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Mrs. Underwood: Linguist, Littérateuse

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Craine, Carol Ward

**Mrs. Underwood:
Linguist, Littérateuse**

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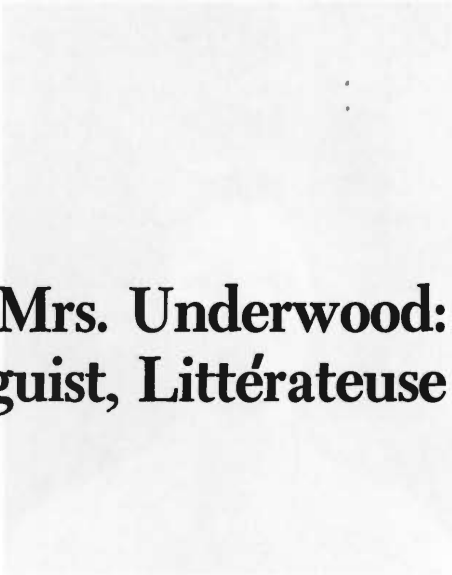
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Carol Ward Craine

Biographical Sketch of Author

Carol Ward Craine received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Maryville College, in Tennessee, and a Master's degree from Fort Hays Kansas State College. Mrs. Craine, a Kentuckian, came to Kansas in 1946 and is presently a part-time instructor in the Division of Language, Literature and Speech at Fort Hays State.



Mrs. Underwood: Linguist, Littérateuse

1891-1892

Biographical Sketch of Author

Mrs. Underwood was born in the town of ...
She was educated in the ...
She was married to ...
She was a member of the ...
She was a member of the ...
She was a member of the ...

Foreword

Edna Worthley Underwood, 1873-1961, was a versatile woman of letters, novelist, author of short stories, poet, and translator of literature from many languages. Her work does not typify the period in which she lived: three novels are set in another era, eighteenth and nineteenth century Russia; the cultural influence of a wide background of reading in various languages is reflected in much of her poetry and in many of her letters; several short stories are fabricated of fanciful illusions. In her writing, Mrs. Underwood projects an individual characteristic—she sketched with words. Because of this, her creations lack the depth and enduring quality of masterpieces; yet, there are flashes of brilliant imagery, phrases of provocative thought, glimpses of beauty and intellect. However, too often imagination and words lack control; their power is consequently diminished. Although her work does not ascend to the summit of literary accomplishment, it provides some pleasurable vistas.

The purpose of this study is to present a literary biography of Mrs. Underwood: to make an acquaintance with her as a woman and author, and to survey the scope of her writing with some critical analysis.

An internationally known book dealer of Kansas City, the late Mr. Frank Glenn, purchased from the estate of Edna Worthley Underwood a portion of her private library, unpublished manuscripts, and scrapbooks containing correspondence and news clippings collected over a period of years. In 1959, not long before his death, Mr. Glenn made a gift of this material to Mr. Paul Friesner, former Director of Forsyth Library, Fort Hays Kansas State College, Hays, Kansas. Mr. Friesner believed the material provided possibilities for a worthwhile study, using reference sources of which many were previously unavailable, and generously proffered the use of it.

Examination of the material disclosed a challenge, for each page of the scrapbooks, every piece of correspondence, newspaper clippings, and marginal notes appeared as varied fragments to be fitted into a composition portraying the life and personality of their subject. The nature of the material—a veritable hodgepodge of accumulation—afforded some difficulty in utilization. Much available information derived from newspaper clippings, and the frequent discrepancies in print further hampered selectivity of sources.

Mrs. Underwood's published works proved invaluable as interpretive aids.

Assistance was received from many during the compilation of this work. Sincere appreciation is due Mr. Friesner, for making it possible; to Dr. Verna Parish, under whose guidance this study was brought to realization; to other members of the committee, Dr. Roberta Stout, Dr. Raymond L. Welty, and Mr. Friesner, whose encouragement and suggestions are valued.

Further acknowledgement of gratitude is extended to Mrs. Mattie Schmidt, of Winfield, Kansas; Mr. R. P. Guyot, of Arkansas City, Kansas; and Mr. William E. Cunningham, of that city. Their generous cooperation resulted in the obtaining of information relative to Mrs. Underwood's later years.

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Chapter I

Edna Worthley Underwood

I. THE WOMAN

The essence of any human being is unknowable; but the qualities of an individual, when consciously or unconsciously revealed and accurately discerned, may be pieced together, and the pattern of a personality emerges. To trace the individuality of Edna Worthley Underwood her own words are utilized as a primary source to illumine the search. Of herself she has exclaimed sincerely, "Write me down as the woman who is mad about words."¹ Of them, she has said:

. . . I have loved words. . . . The emotion of words, with their different rhythmic passions, in many races, in many lands, lured me. Following etymological laws, I have watched them, like gay actors on a stage in a play that never ends, put swiftly on varying vowel and consonant raiment.²

From her pen words were expended as a profusion of symbols expressing her ideas, impressions, and emotions, and her response to the thoughts of others, for she was also a voracious consumer of words from many languages. Words offered her escape from reality, and because of their imaginative power she declared, "Less and less I saw the world about me."³

In her youth, the writing of Pierre Loti held a strong appeal, as it continued to do when she was no longer young, and she said, "I did not see my own youth; I saw only his."⁴ Loti comprehended the beauties of creation; and as he wrote of them she, in "a far, lonely, wind-swept prairie village," caring almost nothing for the people or the things about her, "was climbing the mountain highways of Persia, *with Loti*, to look upon Persepolis. . . ."⁵

1. Edna Worthley Underwood, *The Taste of Honey: The Notebook of a Linguist* (Portland, Maine: The Mosher Press, 1930), p. 105. Kept as a kind of diary, this book contains undated entries of observations over a period of years from youth through middle age.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Or she "was slipping along hot jungleways, by night, to look for the first time with startled senses, upon fabulous Angor."⁶

Still through the allure of language, she "saw plum blossoms fall like rain in rare forgotten spring times of Japan. . . ." ⁷ She "saw Peking, with its gold and jade . . . climbed the Street of the Kasbah, in windless African nights, when scent of almond blossoms hung heavy on the air . . . loved night and sunset on his distant seas."⁸

When Loti confessed that he "was afraid of Dame Reality," she echoed, "Perhaps I am, too."⁹ There was consolation, a happiness to be found in the reality of the unreal. She "lived intensely in many lands through the prose of many masters."¹⁰

Often the imaginative response so strong in her nature leaned toward the fantastic, and this inclination was manifested in portions of her writing.¹¹ Her mind was intrigued, for example, by the idea of the metamorphosis of plants; and the Sanskrit teaching that in the tree and in man dwell the same spirit, an idea repeated by Lao Tzu, the Chinese philosopher, in his declaration that "the tree is thy brother," attracted her interest to the extent that she wrote, "The time will come when the insistence of the East, written in the most ancient documents known, that life is one, will be proven."¹²

Of all plant life, the orchid fascinated her most because it is "the plant that has climbed nearest to human life,"¹³ and because it expresses intensity, for "the orchid is an adventuress, reaching out greedily between planes of existence."¹⁴ Her speculations embody a dream-like quality in a world where botanical science may discover that plants are climbing upward toward a sentient life.¹⁵ If judgment proclaims these sentiments to be an over-indulgence of fanciful reveries, justice should add a further statement of Mrs. Underwood: "Facts are felt dimly by many before they are stated broadly by one."¹⁶

The need for escape through the power of imagination is reflected in the comment, "A delusion is not a bad thing to grow.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 26

11. This quality is particularly apparent in Mrs. Underwood's fantasy, *An Orchid of Asta*, and in her collection of short stories, *A Book of Dear Dead Women*.

12. Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

16. *Ibid.*

It is superior to reality because it is out of range of attack and can not wear out. It transcends time and accelerates action.”¹⁷

From her early youth, Mrs. Underwood was “peculiarly sensitive to beauty,”¹⁸ an awareness which touches and lifts her comments from the commonplace:

I had red raspberries for breakfast this morning which makes this a remarkable day. I wish you could have seen them piled upon powdered ice, with yellow cream on top of them. I recall a dish of berries that Renoir painted that has just this luscious ripeness.¹⁹

Although Mrs. Underwood rarely referred to anything of a domestic nature, her discernment of beauty transformed prosaic objects, and a basket of vegetables contained visual delight:

The skins of the onions are lovely considered as delicately woven tissue. Faint spirals of color, like fading rainbows, slip across them, and arranged with the greatest nicety. Chinese potters tried to make the surface of a certain porcelain like them, which, when they partially succeeded, they named “onion-skin.” The brush of Chardin painted them with love and zest. The red of the beets I can decompose in my eyes into deep and angry blues, that flush again with violet, and mount to red. . . . The heart of a freshly cut cabbage is just the hue of the huge ivory objects African kings have carved. And this changes by the subtlest gradations to wet, refreshing green.²⁰

It is typical that in these quoted passages Mrs. Underwood refers to artists and their works; likewise, in passages far too numerous to quote, except for those scattered at random throughout this paper, she reveals an acquaintance with poets and prose writers, painters, and musicians of many lands and many eras, and the diversity of factual knowledge lying within her range of interests is prodigious. She has said, “I have been years in discovering for myself . . . this delectable land of the mind, where I am superior to life and time, and where things that vex and annoy can not reach me.”²¹

Pleasures derived from the mind are longest lasting, though they may be intensified by the spontaneity of sensual delight, and Mrs. Underwood found pleasure in symphonic music, in rare textiles and old weaving, in ancient Chinese drawing, and in the sea; but she said, “When I am ill, when I am sad, there are lines of French prose I repeat for sheer delight, with the dumb instinct of bringing joy back.”²²

Images of other delights are reflected in her remark, “Ships fascinate me, the beginnings of navigation, Strabo’s *Geography*, maps,

17. *Ibid.*, p. 37

18. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

19. Edna Worthley Underwood, *Letters From a Prairie Garden* (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1919), p. 153.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 151-152.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

22. Underwood, *The Taste of Honey*, p. 137.

old globes, and the Hakluyt Voyages. . . . Old shipping books interest me. And the adventures of whaling days.”²³ Some pleasures, she felt, are seemingly foolish; even so, she said, “One of mine is just to hold in my hands old books printed in Venice.”²⁴

To Mrs. Underwood, Venice was a combination of memory and allurements from which she could not get free, and of that “sea-born” city she says:

I even love summer in Venice. I love the hot Italian nights and the glamour, the strangely irritating scent of the green lagoons. I love the consciousness of all the glowing, unseen paintings in its closed, vast palaces, and the beauty of its people made to paint, and the giant magnolias which light dark, windless nights like mimic moons.²⁵

Her love for Venice is further revealed in the declaration, “The kind of life men live there is the life that suits my taste.”²⁶ She adds:

Nowhere else do days drop away so delightedly. Nowhere else is loneliness wholly without bitterness. There is no other spot in the world where I am myself—where neither years nor place, nor people can touch me. There is no other city where I can so happily support the necessary boredom of living.²⁷

There is a poignancy, at times, in Mrs. Underwood’s expressions, a sense of longing for the past, a plaintive misgiving for the present. She felt that “the old arts are dying. They have no place in a mechanical civilization. Man has procured a strangely noisy set of grown-up toys that engross his energies.”²⁸ Her concern is evident:

In these days of art-predatory pedants, jazz-extras, circus-advertising, and writing-schools, I turn to the Roman; I turn to the Greek Anthology; the old dreaming masters of the East. Beauty belonged to the elder world, story-telling wisdom, and the careless phrase of completeness. . . . The scientific world upon whose threshold we stand will not need the old arts. It will have new ones all its own. That is why they are dying. And so when I say anything derogatory, it is not I who speak, but the age, through me.²⁹

Although Mrs. Underwood deplored the fact that “pleasure has disappeared,” and that “to illumine *taedium vitae* we have gain, efficiency, and a desire for swifter and swifter movement from place to place, *physical restlessness*,”³⁰ she extended this hope: “Charm can come again, even in this dull day! It must be born, however, of brilliant mind united with nobility.”³¹

In spite of her apprehension that the “old arts” will be supplanted

23. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

31. *Ibid.*

by new forms discovered through science, Mrs. Underwood felt that "the most interesting thing the world has done, or will do, is slow turning of the ponderous pages of science, each leaf of which represents an age."³² She continues, "One of my regrets is that I can not watch the turning leaves of all the future."³³ Yet, this regret, implying as it does an adventurous quality, an eagerness to know all that can be known, is tempered by a greater regret, with its implication of the recurring theme of escape so often reflected in Mrs. Underwood's remarks, for she says, "One of my greatest regrets has been that life has no back door."³⁴

II. THE ARTIST

Those qualities observed in Mrs. Underwood—a love of words, a strong imagination, sensitivity to beauty, the frequent desire to flee reality—are evident in the artistic accomplishments in both her poetry and prose. The degree of her artistry would be extremely difficult to determine precisely, for in her work what may appeal to one may repel another; or, it is possible that her works have been subjected to the time-test of worth with neither a positive nor a negative response, but only indifference.

The preceding statement is, of course, a generalization; we should examine some specific comments. The poet, Edwin Markham, wrote to Mrs. Underwood, in 1911, a letter from which a portion follows:

I read the Masque [*Masque of the Autumn Moons*] with genuine pleasure, for you are unquestionably a poet—one who has obviously made an earnest study of the poet's art. I trust therefore that you will go on with your poetry, working for a still greater mastery of technique.³⁵

Mr. Markham, later that same day, wrote another letter to Mrs. Underwood which contained these favorable comments:

I have just returned your Masque with marginal comment, [treating of a few technical points] but it comes to me (just as the evening lamp is lit) that I neglected to express my sincere gratification at your most kindly references to my poetical work. Your words are highly gratifying, coming as they do from one who is herself an authentic poet, and from one who has made herself familiar with what is best in this world of song.

Let me again urge you to persist in your work in poetry: you have an unquestionable right in the chamber of the Muses.³⁶

32. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

35. Letter [number one] from Edwin Markham to Edna Worthley Underwood, December 12, 1911, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 88. The sources of many of the clippings from newspapers and other printed matter are uncertain or unidentifiable; many are undated. Therefore, the procedure of numbering Mrs. Underwood's scrapbooks, and the page number where the entry is located, is utilized where other identification is dubious or impossible. The location of letters is similarly set forth.

36. Letter [number two] from Edwin Markham to Edna Worthley Underwood, December 12, 1911, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 89. Presumably, Mr. Markham had been making marginal notes on a manuscript, as *Masque of the Moons* was not published until 1928.

