” which uses a playful, ironic tone as a counterpoint to the treatment of disappointment in love:
The year’s a little older grown;
    And fair white boughs by green ways blown
In these new days are no more known.
    (Oh, who can bring the May again?)

And we are wiser grown, we two.
Our story’s told; each word was true;
And you love me, and I love you.
    (Oh, who can bring the May again?)
Was it not sweeter ere we knew?
Yet who can bring the May again?
(A Branch of May 6)

If, as Gilbert and Gubar have written, the challenge for the female poet at this time was to be “assertive, authoritative, radiant with powerful feelings while at the same time absorbed in her own consciousness—and hence, by definition, profoundly ‘unwomanly,’ even freakish,” Reese met the challenge, surmounting the cultural “contradictions between her vocation and her gender” (xxii).

In sending a copy of A Branch of May to Stedman, Reese selected the person who was in the best position to advance her literary career. In Poets of America, after depicting the “dynamic insufficiency of our present metrical literature,” he concluded that “the belief scarcely can be resisted that there is, if not a decadence, at least a poetic interregnum.” However, Stedman encouraged younger poets, whom he urged to develop a dramatic style, one capable of exploring life’s inherent conflicts. He offered particular support to women poets, whom he credited with excelling their male counterparts “in perception of the finer details of life and nature.” In fact, he claimed that women poets were leading the way toward the poetic revival that yet must come: “a general advance is just as evident in their poetry as in the prose fiction for which they are held in honor throughout the English-speaking world” (437, 447–48).

Stedman received approximately one volume per week from aspiring poets eager to gain his criticism and support. Since he earned his living as a broker on Wall Street and also had undertaken a series of demanding critical and editorial projects, his time was severely constrained. Reese’s first book came to him when he was editing the eleven-volume Library of American Literature. He responded with a form letter to most of those who sought his assistance, stating that he was unable to read the manuscript and offer criticism, but when a promising writer, such as Reese, Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935), William Vaughn Moody (1869–1910), or Josephine Preston Peabody (1874–1922), came to his attention, he could not hold back.

On Thanksgiving Day 1887, he wrote Reese:

At last I have a spare day, & can thank you for the gift of your volume—“A Branch of May”—which I have read from first to last, without finding a poem that has not a certain exquisiteness or a line that has’t some beauty of its own. That is something which one can very rarely say of a latter-day book of verse; and I get many & much larger books of verse, from new authors, every week in the year!

Artistic, & full of thought & color, as your poems are, I do not see that they are very American—except a few of which the lovely “Anne” (Sudbury Lane, Old Style) is perhaps the most notable. They might have been written . . . by some choice pupil of the English art school. Now, you have the gift & taste to enable you to make what you choose of yourself. I believe in the universal franchise of the poet—he has a right to draw his themes & feeling from the world at large. But if you want to make an impression—to have the people everywhere listen to your song, you must discover your own new & special touch, motive, field, method. What these are, no one can indicate for you, but you must discover them—and you will not regret having done so, in the end.

Stedman unhesitatingly told her just what she most needed to hear: that she could “make” whatever she wanted of herself. Characterizing her work as not “very American,” he challenged her to break from the British “art school,” the line from Keats and Tennyson to the Pre-Raphaelites, and thereby find her own way.

As a provincial, isolated poet who learned her art on her own, Reese had apprenticed herself to an essentially British tradition—from the authors of the early ballads to Herrick, Keats, Poe, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dante Rossetti, and Christina Rossetti. Like others in her situation, she tended to approach the English tradition with excessive reverence. To the extent that the tradition came to Reese and her contemporaries largely through anthologies, such as Palgrave’s Golden Treasury, there was the added danger, as David Perkins has remarked, that the “past and present of England [would come before the mind] in one dazzling, wholly intimidating, mass. England had, it seemed, cultural advantages that drab America lacked” (91).

