Excerpt from *Amelia*, Chapter XX, pp. 230-31

The lover, the friend, and the husband, have 
sacred charms: the brother, and sister, may 
feel and enjoy a thousand sweet and tender 
amities: but the purest sensations that ani-
mate the human heart, with all their train of 
unspeakable blessings, are reserved for the 
boon of a mother.

[In this scene, Amelia Stanley and her mother 
are reunited, each having believed the other 
to be dead.]

The stranger for a moment looked intently 
in Amelia’s face, and to our surprise, cast 
his arms about her neck exclaiming, “my 
child! my child! my blessed, lovely child!” 
The voice of nature spoke loudly in the 
breath of Lady Stanly, and she sunk upon 
the bosom of the stranger, while her bearing 
heart impeded her words, and every muscle 
of her face acknowledged her for a parent. 
“You,” at length she exclaimed “you are my 
mother, my whole soul owns the tender 
claim; but how—” “Oh,” said the lady, “ask 
no questions; I have found you my child, 
my daughter; the living image of my noble 
husband! I thought you dead my Amelia! I 
thought you were in infancy laid by the side 
of your father, and till this morning dreamt 
not I had a child. How are all these wonders 
explain them, least [sic] excess of joy in 
this perturbation, become too much, and my 
reason again deserts its seat.”

“Till yesterday,” cried Lady Stanly, “till 
yesterday, your Amelia knew not that she 
ever claimed a parent, and amidst a tide of 
joy, too great to be lasting, wept that her 
mother was no more, that she did not live to 
see her child, and share her happiness for she 
thought sorrow had before this, deprived 
er of a mother.”

“Sorrow my love,” returned the lady, “can 
tame the high and lofty spirit, can check the 
ebullitions [sic] of vanity, distract the head, 
and break the heart; but the frame so weak 
and so frail, will still survive them, survive 
the wreck of all the noble faculties, and 
though reluctant, bear about the wretched 
rains eighteen years. . . .”

“Oh, my mother,” cried Amelia, “how 
sweetly sounds that dear name! I can never 
be tired of repeating it.”
American Women's Poetry (1998). Over the years her work has been discussed appreciatively in critical surveys, including those by Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska (1916), David Perkins (1976), and Emily Stipes Watts (1977). Nevertheless, her poetry, which has not been collected, remains largely unknown.

Reese was born in 1856 in Waverly, an agricultural village outside Baltimore. She recalled an idyllic childhood in a "green quiet country, with scattered houses, with stretches of orchard and meadow, and, although within easy-reaching distance from Baltimore, almost as obscure as though it stood on the edge of the desert...well-beloved, and long remembered." She and a twin sister were the oldest of four daughters and a son born to immigrant parents; her mother came from Germany and her father, who fought for the Confederacy, from Wales. When the Civil War reached this heretofore peaceful region, she wrote, "my small sisters and myself were afraid to go to bed at night...between the blue forces and gray we were ground between two millstones of terror." Waverly, however, remained the center of her imaginative universe: "Here was I fed," she wrote in "Apricot Trees in Bloom," and "Here was my bread! Until the grave and after" (Victorian Village 24:68, 87).

Reese, who did not marry, supported herself as a high school English teacher, retiring in 1921 after forty-eight years of teaching, all but two in the Baltimore public schools. In her 1929 memoir, A Victorian Village, she spoke with pride of having been "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" (255).

The last of the eleven volumes she published during her lifetime, Pastures, appeared in 1933, two years before her death. Not a member of an artistic school—except insolar as she helped open the way for others—Reese brought a purity of expression to common subjects. In "To a Town Poet" (1896) she spoke of her desire to "Snap the departing mood as a means of expressing 'faith in the time, faith in our common blood.'" Let trick of words be past," she concluded, "strict with the thought, un

uncertain of the form" (Selected Poems 97-98). Bogan remarked that Reese's later works showed only "a further distillation and concentration of form and material" (22).