A spontaneous tribute to Mrs. Underwood was sent from Little Rock, Arkansas, by Mr. George B. Rose, who wrote, in 1913, a letter including the following remarks:

I wish to thank you for the pleasure that your "Garden of Desire" has given me. I am a great reader of poetry, and try to keep up with the verse that is coming out in the languages that I know, English, French, Italian, Spanish and German; and when I come across something that is really worth while, like your little volume, it is a treat. You have something to say and you know how to say it.³⁷

From the west coast, a student at the University of Washington, having read *Letters From a Prairie Garden*, recognized a kindred spirit and was moved to write that ever since she had been a small girl she "had pictures woven by Imagination in my heart, and I have written them down because I couldn't help it." She continues: You know the sort of pictures they were, for you too have felt them, and you can understand them, but most of the others thought them silly . . . but until now I didn't realize that there was another who dared place such dreams before a critical world . . . I have felt almost ashamed of my fancies, but oh, You have given me the courage to go on, for you have tried, and succeeded.³⁸

From the east coast, New Gloucester, Maine, a young woman sent this message:

Having just finished your "Letters From a Prairie Garden," I think I shall begin at the beginning again. How satisfying it must be to be able to clothe in beautiful and appropriate words the dreams and fancies that fit through one's mind.³⁹

Will Durant, author of the many volumes contained in his immense *Story of Civilization*, requested permission to quote in his first volume a number of passages from *Tu Fu*. His revealing reply to Mrs. Underwood's response follows:

Thanks for your generous permission to quote from your "Tu Fu." I quite agree with what others have said about your translations; they are the work of a true poet, and yet they are faithful to the original.

I shall certainly make use of your other translations when, in the slow course of my five-volume twenty-year enterprise, I reach modern poetry. My next five years belong to Greece and Rome, and the five thereafter to medieval Europe, the Renaissance, and Islam,—if the germs don't get me. ⁴⁰

These are samplings selected from numerous available pieces of correspondence which were sent to Mrs. Underwood. The comparative comments of professional critics and reviewers will be discussed more extensively in a latter portion of this paper. It is

37. Letter from George B. Rose to Edna Worthley Underwood, July 4, 1913, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 68.

38. Letter from Deane South[?]th to Edna Worthley Underwood, [undated], cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, pp. 46-47.

39. Letter from Mary Glenn Worthley to Edna Worthley Underwood, September 2, [?], cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 47.

40. Letter from Will Durant to Edna Worthley Underwood, September 17, 1934, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 179.

apparent that to many readers the writings and the translations of Mrs. Underwood appealed strongly; however, it is significant that in *An Anthology of World Poetry*, compiled by Mark Van Doren and first published in 1928, he did not choose to use any material translated by her, selecting instead the translations made by Florence Ayscough and Amy Lowell, by Arthur Waley and L. Cranmer-Byng, among others. He remarks in his preface:

Horace, Catullus, Heine, Hafiz, Sappho, and others are each rendered by various—perhaps too various—hands. There would have been an advantage in presenting a single poet through a single translator, but on the whole I preferred variety, and I found the comparison of methods an engaging game. As usual, too, I was interested only in what seemed to me the best versions, and was content to take them from as many sources as might be.⁴¹

Among Mrs. Underwood's effects there is an article, fastened together with a rusty paper-clip and dated in her handwriting, "Nov-Dec. 1929," which was written by L. Cranmer-Byng, himself a translator. From his delightful critical essay relative to translators of the Chinese poet, Tu Fu, these excerpts are particularly pertinent:

Others, the writer of this review included, have attempted to paint him [Tu Fu] as we imagined him, set him upon his horse again, or present him, sails unfurled, drifting to the capital of his dreams. But Mrs. Ayscough is wiser than the rest, wiser than her gifted colleague, the late Amy Lowell, than Mrs. Underwood, than Mr. Arthur Waley, whose Oxford trousers are unescapable. "When we imagine we are depicting others," says Emile Hovelague, "it is rather our own portrait we are painting." And translation, especially from the Chinese, is largely an effort of imagination and substitution. . . . By an act of self-sacrifice, by suppressing her literary self, Mrs. Ayscough has achieved nothing short of a revolution in the art of translating.

Mrs. Underwood has attempted two very different things in one book. Many of her poems are rendered, more or less freely, into English verse. As such they are the outcome of a gracious personality—the personality of Mrs. Underwood. Tu Fu is but remotely in the background of the picture. . . . There is, however, another Mrs. Underwood. In a foreword brimming over with true appreciation of beauty and its origins she tells us that—"Only selflessness could create these supreme things—this effortless excellence." And where she has attained selflessness, removed the useless encumbrance of verse-forms, swept away the dust of Western prejudice she is entitled to full need of praise.⁴²

In her original prose writing, Mrs. Underwood was prodigal with words, but her precise meaning is sometimes elusive. Comprehension is confounded in this web of words:

41. Mark Van Doren, ed., *An Anthology of World Poetry* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1929), p. x. It should be observed that Mrs. Underwood's major period of productivity in translating poetry, certainly as far as published results are concerned, began about 1929. However, she was well enough known in literary spheres, for various translations, that Mr. Van Doren, in seeking desirable material, could hardly have been unaware of her work. For example, she had published as early as 1917, a translation of Silva's "Nocturne," as well as verses from Horace, Anacreon, Catullus, Ronsard, D'Annunzio, Leopardi, Heine, and others.

42. L. Cranmer-Byng, "A Garden of Bright Ghosts," *The Poetry Review*, Nov.-Dec., 1929, pp. 409-413.

We know primitive tongues were monolithic. They were built in gigantic squares, like the stone buildings of primitive peoples, the temples upon the Andes, in Peru, in Honduras for example, Yucatan, the pre-historic buildings of Guatamala, India, Egypt. Primitive men hurled at each other blocks of unhewn thought. The change that was in progress from that day to this was one of *making little*, disintegration. The rocks were wearing slowly away to sand. Now speech is broken. It is filled with tiny paste-like particles, inconsequential connectives, the worn, floating detritus of years.⁴³

Because she wrote with such intense responsiveness to the mood of a moment, and because moods can vary as time permits different views, there appear to be contradictions in certain declarations. As an example we have the comparisons, to be found elsewhere in this paper,⁴⁴ of her supreme delight in Venice and in Cartagena. Again, having eloquently extolled her joyous memory of the younger Salvini, she wrote of a relative emotional extreme:

There is only one other thing I remember with equal delight, equal vividness. It is night. And likewise a night of long ago. It is near a Latin land, by the Mexican Gulf; a sultry night of summer; a silent, outspread, sullen water, with faint, far stars winking down into it, and the white gleam, and the drunken, too heavy scent of magnolia blossoms. These two memories sway my senses.

Now I know that the reason is because they keep securely the same emotional height.⁴⁵

Yet, she declared, "My first sight of Venice gave me the greatest emotion, I think I have ever felt."⁴⁶ Coming at a later date, the emotional response to this view of Venice superseded in intensity those previous experiences. Nevertheless, Mrs. Underwood's predilection for superlatives would seem, at least for the critical reader, to undermine some of her statements. One cannot, with constancy, too often attain the highest of emotional heights.

Her obsession with superlatives in relation to herself is observed with regrettable frequency, a preoccupation which appeared to foster a delusion that "I" and "my achievements" were superior in a degree beyond the recognition accorded to them. In the composition of Mrs. Underwood's personality, it appears that humility was a negligible ingredient. From an autobiographical sketch we find such indicative statements as these: "She [Loie Fuller, the dancer] said it [Mrs. Underwood's teen-age composition] was the most perfect ballet ever written."⁴⁷ Again, "Luther Burbank wrote me [regarding her story, *An Orchid of Asia*] it was the most fas-

43. Underwood, *The Taste of Honey*, p. 102.

44. See pages 4 and 24 in this paper.

45. Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

47. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936.

cinating thing he ever read.”⁴⁸ A further example selected from many typical remarks states, “The chapter in ‘‘The Passion Flower,’’ called ‘‘March of Great Gray Armies’’ and the introduction to ‘‘Tu Fu’’ have been called the greatest pieces of prose written by an American.”⁴⁹

Whether such statements, with additional unquoted ones, lie within the limit of pardonable pride, they seem to denote a deeply inherent need for recognition, approbation and praise. Certainly, commendation is due her compelling ambition, her acquisition of languages and literary knowledge, and her unstinting devotion to her work.

III. THE CRITIC

We cannot separate the woman and the artist, the nature of each being inextricably entwined; we can observe a third facet, that of the critic, which was a natural outgrowth of Mrs. Underwood’s diversity of interests in the arts and artists, her sensitivity to them, and her comprehension of them. Sometimes, her criticisms are qualified by a certain obstinacy of opinion:

Among the poorest books—most inadequate translations—printed in the United States, is *The Wanderer*, by Fournier, delightful, satisfying worker in his own tongue. And I must add to this, Mrs. Ayscough’s verses from the Chinese, in collaboration with Amy Lowell. (This last is the judgment of Chinese-reading poetry-scholars and Chinese themselves) who know the originals by heart. Mrs. Ayscough has no natural gift for words. She ought to play with something else.⁵⁰

Her censure of an author can be without charity:

It is a peculiar thing that Mrs. Asquith should write. It is something for which she has no ability. . . . She has nothing to say. And she does not know how to say nothing well.

Frequently she seems ungrammatical. Her power is personality, speech; *nerve*. . . . Only an age when art is dying could have printed her.

In reading her books I do not recall finding one commanding idea, sentence, not to mention beauty of any kind. In print her mind is harsh, cruel, insensitive. One does not see the majestic moving forward of that which charms, interests.⁵¹

The critical comments of Mrs. Underwood are most sarcastic when they are directed toward editors:

Delightful short stories are written in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, but almost never in America. The reason is not that Americans can not write them or are less talented. The fault lies with the editors. The

48. *Ibid.* Mr. Burbank’s letter, quoted in part on page 23 of this paper, actually said, “The narrative is beautiful . . . and is full of life and interest.” His closing remark repeats, “It is rarely that I read anything that is more interesting than this manuscript. . . .”

49. *Ibid.* Mrs. Underwood does not say who made the declaration.

50. Underwood, *The Taste of Honey*, p. 22. See page 7 in this paper for quoted discussion of differing opinions regarding this topic.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

good short story . . . has to be changed to suit the policy of the magazine. It may be a magazine which prints square purple stories with pink corners; or, round green stories with yellow dots. Secondly, it has to be changed to suit the personal inclination of the editor. He may like only oblong white stories with crimson points. Thirdly, the editor must change it a little to comply with his dignity, and carry out what he considers duty. What is the result? A kind of ruin for which there is no name. Then the story has to suit the season of the year, and religious, social, and political conditions of the community.⁵²

Mrs. Underwood's perception of the past is expressed with sincerity:

The old writers put down what they knew. The modern writers put down loosely, and sometimes eloquently, what they do not know. Always in the vague, weedy, word-garden of the present, I miss this unequivocating directness; clearness, firmness; this chiseled accuracy.

They did not say anything for effect.

There are no vague foolishnesses. There are no indefinite horizons. Words were serious expressive things. . . . They did not throw them away.⁵³

A personal reflection adds an ingenuous charm to the following comment:

I read Horace first in an old university town in the north. [Ann Arbor, Michigan] Each night as I walked home from lectures, autumn leaves were being burned in fragrant piles, under long rows of trees that still were faintly amber, faintly crimson.

Because of this, and likewise because of something in the nature of the Roman poet, it has always seemed to me that Horace is read best in the autumn. There is something in his mind that is native to the season. He came from the ripe, mellow autumn of a rich, a prodigious civilization. . . . With him poetry was not inspiration. He did not know its self-forgetful fury. Instead, it was one of the ornaments of a well-tempered life. . . . In his verse there is nothing wonderful. At the same time it has an immortal touch. He was not a great imaginative poet. He seldom stirs the blood. But he has a smooth, even excellence, a companionableness, a marvelous proportion of word to thought. He is master of felicitous expression.⁵⁴

In the following declarations Mrs. Underwood reveals a quality of resoluteness:

The slow, ripening of time must go to making of lyric poetry. I do not believe many will contradict me when I state that Heine, Hafiz, Anacreon, and Tu Fu, are the supreme lyric poets of the world—the Jew, the Persian, the Greek, and the Man of China.

The age of each was made turbulent and restless by great conquerors. . . . lyric poets have not been beloved of their contemporaries, nor indeed of conventional scholars of the ages, because of unrestraint of utterance, and their untamable fire. Their souls are revolutionary. They do not follow the established order. Too frequently they utter the naked thought.

In addition, lyric poets have always loved life for its own sake, unenlivened of faith and unsanctified of the spirit. Their sense and appreciation of the present has been so real, vivid, that there was left neither room nor desire to ask for anything beyond.⁵⁵

52. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Everything Mrs. Underwood read, all that she saw, seemed to elicit a response of heightened awareness which she exhibited in word sketches, some of which bear a wistful charm:

It is too bad they do not make children's books for grown people today, delightful, unreal fables for adults, to temper the prosaic duties of living, to make them forget the regrettable, cast off care; and be joyous. There are none who need such books more than grown people. I am thinking of Ariosto, his *Orlando Furioso*.⁵⁶

Some are drawn with such economy as to be epigrammatic:

Mr. Mencken is a pugilist, not an artist.⁵⁷

And some, in their delineation, are perplexing:

A fine sentence is a geometrical sound-picture affecting the body as line affects the eye, built up out of vowels, soft padding of consonants packed between, to keep them from bruising each other in their expanding ecstasy, their lift, their lyric laugh.⁵⁸

Mrs. Underwood candidly reveals her thoughts about writers and their works, their appeal or lack of it, the eras in which they lived, in observations that are frequently vivid, often provocative, and generally interesting. One is tempted to excessive quotation.