In questioning the Americanness of her poetry, Stedman in effect suggested that Reese not listen for echoes of British poetry in her American poetic garden, as in, for instance, “Sweet Weather,” but rather render her
world directly, in her own voice. In her 1896 "To a Town Poet," which Stedman included in his *American Anthology* (1900), Reese counsels the young urban poet—she herself had worked and lived in the expanding city—to "Snatch the departing mood," and thereby realize that wherever one lives, "Your verse awaits you there." "Let trick of words be past," she concludes, "Strict with the thought, unfeared of the form" (611). Stedman’s advice may well have reinforced the stylistic direction already evident in her poetry toward simplicity, compression, and purity of statement. In 1899 she would recall her realization that "the Victorians had a full cup and it spilled over. Their faults were over elaboration and sentimentality" (*Victorian Village* 208). Stedman had made this point in *Victorian Poets* in 1875, and reiterated it in *Poets of America* a decade later.

How, then, should Reese respond to Stedman’s initial letter? What precisely did he mean in suggesting that she modify her style—"to make an impression"? How would he define an *American* style? Should she engage him in a discussion of style? That question may have been responsible for a delay of over three months, until March 5, when she wrote him:

A little while before Christmas I mailed you my book of poems [*A Branch of May*], and received in return a letter so brimful of encouragement and kind wishes that I must heartily thank you for it.

If I ever succeed in making anything of myself—as you seem to think I can—I will always count your letter as one of the principal means to that end.

Respectfully,

Lizette Woodworth Reese.

Through that final sentence, which echoed Stedman’s letter to her, Reese invited his continuing support and guidance.

Shortly thereafter, Reese took the initiative in establishing a personal relationship, requesting on April 16, 1888, that Stedman send her "one of your pictures, and when you send it, please write your name on the back of it. I want to put it into an ivory and gold frame, and stand it up in my parlor." Not put off by her directness, on April 25 Stedman offered both a photograph and an engraving. He concluded by remarking that "I was very much gratified to see you have a friendly and discriminating notice in *The Critic*," the New York literary weekly of which he was a mainstay. (The review had appeared on April 14, 1888.) Although I have no documentary evidence, it is likely that Stedman encouraged the editors, his friends Jeannette Gilder and Joseph Gilder, to review Reese’s volume. Stedman himself figures in the notice. Here is an excerpt:

There is an important distinction to be made between imitation prense, and that scarcely conscious, though evident, imitation which is born of ardent enthusiasm. The former is sterile, is an end in itself; the latter may be a phase of artistic growth, presenting indications of the greatest promise. This seems to us the case in the slender, soberly-clad book entitled "A Branch of May." That Miss Reese has been much-influenced by the Rossettis is evidenced . . . by the exotic fragrance of such poems as "A Spinning Song" . . . and the dramatic, but crude, "Death Poison." . . . These belong distinctly to what Mr. Stedman has called "the Stained-Glass School." But what strikes one as essential is the writer’s instinct for melody and unusually keen sense of beauty. These pages are all a-flush with pure color. . . . Could anything be better than "Sweet Weather" and "After the Rain"? . . . Setting aside thought of the future, we must confess our great pleasure in the present phase. A delicate aesthetic melancholy pervades the poems, but now and again a deeper tone is unmistakable. (n.s. 14: 177)

Reflecting Stedman’s warning in his letter about the echoes of the "art school" in her verse, this is precisely the sort of review that is calculated to serve a young artist profitably. Stedman may also have mentioned *A Branch of May* to his friend William Dean Howells, whose perceptive notice appeared in his "Editor’s Study" column in *Harper’s* in September 1888. Quoting "Sunset," Howells praised Reese’s "close, loving, and vivid picture(s) of nature," in which "the attitude of the poet mainly supplies the human interest" (77: 638-42).

Stedman and his wife, Laura, entertained regularly during these years, making their home something of a social center for artistic New York. At some point Reese made the first of what she would recall as "occasional" visits to the Stedmans, "first at [their] New York house in Fifty-seventh Street, and afterwards at the one on a hillside in Bronxville, which suburb had lately been developed. Everybody of consequence as artist, novelist, poet came back and forth to these unlocked, cheerful doors, raw young writers like myself, seasoned writers, and old, eager friends ready to renew past companionships. It was like one of those gay and friendly London mansions in the flashing eighteenth century" (*Victorian Village* 246-47). Another frequent visitor, the poet Harriet Monroe (1860–1933), the founder of *Poetry*, recalled the warmth of those gatherings, noting that Stedman took special pains to introduce younger writers to the veterans. Others who attended, she recalled, included Howells, as well as Richard Watson Gilder (1844–1909), editor of the *Century*, and his associate, Robert.
Underwood Johnson (1853–1937). The *Century* published Reese’s “Daffodils” in April 1890. Later that year Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Ella H. Bigelow included the poem in their collection, *American Sonnets* (1890), published by Houghton Mifflin (185). If one function of the mentor is to help the neophyte to associate comfortably (and profitably) with established figures, then Stedman served Reese admirably. The Stedman’s gatherings also helped her to form friendships with such contemporaries as the poet Edith Thomas (1854–1925), who, Reese recalled, pointedly warned her to avoid archaic expression (*Victorian Village* 248).