Publishing "The Deserted House" in the Southern Magazine of Baltimore in 1874, Reese, who had no higher education, spent the next thirteen years developing her art, writing "stories for Sunday School papers, essays for school journals, and poems, poems, poems...". Only a few of these were worth saving, and these few, in addition to others I wrote for the especial purpose, were published in my initial volume of verse. She contracted with a Baltimore firm to print three hundred copies of A Branch of Mary, for which she secured one hundred subscriptions. After distributing twenty review copies, she sold the remainder, earning a small profit on the venture (Victorian Village 24:64-45). In 1891 Houghton, Mifflin published her second collection, A Handful of Lavender, which included the thirty-three poems of the first book. Appreciative notices appeared in such magazines as the Atlantic Monthly (Dec. 1891: 845), Critic (Dec. 1892: 530), and Dial (Feb. 1892: 537-58). Now Reese regularly placed her work in the leading periodicals, including the Century, Atlantic, and Scribner's, which published her most famous poem, "Tears," in November 1899. In the same year a difficult time for poetry, one that Edmund Clarence Stedman in Poets of America (1885) called a "Twilight Interval." But it was also a period of creative ferment for women poets, as Stedman, who became Reese's close friend and literary advisor, well understood. Condemning the sexist reaction that had grown up in response to the growing prominence of female poets, Stedman insisted that readers recognize "what has been achieved by our countrywomen..." a general advance in the poetry of women. In the prose fiction for which they are now held in honor throughout the English speaking world" (447-48). In the pages of Legacy, Paula Bernat Bennett has argued that it is in the work of American women, "especially their nature poetry, that many of the most radical changes in poetic style occurred between 1889 and 1900." She charged that their work, labeled sentimental—whether or not it was—was lost when male writers brought "the revised modernist canon of American poetry into being." Yet, the ground-work for this moment (and for early modernist poetry as a whole) had been laid decades before, in good part by American nature poets, poets who found in nature's details the means and ends of their aesthetic effects, the raison d'être for their poems. Bennett, who does not discuss Reese, concluded that "it is time we returned to these poets' garden and restored their flowers." (Late Nineteenth-Century American Women's Nature Poetry 100).

One contemporary critic, who did visit Reese's "garden," was William Dean Howells, who described in his "Editor's Study" column in Harper's for September 1888 the emergence of "a landscape school of poetry, in the pieces of which the attitude of the poet mainly supplies the human interest. The charm of a delicate little painting like this below [Reese's "Sunset"] will be, for the sympathetic witness, largely in the suggestion of the environment that invited to the study of it." (640).

In the clear dusk upon the fields below, The blossoming thorn-bush, white, and spare, and tall, The little pool beneath the willow trees, Yellow as topaz flames from edge to edge; A line of light the deserted highway glows. Odors like sounds down the rich air do pass. Spice from each bough, musk from the brier rose Dropping its five sweet petals on the grass. Swallows are whirring black against the blazes; I hear the creek laugh out from pebbly ways. (A Handful of Lavender 41)

It is not hard to see why a Realist such as Howells would be attracted to the "set," since it brings a remarkable precision to the study of a discrete moment and avoids metaphysical conclusions and sentimental affirmations. Only in the last line does the speaker enter the poem, but even there she refuses to comment. Why does the creek "laugh"? If an answer is to be found, it must be through the poem's exploration of the interplay of the natural world and light, sounds and smells, swallows and bees. Capturing a moment of brilliant fruition, "Sunset" points to darkness and decay. Like the creek, the poem continues to move in time, reminding us of the theme of persistence in the midst of change. In its precision and compression, Reese's work is broadly consistent with the first two of the three principles of the 1913 statement by the Imagists (Pound, H.D., Flint, and
Aldington): “Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective” and “To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.” However, Reese differed on the third principle: “As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (Pound 95). Her lines scan Poetry for her both a musical and a painterly art. Although, as Bennett argued, women poets may have helped to establish the “ground-work” of the modernist movement, Reese for one refused to participate in its experimental phases. Her work remained rooted in a lyric tradition that extended back to the Elizabethans and Herrick and included Wordsworth, Keats, Poe, and Christina Rossetti.

“Miss Reese’s first book,” Louis Untermeyer wrote in Modern American Poetry: A Critical Anthology, “had an underrun of intensity beneath its quiet contours. Few of its readers in the Nineties would have dreamed that this straightforward undeniably speech would pave the way for the direct songs of Sara Teasdale and Edna St. Vincent Millay. In a period of sugared sentiment and lace valentine lyrics, Miss Reese’s crisp lines were an entire generation ahead of the times and consequently were appreciated only for their pictorial felicities” (116). Louise Bogan, as Elizabeth Frank has observed, found in the work of Reese, along with that of Christina Rossetti, Alice Meynell, and Teasdale, a tradition characterized by “vigorous syntax in short forms and high, controlled feeling. Nature, mutability, love and loss were constant motifs, but they were woven through with a tight pattern of irony and restraint that implied passion all the more intense for having been mastered” (35). As important as Reese was to later female poets—and they to her—it would be a mistake to ignore her significance for a succeeding generation of male poets as well. Letters to Reese at the University of Virginia from Edwin Arlington Robinson, John Hall Wheelock, Robert Hillyer, and others testify to her importance for this generation.