Her feeling for art, which she closely allied to her feeling for literature, is exemplified in this brief selection from her plentiful comments: "Pictures flash us out of our dull selves into clear, unvexed dominance. There is healing, health, in beauty."⁵⁹

Etchings, she felt, have "humming-bird grace . . . poignancy and intimacy."⁶⁰ The etchings of Daubigny "recall Virgil, in the *Bucolics*. The lovely, Latin land where cities are not near, fields are cultivated, and little rivers draw water birds! The line of Daubigny is gentle, loving. It is of the unforced rhythm of Virgil."⁶¹

With pleasure she remembers this:

I know an Utamaro, which is the loveliest thing in existence! Two tall women. One wears enchanting faded pink, one of the unforgettable colors of poet-print-makers; the misty brown that floats above paper with silken shining threads, only Japan could make. The added splendor of incomparable accents of black. The pauses in South American tango dancers, are like these black accents in Eastern art.⁶²

56. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

Her mind was filled with a gallery of pictures, and she labeled each of them with an impression amenable to her own imaginative power. "It is not easy," she said, "to measure the good of contact with the silent things of art."⁶³

Mrs. Underwood—the woman, the artist, the critic—at one time exclaimed, "It is good to be interested in everything,"⁶⁴ and she sought, above all, knowledge and beauty.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

Chapter II

Biographical Background

I. A MAINE CHILDHOOD

Edna Worthley Underwood was born in Maine, in a small white farmhouse near the village of Phillips, in the first month of the year 1873.⁶⁵ Her parents, Albert and Alice (Howard) Worthley, were links in a lineage whose deep-rooted past Mrs. Underwood reviewed with pride. Her mother's ancestors included the Howards, that ancient English family of which it was said: "The history of England is the history of the Howards."⁶⁶ Among them was Henry Howard, an early lyric poet and translator of French, Italian, and Latin poetry. On her mother's side there was also the family name Bonney, a family of Provence who numbered many poets in the time of the troubadours. "One Bonney and his son," said Mrs. Underwood, "were among the best of them; their books may be found on book stalls in France, in libraries, catalogues."⁶⁷ She added that she owned the lists, dates, and names. There are still poets in Provence who bear the name Bonney. Alphonse Daudet relates the visit of one of them, in Paris, and how glad he was to hear again the speech of the Midi.⁶⁸

On her father's side was the name Wortley—the original family name—from the town Wortley, Yorkshire, England. She owned a book dated 1610, in which there is stated: "Sir Francis Wortley had all the Advantages of Education and was well learned in Greek and Latin Authors, quick Wit, Ready Speaker and well seen in Poetry—."⁶⁹ More than a century after this was written, in 1733 there came from England two brothers who founded the Worthley family in America.⁷⁰ Also on her father's side was the name Norton,

65. *Who's Who in America, 1948-1949* (Chicago: The A. N. Marquis Company, 1948), Vol. 25, p. 2525.

66. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936. Quoted from an article copyrighted in 1936, by Edna Worthley Underwood.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Portland [Maine] Evening Express*, July 10, 1923.

the same family of Nortons to which belonged the mother of Sheridan, who wrote *The Rivals*. They were scholars, linguists, translators. The Nortons, whose name had been translated from Nordville, were Norman French who had come to England with The Conquest. In America there belonged to this family Charles Elliot Norton, of Harvard, and Lilian Norton (Nordica), the grand opera singer.⁷¹

Mrs. Underwood felt a close spiritual kinship to those scholars and writers who were, in their time and place, among those families from whom she descended; but her ancestry, she believed, merely helps to illustrate what she called "the Long Trek," which to her meant destiny, and over which she felt no one ultimately has a great control.⁷²

For one possessing vividness of imagination, musing on the procession of the past can be gratifying, and sometimes the delight of discovery is added reward. Such a pleasure occurred one summer while living in England when, one heavily misted morning, Mrs. Underwood set out to explore the Victoria Hotel on Northumberland Avenue between the Nelson statue and the Thames. She found a stairway leading down to a dimly lighted hall, a stairway which was itself lighted by tall colored glass windows on which in detail was pictured the life of the Howards centuries ago.⁷³

As a child in a lonely mountain valley in Maine she heard names of strange cities and far seas, and saw bright beautiful objects displayed like treasures on black walnut whatnots in an old-fashioned parlor. Great uncles on her mother's side were sailors who, in an early day, shipped on the old four-masters by way of the Horn to India. They sailed from Kennebunkport, from Eastport, from Portland; after long months, sometimes years, they came back bringing stories of exotic places such as Malabar, or the Coromandel Coast. The little girl remembered best the uncle who had spent his life on the ocean, because he was seasick on dry land.⁷⁴

These things left their mark, the memories stirring interest, curiosity, longing. But the greatest influence in Mrs. Underwood's childhood was the companionship of her grandfather, whose teaching she freely acknowledged as her life's impelling force.⁷⁵ Joseph N. Worthley was a remarkable man, having great nobility of nature

71. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936. *Who's Who Among North American Authors, 1936-1939*, Vol. VII, page 965, lists the names of John Alden and Lady Mary Worthley [sic] Montague [sic] as ancestors of Mrs. Underwood; however, the latter is not mentioned by Mrs. Underwood in her autobiographical sketch, although she wrote, in a sentence strangely out of context, "To return to my mother's family again—John Alden." In a genealogy chart the name John Alden is given—the spelling may, of course, be a printer's error.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.*

and an interest in every activity of mind. Although denied the advantages derived from formal education, his desire for knowledge was insatiable. Every penny he could spare went to buy books: history, science, travel, and music. He tried scientific experiments with fruits and flowers; he carried with him to the fields a geologist's hammer to chip off pieces of rock, and then studied them in the light of something he had read. He taught her not to fear lightning and the storm.

Mrs. Underwood remembered that sometimes from a high shelf he took down limp, old-fashioned atlases and dog-eared geographies, and spread them out to look at.⁷⁶ He pointed to the blue spaces, the oceans, and to the lands beyond where other people lived, who spoke other tongues. To his granddaughter he gave this injunction: "Never grow weary of learning."⁷⁷ Again, while telling her stories of ancient Greece and Rome, he stressed this desire: "They did not speak the language we speak, but others. In these languages wonderful things are written which I have never been able to read, but which I hope you will. I want you to be a scholar."⁷⁸

This was the beginning of an education, the planted seed of intellectual curiosity and a quest for knowledge which was nurtured in subsequent years by private tutors, in public schools, in the state universities, in American and European libraries. And the flowering of that seed doubtless surpassed even the far-seeing vision and the dreams of the old man whose influence lingered long after his lifetime.

II. GIRLHOOD ON THE PLAINS

When Mrs. Underwood was eleven her parents moved to Kansas. They made a home in Arkansas City, which seemed to the little girl from the North "an isolated village upon the plains, where everything was ugly, cheap, except the magnificent land-levels, and the sunsets."⁷⁹

In a few bare rooms above a business block, the children attended school. Across Main Street there were other buildings whose upper stories contained rooms rented to houses of ill fame. At any time the children could turn from their lessons and see the painted, disheveled creatures clad in gay cotton Mother Hubbards, lolling in their rooms. A saloon was beneath one of the houses,

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Portland [Maine] Evening Express*, July 10, 1923.

79. Underwood, *The Taste of Honey*, p. 158.

where stragglers of the plains gathered to drink, to gamble, to quarrel frequently.

In the sun-drenched, wind-swept settlement there was nothing she wanted, and its rude, unrefined life represented those forces from which she longed to get away. As she matured, becoming more conscious of this longing, she would say to herself: "I can not know the heights of life, wealth, power. I can not have things that do not depend upon myself. But, with my brain, I can know the heights of art. I can know all men have dreamed."⁸⁰

A young Swiss, Arnold Jeannerett, introduced her to the books of the Old World, gave her the use of his library, and taught her several languages. Deeply grateful to her foreign tutor, Mrs. Underwood "learned languages as other women learn to sew,"⁸¹ and by the time she was fourteen she was reading a number of languages and was making some headway with their literatures.⁸²

She read Ariosto; she learned to know Petrarch and the classics of Italy. She read the lyric poets of Germany, the splendid prose of France: Bossuet, Fenelon, Chateaubriand, Rousseau. The world of reality, with its crudity, its discomforts, its harsh contrasts, faded away and there remained a place of enchantment. Elated, she spent happy days reading the "word-masters of the world,"⁸³ who offered escape from that lonely prairie village.

Although her spirit was exalted and her mind freed to seek a range of perception heretofore dimly dreamed of, she could not evade the hostile criticism expressed by the women of the village who, in angry displeasure, questioned her right to amuse herself in ways that were not theirs.⁸⁴ But her mother understood, let her alone, permitted her to idle and to read. Mrs. Underwood recalled when, at eighteen, she was learning Russian without a teacher, her aunts and cousins used to peer at her through windows and door cracks, then whisper to each other: "She has looked at one page an hour! No one but a fool would do that."⁸⁵

To read in the daytime, where she lived, was only a degree less criminal than stealing. But she had to have her books, though it was not easy to get the money to buy them. She learned that for only a few pennies she could procure from foreign publishers the output of older writers, and those books she ordered from Italy. There was the long waiting; and when the books did come she

80. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936.

83. Underwood, *The Taste of Honey*, p. 140.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

went around bemused—forgetting to eat, reading late at night, increasing the disapproval of her relatives.⁸⁶ Bewitched by the beauty of words, she found the exquisite verse of Leopardi and the poetry of d'Annunzio to be a particular delight.

After she had finished reading a book, she read, over and over, all the advertisements on both covers. When Italian publishers sent lists of new books there was joy in contemplating them, making a careful and painstaking selection, in the eager awaiting of their arrival.⁸⁷

Shakespeare and Poe she read first in German—adequate, admirable translations, far less expensive than English and American books.⁸⁸ Some plays of Alfieri, bearing the publishing date 1846, were printed by Georgio Franz of Monaco. They were tiny books printed on grey newsprint, having no separate outer cover, for which she paid about four pennies each. For a quarter she bought a cheap Ariosto, printed on similar unbleached paper, and found the *Orlando Furioso* to be a charming fable.⁸⁹

On every New Year's Day she used to hope to be able to subscribe to *Century* or *Harper's*, then leading magazines. They represented extravagance beyond her reach; therefore, she read Dante more often instead, learning pages by heart and repeating them aloud.⁹⁰

From New York City, a men's clothing house sent out advertising booklets printed in various languages, one being in English. Placing them page by page with the English text, she ingeniously fashioned a grammar. Also, from a New York Bible House she ordered a number of cheaply priced Testaments, and arranging them in the same manner, she used them for study.⁹¹

Once came a treasured gift! An old woman rented a house next door, and she brought with her a large box of books which had belonged to a vagabond son whom she had loved, who was now dead. Observing the young girl reading with her tutor in the yard under the trees one day, she said to her, "My son . . . read all day just as you do. I'm going to give you his books! I can't read them. The others don't want them."⁹² The box contained mostly books on linguistics by Max Muller, in German. There were Russian history and poetry, and there was Indian philosophy printed in English.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

91. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936.

92. *Ibid.*

Mrs. Underwood's acceptance and use of the gift books, the cheap little Testaments, and the advertising booklets appeared to substantiate her philosophic view that "if you like a thing well enough—unselfishly—that which is best in it—which you need, begins to gravitate toward you."⁹³

During this period, in her teens, she wrote some verses—one long poem and two or three short ones—which she sent to *Century*. They were accepted. But a letter to the new contributor, being carelessly delivered, was swept up by the autumn winds and deposited under a group of bushes. Buried under the leaves, the *Century's* letter was not discovered for nearly two years.⁹⁴

Additional frustrating incidents occurred to the young writer. Mrs. Underwood recalled that before she was twenty she had created two dramatic works, although she was untrained and without encouragement. She composed a ballet in verse, in three tableaux, on an Oriental subject—the stone frieze of Angor—which she named "The Birth of the Opal." The manuscript was copied by hand and sent to the American dancer, Loie Fuller, who was then in Paris. Miss Fuller was delighted with the ballet and bought it. There was an exchange of letters, a parley over money, but somehow payment was never made. The author was young and inexperienced and far away. Many, many years later, when she had forgotten about her first compositions, in New York she visited an exhibit of deluxe foreign books by famous binders, on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts. The books were arranged, the front page of each was open, in long rows in glass cases. One, a page in French, sounded strangely familiar: It was the opening lines of the dance of the spirits of the light to an Indian god—lines she had written in her Opal Ballet. Acquiring a proper address, she wrote to Paris and learned that there her ballet had been set to music long ago, had been danced for years throughout the Continent.⁹⁵

The other dramatic work, for which the young author received neither payment nor acknowledged praise, was a play inspired by her Russian reading. Copied by hand on social stationery, it was a story of one night in the life of Catherine the Great, and it was named *A St. Petersburg Night*. Hopefully, she sent it to a producer in New York, but she did not receive a reply. Years passed, and the incident faded from her memory. Then she read in the press that this same producer, now an old man, had in his youth written a play about Catherine the Great, which had been translated into

93. *Ibid.*

94. *Ibid.*

95. *Ibid.*

all continental languages and had long runs in Europe. There was talk of producing it in English, in which it originally had been written. From an acquaintance, Mrs. Underwood borrowed a German copy, and recognized the play as her own, the same opening line letter for letter, which had been pure invention on her part.⁹⁶

As her familiarity with languages increased, the ideas of writers in other languages and the beauty of their expressions were treasured in her own mind, molding her own thoughts, to be later released in prose sketches or sensitive poetic pictures. She was keeping, after a fashion, a kind of diary, undated comments relative to her literary and artistic acquaintance, and to the emotional responses experiences of the years brought. At intervals she was publishing, in obscure newspapers, translations from other languages of short stories and poems.⁹⁷

She entered Garfield University, in Wichita, Kansas,⁹⁸ and after leaving she went to the University of Michigan, from which she was a graduate in the course of languages and literature. There she was remembered as "Julia E. Worthley, class of '90-92."⁹⁹ Her former teacher, Esther Boise Van Deman, who was working on an advanced degree at the university, took the young scholar with her, for which Mrs. Underwood felt she could not easily estimate her indebtedness.¹⁰⁰

Dr. Esther Van Deman was a brilliant woman who later was a Carnegie Fellow in Greek and Latin, residing in Athens and Rome for the purpose of archaeological research. Among Mrs. Underwood's effects there is a letter from the late Dr. Ralph V. D. Magoffin, formerly of the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, President of the Archaeological Institute of America, and nephew of Dr. Van Deman. He wrote in part:

It was very nice to have your letter . . . for it brought back pleasant memories of those days out at Sterling [Kansas] as much as five or six years ago. . . .

My aunt has been a Carnegie Research Associate working in Italy a good

96. *Ibid.* The play in question, written "before she was twenty," presumably was created and first offered for production not later than the year 1892. It is of interest that the author unquestionably offered the same play, revised or not, some seventeen or eighteen years later, to Harrison Grey Fiske of New York, who replied in a letter to Mrs. Underwood, written June 14, 1909, that "'A St. Petersburg Night' is animated and would be picturesque in costume, but its story is diffuse and I fear would not greatly interest audiences of today, as it belongs to a class of plays that are not in demand at present." He adds: "I return the manuscript under separate cover." On a mutilated envelope addressed to Mrs. Underwood, and postmarked from Grand Central Station, New York, April [?] 1910, there is a notation in Mrs. Underwood's handwriting: "Play—Russian—Submitted April 11, 1910." To whom it was submitted there is no indication.

97. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936; and Underwood, *The Taste of Honey*, p. 158.

98. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936.

99. "Two Michigan Poets," *The Michigan Alumnus*, [undated], p. 780, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 91.

100. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936.

many years now and is, I feel quite sure, the foremost woman archaeologist alive, and so far as Roman archaeology goes I do not know any men who would outrank her.¹⁰¹

From the northern university Mrs. Underwood returned to her prairie home, and for three years she taught Latin and English in the Arkansas City High School.¹⁰² She felt that she was a success, until at length she sensed that something was wrong. It had been her practice to carry to work each morning a bundle of paper-covered foreign books, usually yellow in hue, for reading during the lunch hour. A devoted pupil later revealed to her that she was accused of reading yellow-back dime novels. By way of proof, one of these "wicked books" was taken from her desk; it was never returned. The book was Bossuet's *Funeral Orations*. The Presbyterian clergyman was adverse to the situation, and in his diligence threatened that she would be discharged if she persevered in her reading habits. She refused; he persisted; she was fired.¹⁰³

An emotion, which may well have fed upon this incident, is fluently expressed in Mrs. Underwood's vivid prose:

What a delight in the long ago, upon the burnt, barren plains, where Presbyterianism thrived like a green bay tree in Purgatory, were the early books of Loti. . . .

I was always vexed that Presbyterianism thrived upon sand. It was connected, in my mind, with unloveliness, both of matter and spirit. There was never a surface that refracted so bitterly the light, as the white front of that church. It had three sharp points, in a row, that stuck up ready and willing to impale sinners. The priests of Presbyterianism are stormy and iron hearted.¹⁰⁴

III. THE INTERNATIONAL YEARS

In August, 1897, Edna Worthley married Earl Underwood, who had been born in Bedford, Iowa, March 28, 1876.¹⁰⁵ The succeeding years were busy ones for Mrs. Underwood, who with eager mind, varied interests, and maturing abilities was industriously engaged in creative writing, her own original prose and poetry; in research, particularly in Russian history; and in translating into English the expressions of authors in foreign languages.

Her husband was, for a time, a jeweler in Arkansas City.¹⁰⁶ Subsequently, the couple moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where Mr. Underwood was a proprietor of a jewelry store located in Petticoat

101. Letter from Ralph V. D. Magoffin to Edna Worthley Underwood, October 13, 1922, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 61.

102. *The Arkansas City [Kansas] Daily Traveler*, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 16.

103. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936.

104. Underwood, *The Taste of Honey*, p. 167.

105. From a copy of a family lineage record prepared for publication in *The Abridged Compendium of American Genealogy* (Chicago: F. A. Virkus and Company). The specimen record is attached to an order form, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 146.

106. Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 12.

Lane, in the heart of the business district of that city.¹⁰⁷ When Mr. Underwood accepted a position in charge of the wholesale department of a jewelry firm in New York City,¹⁰⁸ a move to that metropolis was made. Occasionally, the job required trips to be made abroad, and Mrs. Underwood, accompanying her husband, acted as interpreter.

Mrs. Underwood apparently was an indefatigable writer, recipient, and saver of letters. Among the copious correspondence contained in her scrapbooks, all but two pieces were written by correspondents other than herself; but the accumulated correspondence reflects Mrs. Underwood's activities and her changing addresses over the course of many years.

The earliest date among the collected letters is 1904. Mrs. Underwood received the rejection by a magazine published in Los Angeles of her submission of a Russian poem, with an explanation that the publication used only certain material, the poem lying outside its possibilities.¹⁰⁹

In June, 1905, Mrs. H. C. DeMille, the Hudson Theatre, New York, wrote to Mrs. Underwood, then residing in Arkansas City, regarding the possibilities of a submitted five-act play if it were reworked according to specifications.¹¹⁰ Mrs. Underwood's reply asserted that she was then at work on a libretto, the first part of which had been accepted; as she was under contract to finish the remainder in a given time, she could not rewrite the play herself. She indicated that she would prefer to leave it in the hands of Mrs. DeMille.¹¹¹

In March of the following year, Mrs. Underwood, writing from a new address, Kansas City, Missouri, accepted Mrs. DeMille's offer and asked for a contract whereby she agreed that a playwright might be at liberty to make any changes he felt necessary, that her name was to precede the collaborator's on the title page, and, if the play was produced, she would receive half the royalties. She added the information that her libretto for a grand opera had been accepted and she was at work on another. Finally, she indicated that she kept in close touch with European literature and would like the opportunity to adapt foreign plays into the English language if there was a chance for remuneration in the work.¹¹²

107. *Ibid.*

108. *Ibid.*

109. Letter from C. A. Moody to Edna Worthley Underwood, January 25, 1904, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 156.

110. Letter from Mrs. H. C. DeMille to Edna Worthley Underwood, June 21, 1905, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 155.

111. Letter from Edna Worthley Underwood to Mrs. H. C. DeMille, June 25, 1905, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 155.

112. Letter from Edna Worthley Underwood to Mrs. H. C. DeMille, March 25, 1906, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 155.

In 1909, still in Kansas City, Mrs. Underwood received a rejection of the play, *A St. Petersburg Night*, which she had written in her girlhood.¹¹³ But the following year, in August of 1910, at an address on Tremont Street in Boston, she received from Little, Brown and Company, publishers, a letter containing most gratifying news:

We have read the manuscript you kindly left with us and are much impressed with the originality and fantastic quality of the stories. At the same time a publisher has courage who attempts at this time to bring out a volume of short stories, for such a book seldom has much sale. We would, however, like to issue this book with the idea that you could later let us have for publication a story of sufficient length to make a volume, and the present book would help to make your name better known. . . .

"A Book of Dear Dead Women" (from Browning's line "Dear dead women with such faces") Possibly you can suggest something better.¹¹⁴

The suggested title appealed, and in 1911, *A Book of Dear Dead Women* was issued.

In 1912, the Underwoods were living in New York City, and from April through June of that year business correspondence between Mitchell Kennerley and Mrs. Underwood culminated in the agreement that Mr. Kennerley publish her book of poems for which he chose the title, *The Garden of Desire, Love Sonnets to a Spanish Monk*.¹¹⁵ In June of 1913, Mr. Kennerley wrote to Mrs. Underwood, informing her of reviews and proposed advertisements in the New York papers for *The Garden of Desire*. He mentioned preparation of contracts for two other books, but their titles, if indeed they had been chosen at this time, were not indicated.¹¹⁶

Her pen and typewriter were constantly active, and Mrs. Underwood kept a continual supply of submissions, inquiries, and suggestions moving to numerous recipients. At times, her offerings were accepted, published, and publicized; at times, they were courteously rejected. Sometimes, warm and sincere expressions of appreciation came unsolicited from someone who had been genuinely moved by her creations; other times, a brief, polite "thank you" followed in the wake of her calling attention to this or to that one of her efforts. She was gaining a modest measure of renown.

In 1914, acting as interpreter for her husband on a business trip to Cuba, Mrs. Underwood became intrigued with an idea which

113. Letter from Harrison Grey Fiske to Edna Worthley Underwood, June 14, 1909, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 155.

114. Letter from Little, Brown and Company to Edna Worthley Underwood, August 15, 1910, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 123.

115. Letter from Mitchell Kennerley to Edna Worthley Underwood, May 24, 1912, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 140.

116. Letter from Mitchell Kennerley to Edna Worthley Underwood, June 24, 1913, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 141.

came to her during a visit to an estate famous for a remarkable collection of orchids and apes.¹¹⁷ To be able to express the idea she studied scientifically for two years, and then she wrote *An Orchid of Asia*, a fantasy of flower life.¹¹⁸ She sent the manuscript to Luther Burbank for criticism, and he replied:

The narrative is beautiful from beginning to end. . . . The first criticism I could make in reading your work is that it might give much more time on the development of plant life on the earth with great advantage to the work; the second is where the dream commences. It is a pity you should make it cruel.

. . . altogether you have used your imagination to the fullest extent in creating the new orchid.¹¹⁹

An Orchid of Asia was published in serial form in the August and September, 1920, issues of the magazine *Asia*.

Meanwhile, in 1917, *Songs From the Plains* was published, a volume containing mostly original verse but including several translations. *Songs of Hafiz*, translated from the Persian, was issued the same year. *The Whirlwind*, Mrs. Underwood's first novel, was published in 1918. The following year, *Letters From a Prairie Garden*, a delightfully charming collection, was issued. Also, published in 1919 was *Short Stories From the Balkans*, a translation of selected works.

Beginning with the twenties, the years encompassing a decade and a half were probably the most rewarding of Mrs. Underwood's literary life; certainly, it was a period of ambitious enterprise even more productive than previous years. The energy expended in her literary efforts was prodigious: she had mastered ten modern languages and, of course, the ancient Latin.¹²⁰ She had spent probably ten years of reading and research for her projected *New World Trilogy*, and felt that at one time she perhaps knew the literature of Eighteenth Century Russia as well as anyone in the world.¹²¹

Now she was translating more extensively. In 1921, *Famous Stories From Foreign Writers* was Mrs. Underwood's translation of eleven stories in a collection representing works of writers, two of whom were Bohemian, two Armenian, two Hungarian, two Austrian, and one each of the Norwegian, Finnish, and Dutch nationalities.

In the latter part of the year 1922, *The Penitent*, first of a pro-

117. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936.

118. *Ibid.*

119. Copy of an extract of a letter from Luther Burbank to Edna Worthley Underwood, September 3, 1918, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 48.

120. *Topeka [Kansas] Capital*, February 7, 1922. There is stated in the *Portland [Maine] Evening Express*, July 10, 1923, that Mrs. Underwood reads eleven languages, of which she speaks six fluently, and was beginning the study of Arabic.

121. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936.

posed trilogy of novels based on Russian history, received extensive and varied reviews; *The Passion Flower* followed in 1924, and *The Pageant Maker* in 1926. Regarding her work on the novels, Mrs. Underwood commented:

I keep regular office hours, because I think there is a sort of cumulative gain in daily work, always begun at the same hour, regardless of personal feeling in the matter. I begin at eight and write until five, all on four cups of strong coffee and two slices of toast. Then I sleep for one hour and dress for dinner. For months at a time on this long Trilogy, I haven't seen the day.¹²²

A busy schedule filled with writing, reading, and translating did not exclude traveling for Mrs. Underwood. With the completion of the second book in her trilogy, she felt that she needed to rest, and to recuperate the strength which had been expended by the strenuous devotion to her task.¹²³ In the spring of 1924, accompanied by Miss Hortense Butler, a young woman of Phillips, Maine,¹²⁴ Mrs. Underwood sailed from New York for the West Indies and South America. One day out from Jamaica, in a letter dated March 24, 1924, she wrote in part:

We land in Kingston about six tomorrow afternoon, being about a day late because of the violent windstorm. From Kingston, Island of Jamaica, we stream right across the Carribean [sic] sea to Panama. There we cross the Isthmus by train and then go by small steamer to the canal. From there we sail to Columbia, South America, and visit four of its cities—Santa Marba, Cartagena Indies, Christobal [sic] and then sail up the Magdalena river to Barranquilla and the port of the Eastern Andes. Then we go back to Cristabol [sic], where we take the steamer again and come back to Kingston. . . . When we come back from Jamaica, where I plan to stay at least a month, we take a steamer by way of Cuba and to Havana again for a few days. I never had anything to do me so much good as this "getting away" as I needed rest.¹²⁵

She seemed amazed that "in this terrible heat, I do not need any sleep, feel perfectly well and am not seasick at all."¹²⁶ As she followed the proposed itinerary, Mrs. Underwood frequently wrote letters which vividly relate her impressions. Her most eloquent praises were lavished on Cartagena:

Night before last we were in Cartagena, the oldest city in South America. It is by all odds the loveliest thing I have seen in my life.

I have never in my life seen anything to compare with the beauty of the streets of Cartagena. It should be called "The Painted City." Miles of unimaginable trees under a blazing tropic sky and the constant, languorous [sic]

122. *Hartford [Conn.] Courant*, May 11, 1924. An observation regarding *The Trilogy* reveals the curious fact that no review of the third novel was found in any source, and there is no listing of it in *The Library of Congress Catalogue* file, although *Who's Who Among North American Authors, 1927-1928*, Vol. III, p. 877, lists *The Pageant Maker* as having been published in 1926.

123. Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 59.

124. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

125. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

126. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

swaying of tall royal palms of the desert. It is the first time in my life that anything completely satisfied my desire for beauty; the only thing perfect and incomparable.¹²⁷

En route home, Mrs. Underwood was welcomed by officials of Panama, where she stayed for seventeen days. She received highest praises in the press, while the big magazine of the Canal Zone, *Pulse of Panama*, prepared to dedicate its next issue to her, featuring her word reaction and views of Panama.¹²⁸

Arriving at her home, Mrs. Underwood found a contribution of the South American author, Galvez, who had sent to her his latest novel, autographed "To Edna Worthley Underwood, with all my affections."¹²⁹ There was also a book with the message, "In honor of gratitude, admiration and affection," autographed by the writer, Ballesteros de Martos, owner of Spain's greatest newspaper, *El Sol*.¹³⁰

Mrs. Underwood's literary work was demanding her attention once more, for the publishers were rushing her to complete her latest book, *The Pageant Maker*.¹³¹ In the late spring of 1926, however, Mr. and Mrs. Underwood journeyed to England and Europe.¹³² They had previously traveled to Europe on a trip curtailed by England's declaration of war on Germany, and Mrs. Underwood wrote that having hurriedly left France, they were fortunate in securing homeward passage on the *Mauretania*, the last ship to leave England, sailing from Liverpool to Halifax in a fast run of five days.¹³³

During their second journey on the Continent, Mrs. Underwood wrote to her parents, from which a portion of one letter follows:

We have been here a week and we may stay on two weeks longer.
. . . We had to leave England on short notice because of the great strike. We got over to France on the last boat and we had only one meal that day. We were tired and cold and hungry. Every morning here at 9 o'clock a chauffeur comes for us. . . . E. does business all day and I interpret for him. . . . We've got to go back to England and then to Scotland.

We had one glorious day at the Palace of Versailles. We motored out through fields glorious with spring flowers every where too and the song of birds. Two days before I saw the Palace of Versailles I was at Windsor Castle, England. The difference in architecture of the two castles expressed the difference in nature of the two countries with a good deal of exactitude. Windsor—grand, gloomy, sullen, thing of power, defense, pride. Versailles—nothing but the allurements of beauty—the joy of a Latin race.¹³⁴

127. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

128. *Ibid.*

129. *Ibid.*

130. *Ibid.*

131. *Ibid.*

132. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

133. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

134. *Arkansas City [Kansas] Daily Traveler*, May 25, 1926.

