

ON THE LIFE AND POETRY OF ABBIE HUSTON EVANS, 1881–1983



Abbie Huston Evans in the 1950s.

WAITING AND LOOKING are two vital skills that ripened in American poet Abbie Huston Evans during a six-year convalescence from surgery in both eyes. Since reading or writing any print was proscribed, Abbie put off her entrance into Radcliffe College for the period; walking the Maine coastline—around the hills of Camden—became her primary activity. This dailiness informs the small but integral body of poetry that Evans produced over time: a penetrating depiction of the natural world as repository of the sacred.

By her own admission, Abbie Huston Evans was hostile to poetry as a child and remained so into her teens. Then, on one particular Sunday, seated on a hard pew of the First Congregational Church in Camden, she listened to Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" woven into the sermon, and was forever changed.

We can only imagine the experience of listening to the rhythms of a sermon delivered by Abbie's father Lewis, then minister of the Camden Congregational Church. Earlier in life he had acquired the name Bard Evans, not as nickname in jest but as the just title reserved for Welsh coal miners, whose highest aspiration was to excel in singing and verse-making.

At twenty, Bard Lewis Darenydd Evans arrived in the United States, without English and with sparse schooling of any kind, having worked the mines in Wales from the time he was seven. For many years he continued to labor as a coal miner in this country as well, until he had learned sufficient English to be accepted for college. He spent two years at Western Reserve, where he had to study fifteen hours a day to keep up to the standard he set for himself. In his 30s he fulfilled a lifelong ambition to be a minister, graduating from Bangor Theological Seminary, a school specially designed to accommodate late vocations.

Always deeply admiring of her father, Abbie inherited his love for the music of rocks, which emanates from a habitat deep in the earth. Rocks, crystals, mineral gems, and aeons of geologic time emerge in her poems again and ever again. In the course of the poem "The Stone-Wall," stolid stones become a living organism.

Look up from the stones
When noon inks in the shadows.
Life is in these drones,
Nothing else created
Has such secret eyes;
Dim mouths set as these are
Make no cries.

Dwellers underground
Dragged up to the air
Lie out and plot together
Against alien glare,
Back to darkness sinking
At a pace too slow
For man's eyes to mark, less
Swift than shells grow.
Inhabitants of darkness,
Dragged up to the light,
Bend their graven faces
Back to night.

Nothing from without
Can break their calm.
—The warm snout of a rock
Nuzzles my palm.¹

Though poetry as revelation came quite suddenly and premanently to Abbie, the youngster on a church bench, writing poetry never came easily or quickly. Much later in life she recalled, “It took a long time before I dreamed about writing myself. I started by writing short, nature poems. Two or three in a year’s time was a good output for me.”

Meanwhile her life was full and adventurous for a young woman of her time. Following the years during which she was forbidden to read or write, she *did* attend Radcliffe, as a special student six years older than the rest of her class, and worked to complete first an undergraduate, then a Master’s degree in English. The First World War was not quite ended when she went to France to be of service, then came home to serve the families of coal miners in Colorado and Pittsburgh.

MUCH LATER, Abbie recalled with wry amusement that eighteen years of writing and sending out poems passed before she saw the first one in print in a periodical. Then, in 1928, when Abbie was already 47, her first slim volume of poetry was published by Harper under the title *Outcrop*. Ten years later Macmillan published the second collection—again small—which she called *The Bright North*. It was 1961, with Evans about to turn 80, before the third volume, *Fact of Crystal*, was published. At Harcourt, Brace, where the third volume was published, Evans found a great friend and champion in poetry editor Margaret Marshall, with whom she corresponded until shortly before Margaret’s death in 1974. Marshall and her friend Louise Bogan, well-known literary critic and poetry editor at the *New Yorker* from 1931 to 1968, saw to it that Evans’ poetry was seen and recognized by other poets of the time, if not by the general public.² Bogan accepted several of Abbie’s poems for publication in *The New Yorker* and, in 1969, just shortly before her own death, declared Evans’ poems the “most *neglected* of the last ¼ century.”³