On November 12, 1889, Reese told Stedman that “A friend has given me a copy of Mr. Sharp’s ‘American Sonnets,’ and I find—on reaching the R’s—that one of mine has been included. I am very much obliged to you for remembering me and for telling Mr. Sharp about my sonnet.” The British writer William Sharp had selected “Tell Me Some Way” for the collection, which he dedicated to Stedman as “the foremost American critic.” The poem develops what would become a familiar theme in her work: disappointment in love. Writing on December 12, Stedman told Reese that he was not responsible for placing the sonnet, but confessed to having praised her work when Sharp had visited him. He then inquired about recent work and publishing plans:

My Dear Sibylla,

’Tis just a month since I got your pretty note. Meantime I have been through rather deep waters, with illness of my own—and the death of a dear & beautiful mother—and am just picking up the tangled skein of life again.

No: you are indebted solely to the quality of your work for the compliment paid you by my friend (& recent visitor) William Sharp. While he was our guest, I told him something about you—but his book was issued before I ever met him.

I saw, somewhere, an item that you were soon to bring out another collection of your poems. If this be so, will you kindly tell me how soon it will appear? If not, can’t you lend me cuttings of one or two of your lyrics, which you consider the most noteworthy, printed since the date of your volume?

Welcoming his involvement with her planning for her next volume, Reese, on December 14, sent him five new poems. Not coincidentally Stedman included two new poems by Reese in the final volume of *A Library of American Literature*, “In Sorrow’s Hour” and “The Garden at Bemerton,” as well as “Anne” from *A Branch of May* (11: 329–30). In just two years, Stedman had helped Reese establish herself as a poet with a growing national reputation.

Reese now faced the challenge of finding an established publisher who could do justice to a second volume. It was one thing for her to self-publish the first book, but it would be quite another if she were forced to do the same with the second. Most likely Stedman and Reese discussed the matter when he visited Baltimore in June 1890, possibly to make arrangements for the Turnbull Lectureship in Poetry at Johns Hopkins, which he inaugurated the next year. When Stedman returned to Baltimore for the lectures, the two had somewhat more time to consider her publishing plans. Would she include *A Branch of May* in the new volume? What could Stedman do? On March 22, 1891, Reese wrote accepting Stedman’s offer to act as her literary agent:

I enclose my Ms. with this. C. Y. Turner, the artist, is anxious to illustrate the poems for me. However, the publishers generally do what they please in the matter. I have promised to mention Mr. Turner, and so I keep my promise. Mr. Stedman, I have done my best in writing these verses; I feel sore whenever I think about them. I feel sore because I wish they were so much better.

But I am very, very slow; it takes me a year to absorb an idea that other people only take an hour to absorb. Some day I may do better.

You see I enclose my old book. I am glad you are so kind to me.

Sincerely,

Lizette Woodworth Reese.

Perhaps they would rather publish the new verse in a separate edition. The title for new or for old and new together, is “A Handful of Lavender.”

On March 24, in seeking to clarify the question of whether Reese had sent the book to publishing houses, Stedman used yet another name in addressing her:

Dear Gemina,

I don’t know whether they teach Latin in schools like yours, but, if you do, you will know why I call you Gemina! I give a select few of my lady correspondents pet-names: for example, I have among them Hypatia, Parthenia, Titania, & Egeria. But you are Gemina, by your own confession.

Your Ms. reached me, with your letter, & I have read some of the poems. They are all remarkably and daintily finished, and where
you get your quaint atmosphere and thoughts is more than I know.
I see you have a noteworthy care for, & choice of, words. A fine &
unusual trait. But I write to know if I misunderstand you. I thought
you said these poems were now at the Harpers, and I told you that
you might entrust them to me if they should send them back. Did
they do so? I ask, because I do not wish, of course, to offer them there
if they already have examined & declined them. In short, has any
house as yet considered them? If so, what firm or firms?