Other sight-seeing tours are mentioned, but Mrs. Underwood's great interest in writers is evident as she continues:

Today I went to the grave of Heinrich Heine in the cemetery of Montmartre. Heine has been dead more than 60 years. He was not a Frenchman but a Jew brought up in Germany and they say there has not been a single day in all these years that his grave is not covered with flowers. Today was cold, rainy, grey, but the marble was banked with blue violets and white lillies [sic]. . . . Many strangers were there today. Some of them spoke to me when they saw I was deeply moved to stand by his grave.¹³⁵

She closed her letter with these personal remarks:

I am having a fine time talking with everyone I meet. In some of the places I speak German, in some Spanish, and in some French. Earl is having fine business. At night I am dreadfully tired. . . . We leave the hotel at quarter of 9 in the morning and do not get back until 6. From here, probably, to Germany because the strike is still on in Engalnd.¹³⁶

The Underwoods were traveling again, in the summer of 1928, making their third¹³⁷ trip to Europe, and Mrs. Underwood again wrote of her impressions gathered along the way. Excerpts follow: When we reached the Azores we found them cold and drenched with rain. Their many famous gardens were as sad as if they had been drenched with tears.

.
From the land the wind brings to me now that strange odor I have noticed in island towns before. How can I name it? Spices, perishing vegetation, mingled with wetness and the odors of many things that are dying. . . . Night is coming and the splendor of the sea is greying. The mountain tops look black and lonely as I say goodbye to them and veiled with the rain. In three days we shall be in Portugal.

.
From the Azores to Portugal there was rough and stormy weather. There was mist, cold and continued rain. Then suddenly there blossomed out of the mist this richly hued, vari-tinted city, Lisbon. The sun began to shine. We had already steamed up the Togos [Tagus] in the night. . . . Because cities possess personality, we must say that Lisbon is lovable. It strikes the senses like a melody of delight.¹³⁸

It is not surprising that in her tour of the city Mrs. Underwood lingered in a small chapel where there are found the tombs of Vasco do Gama and Luis de Camoens, of whom, continuing her letter, she writes:

. . . Carmoens [sic] himself was poet, warrior and discoverer too. (It was from Carmoens' [sic] book "O. S. Lusindos," that I learned to read Portuguese without grammar or dictionary.)¹³⁹

From Lisbon to Gibraltar, past Sardinia, and on to Naples they sailed:

Naples from the sea looks lovelier than from the land. On one side, looking up, I see the Castle of St. Elmo which crowns the city's highest point.

135. *Ibid.*
136. *Ibid.*
137. Editor's note in the *Arkansas City [Kansas] Daily Traveler*, Friday, July 6, 1928.
138. *Arkansas City [Kansas] Daily Traveler*, July 6, 1928.
139. *Ibid.*

On the other side, Vesuvius and the little villages that dot it. . . . I bought some little cameos just to look at, not to wear, because on these are gay little figures copied from the painted walls of Pompeii. The one I like best is of a dancing girl. I remember well her tomb. On it in Latin, it said, "She danced once and she pleased."¹⁴⁰

Palermo was visited, after Naples, and to this Sicilian city Mrs. Underwood conferred the highest praise she knew, by comparing its loveliness to that of Venice; and, in closing her letter, she inserted this information: "Tomorrow we start for south of Sicily, there to visit older cities—Syracuse and others, and from there we can get a boat across to Tunis (which was ancient Carthage) and only 80 miles away. I'm so tired. . . ." ¹⁴¹

Mrs. Underwood recalled, as she was writing some memoirs a number of years after this journey, that in the ancient city of Syracuse she used to go to read in the mornings, beside the old Greek Fountain of Arethusa. She had been collecting books and studying Arabic preparatory to translating the Arab poets of Sicily. Later, she learned from one of her Arab teachers that a poet upon whom she was working at the time once did much of his writing beside the same fountain, before he was exiled to Sevilla.¹⁴²

In 1928, there were published three thin volumes of verse entitled *Masque of the Autumn Moons*, *Egyptian Twilights*, and *Attic Twilights*, a collection of "dainty bibelots."¹⁴³ But now having completed the trilogy of novels, Mrs. Underwood concentrated her literary efforts primarily on translating. In 1929, in collaboration with Chi-Hwang Chu, she produced *Tu Fu, Wanderer and Minstrel Under Moons of Cathay*, described as "the world's first edition of any one Chinese poet; the first of China's greatest poet—*Tu Fu*; the first translation by an American poet and a Chinese poet, insuring fidelity of meaning."¹⁴⁴ Besides the regular issues, there were published fifty super de luxe editions, numbered and signed, printed on Japan vellum, bound in precious antique Chinese silk and gold brocade.¹⁴⁵ Also, in collaboration with Chi-Hwang Chu, two small books were issued: *Three Chinese Masterpieces*, and Tu Fu's *The Book of Seven Songs*.

The diary begun by Mrs. Underwood when she was a young girl in Kansas, recording observations made during intervening years relative in the main to subjects of literature and art, authors and artists, was published in 1930 under the title, *The Taste of Honey: The Note Book of a Linguist*.

140. *Ibid.*

141. *Ibid.*

142. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936.

143. *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 8, 1928.

144. *The New York Times Book Review*, March 31, 1929, p. 22.

145. *Ibid.*

Mrs. Underwood undertook the tremendous task of collecting and translating the works of various poets of the world, the results to be assembled into anthologies. *The Slav Anthology*, a collection of the classic poets of Russia, Poland, Bohemia, Serbia, and Croatia, was published in 1931. A descriptive review states:

It is the only book in which the great periods of poetry of almost all Slav peoples may be found, and it is also the only anthology of the Slav peoples translated by a single individual and a poet. Verse-forms of originals, lives of most of the poets, and critical study and history of the various sections of Slav poetry are to be found in this excellent volume, which is a work of encyclopedic scope and vastness, dealing with the work of eighty poets, and more than two hundred poems.¹⁴⁶

An Anthology of Mexican Poets was issued in 1932, for which the publishers claimed the world's first translation of ninety representative poets from the period 1580-1932.¹⁴⁷ Mrs. Underwood "had as advisors on her anthology heads of universities, chiefs of libraries, statesmen, and diplomatists as well as present-day writers of prose and poetry, historians and archaeologists"; furthermore, the book "represents the Golden Age of Mexican poetry of which little is known to the world in general."¹⁴⁸ The foreword contains a study of Mexican poetry. In place of illustrations there are fifteen prose miniatures of landscapes and cities of Yucatán and Mexico by their greatest prosateurs.¹⁴⁹

A third anthology, *The Poets of Haiti*, appeared in 1934, with an introduction to the work written by Stenio Vincent, then president of Haiti. The foreword contains a study of the contribution of the black race to the art of the world. The book is illustrated with seven woodcuts by Petion Savain, a Haitian artist; there is added a useful glossary of the Creole vocabulary compiled by Charles Presoir. There are biographical sketches of each poet, of which forty-nine are represented with one to eight poems each. Mrs. Underwood's translation is "the first in the world, as well as the first in English. No such anthology can be found even in French. . . ." ¹⁵⁰

The succeeding years saw publication of Mrs. Underwood's translations of the following: *Spirit of the Andes*, by José Santos Chocano, 1935; *Nuevo Amor*, by Salvador Novo, 1935; *The Weaver by the Nile: Arsene Yergath*, 1936; and in 1937, *The Poet of the Indian Ocean: Robert Edward Hart*. A little volume of original verse, *Maine Summers—Sonnets to my Mother*, was published in

146. *The Hindustan Review*, [Patna, India], July-September, 1932.

147. *The New York Times Book Review*, December 4, 1932, p. 37.

148. Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 116.

149. *London*, December 1, 1932.

150. Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 121.

1940, a tribute to Alice Howard Worthley, who had died, at the age of ninety, in 1936.¹⁵¹

A lengthening list of honors and international recognition in literary circles were accorded Mrs. Underwood. In December, 1921, she informed the editor of the *Arkansas City Traveler* that in the forthcoming edition of the international Blue Book of France her name was to be found and a list of the books she had published, which thereby indicated recognition of Mrs. Underwood as one of the leading authors of that time.¹⁵²

After her *Famous Stories from Foreign Countries* had been distributed, Mrs. Underwood wrote to her mother of having received fifteen books from Holland, with the request that she translate them into English and introduce them to America. Dutch authors had asked to translate her new novel [*The Penitent*], to be off the press about September 1, into the Dutch language. Her work was to be reviewed in the leading magazines of Holland and Belgium.¹⁵³

Reviews of *The Penitent* and *The Passion Flower* appeared in Spain's leading newspaper, *El Sol*, on July 26, 1924.¹⁵⁴ Subsequently, Mrs. Underwood received an invitation to visit Madrid in the spring of the following year.¹⁵⁵

According to a biographical profile,¹⁵⁶ she was made a Corresponding Member of the Institute of France, with a diploma and gold medal, for introducing poets of Latin races to English; she was made an honorary corresponding member of the Latin American Institute of Culture of the University of Buenos Aires, in 1941. She received a gold insignia for *Poets of Haiti*, 1935, and a silver medal for *Poets of Mexico*, in 1937.¹⁵⁷ She is also listed as being, besides a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a Fellow of the Contrafraternite Universelle Balzacienne; a member of the Archaeological Institute of America, the Authors League of America, Society of Arts and Sciences, Modern Language Association of America, Authors' Fellowship, Modern Humanities Research As-

151. *Lewiston [Maine] Journal Illustrated Magazine Section*, February 24, 1940.

152. Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

153. *Ibid.*

154. *Kansas City Journal-Post*, September 14, 1924.

155. *Columbus [Ohio] Record*, May 28, 1924.

156. *Who's Who in America, 1948-1949* (Chicago: The A. N. Marquis Company, 1948), Vol. 25, p. 2525.

157. Letter from the Marquis de Champvans de Faremont to Edna Worthley Underwood, December 19, 1936, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 184. The letter states in part: "I have the honor to inform you that our Reading Committee had decided to confer upon you our SILVER MEDAL for your submitted works: 'Anthology of Mexican Poets' and 'The Poets of Haiti.'" This correspondence, from the president of the Institut Littéraire et Artistique de France, appears to contradict the entry in the above reference.

sociation of England, Daughters of the American Revolution, and Hellenic Travelers' Club.¹⁵⁸

The reviews of her work in papers throughout the world, and the letters she received from correspondents in various countries are far too numerous to attempt a citing of them. One response, however, was singularly meaningful to her. In 1923, Mrs. Underwood sent to Pierre Loti, the French romanticist whose writing she had so long admired, a manuscript containing part of her diary—later published as *The Taste of Honey*—with the hope that he would read it. It was the last thing he read before he died.¹⁵⁹ He signed his name to one of his calling cards to be enclosed with the following letter he requested his secretary to write:

Monsieur Pierre Loti is very ill at this moment, but your letter was so charming, and so delightful the written passages in that diary of a young linguist of yours, that I have permitted myself the liberty—and it is a very rare exception—to communicate this diary to him. He says to tell you he is touched—infinately touched—with the sympathetic things you have said to him, and that with all his heart he sends you his last, his farewell thanks.¹⁶⁰ Of his death Mrs. Underwood remarked: “Now that he is gone, and writing and traveling no longer, I shall have one pleasure fewer in existence.”¹⁶¹

158. *Who's Who in America, op. cit.*

159. *The Kansas City Star*, July 21, 1923.

160. *Ibid.*

161. *Allentown [Pa.] Call*, September 9, 1923.

Chapter III

The Prose Writer

The art of judging with knowledge and propriety the beauties and the faults of works of literature is partially influenced by the individual critic's response to any given composition. A reasoned opinion involving the judgment of value, truth, and technique of a written work, and the appreciation of the beauty it may possess, to some extent can be rendered objectively in accordance to a literary code of discrimination; however, an intuitive sensibility toward an author's creation cannot be completely eliminated. Because of this subjective intrusion we have varying shades of criticism, and scarcely can any one criticism be called definitive.

Critical reviews may be biased in relation to their reason for existing, and a review written for the primary purpose of commercial value for a publisher must be regarded with reservation. Reviews should also be considered in relation to their place of publication: frequently, there is reflected the pride of a community or an area claiming an author as its own, with plaudits being extended indiscriminately.

To establish a unanimous conclusion of the worth of a literary work would seem a remote possibility; but a comparison of available criticisms—if an alertness is sustained to the degree of subjectivity of the critic, the reason for the review, and the place it appears—may reveal observations of value to our study.

I. MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTIONS

In her foreword to *Letters From a Prairie Garden*, Mrs. Underwood divulges that they are genuine letters, not fiction, written to a famous, unnamed artist who was visiting in a mid-Western city [Kansas City]. He had accidentally overheard her laugh, when telephone wires became crossed, and he appealed to a hotel clerk for permission to talk to "the woman who laughs"; consequently, there developed a correspondence between them, although Mrs. Underwood declined a personal meeting.¹⁶² The

162. Edna Worthley Underwood, *Letters From a Prairie Garden*, Foreword.

letters were written to "a connoisseur of things beautiful,"¹⁶³ and the subjects most often discussed are music, literature, and objects of art.

The letters were conceived in a romantic tradition, and frequently they exhibit a vivacity of imagination and a delight in expression that is almost effervescent. As may be expected, the opinions of them are varied. In *The Saturday Review* there is the observation, "To those who turn with dislike from the monotonous cant of political altruism these letters will be a relief and a delight, at once soothing and stimulating. . . ." ¹⁶⁴ But another critic feels that they "sometimes attain to poetic beauty and sometimes degenerate into mere silliness. A book to delight the temperamental girl."¹⁶⁵

A reviewer in *The New York Times* states, "They are written in a graceful if somewhat self-satisfied style, many of them resembling short essays of a rather pedantic kind."¹⁶⁶ With a dubious introduction, a fourth critic comments, "Whether genuine or not, the letters contain, in addition to their dream-land vaporings, much good talk on all sorts of subjects."¹⁶⁷

In her letters Mrs. Underwood expressed her independent thought, and occasionally defied the opinion of her correspondent to whom, in her fifth letter, she writes:

I am afraid I cannot agree with you! (And what right have I to disagree with an artist like yourself?) I do not believe in that old dictum of the Greek philosophers that art was meant to imitate something. Art does not imitate! It creates. It builds a little independent world of pleasure. It is the visible expression of joy. It makes on its own responsibility a miniature universe. Back of it is the divine force—love. It is really a part of our religion and our faith. It is related to all things noble the mind has encompassed.¹⁶⁸

With a dreamer's contempt for material wealth, she says, "Money is merely a sort of pleasant vulgarity. It is one of the soft and padded cushions for the couch of mediocrity."¹⁶⁹ When she acknowledges that her "pocket may be guiltless of gold," she adds, "I do not have the consciousness of being poor."¹⁷⁰ She believes that gold is not the proper substance to dissipate poverty, for to

163. *Ibid.*

164. *The Saturday Review*, April 26, 1919, p. 404, cited by Mary Katherine Reely, ed., *The Book Review Digest—1920* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1920), Vol. XV, p. 507.