In fact the much better known poet had spoken out publicly in favor of Evans’ writing in 1961, in an article about the discouraging state of American poetry—its “limiting of feeling to hostility (open or disguised), violence, guilt, anxiety” and “a certain monotony.” In contrast, Bogan observed that

A turn into renewed freshness and vitality is due, and in fact, scattered evidence of change has lately appeared in unexpected quarters. For instance, in Abbie Huston Evans’ *Fact of Crystal*, we discover something intense and rare—mystic apprehension. Miss Evans’ body of work is small . . . and her utterly distinctive quality has gone virtually unnoticed. Yet here is a New England woman. . . whose sensitive and

strong perceptions pierce deep into the heart of things, whose sense of ‘inscape’ can be set against Hopkins’ and Dickinson’s. Her Welsh inheritance, grounded in the stern landscapes of her childhood, has been disciplined, and defined, given grandeur and depth. These later poems, written in her sixties and seventies, include work of such profound inspiration that small modern categories and classifications fall in confusion before them.⁴

Nor did Abbie Evans ever regret her periods of seeming silence. When she was 90, in remarks accompanying an inspired public reading of her poems, she recommended to young poets the advantage of “not being in a hurry,” of waiting. Choosing to write her poems in step with the universe’s unfolding, she insisted on looking at the big picture—time in its larger hunks and stretches. As William Blake finds the world in a grain of sand, so Evans locates large, bedrock concerns like mortality, time, creation, and evolution in their most precise details, their merest outcroppings. Consider

The Dark-Blue Morning-Glory

I know now how the dark-blue morning-glory
Feels in its velvet first-hour, motionless
Pulled sunwards; so the top stands up on its toe
In one place, steady, and the humming-bird
Makes a taut mooring off the larkspur spike.

I may be wrong, I may be wrong, but surely
These blue too-quiet flowers are whirlpool-centred:
—As who can doubt, seeing how on either hand,
Centre-engrossed against disintegration,
The sum of things subsists? Hung on the night,
With slumber at the core, like dynamos,
The atom prospers, and the galaxy
Stands up in arms against the Great Dispersal.
And shall the flower go free, the perishing flower?

The top of motion wears the look of rest—
This much I know; but do the words read backward?
Is rest but top-speed? Almost I believe it.
Seeing this blue hushed vineful tugged one way
Wearing its secret and ulterior look,
I am admonished stillest is most active.

Caught in the drag of the intake, spun to a centre,
No eddies torn from eddies in me left,
No deep divisions, multiplicities,—
Dawn into one, as single as a flower,
I stand at rest on the spiraling Vine, full-blown.⁵

For thirty years, when she wasn’t thinking or writing poetry, or wasn’t savoring late-summer returns to the Maine coast for vacation refreshment, Abbie Evans gave her artistic passions to the Settlement Music School. Presently the largest community-based school of the arts in the country, with five active branches in the Philadelphia area, the school was founded in 1908 as part of a social services center for newly arrived immigrants. Starting with such practical services as an Employment Bureau, English language lessons, and athletics on the roof, its main focus rapidly became the arts, and music in particular, always aimed at its inner-city immigrant population.

Evans joined the faculty in 1923. There, the various classes she administered were in poetry, dance, art, and dramatics. She served as supervisor of allied arts and as a member of the board of directors. For those years, Miss Evans lived at 414 Queen Street in downtown Philadelphia. Directly next door, at 416, the central branch of the Settlement Music School had been built in 1917, financed by Mary Louise Curtis Bok Zimbalist (who came from a wealthy family that owned property and houses in Camden, Abbie's home town). In fact, the famed Curtis Institute of Music grew out of the Conservatory Division of Settlement, financed by the same woman in 1924. And although the Institute has continued to produce professional musicians of note, Settlement steadily increased its music offerings through the years, adding choruses, bands, music theory classes, as well as private instrumental lessons whose fees are governed by the students' ability to pay.

Johan Grolle, the man who directed the Settlement Music School for most of Abbie's tenure there, was himself an immigrant. Speculations about the exact nature of the personal relationship that developed between Abbie and Grolle are not so far substantiated. What is clear is the intense devotion they shared to a common cause.