Since Reese was a twin, Gemina was not an inappropriate nickname;
yet one winces at Stedman’s habit of giving pet names only to his female
correspondents. He had addressed her as Sibylla, and though it may seem
that he was placing her in the traditional female role of muse or Sibyl,
inspirer of others, that is unlikely, since he had committed himself to pro-
moting her poetic development. His use of the term Sibyl may have been
a way to acknowledge that Reese had become her own muse. Still, there is
a gendered response in his reference to her work as “daintily finished”—
not a remark that he would apply to work by a male poet. Reese did not
accept such limitations, writing approvingly of strong, subversive
women, such as “Nina”:

She was a woman like a candle-flame—
This stranger dead a score of years ago—
Tall, clearly dark. We loved, but said not so,
The slowness and the music of her name.
A widow. She was kind, the women knew,
And lent them patterns of her violet frocks;
And she had lovers. Past her high, crabbed box,
Went the sour judge, the rosy doctor, too.
Once, twice, a black word pricked the country-side.
She heard, and held a flower up to her lips,
Spoke brightly of our town, its small, close life:
On a wild morning of a sudden she died.
The next, a loud man, with the air of ships,
Stood at her coffin head: she was his wife.
(White April 45)

In the introduction to An American Anthology, which generously rep-
sents works by women, Stedman reflects the somewhat contradictory
contemporary expectations for women’s poetry—speaking of their work
as “exquisite, some of it as strong as sweet; indeed, a notable portion of
our treasure-trove would be missing if their space in the present volume
were otherwise filled” (xxvii).

Apologizing to Stedman on March 27 for not informing him about her
efforts to find a publisher, Reese spoke of the difficult situation for poetry:

I am sorry that I was so stupid as not to tell you about Harper’s. They
returned it with these words—“Although our readers have spoken
in some respects favorably of ‘A Handful of Lavender,’ we do not feel
encouraged to undertake its publication.” And also—“We have
for several years published but little in the way of poetry—In fact
our publishing a poetical work has been a rare exception and the
trade has come to look to other houses for new issues in that depart-
ment of literature. In view of this fact,” etc. etc. Also, they advised
me to try Houghton Mifflin & Co.

I have tried only Harper’s.

I am very glad that you are pleased with the verses. I enclose a
sonnet written within the last two days to be put amongst the rest.
All of the verse (apart from about eight) have been published in
various magazines etc.

Thank you for all the kind words you have to say. I am not sure
if my English is good—where I got it except out of my prayer-book.
It seems to me that people—as a rule—brought up upon a liturgi-
cal form of worship use better language than those brought up with-
out it.

Stedman told Reese that he would try his own publisher, Houghton
Mifflin, but warned that “I am in grave doubt as to success with that firm.
Some months ago they declined to take a volume of poetry by a long-time
favorite, although acknowledging that the standard was high & a moder-
ately good sale would be sure. They said that their list of authors & books
was so unwieldy that they could make no additions to it except in the case
of exceptionally important works. . . . I suppose the real trouble is that the
big houses wish to compete for British authors, under the new copyright
law.”

As far as I know, this is the first indication that the passage of interna-
tional copyright not long before worked against American authors.

In sending Reese a publisher’s letter acknowledging the receipt of the
manuscript on April 1, Stedman again cautioned her: “I have little hope of
getting you on their list at this time, as their list is very large already.
However, I am trying, you see, the best house first.” His contact at the firm
was Horace Scudder (1838–1902), also editor of the Atlantic Monthly, to
whom Stedman praised Reese's work in the strongest terms. Two days later Reese saw the power of Stedman's advocacy when she received through him a letter from the firm expressing its willingness to consider the volume. She acknowledged to him that a poet in her situation would be powerless without such an advocate:

I got a kind little note from you on Tuesday, and started to answer it; but I was too stupid (I have not been well all this week), to say in it just what I wished, and so put it by for a while. ... This morning another note (inclosing one from Houghton & Co.), reached me, and I shall try to thank you as you deserve ....