165. A. L. A. *Booklist*, May, 1919, p. 320, cited by Reely, ed., *The Book Review Digest—1920*, Vol. XV, p. 507.

166. *The New York Times*, July 6, 1919, cited by Reely, ed., *The Book Review Digest—1920*, Vol. XV, p. 507.

167. *The Nation*, May 3, 1919, p. 701, cited by Reely, ed., *The Book Review Digest—1920*, Vol. XV, p. 507.

168. Underwood, *Letters From a Prairie Garden*, p. 11.

169. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

170. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

do so takes something more divinely nurtured. Rather, she feels rich:

I shall will to a certain person . . . the joy I have when I open my eyes in the morning and see the skirt of the day fluted with light. To another, the pleasure I had when I was a child and dipped a shining tin dipper into a sparkling pail of freshly drawn springwater. . . . To someone else, the sensation I experience when I pour thick yellow cream out of an old buff-colored stone-ware pitcher, a sensation richer in contentment than the coins of Croesus could buy.

To another my interest in pictures, and the collection that hangs upon the walls of my mind. To another my pleasure in promenading my eyes over the surfaces of things that are fine. I have a right to prefer surfaces to souls if I wish.¹⁷¹

An impression of one reviewer is that the writer of these letters must have read prodigiously, drawing as she does on the lore of many lands and many ages; yet she is not encyclopedic, for she has assimilated the knowledge in her own beauty-worshipping nature. The letters show the keen and vital pleasure culture brings into life, "the beauties of the mind that makes rich."¹⁷²

In her letters, Mrs. Underwood takes her correspondent on many fanciful journeys, most often to the Orient, where they travel in barbaric splendor rich in brilliant imagery; she takes him to her prairie garden, in Kansas, and the magic of her words makes the garden wonderfully alluring; and she takes him to an old red farmhouse in the New England hills, where they envision a dream. She sends him delightful character sketches of Horace, and Heine, and Leopardi—the Roman, and Jewish, and Italian writers.

The letters, composed with imagination, knowledge, and culture, and encompassing a variety of subject images, have such charm that receiving them would be a certain delight. One questions that they should be evaluated by literary standards, even though they are collected and published as a book. They do serve to give us glimpses of Mrs. Underwood's nature, and the commingling of factual knowledge and fanciful musing in her mind.

Further revelation of the nature and mind of Mrs. Underwood as expressed in written thoughts is to be found in *The Taste of Honey*, which is, the author says, "a genuine diary . . . not dated nor arranged in order," and she adds, "It is the unreserved expression of what was in the reader's [sic] mind. . . ." ¹⁷³ The diary was begun when she was sixteen and continued through her middle age, being published in 1930. A most impressive revelation of the book is her exceedingly extensive background of reading, in many languages, and Mrs. Underwood's sensitivity to the

171. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

172. *Lewiston [Maine] Journal*, April 19, 1919.

173. Underwood, *The Taste of Honey*, Foreword.

ideas and impressions she reaps from the field of literary and artistic expression.

Compiled as it is, "for personal pleasure," there is no attempted literary achievement; instead, much of the writing appears to be the quick jotting of mercurial thoughts, interspersed with frequent dashes, and employing very loosely constructed sentences and careless phrasing. A quantity of imagery is lavished throughout the book, often vivid, at times trite, not always apropos. Occasionally, there are arresting passages; for example, referring to the question of originality or nonoriginality, the case of two people having the same idea, she writes, "Many of us bend at the same moment over the great grey, shining, reflecting pool which is universal mind across which, in time, all pageants pass."¹⁷⁴

The Taste of Honey is a book which may be picked up, opened at random, and scanned with varying rewards. We meet a questioning mind, attracted by knowledge and by beauty, paying deference to the past, apprehensive of the present and future, responsive to all that touches it, and resolutely formulating ideas of its own.

In each of Mrs. Underwood's volumes of verse translations she has placed a foreword, setting the scene of the poet's birthplace and its relation to his work, sketching some biographical information, and reiterating the theme of a quality of poetic nature which, to her, seems to mean primarily that "art must be the result of not trying."¹⁷⁵ Thus, supreme art embodies "effortless excellence,"¹⁷⁶ an idea again reflected by her phrase describing a collection of poems as "flowers of blazing light and unforced loveliness. . . ." ¹⁷⁷

The poetry of the East holds a special fascination for her, and one finds her repetition of the idea that the ancient races understand "how great are little things: a drop of water, a pebble found in a brook, a dead tree, flower petal, grain of sand. What wealth superb senses garner from the inconsequential."¹⁷⁸ To this thought Mrs. Underwood adds, "The thinking of the East is a crucible distilling the elemental."¹⁷⁹

Reading the prose of Mrs. Underwood, one becomes quickly aware of a stylistic trait exhibited by her apparently inexhaustible utilization of compound words, for in addition to her liberal use

174. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

175. Edna Worthley Underwood and Chi Hwang Chu, trans., *Tu Fu, Wanderer and Minstrel Under Moons of Cathay* (Portland, Maine: Mosher Press, 1929), p. xxvi.

176. *Ibid.*

177. Edna Worthley Underwood, trans., *The Poet of the Indian Ocean: Robert-Edward Hart* (Portland, Maine: The Mosher Press, 1937), p. xi.

178. Edna Worthley Underwood, trans., *The Weaver by the Nile: Arsene Yergath* (Portland, Maine: The Mosher Press, 1936), p. vi.

179. *Ibid.*

of compound adjectives she has a propensity for linking nouns. Leafing at random through the forewords of her verse translations, one finds representations such as these: "soul-stains," and "soul-splendor"; "heart-fire," and even "heart-fire-something"; "sense-ideas," and "wonder-sense," and "spirit-effluvia"; "blossom-period," "painter-centuries," "mirror-shadow," and "race-beauty." A complete compilation would cover many pages. The visual text abounds with dashes, dots, and hyphens. This fault, along with an equal one of too-frequent vaguely constructed sentences, may be somewhat mitigated if one accepts, for its value, the expressed thought. The following observation is typical:

Great poets are usually born at a date when periods focus, swirling around them dizzy years of epochal change, opening before their sensitive eyes chasms that dazzle.

When civilizations are furrowed with wars, political struggles—with their frequently evolutional causes—mind drenched with emotion, and the witch-lights of flickering ideals, poets bloom like flowers in rain-stung March. Forces, threatening, *struggling*, to expand incalculably, are beneath ages that bear such men.¹⁸⁰

A discussion preceding the translations of the Haitian poets contains interesting tracings of the Negro's influence in art, but to comprehend the remarks made by Mrs. Underwood, one is forced to surmount rather formidable obstacles found in paragraphs such as this one:

A history, an intermittently visible romance with race for hero, fascinating to trace, to reproduce in entirety precious bit by bit (flying across centuries on magic of mind), as the hauntingly lovely face of the Egyptian Queen of long ago (1375 B. C.)—Nefertite, of whom we learn not from historical document, but from art—carven gem, antique glass, fragments of painted pottery showing arresting headdress, profile, gesture—*her picture*—in widely scattered mosaics uncovered then put together from excavated Theban, Babylonian Palaces, dead, sand-drifted desert cities, saffron-tinted, fading walls, floors, of dim dwellings by the Nile, in short, a Moving Picture thousands of years old with Time for background. It is the proper way perhaps a story should be told connected with Africa, *land of footprints*, mystery cities, whose ruins no one can explain. The migrations of the Negro form a fascinating subject, the trek of destiny, race determination; their bodies, minds, touched all ages, peoples, coasts; for them geography spread its spaces and we recall a Biblical phrase: . . . *the musicians of Egypt with their enchantments*, and a Chinese prophecy: *Time uncovers all*.¹⁸¹

II. SHORT STORIES

A collection of nine short stories with unusual themes composes *A Book of Dear Dead Women*, and in these tales Mrs. Underwood has created women who are "beautiful and brave, self-willed and passionate. Piquant they are, and alluring, in their old-world

180. Underwood and Chi Hwang Chu, trans., *Tu Fu*, p. xlviii.

181. Edna Worthley Underwood, trans., *The Poets of Haiti, 1782-1934* (Portland, Maine: The Mosher Press, 1934), pp. xix-xx.

settings and their atmosphere of romance and unreality.”¹⁸² We are told that the author of these stories, with her knowledge of foreign tongues, has “delted into the literature of Russia, Hungary, ancient India, Provence and the medieval legends of France, Germany and Italy, till she is saturated with the spirit of other lands and other ages,”¹⁸³ these elements having affected her stories; her style is compared to Poe’s, with the difference that her stories are “permeated with the gladness of life, its beauties and its raptures.”¹⁸⁴

An accumulation of “typical opinions” of the work has been gathered and reprinted in a small leaflet which probably was used for publicity purposes. All of these opinions, directly or by implication, extol the author and her creations. “There is something Oriental in her descriptions,” observes *The New York Evening Post*, “and in the tragic fearlessness of the denouement. One would say that she was a disciple of Gautier.”¹⁸⁵

The Philadelphia Press says, “Something of the fantastically imaginative power of Hawthorne, combined with a gorgeousness of imagery that a writer fresh from the puritanical traditions could hardly have attained to. . . .”¹⁸⁶ One other selection chosen from the group declares, “Her invention is remarkable . . . her sense of beauty and power are quite extraordinary. To those who love beautiful things and beautiful thoughts, it will appeal.”¹⁸⁷

Searching elsewhere for additional opinions, we find a review which relates that the collection “brings to a reader of wide catholic taste a thrill of very genuine joy. The sort of book whose quality is as elusive and volatile as the scent of some rare flower.”¹⁸⁸ The work elicited another statement: “There is a tendency to create a hybrid kind of literature which one may qualify as the fictional biography rather than the historical novel. In this department belongs Edna Worthley Underwood’s ‘A Book of Dear Dead Women.’”¹⁸⁹

The fantasy in these tales, lending a quality of difference, may pique the curiosity of the reader, and there is much imagery color-

182. Quoted from an advertising leaflet pasted inside the front cover of the first copy of *A Book of Dear Dead Women*, autographed by Mrs. Underwood to her parents, and now among her personal literary effects.

183. *Ibid.*

184. *Ibid.*

185. Quoted from *The New York Evening Post*, cited in the aforementioned publicity leaflet identified in footnote number 182.

186. *The Philadelphia Press, Ibid.*

187. *The York York Herald, Ibid.*

188. *Bookman*, September, 1911, p. 79, cited by Justina Leavitt Wilson and Clara Elizabeth Fanning, eds., *The Book Review Digest—1911*, (Minneapolis: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1911), p. 477.

189. *The New York Times*, April 23, 1911, cited by Wilson and Fanning, eds., *The Book Review Digest—1911*, p. 477.

ing an atmosphere blended of seeming reality and unreality. Perhaps one should not wish for more fully drawn characterization, when many of the participants in the stories are so elusive, purposely insubstantial. When narrative is employed to the great extent this collection encompasses, the story-teller needs a deft touch, and the reader finds less than that in the instance a narrator remarks, "Calmly and in silence we looked at each other. In my face surprise and admiration struggled."¹⁹⁰ Perhaps this is disproportionately caviling. The themes are often intriguing; the narrative is not always successfully sustained.

Mrs. Underwood's story, *An Orchid of Asia*, previously mentioned in this paper, is a fantasy published in two parts by the magazine, *Asia*, in their August and September issues of 1920. An interesting possibility regarding the story is found in correspondence from the associate editor of the magazine, who sent an inquiry to the author asking if she would be interested in having *An Orchid of Asia* made into a scenario for the moving pictures.¹⁹¹ A reply from Mrs. Underwood signified agreement on the condition that she would receive 50 percent of the total returns, whereas the magazine desired to share half of the net profits which would accrue from the sale of the scenario, since it must absorb the cost of bookkeeping, as well as the writing and marketing of the scenario. A careful explanation was given of the only just and reasonable business arrangement, with the hope that the author would find it agreeable.¹⁹² However, in a very prompt reply, Mrs. Underwood remained unyielding in her demand, and *Asia* just as promptly withdrew its offer with the following explanation:

It is impossible for ASIA to agree to your proposal that your "returns must be half of total returns" and "without charges against me of any kind for bookkeeping, marketing or handling in any way." Of course, you can readily see that ASIA would lose money on such a basis, and there would be no financial return to us for the considerable effort and expenditure necessary to put the story in shape for a scenario, and afterward market it. Therefore, ASIA is obliged to withdraw its offer to collaborate with you in writing and marketing a moving picture scenario of an "Orchid of Asia."¹⁹³

190. Edna Worthley Underwood, *A Book of Dear Dead Women* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1911), p. 213.

191. Letter from Elsie F. Weil to Edna Worthley Underwood, September 3, 1920, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 92.

192. Letter from Elsie F. Weil to Edna Worthley Underwood, September 14, 1920, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 92.

193. Letter from Elsie F. Weil to Edna Worthley Underwood, September 16, 1920, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 92.

III. NOVELS

"One of the most worthwhile novels of the present season comes from a Maine author, or one who, at least, is a native of Maine."¹⁹⁴ This comment in the *Lewiston Journal* refers to Mrs. Underwood's first published novel, *The Whirlwind*, whose theme is centered about Catherine the Great of Russia and which depicts "the unmaking of a woman into a master sovereign. . . ." ¹⁹⁵

Of the novel, *The New York Times* prints the following:

The action moves too slowly to hold the reader's attention centered upon the theme, but this defect is in a certain measure compensated by the richness, magnificence, and detail of the descriptions of events and of the actors in them that follow one another in close succession. . . . She is not so successful in her treatment of Catherine.¹⁹⁶

There is reported in another review that "the author seems very much at home in her field where she handles the material with richness and detail. As a novel pure and simple, however, the book is not in the first rank. . . ." ¹⁹⁷

Four years later *The Penitent* was published, a novel in the historical setting of nineteenth century Russia, with the tragic figure of Alexander I and the romantic poet, Pushkin, as the principal protagonists whose lives are externally affected by the machinations of the reactionary Metternich and the revolutionary Decembrists. Isabel Paterson, writing for *The New York Tribune*, has given a worthy criticism of the work, pointing out the difficulty of blending the requirements for a successful historical novel in which "character must be adduced from the action already on record." ¹⁹⁸

After a commendable discussion of the epic novel and its relation to history, the critic proclaims that "one is amazed at the magnitude of Edna Worthley Underwood's achievement in 'The Penitent,' despite its manifest faults," adding that "it is a volume that richly repays its reader." ¹⁹⁹ She continues with a perceptive review of the theme and an analysis of the protagonists, after which she recounts the indicated "manifest faults" and discernible merits in the following portion:

History says he [Alexander] died; legend that he abdicated secretly and became a monk. Mrs. Underwood chooses to follow legend; and herein, I think, is her error. From it results a cleavage in her book, so that it is not an artistic whole.