The most intriguing of these literary relationships was with Robert Frost, whose friend Wilbur Snow wrote that Reese’s work “enjoyed Frost’s hearty approval” (16). A comparison of Frost’s famous sonnet “Design” with Reese’s “After the Rain” enables us to identify some points of similarity:

Dripping the hollyhocks beneath the wall
Their fires half quenched, a smouldering red.
A shred of gold upon the grasses tall,
A butterfly is hanging dead.

A sound of trickling waters, like a tune
Set to sweet words; a wind that blows
Wet bushes against a slatron sky; all June
Caught in the breath of one white rose.

(Selected Poems 25)

Depicting a rich June evening, Reese casually mentions the death of a butterfly. Similarly in “Design” Frost’s speakers answers “a dimpled spider, fat and white, / On a white heel-aid, holding up a moth / Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth— / Assorted character of death and blight” (275). Both poets (Reese implicitly) challenge any preconceptions the reader might have of the existence of a beneficent “design” in the cosmos. Frost concludes by asking a series of questions: “What brought the kindred spider to that height / . . . What but design of darkness to appall? / If design govern in a thing so small” (275). Reese allows the “facts” to speak for themselves.

Richard Poitier has argued that one of Frost’s intellectual sources was William James’s Pragmatism (1907), which calls into question Bishop Paley’s famous argument for the existence of God from design, that the perfect adaptability of species to their environment demonstrates the existence of the divine “designer.” In light of Darwin’s arguments on chance, James asserted instead that as a concept “design” is rather “a blank cartridge— . . . What design? and what designer? are the only serious questions, and the study of facts is the only way of getting even approximate answers” to our philosophical questions (Poitier 245–52). Both Reese and Frost, then, were engaged in the study of diverse, sometimes disturbing “facts” in the natural world. Is it possible that Reese’s poem contributed to Frost’s “Design”?

Not simply a nature poet, Reese directly and concisely explored human emotions. “Death’s Guardian,” for instance, treats women’s willful ignorance and male deception:

Secure in death he keeps the hearts he had;
Two women have forgotten the bitter truth;
To one he is but her sweet little lad;
To the husband of her youth. (Selected Poems 49)

She was also a pioneer in the exploration of romantic love. In introducing her anthology The Answering Voice: Love Lyrics by Women, Sara Teasdale wrote that “for reasons well known to the student of feminism sincere love poems by women were very rare in England and America” until comparatively recently (xx). Teasdale included four poems by Reese, “That Day You Came,” “Love Came Back at Fall of Dew,” “An April Ghost,” and “His First Love,” which I quote in its entirety:

Can you forego me? Treat me like a thing
More trivial than a flower; and less dear?

Robert J. Scholnick

Think for a while. Can you forego the spring.
Forfeit the one mad weather of the year?
I press between you and each other yesterday.
Smelling of wind, of white briar in the dew.
From the grave’s edge, and from the shell, trodden way,
I that am ghost, reach to the ghost in you.
Foregoing spring, you thus can forego me.
And bare of me, of spring you shall go bare.
Leave me or choose me. Yet it matters not.
I shall possess you as the root the tree,
Take of your candlelight and loaf my share.
Read in your books, dig in your garden plot.
(Selected Poems 178)

Although in 1926 Edmund Wilson praised Reese, then past seventy, for her ability to write with “the same distinction” as forty years ago, the course of her career did not always run smoothly. Houghton, Mifflin, which in 1896 published A Quiet Road, rejected several proposals for a new collection during the next decade. The pressures of teaching and financial and family worries contributed to fallow periods. But Reese wisely refused to force her art: “I had nothing to say, except at long intervals, and therefore did not try to say it” (Victorian Village 249). Her fourth book, A Wayside Lute, appeared in 1909, when Thomas B. Mosher of Portland, Maine, became her publisher and reissued her previous work. In 1930 she changed publishers again when Norman Remington of Baltimore issued Speicewood, with Wild Cherry following in 1923. Only in 1926 did a New York publisher take up
her work. To promote Selected Poems John Farrar of George H. Doran arranged for a seventieth birthday party at the Brevoort Hotel in New York.