No, I don't suppose Houghton & Co will put me on their list. I am quite sure, too, that if I had mailed them the Ms, they would have returned it unopened. I am afraid I owe you so much I will never be able to pay you.

I hope you are not giving yourself too much trouble over those verses of mine.

On April 26, Scudder asked Stedman if Reese was "a poet who can afford the luxury of paying for publication?... Entre nous I have a pretty hard time of it usually getting a volume of verse through. This is an evil and adulterous generation that seeketh after a sign other than the existence of the spirit of poetry in a book." But such was Stedman's authority and such was Scudder's persuasiveness that, along with Laura Stedman's timely intervention of replying in her husband's absence that no, Reese could not afford a subvention, the Boston firm accepted the book without one—as Stedman explained in a letter to Reese on May 3. Assuming other functions of the mentor, in that letter Stedman attempts to instruct her on the mysteries of negotiating with the publisher; taking care of the niceties of literary politics; and the importance of not becoming identified as Stedman's protegé. In a moment of exuberance, he predicts that she will now have a place on Houghton Mifflin's list "for life," a prediction that did not come about. The firm declined her fourth book, A Wayside Lute, which Thomas Mosher of Portland, Maine, published in 1909. Stedman also urges her to write "fewer sonnets if you wish continued success—a career."

Perhaps Stedman counseled Reese not to write sonnets because the form had become all too familiar. William Sharp, in the introduction of American Sonnets, remarked that the sonnet "has flourished in America mightily in the last three decades. It is now, probably, the favourite form of at least two-thirds of the younger poets and versifiers overseas" (xxii). The almost simultaneous appearance of his American Sonnets and Higginson and Bigelow's identically titled volume reflects a sonnet mania. In thanking Stedman on May 4, Reese told him of her decision not to write more sonnets, a promise, which, fortunately, she did not keep:

"God bless you. I have just written Houghton Mifflin & Co. my acceptance of their kind offer, and also a little note to the kind Mr. Scudder.

It is you, however, who deserve all the thanks. I feel quite sure my good luck is due entirely to you. If you had not written that "strenuous" letter, and done so much in other ways to encourage and help me, I feel that everybody else and everything else would have been nought. I am not going to write any more sonnets unless I can help it, and I thank you for telling me about it. I do so love a lyric, that I intend to see whether my Muse won't always inspire me to write that and nothing else. No, I will say nothing about your helping me with the book; I understand how you feel about it. It shall be one of my secrets to remember how good and kind you are.

I have told the publishers about my re-copied Ms., paging, etc. (You suggested my doing so.) ...

And now, goodbye, my dear Mr. Stedman. Remember me to Mrs. Stedman, and thank her for me for writing what she did to the publishers. I enclose Mr. Scudder's letter. I am glad you let me read it. God bless you."

Stedman had every reason to be pleased with A Handful of Lavender, which, in addition to the thirty-three poems from A Branch of May, included forty-three new poems. He told Reese on October 4 that "I like your verse better than ever; now it is all together between covers. The love of the collection is unbroken throughout, & very individual. I am sure it will attract and charm. You have done wisely to alternate the Sudbury lyrics, throughout the book, with the sonnets. It is well adjusted. And now you are on tiptoe to see what the critics will say? So am I. But I think you will find favor & readers. I am glad to receive the 'first of all' copy, & to be your friend, & by and by you shall come on & cement the friendship chez nous?" In a postscript, he requested that she "Please" send him "a photograph, to go with your book."

Since A Branch of May was no longer available, the decision to include it as part of A Handful of Lavender proved wise. Reviewers treated the new book as a debut volume. In December 1891, the Atlantic, which would publish seven of her poems over the next decade, noted that the volume is "full of fine thought and an elevated spirit" (68: 845). And, in its review of December 12, 1891, the Critic asserted that Reese's poems "are sure to
captive every reader who loves verse that is full of fancy and sentiment expressed in a simple and natural manner” (“Miss Reese” 330).

Despite the critical success of A Handful of Lavender, Reese’s material situation did not change. Her verse could not support her, and few, if any, career options were open to poets as poets, male or female. She had no choice but to keep her teaching position, despite its heavy demands and poor pay. Stedman continued to promote her work, but there was little that he could do that would fundamentally change her situation. Still, their friendship deepened. She looked to both Stedmans—each in different ways—for emotional support and affection, and developed the habit of writing to each separately.