194. *Lewiston [Maine] Journal*, October 26, 1918.

195. Mary Katherine Reely, ed., *The Book Review Digest—1918* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1919), p. 448.

196. *The New York Times*, August 25, 1918, cited by Reeley, ed., *The Book Review Digest—1918*, p. 448.

197. A. L. A. *Booklist*, November, 1918, p. 72, cited by Reeley, ed., *The Book Review Digest—1918*, p. 448.

198. *The New York Tribune*, October 15, 1922, p. 12.

199. *Ibid.*

She has wavered between two antithetic formulas; the realistic, which Tolstoy employed so superbly, and the symbolistic and romantic method developed by Merejkowski. The first part of her work is mainly realistic; but to lead up the abdication, she is obliged to turn to symbolism. And her realism is so convincing it will not resolve into a symbol.²⁰⁰

The critic remarks that the character drawing has a vital quality, with the possible exception of Metternich's woman spy, Chali, and resumes her analysis of the author's work:

Her style is strangely uneven. It reads like a translation, which is not perhaps so strange since she went to the original Russian for her material. So her phrasing is frequently awkward and in especial is marred by a meaningless use of italics; yet she strikes off memorable epigrams, of which not a word could be altered save for the worst. For instance, this summing up of Madame Narischkin's feeling toward her imperial protector: "Alexander was a lover of such long standing that she could not remember when she had not been tired of him." There is the soul of a light woman caught in a single sentence. And there are descriptive passages, whole pages, of sheer beauty.

Of the literal accuracy of the book, only a specialist in that period can judge; but anyone else will believe perforce.²⁰¹

An unsigned review in the *Hartford Courant* presents a less comprehensive and more caustic criticism, but with some similarity in concept of the novel. The reviewer remarks that it seems like "an English translation of the work of some mythical, and incredible Russian novelist"; and further asserts his feeling by implication when he adds that Russian novelists "are not, even under the handicap of translation into an alien tongue, a weariness to the mind of the reader."²⁰²

There follow additional observations, containing apparent sincerity and an undetermined degree of discernment:

Into the making of this unwieldy and formidable book Miss [sic] Underwood has put her utmost powers; she has worked hard, conscientiously, bringing to her task a vast stock of historical knowledge, a wealth of illustrative detail, and an evident enthusiasm for her subject. Her efforts command respect, but their result, considered as a novel, is not a success. . . . Miss [sic] Underwood's novel fails to interest, it falls, as the old saying has it, between two stools, it is stupid as a novel, and it is too diffuse, and too elaborate to be read as history merely.²⁰³

Totally invalid as criticism, but amusingly interesting because of its regional appeal, is the review in the *Topeka Journal*, hailing *The Penitent* as "the literary and historical sensation of the year."²⁰⁴ There is a rather lengthy narrative, primarily sketching Mrs. Underwood's former years in Kansas and leading up to the writing of her trilogy, which the reviewer exultantly predicts as "the largest

200. *Ibid.*

201. *Ibid.*

202. *Hartford [Conn.] Courant*, November 5, 1922.

203. *Ibid.*

204. *Topeka [Kansas] Journal*, September 16, 1922.

thing in the fiction line to be attempted by an American, comparable with the far-visioned plastic creating of Zola, because it was conceived wholly, and begun, on Kansas soil. . . ." 205

In the undertaking of the trilogy the author's aim is to trace the disintegration of the Old Order, exemplified by Russia, and the emergence of a new phase of civilization which had its beginnings in the nineteenth century. After *The Penitent*, Mrs. Underwood resumes her story in *The Passion Flower*, in which St. Petersburg in 1825, the first winter after the coronation of Nicholas I, furnishes an exotic background for political romance.

In the *Kansas City Star* the book is reviewed by Schuyler Ashley, whose remarks are quoted in part:

As a foil to the unimaginative and icily arrogant Nicholas, with his obsession for benevolent autocracy and his crowd of sycophants and schemers, the author has elevated the figure of the poet Pushkin to an importance which he probably did not occupy in court circles, and made of him the hero of her tale. Pushkin's strangely mixed inheritance of Slav and negro blood makes him interesting material for this sort of treatment, but he is spoiled as a character by Mrs. Underwood's propensity to see him as a symbol.²⁰⁶

Mr. Ashley continues his analysis of the narrative, but writing, one feels, with a cynically lifted eyebrow. He credits Mrs. Underwood with seeming to be amazingly at home in her period, which must be very convincing—to the inexpert. Her masses of historical detail and the exactitude with which she describes customs and costumes are impressive—if not always entertaining. Yet, in spite of all their trappings, he feels the characters are somehow lifeless and that the elements in her story remain unfused into any artistic purpose.²⁰⁷

He mentions a trait of the author which he finds irritating: "It is doubtless whether, even in these days of eccentric punctuation, any novelist has quite equaled her profuse use of the dash."²⁰⁸ As an example, he quotes sentences which are, he feels, all too typical: "Not to say yes—sometime—would be madness. Circumstances—which master all people—would force her ultimately."²⁰⁹

Reviewing the work in the *Philadelphia North American*, Sidney Williams declares that "this is really less a novel than a panoramic study. And in its panoramic effects it is most striking. There is barbaric splendor and brute force reduced to singing prose"—a

205. *Ibid.*

206. *Kansas City [Mo.] Star*, April 26, 1924.

207. *Ibid.*

208. *Ibid.*

209. *Ibid.*

statement he qualifies by adding, "Prose mannered at times, but elsewhere eloquent." 210

The critic for the *Hartford Courant* reports his response to this book, from which the following is quoted in part:

It is no discredit to Miss [sic] Underwood to state, and to state emphatically, that the task she has set herself, is far beyond her powers. . . . Miss [sic] Underwood has vision, imagination, a finely cultivated mind, and a fair degree of literary skill,—a good equipment; but lacking, as Miss [sic] Underwood does, the divine spark, this equipment proves itself wholly inadequate to present the tremendous drama of . . . "the crumbling of the great civilization of the past." 211

The Pageant Maker, which promised to carry the story to the New World, the Americas, did not appear, and the completion of the trilogy was not realized. The reason must be left to conjecture.

210. *Philadelphia North American*, April 26, 1924.

211. *Hartford [Conn.] Courant*, June 1, 1924.

Chapter IV

The Poet

Among the writings of Mrs. Underwood are several thin volumes of original verse. *Attic Twilights* contains six sonnets on classical themes, and a pagan's prayer to Christ. *Egyptian Twilights* comprises two poems, one a legend of the Priest of the Goddess Mut, the other an impressionistic picture of ancient Abydos and its statues. *Masque of the Autumn Moons* embraces the legend that when the harvest moon is full, in its golden chambers gather the fair women whom the gods have loved—Sappho, Thais, Dalila, Flora—of whom the poet represents interpretations. The verses “give impressions, descriptions, and history with little or no explanation. But they have beauty and thought enough to challenge the reader who can understand.”²¹²

A grouping of sonnets composes *A Garden of Desire, Love Songs to a Spanish Monk*, the first published book of Mrs. Underwood's poetry. Her opinion regarding that very confining poetic form is, in part, related as follows:

Most sonnet writers in America . . . overweight the sonnet line. . . . The sonnet line should be noble, clean, and of gracious curve.

Modern sonnet writing is becoming an exhibition of acrobatics, of how to put the greatest possible number of objects dangling, pirouetting, balancing, upon one little line until its loveliness, its clean, clear profile is obscured. Art is made to astonish. . . . It is made to charm, to ennoble, bring refreshment to the spirit. . . . It is plucking the invisible flower of the heart, for a moment's showing. Assuredly an unvexed thing, from which imperfections have been taken.²¹³

In *A Garden of Desire*, the third sonnet of a sequence entitled “The Book of the White Peacocks” exemplifies the author's opinion, and for the reader there is appeal in imagery of vivid hue, in theme of empty vanity:

212. *Salt Lake [Utah] Tribune*, July 8, 1928.

213. Underwood, *The Taste of Honey*, pp. 95-96.

Within the golden chambers of the moon
 Left barren and bereft of revelry,
 Since life had fled to spheres where life might be,
 One gorgeous giant peacock braved the noon,
 Flung blue and purple shades—an irised rune—
 O'er lonely gold; his plumes outspread to see
 Their beauty multiplied so marvelously,
 And held with his reflection proud commune.

But ever as he walked himself alone
 Bowed back at him from dome and floor and wall,
 None praised nor envied such rare beauty hurled
 Across the silence. Then his pride made moan.
 Grief whitened o'er him—wings, tail, crest, till all
 A ghost he glimmered in a gold dead world.²¹⁴

The use of a contraction, more than once in the above selection, is a poet's privilege, but Mrs. Underwood uses contractions to excess. Her verse burgeons forth a multiple scattering of "o'er," "e'en," and "ne'er," along with "'was" and "'neath," "'cross" and "'mid." This element in her writing, which includes the frequent choice of words as "ere," "whence," "thy," "thee," and "wert," results in an affectation and, for the reader, a recurring irritation. These annoyances, however, become more tolerable on discovering a phrase of great attractiveness: recall "an irised rune." One wishes they appeared more often.

A memorable phrase, creating a delicate image of lingering loveliness, nestles in a poetic monologue of the imprisoned Mary Stuart, who meditates upon a youthful portrait of herself, one of her remembrances being this:

. . . and then a voice, singing that old
 Love song he made who loved me well. He sang
 It first the day I wore this pictured dress
 And smiled to see my hair piled high within
 The jeweled net Italianwise; but when
 I placed the *pendant pearl* in front he frowned
 And broke his singing off, saying it pleased
 Him not at all to see above my eyes
That symbol'd shadow of a tear. [Italics are mine].²¹⁵

The fragment is extracted from a composition included in *Songs From the Plains*, a volume of verse so named "not because of an especial applicability as regards content, but because the verses it contains were written upon the plains when the writer was about twenty years old."²¹⁶ This is true of some fifty pages of lyrics, which have little to recommend them as poetry, but do reveal the poet's thoughts and emotions, which are frequently romantic musings on the appeal of other areas and other lands. The latter

214. Edna Worthley Underwood, *Songs From the Plains* (Boston: Sherman, French and Company, 1917), p. 95.

215. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

216. *Ibid.*, Foreword.

part of the book is a potpourri of improvised sketches made at a later period, in Kansas City and in New Orleans; there are half a dozen "portraits," eight sonnets, and a series of translations. One reviewer observes:

Altho "spontaneous" is a much over-worked word, no description of "Songs from the Plains" would be adequate unless it called attention to this—one of its most distinctive qualities. One has only to read the sketches made in New Orleans and in Kansas City, and the improvisations written upon seeing the portrait of Rachel and upon hearing Kubelik play, to realize that in this book the author has used verse as the artist uses his sketching pencil—to sketch street scenes and pictures that made a fleeting impression.

Unlike most poetry the work is not subjective—a record of hidden emotion—but it is objective—a record of the plastic vision that passed before the author's eyes.²¹⁷

An illustration of objective approach is found in a sketch made in Kansas City, a composition entitled "The Beggars," from which a portion is quoted:

In the green-flecked gold of the April noon,
Down Petticoat Lane the beggars croon
Their pitiful prayers.

Old, crippled, whipped grey by adversity,
The spring sun shuns them nor seems to see,
Nor shares with them ever its gayety.

Falsely humble, remorseless, furtive, feline,
Their thirsty eyes from dark doorways shine—
"O give us a dime! Please—please—a dime!"

In the green-flecked gold of the April noon,
Down Petticoat Lane the beggars croon
Their pitiful prayers.²¹⁸

Regarding the prosody of the poet, there is evidence in the above lines that in places Mrs. Underwood stumbles awkwardly in her metrical expression, a trait that is frequently observable in her lyrics and one which her attempts to alleviate often result in clumsy or affected phrasing. This fault is doubtless multiplied by the fact that much of her work is improvisation, the making of quick sketches with the implication that little time or effort was expended in polishing them nearer to perfection.

An artless revelation, apropos the preceding comment, lies in a piece of correspondence pasted in a scrapbook of the poet. At the top of a letter written to her from a woman in California, and bearing the salutation, "Dear Lady of the Museum," the following note was jotted down by Mrs. Underwood: "This woman stood beside me while I improvised *Ars Egyptica*, pub. in Nov. 1922

217. Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 36.

218. Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

International Studio. She wondered how I could talk and write at the same time." 219

A poem of several stanzas, *Ars Egyptica* was written in the Metropolitan Museum of Art beside the objects described,²²⁰ and was later reprinted as a portion of *Egyptian Twilights*. Mrs. Underwood captures images which are commendable when one reflects that she was simultaneously conversing. Stanza III is an example:

This frieze here where you dance is faded now:
Faint wash of saffron across greying stone.
One crumpled Lotus leaf lies at your feet,
Which are as thin, as young, as that fine line
That curves your back and warns the dance was wild.

Across the broken stone that marks your lips
I catch today your sly, slow, cat-like smile Egyptian.²²¹

Perhaps because the form demands more control the sonnets, on the whole, contain greater intrinsic worth of poetic value. Written in the British Museum, the sonnet entitled "To the Demeter of Gnidus," except for the unfortunate phrase, "ere for aye," is loveliness:

Lone waters where the ships vex not the sea,
Dim lakes at twilight where the lilies sleep
And blacken with their whiteness deep on deep,
Are not serene as is the brow of thee.
Some far-off sun of peace I can not see
Shines still upon thy cheek and chin which keep
A shadowed splendor where I fain would steep
My soul in sunsets of serenity.

Great Mother, on thy throne of tragic calm
Which shakes me as the sunlight shakes the star,
Just once, Great Mother, ere for aye I cease,
Upon my futile heart let fall this balm—
Grant me to glimpse within some gate ajar
The pearl, pale sunrise of thy pagan peace.²²²

This work blends a subjective quality with the objective "plastic vision," giving to it more enduring depth.

In 1940, there was published *Maine Summers: Sonnets to my Mother*, sonnets which echo "loneliness and sense of loss,"²²³ for they are a tribute to the memory of the poet's mother. In these poems, intimacy and a sustained sadness predominate: "How sad, how sad, the moon is, dear, tonight!"²²⁴ This is the last recorded published volume of Mrs. Underwood.

219. Letter from Mrs. Mary P. Marotz to Edna Worthley Underwood, November 18, 1922, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, II, p. 93.

220. Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 141.

221. *Ibid.*, p. 143; and Edna Worthley Underwood, *Egyptian Twilights* (Portland, Maine: The Mosher Press, 1928), p. 8.