Grolle was born in the Netherlands in 1880, trained as a violinist under William Hess, and performed under conductors Willem Mengelberg and Richard Strauss in Amsterdam. He came to the United States in 1900 at the age of 20, playing with the Philadelphia Orchestra until 1909, when he left to become the first Executive Director of the Settlement Music School. Grolle held the position for 40 years, until his retirement.⁶

Grolle's particular contribution to the development of the arts in American education during the first third of the twentieth century was an insistence on excellence. During a time when lines were being drawn between those who believed that settlement music houses in this country were under a mandate to teach "social music" and those who believed otherwise, Grolle was the person who identified the role of settlement schools such as his in Philadelphia as serving "the same purpose as music conservatories, with one exception: the settlement music schools, aiming to serve working-class students, kept their tuition levels low, so that no student was excluded due to a lack of ability to pay."⁷

Such insistence on excellence in the arts, without reference to transient popularity or institutional clamoring, was a hallmark of Abbie's, whether in her own creative work or in her evaluation of the work of others. She recognized fine art in its many forms, whether in appreciation of Marsden Hartley's paintings, young Ned O'Gorman's poems, or a concert of the Philadelphia Orchestra.⁸ Until she was well into her 80's she wrote to close friends about the glories of weekly concert-going. Music retained its sacred genesis in her worldview. No doubt it was a particular concert of the Philadelphia Orchestra that inspired

All Those Hymnings-up to God

All those hymnings-up to God of Bach and César Franck
Cannot have been lost utterly, been arrows that went wide.
Like homing birds loosed from the hand, beating up through land fog,
Have they not circled up above, poised, and found out direction
(The old God gone, the new not yet, but back of all I AM)?

Such cryings-up confound us; I think they are not tangential,
But aimed at a center; I think that the through-road will follow their blaze.
No man has handled God, but these men have come nearest.
I trust them more than the root rule. Bach may yet have been right.⁹

LOOKING AT PHOTOGRAPHS of Abbie Huston Evans at the time she wrote that poem—she was in her late 70’s—reveals a very plain-looking woman with a very ordinary smile and typical-of-her-time crimped, gray hair. She looks neat and tidy. In the words of a man for whom she worked for many years, “One of the things which impressed me so much about Abbie was her neatness in dress and habits. . . . She dressed nicely and with excellent taste.” Then he goes on to say, “She attended the concerts of the Philadelphia Orchestra regularly and, even at seventy years of age, enjoyed mountain climbing.”¹⁰

Mountain climbing at 70? Not surprisingly, admirers from the state of Maine account for this physical hardiness as stemming from the “flinty soil” that nurtured her: her mother’s Huston family had tilled soil on that rocky coast since the 18th century.¹¹ Abbie honored that heritage to the end of her days, but insisted as well upon the Welsh heritage from her father. A memorable trip to Wales is recorded at length in various letters of the poet and inspired the poem “Welsh Blood,” which begins

Welshness is tinder stuff.
Genes of the Britons
Kindle the bloodstream:

Sparkings from old tribes
Backed up in the mountains
—Snowdon, Cader, Idris—
Against the Romans;
Under Brecon Beacons
Standing off the Saxons;
On the ribs of seacoast
Fighting the Danes;
Watching castles building
To hold them under;
Mouthing the old tongue,
Believing in magic,
Alive with wonder.¹²

Remarkably, this woman who looked so ordinary¹³ and who grew up in the home of a strictly traditional Congregational minister-father, was strikingly ahead of her time in understanding the sacredness of Earth and its workings. She recognized the limitations that are the underpinnings of traditional religions and exercised a life-long curiosity about things geologic, astronomic, and evolutionary. In the end, she insisted on patiently contemplating, evaluating, and listening to the poetry that emerged. She had a rare understanding of her place in history and of the poets who witnessed the many wars and revolutions of the twentieth century.

This Bridgehead Generation

We are too near. In the face of what we see
Silence is better than the sound of words.
Homer himself sang not till Trojan swords
Were long since rust in an old century.