Telling Stedman on October 26, 1891, that she would soon send him a photograph, Reese flirted: “I shall be very careful in wrapping it so that it won’t reach you with a mark across the eyes, or the impress of a United States stamp on some other part of the body.” Responding on November 15, 1891, Stedman saw in her picture a woman who had achieved a remarkable victory over the pain of rejection in love: “Yes, my minstrel lass of Sudbury, I did indeed receive your bright new photograph, & am grateful thereof—though methinks ‘tis somewhat graver than your wont, & as of a maiden who has thought & suffered—and so of more account, & of truer beauty, than of one who has found life all roses and candy. (I do not know who he was, but he was not worthy of you, & his chief use in life was to be the poor means of raising you quite above him.)”

On November 12, Reese told Stedman of her pleasure at the “very, very favorable” reviews of A Handful of Lavender, writing that “the unfavorable ones have done me a great deal of good, and I feel in very good humor with all the universe.” However, less than a month later she confessed that a recent illness was enough “to make me dread a return of an old enemy of mine—nervous prostration.” Reflecting their developing closeness, she sent him a sprig of lavender, perhaps in response to the heliotrope that he had sent her in October. She promised to visit “the ‘dear and good’ Stedmans (if they be settled or not), and... bid them a Merry and Happy New Year.”

In thanking Stedman the next November for the gift of The Nature and Elements of Poetry, his Johns Hopkins lectures, Reese told him that she would “keep it in my own room and for Sunday afternoons; and I know it is going to help and comfort me.” Taking exception to his reference in the inscription to himself as a “gray beard,” she wrote that “neither you nor Mrs. Stedman will ever be old.” Several weeks later she reported that she was reading his “noble book” while sitting at the bedside of her fatally ill brother. There would be no need for Stedman to respond: “Just imagine I have met you on the street and told you all these things.” She learned his size from his secretary and, as she wrote shortly before Christmas 1892, she knitted a shawl “for your pretty shoulders,” enabling her to embrace him. She gave him a “beautiful memorandum book” for which she thanked him with the comment that “I hardly ever buy myself pretty things, so this is one of them I would forever [have] done without only that you were sweet enough to send it to me.” Providing the space in which to do her work, the gift symbolized Stedman’s confidence in her creative powers—despite a recent fallow period.

A visit to the Stedmans the next spring gave Reese a sense of artistic renewal: “I really believe I am about to take up my writing again,” she wrote on April 13, 1893. “I feel so much better and stronger in body and spirit. I am ‘honing’ to get hold of my little memorandum book, and write something that will be worth keeping therein. I have already set about copying a story that I have had in my mind two years and more.” After an apparent break in their correspondence, on April 25, 1895, Reese sent the Stedmans’ younger son, Arthur, one or more short stories, apparently with the request that he serve as her agent in placing them. Two stories appeared in the Outlook during next few years: “Adam” on January 30, 1897, and “Old Mis’ Rich” on February 5, 1898. She never collected her stories, but in December 1895 she shared with Stedman her plans to “get out a new book by the title of ‘A Quiet Road.’” The next September she wrote Laura Stedman that Houghton Mifflin would publish the collection in the fall, and promised to send the Stedmans the first copy. The new collection solidified Reese’s reputation. The Critic asserted in January 1887 that “her voice has acquired depth and richness without losing any of its sweetness.... The absolute simplicity of her language, the freshness and fitness of her imagery and, above all, the genuineness of her singing make one hope for more poems from the same source” (n.s. 27: 406). Apparently “sweetness” remained a quality that reviewers expected of women poets.

Congratulating Reese in October 1896, Stedman wrote of his own difficulties: “The year has been a sad one for me... I am far from well, at [m] very weary, & books and letters lie unacknowledged. But I seldom hear from one of my own, like you, & you see I am writing you forthwith.” He urged her to visit in Bronxville, where she “would see no enemy—not even Winter and rough weather—before our hickory fire. There is a nice room expressly for you, & you know I never shall see much of you unless we confabulate for more than a single evening under my own roof.” What
had begun as a relationship in which a newcomer looked to an important literary critic for help and developed into a friendship based on absolute trust and growing intimacy.