The event reflected contemporary literary politics. Poets who attended—including Frost, Elinor Wylie, Teasdale, Anna Hempstead Branch, and Edwin Markham—and those who sent regrets—including Masters, Robinson, and MacKay—were traditionalists. Reese distanced herself from the experimentalists; after praising the "general excellence" of contemporary poetry, she complained of "a disturbing ignorance of older poetic literature... Words are wrenched out of their usual context... It is playing upon a cracked instrument." The "decisive test of the artist" remained for her the "perpetuation in word and phrase of beauty, that readjuster of the chances and changes, the confusions and the rancors of life" (Victorian Village 263-64, 209). But at this point, Reese had achieved a position quite apart from literary fashion. As Eda Lou Walton wrote in the Nation in 1933, Reese's art "is entirely her own... Her communication is so perfect, because of the honesty and language beautifully employed, that there is no barrier between her and even the most modern reader" (571).

The only book by Reese now in print, Selected Poems (Reprint Services 1992), includes only 122 of her approximately 400 published poems. In 1992 Robert Jones included 197 of her poems in In Praise of Common Things, which contains a biographical introduction, commentary, and bibliography. Jones pointed out that the Reese collection at the University of Virginia contains as many as 150 poems in holograph that have never appeared in book form. He estimated that the body of her "published poetry appears to be between 500 and 700 poems" (3). A complete edition, which would include poems she did not collect during her lifetime, is long overdue.

In defining Frost as both modernist and "sustainer of an expiring idiom," Brad Leithauer recently asked, "What is the probabilistic term that... would honor the artist who extends beyond its expected life a beloved tradition" (45). Whatever that term, it applies to Reese as well.

Notes

1. In his History of American Poetry, David Perkins writes that "Tears" deserves its fame if only because of its fine, elegaic cadence and swift accumulation of suggestive metaphors. But it is slightly sentimental and, to that extent, not quite characteristic" (110).


Works Cited

See Selected Primary Works for Works by Reese.


The Second Wife
She knows, being woman, that for him she holds The space kept for the second blossoming, Unraveled with dreams, held tightly in the fold Of the accepted and long-ruled thing— She, duly loved, and the proud of her books, Shy of her wit. And of this other she knows, She had a slim throat, a nice taste in words, And grew prettier in squat garden rows. Thus knowing all, she feels both safe and strange: Safe in her life, of which she has a share; Safe in her undisturbed, cool, equal place, In the sweet communions that will not change; And strange, when, at the door, in the spring air She hears him sigh, old April in his face. (White April 45)

Nina
She was a woman like a candle-flame— This stranger dead a score of years ago. Tall, dearly dark. We loved, but said not so. The sorrow 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, crabbled 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 snips, Stood at her coffin head. She was his wife. (White April 52)

August
No wind, no bird. The river flumes like brass. On either side, written as with a spell Of silence, broad the fields. In the deep grass, Edging the dusty roads, lie as they fell Hands of shriveled leaves from tree and bush But bow the orchard fence and at the gate, Throwing their saffron marks through the bush. Wild lilies blaze, and bees hum soon and late. Rose-colored the tall struggling bitter, not one stone left. The spider sets its loom on there. Coax to the trees, and spin out in the sun. A silken web from twig to twig. The air Is full of hot rank scents. Upon the hill Blinks the river's single cloud, white, shaming, Still (A Branch of May 58)

The Old Path
OH, love! Oh, love! This way has hints of you In every bough that's torn, in every bee, Yellow and glad, crossing the thick grass through, Is box from red on the bush, white on the tree. And when the wind, just now, came soft and fleet, Scattering the blackberry blossoms, and from some Fast darkening space that trembles sang sudden sweet. You were so near, so near, yet did not come! Say, is it thus with you, oh friend, this day? Have you, for me that love you, thought or word? Do I, with bad or bough, pass by your way? With any breath of brier, or nose of bough? If this I know, though you be quick or dead, All my sad life would I go comforted. (A Branch of May 14)

In Praise of Common Things
For stock and stone;
For grass and wood;
For quince tree blooms
A virgin white in spring;
And for the will bough,
Gray, gentle, wide;
For roof, loof, everything,
I praise thee, Lord;
For toll, and acte, and stitle,
And all the commonness of life.

Henry, yet thine,
Like country voices in a hymn,
The things a house can hold;
The memories in the air;
And down the stair
Found footsteps known of 60; The chair, the book or two; The little bowl of white and blue.

What would it be, If loneliness were far from me? I stuff I could not take,
To bury up and down,
From field to town;
Needs would say wild heart breaks;
Or, I would vacate;
And, being sought, to nothing grow.

This is the bone:
My little read from east to west,
The breadth of a man's hand,
Not from the sky too far,
Nor any star,
Beneath the cowled land;
From common things that be,
Is it but a step to run to Thine? (Seymour Georg 17:18)