Not till the tumult dies, and under green
Lie all of us, and time has brought to birth
Poets whose frame-dust slumbers deep in earth
Can men make song of what our eyes have seen.¹⁴

Here is Evans' lifelong insistence on patience and contemplation, on not giving way to the word without caution, appreciation, and the absorption of all of one's faculties. But she did continue to speak. Well into her 80's she hazarded words about what she saw. Like William Blake, who was centuries ahead of his time, Evans saw the necessity for understanding self and world in new ways. In 1793, in his illuminated book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake advised, "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that called Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul *in this age*."¹⁵ In 1961, Evans pointed to a deep conundrum for the century that would follow her. With uncharacteristic gnosis for a woman grounded in particular rocks, mountains, and sea—with a real sense of prophetic foreboding—she wrote

The Password

We have come to the edge of the continent; we know it.
We are through with solid ground.
The world of substance is dissolved in force,
In charge, in energies commensurate
With nothing that we know.
And *Humble* is the password of the wise.

Our power of search was greater than we guessed:
Men ran on tightrope hints
From here to there,
Brain wrested light from dark,
Five senses served us well.
Now we have need of ten,
Different and new;
For we conceive
A wall ahead,
Obdurate, granitic,
Adamant to tools worn out with whetting.
And *Humble* is the password of the wise.¹⁶

NOTES

¹ Abbie Huston Evans, *The Bright North*, NY: Macmillan, 1938, 1966. Also in Evans, *Collected Poems*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970.

² For more detail, see letter of Evans to Marshall of June 17, 1971, in Margaret Marshall Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

³ See letter of November 27, 1969, to Ruth Limmer in Ruth Limmer, ed., *What the Woman Lived: Selected Letters of Louise Bogan 1920-1970*. NY: Harcourt, 1973, p. 383.

⁴ Louise Bogan, *A Poet's Alphabet*, Phelps and Limmer, eds., NY: McGraw-Hill, 1970, p. 221.

⁵ Evans, *op. cit.*

⁶ In addition to his duties at Settlement, Grolle became the first director of Curtis Institute in 1924 and Chair of the Music Division of the National Federation of Settlements; then, in 1937, he helped found the National Guild of Community Musical Schools, serving as its President from 1943. For a full account of the issues and controversies surrounding Grolle's service in the latter two organizations, see Shannon L.

Green's Ph.D. dissertation "*Art for Life's Sake: Music Schools and Activities in U.S. Social Settlements, 1892-1942*," University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164

⁸ One of the first honors to come to Evans, at age 65, was an invitation to serve as judge for the Shelley award for poetry. After much deliberation between a collection by Janet Lewis and one by Rolfe Humphries, she writes, "I liked the Janet Lewis book too, very much indeed: was keenly aware of its delicate strong lovely quality, and its sensitivity and impeccable taste. My choice of R.H. is determined not only by his fine writing—as a poet, but also by what seems to me to be the wider range, and greater body of his work, as compared with hers. I feel he has honestly earned such an award as the Shelley—has come through a fairly long writing life without cheapening his output. Marsden Hartley did the same thing, I think, with his painting. Such people do a service for us all." Letter to Louise Bogan of Dec. 3, 1946, from Letters to Louise Bogan at Amherst College Library, Archives and Special Collections.

⁹ Evans, *Fact of Crystal*, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1961. Also in *Collected Poems*.

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¹¹ Abbie herself spoke often and with some levity in letters about this reason for her hardy constitution. Not just the soil, but the woods as well. At one point she writes, "You know I've had some vacations (up to a month) in the deep woods in Maine, sleeping on the ground on firboughs, in a tent, needless to say, some time back, but I still have it in my blood!" From letter to Margaret Marshall, July 10, 1955, Margaret Marshall Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

¹² Evans, *Fact of Crystal*. Also found in *Collected Poems*.

¹³ Ferguson, *op. cit.*, "Abbie Evans was a woman about 5 ft. 4 inches in height weighing in at about 120 lb. Short hair styled and very neatly done. We have mentioned her attire was always very tasteful and up-to-date."

¹⁴ Evans, *Fact of Crystal*. Also found in *Collected Poems*.

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