On Thanksgiving Eve 1896 Reese, after describing her pleasure in the new book, told Stedman of the collapse of her family's finances and his importance to her:

I count your friendship one of the loveliest things I have to be thankful for. I cannot tell you what a comfort your letter was to me; it almost brought tears to my eyes. The book has received a good deal of favorable comment; and I believe it is selling well.

How fine you and Mrs. Stedman must feel in your new house. I can see it plainly every time I think of it (which is often), and more plainly than any other part of it that little room which you kindly think of in connection with me. Alas, I am not coming North this year, or next, and perhaps never at all! My time is just now taken up with trying to keep out of debt, and keep things straightened out, and it is very hard to a woman who is a spendthrift by nature to count every cent that comes here and strive to make it go farther than is natural for a cent to go. However, everything comes right, and I can't believe I am worse-treated than anyone else.

Dear Mr. Stedman, you are the best-loved man of the century. Whenever you feel tired or out of heart with the times... just think of that, and warm yourself at it.

The very act of describing her difficulties to Stedman helped Reese to muster the strength to face them. He and Laura remained secure islands of love and acceptance in a difficult world.

Reflecting the growing intimacy between them, Stedman told Reese on December 20, 1896, how strongly he was drawn to her:

I was much touched and upheld by your recent words to me. Of course you evoked the epithet which was so medicinal from your own loyal "subjectivity"—but that made it all the more effective. For, between ourselves, if you felt moved to make it even in the "positive" instead of the "superlative" degree, and I were a quarter-century younger and not blessed as now with a mate, it would go hard but that the children of Baltimore School District No. 7 should be deprived of their present educational advantages over all other school children!

I am so gratified to find again, as in your case, how surely the true poet came[s] to his own. Several notices like Mr. Stoddard's have met my eye.

Reese developed similar feelings of love for Stedman, her most passionate letter coming on April 7, 1899, after a visit to the Stedmans:

We are so dull here in Baltimore. We know so little about Art, and we think we know so much. Still, it is a great deal for me to feel that I have stood by my guns. Yes, it pays [?].

Dear Poet, I really believe I am going to write some more verse. Something I thought I had lost has come back again. It began to blossom while I was at your house, (the heavenly time I had there quickened it), and now it has blown out, and I am the happiest creature in the world. I tell you because you understand.

This is the last letter of all. I have kept my best [wine?] for the end.

Dear, dear Poet, I send you my love, and you are not to answer this.

This was not Reese's "last letter"—that would come in December 1907, a month before Stedman's death—but Reese could go no further in expressing her love for him.

On October 15, 1900, Reese thanked Stedman for the gift of An American Anthology, which included twelve of her poems. In the biographical entry Stedman wrote that "Miss Reese's poetry is of a rare quality—artistically, natural, beautiful with the old-time atmosphere and associations, and at times rising to a noble classicism, of which the lines "To a Town Poet...afford a fine example" (818). A note in the Reese collection of the Clifton Waller Barrett Collection at the University of Virginia asserts that the publication of "Tears" in Stedman's American Anthology "first attracted universal attention to this sonnet," her most famous poem. David Perkins has written that "Tears" "deserves its fame, if only because of its fine, elegiac cadence and swift accumulation of suggestive metaphors," but that it is "slightly sentimental" and therefore "not quite characteristic" (110).

At the end of December 1901, Reese told Stedman of her plans for a trip to England: "But I have at last decided to cut loose and have seven or eight weeks of liberty and fun. I hardly dare think about it, it is so entrancing. (Is this the Puritan in me? God forbid!)." Stedman helped by providing letters of introduction. On April 23, 1902, he wrote, "You poor little caged lark! Years ago you should have visited the scenes so dear to us... There is no sensation like that of an American's first footfall upon England's soil... My dear child, let me confess to you that for 19 years I have been a prisoner here. All my old comrades have aged, & have ceased to write me. But I give you notes to those who are still near to me." Part way across the Atlantic that next year, Reese's ship became disabled. She had to wait until the next summer to take the trip, which brought her "days of unalloyed delights," as she told the Stedmans, who had seen her off at the dock—the
last time, as best one can tell, that Reese and Stedman would see each other.

In January 1903 Reese thanked Stedman for the gift of a new picture: “It is very, very like, the same kind, spirited face, the keen eyes, the beautiful brows—the best of the Puritans with, a dash of the Cavalier. I shall hang it over my bookcase, in a gilt and white frame.” She also reported that “I have written a story for Harper’s and am at work on two others. But art is long—and School Boards (mostly composed of fools) are getting more little-minded everyday. The best of my time is spent correcting compositions! Two hundred of them!” On April 10, 1902, she complained that the “school board treats us like serfs, and I may have extra duties assigned.” But she told him on June 28, 1903, that “they say I am writing better than ever. Also, I am trying stories. Harper’s published one [“Cornelia’s Birthday”] in June, and one has been accepted by another editor. The latter writes me it is a genuine piece of art and he is proud of me.”

Aware of Stedman’s failing health but unable to visit, Reese regularly told him and Laura how important they remained to her. After the sudden death of Laura Stedman in August 1905, Reese asked Stedman for a keepsake from her possessions. He told her on August 15 that “You know that she loved you—and her loves were chosen well, and, when fastened, held to the last.” With health and financial resources failing, in 1907 Stedman moved from Bronxville to an apartment at 2643 Broadway. He told her of his concern that she had not published a volume of poetry since 1896: “I often wonder if you are writing more poetry. It is not that we don’t have poets—but that the press & public don’t read poetry, & they scarcely know what it is.” Reese replied that “Soon I expect to have a book ready for the publisher. I am now revising it for the last time. When it is finished, I shall try Houghton for the third time, but do not know if he will agree to print it or not.” But Stedman now lacked the authority to intervene and Reese had no other patron to place the book with a prominent firm.

On December 12, 1907, a month before his death, Stedman said farewell:

I cannot for the moment find the letter, which I temporarily answered, in which you wish to have some relic of my wife [and] that went to my heart. She liked none of her younger friends better than you, & knew that you loved her. I can’t find that letter today, having now no regular secretary and being rather unequal to my distressing piled-up mails; but I have never for a moment forgotten my promise, and at last have been able to open up the stored-trunk of what things are left that were my wife’s.

Perhaps this rather old-fashioned, but pretty, breast-pin is the thing which... you may care to wear now and then in remembrance of L.H.S. I think the blue pendant, with its blossoms and its Psyche alluding Love, befit your ladyship in more ways than one.

I have been trying to write, & edit my poems,—the former for means of living, the latter against the chances of one’s 75th year. ... So I must say Yea-Yea & Nay-nay (& even say farewell) to my most loved friends. But you are always dear to me, & I am so glad you wrote that you are to bring out another book of your beautiful poems.

Through his gift of the love pin, Stedman recognized Reese’s passionate nature, which, he saw, figures importantly in her work.

After she learned of Stedman’s death, Reese wrote his granddaughter, Laura: “I felt as if a heavy hand had been laid upon my heart. I shall never know anyone like him again. He was so chivalrous, so kind, so many-sided, so fond of beauty and art—one of the best beloved men of his day. It is hard to think of him dead. How we shall all miss him! Dear soul!” She dedicated A Wayside Late to his memory with the following prefatory poem:

House, how still you are;
Hearth, how cold!
He was vital as a star,
As the April mold.
Friend and singer, lad and knight,
Very dear;—
Hearts, how bare the dark, the light,
Since he is not here!

The Reese-Stedman correspondence demonstrates the many ways that Stedman served Reese and she him. In addition to that crucially important initial letter of recognition, he offered her stylistic advice, secured the best possible publisher for her second book, promoted her work with influential friends, and made it possible for her to meet major and minor writers. She knew when to accept and when to reject his advice. The friendship and affection of both Stedmans filled an important place in her life even as she figured significantly in theirs. Reese and Stedman developed a relationship of particular intimacy. He took pride in her achievements as one of a new generation of poets who would make good his prediction of a renaissance of poetry in America.
Note

1. Reese's letters to Stedman and his to her are housed in the Edmund Clarence Stedman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. The letters are owned by Columbia University and are quoted with the permission of the university. I have also consulted the Lizette Woodworth Reese Collection, Clifton Barret Library, University of Virginia, which is the major repository of Reese material.


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