222. Underwood, *Songs From the Plains*, p. 102.

223. *Lewiston [Maine] Journal*, February 24, 1940.

224. Edna Worthley Underwood, *Maine Summers: Sonnets to my Mother* (Portland, Maine: The Mosher Press, 1940), p. 15.

Chapter V

The Translator

The task of the translator is an important one, for which he must know more than mere words in the vocabulary of an alien tongue. If he is to successfully communicate the literature of one people to another, the translator must be able to transfer into another language the essence of the original, without losing the subtleties of feeling, the fine shades of meaning, the poetry of expression, and the charm of the rhythm of words.²²⁵ To have such power is a rare gift; and the translator, perhaps above all others, comprehends more fully the impossibility of recapturing completely the truth of the original. He can at best offer a reflection, free from distortion only to the degree permitted by his ability, his selflessness, and the inherent restrictions imposed by the shift from one language to another.

Evenings in Little Russia, translated from Gogol, was published in 1903, and for more than thirty years Mrs. Underwood rendered into English the prose and poetry of many writers in many languages. The reader lacking knowledge of other languages is unable, of course, to make a critical appraisal of the translator's competence; instead, he must compare available criticisms. Ultimately, he may accept the solution suggested by the reviewer of Mrs. Underwood's translation of a sonnet sequence by Adam Mickiewicz: "The critical linguist may say that this is Underwood and not Mickiewicz, as they said it was FitzGerald and not Omar, but why go behind the curtain when what is before it is so beautiful?"²²⁶

Behind the translation of Silva's "Nocturne" there is an interesting story related by Mrs. Underwood:

Traveling once—when I was young—in the South West, near the Rio Grande, I met on a night train into some hot, lonely city, a homesick old man who spoke Spanish. His clothing indicated poverty. In his pocket he had a piece of dirty paper upon which he had copied down a poem, which he kept reading over and over. And sometimes when he read, he

225. *Portland [Maine] Sunday Telegram*, June 21, 1936.

226. Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 17.

cried. I was puzzled. After awhile I told him I could read Spanish, and asked to see it. It was *The Nocturne*—before it had ever been printed.²²⁷

She further related how English-reading Spanish and French critics had approved her translation of the poem, but that Americans had little interest in it. They had not heard of Silva, nor did they know in what high esteem his creation was held by critics on the Continent.²²⁸

The translation of "Nocturne" is incorporated in Mrs. Underwood's volume, *Songs From the Plains*, with a preceding introduction to acquaint the reader that the woman referred to in the poem is the poet's sister, who was famous for her beauty; that there is a resemblance to Poe's "Raven," which Silva greatly admired; and that shortly after writing the poem, Silva shot and killed himself.²²⁹ There is a shadowy, graceful quality about the poem, preluded by the haunting refrain: "It was night time,/Night time lonely."²³⁰

Mrs. Underwood perceived with great sensitivity that the poet "loved butterflies and childhood and the first early nights of May; fleeting things, light lovelinesses which pause only long enough to die."²³¹ She observed that "the trembling fragility of his sensations is something almost beyond comprehension."²³² Then, with a sense of frustration which must frequently confront the translator, she flings forth a passionate declaration: "I wish I knew how to hand on his charm to others, in my colder English tongue! . . . Behind each word lie layer after layer of emotion, vision, all the hauntingly sweet, indefinite horizons of great poets, who have suffered."²³³

The translation of Chinese poetry appears to be a particular contention of linguistic critics—instances to which we have previously called attention in this study—for, as one reviewer points out, "there is no language in which translators differ so widely among themselves on verbal meaning as in the Chinese."²³⁴ The critic compares versions of Tu Fu, as translated by Mrs. Underwood and Chi Hwang Chu:

But they who sing may not have their way,
Their too vagrant feet men chide.
Ask some foolish old poet if you may
Fling his poems into Mi Lo's tide.²³⁵

227. Underwood, *The Taste of Honey*, p. 24.

228. *Ibid.*

229. Underwood, *Songs From the Plains*, p. 107.

230. *Ibid.*

231. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

232. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

233. *Ibid.*

234. *The Manchester Guardian*, July 4, 1929.

235. *Ibid.*

As rendered by Mrs. Florence Ayscough and Amy Lowell:

They hated your essay—yet your fate was to succeed.
The demons where you are rejoice to see men go by.
You should hold speech with the soul of Yuan,
And toss a poem into the Mi Lo River as a gift to him.²³⁶

The critic presents his view of the comparison:

The difference here is more than the difference between the literal translation and the free: it is the difference between one meaning and another. Of course, it may be argued that where, as in Chinese poetry, the value lies in the form and the design rather than in the content, in what the words suggest and the mood they evoke rather than in what they convey, discrepancies in meaning don't much matter. But the trouble is that it is just that form and design that is so hard to reproduce; that if one pair of translators here has reproduced it, the other hasn't; and that the English reader has no means of telling which, if either, has.²³⁷

This is a well considered point, but it does not diminish the perplexity of an English-reading audience. However, the critic proposes a definite discrimination in the suggestion that "the least satisfactory are the poems in rhyme, because they represent least Chinese poetry"; and he adds that it is where "the translators rely most on rhythm and the emphatic pause, an impressionism and atmospheric effect, that they are most convincing."²³⁸ He quotes the following example from the Underwood and Chu translation:

The cold river's ferry is blue and vast;
Bamboos in chains knit a long, long bridge.
The stalks are wet now and the mist is wide.
The river grows long when such wild winds shake.²³⁹

In the foreword of *Tu Fu*, Mrs. Underwood represents the translator's feeling: "We express at the moment—as we feel it duty—a constant sense of self-depreciation in daring to touch the art of one so great."²⁴⁰ She hopes that pardon may be granted, however, because "there has seldom been a period when the human mind so needed contact with fierce, untameable fire, like Tu-Fu's, when envy, egotism, lust for false, money bought applause, ravage like red rust."²⁴¹

Successive translations received laudatory comments. Of *The Slav Anthology*, described as "the only book in English where under one cover all Slav poets may be read,"²⁴² J. W. Schottelius, Berlin, wrote: "A work of encyclopedic vastness. Only book in English which shows all great poetic periods of all Slav Lands. Even in

236. *Ibid.*

237. *Ibid.*

238. *Ibid.*

239. *Ibid.*

240. Underwood and Chu, trans., *Tu Fu*, p. xlv.

241. *Ibid.*

242. Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 145f.

the FOREWORD the translator shows in every line that she is a poet herself, with lyric freshness of vision.”²⁴³

The Anthology of Mexican Poets elicited this comment from Dr. Josef Muls, Director of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp: “Your Mexican Poets is a delightful book. To me it is a revelation of a totally unknown world. One has to be a poet to translate poetry the way you can.”²⁴⁴ Regarding the same work, Alfonso Reyes, Ambassador to Brazil, expressed his appreciation: “Thanks for the magnificent vestment of words in which you have wrapped my poems.”²⁴⁵

A gracious introduction to *The Poets of Haiti* was written, in 1934, by the President of that republic, Stenio Vincent, who referred to “a translation as elegant as it is faithful”;²⁴⁶ and feeling that it would bring about a “better comprehension of each other by the people separated by the Atlantic and the Carib Sea,” he predicted “the critic of the future will reserve one of his laurels for the distinguished woman who had the clairvoyance and the diligence and devotion to bring about such a great event.”²⁴⁷

Once, to an interviewer, Mrs. Underwood remarked, “All of my translations are improvisations. I translate directly from one language into another through my secretary,”²⁴⁸ and also, it was revealed, she translated from Russian into Spanish, or from French into Russian.²⁴⁹ Her prose translations, *Short Stories From the Balkans* and *Famous Stories From Foreign Countries*, presented to the English-reading public an opportunity for acquaintance with examples of literature produced by foreign writers.

The linguist is skilled in languages; the translator must adapt that skill with integrity to meaning, but heightened by sensitivity of feeling for the original expression. The contribution of the translator has value of consequence. His efforts make possible extensive literary exchange, by which knowledge is dispersed, beauty is shared, and the visions of men are imparted.

243. *Ibid.*

244. *Ibid.*

245. *Ibid.*

246. Underwood, *The Poets of Haiti*, p. xvii.

247. *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

248. *Kansas City Journal-Post*, cited in Underwood, *Scrapbook*, I, p. 119.

249. *Ibid.*

Epilogue

The record of the years following 1940 is somewhat blurred, and there are numerous unfilled gaps of knowledge relating to this period in Mrs. Underwood's life. Clues are shadowy; a definite delineation is elusive. Tucked inside the cover of a personal copy of the little book of sonnets, *Maine Summers*, there are a few indicative pieces of correspondence. An unusually concise condolence on a tiny card bears, except for the signature, only these words: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"²⁵⁰ It is impossible to determine the circumstances which elicited this expression of sympathy, for, as was previously stated, Mrs. Underwood's mother died in 1936, and her husband died September 5, 1944.²⁵¹

Thank you notes and letters of appreciation for gifts of the volume, *Maine Summers*, are included in the little collection of papers found inside the book. They are from Gaston Figueira, of Montevideo, Uruguay, postmarked 1940; from someone with an illegible signature, also postmarked 1940, and sent from Antwerp; and from Mr. William P. Fowler, North Hampton, New Hampshire, writing on September 16, 1942. In every instance the letters were originally addressed to Box 54, Hamilton Grange Station, New York City, and this address had been marked through, with a forwarding address added, 523 So. B. St., Arkansas City, Kansas.²⁵²

A letter from the Secretary of the Maine State Library, in June of 1940, inquired of Mrs. Underwood whether three volumes of her verse might be sent to her for inscriptions, thereby enhancing the editions to be included in the library's Maine Author Collection. Acknowledgement was also made of the receipt of *Maine Summers*, with the query if it were intended as a gift for the

250. Note from Margaret Brenz to Edna Worthley Underwood, undated, cited in Mrs. Underwood's personal copy of *Maine Summers*, in the Forsyth Library collection, Fort Hays Kansas State College, Hays, Kansas.

251. Correspondence from Mr. R. P. Guyot to the writer, April 11, 1962. Mr. Guyot, of Arkansas City, Kansas, was appointed guardian of Mrs. Underwood in 1953.

252. Cited in Mrs. Underwood's personal copy of *Maine Summers*, *op. cit.*

exhibit.²⁵³ This letter was addressed to Mrs. Underwood in New York City, and several months elapsed before she replied. A second letter, acknowledging the recent reply, was addressed to her in Arkansas City, and dated January 2, 1940, although obviously the year was 1941. This letter contains an expression of appreciation for the author's willingness to autograph the volumes, which were being sent under separate cover. The letter also included this rather curious revelation:

We notice your request for payment of MAINE SUMMERS. As you may recall, last June we wrote to you saying, "MAINE SUMMERS brought no bill with it, and we wonder if you intend to present it to us for the exhibit?" We had no reply to this query, and rather assumed that it was a gift. Since you have informed us that it is not, we are preparing a bill ourselves. Necessary state formalities require about two weeks before a bill is paid, but the amount which you mention (seventy-five cents) will reach you in payment.²⁵⁴

On the title page of the volume, *Maine Summers*, included in Mrs. Underwood's personal effects, there is pasted a reproduced picture, originally taken in 1875, of the late Mrs. A. B. Worthley, the author's mother. Beside it, dated March 14, 1942, is a little improvised poem, inked in and bearing revisions in pencilled marks, signed Edna Worthley Underwood. The poem observes details of the picture and relates the still poignant sense of loss.

The International Who's Who, 1944-1945, reveals in a biographical profile that Mrs. Underwood continued her translating and had in preparation *Arab Poets of Sicily*, as well as the *Anthology of Poets of South America*.²⁵⁵ That publication, in 1949, related that she was a monthly translator from Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and Creole of short stories and poems for the British periodical, *West Indian Review*.²⁵⁶

Mrs. Underwood spent a part of each year, until 1952, in New York City. She had also maintained the family home in Arkansas City, and she came there permanently in the Spring of 1952.²⁵⁷ For a number of years preceding this date, she had traveled frequently, to Maine and New England during the summers, and she spent the winters in Arkansas City.²⁵⁸ By nature she was a

253. Letter from Hilda McLeod Jacob to Edna Worthley Underwood, June 29, 1940. This letter is also located in the personal copy of *Maine Summers*.

254. Letter from Hilda McLeod Jacob to Edna Worthley Underwood, January 2, 1940 [the correct date is 1941]. Same location.

255. *The International Who's Who, 1944-1945* (London: Europa Publications Limited, 1945), pp. 875-876.

256. *The International Who's Who, 1949* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation and London: Europa Publications Limited, 1949), p. 932.

257. Correspondence from Mr. R. P. Guyot to the writer, April 11, 1962.

258. *Ibid.*

recluse and did not have many friends and practically no close acquaintances.²⁵⁹

Once, long ago, she had written that "in the world of dreams all things are mine."²⁶⁰ For Mrs. Underwood, the "world of dreams" became superimposed on the world of reality, and in April of 1953, she was declared incompetent.²⁶¹ Many years before, she had written of the lyric poet, Tu Fu, a statement that was unwittingly prophetic of her later years: "Tu-Fu, drank desperately to forget, to ease his misery, to build a flimsy, make-believe happiness."²⁶² The result of an evident unhappiness and of an undetermined emotional state is believed to be part of the reason for her decline.²⁶³ A long span of years had passed: in 1953 Mrs. Underwood was eighty years of age.

Edgetown Manor is a home, setting on a six-acre tract,²⁶⁴ outside Winfield, Kansas. Here, Mrs. Underwood spent the remainder of her life. Although she was no longer able to concentrate, her English remained perfect to the last, but most of her conversation was imaginative.²⁶⁵ She could be heard at night, talking to herself. She lived in a world of her own, and many of the things she said were fantastic.²⁶⁶ However, there was a curiously interesting element in her conversation: if one quickly said anything to her in French, German, or Spanish, she could reply in that language; but if the conversation continued for a few minutes, her mind would wander to something else.²⁶⁷ Mrs. Underwood's statement, made long ago, seemed to be a refrain through all her life: ". . . I like dreams better than reality. . . ." ²⁶⁸ She died June 14, 1961.²⁶⁹

Original work she left has not found an enduring place in literary annals, but remains a portion of that vast accumulation which, over the ages, came into being, saw a brief existence, and passed into oblivion except for a rare and occasional reference. Mrs. Underwood unquestionably possessed talent, but it did not match the force of her ambition or of her aspirations. The best

259. Letter from Mr. William E. Cunningham to the writer, March 22, 1961. Mr. Cunningham is an attorney of Arkansas City, Kansas, who was acting as guardian ad litem for Mrs. Underwood at the time her library was sold to Mr. Glenn.

260. Underwood, *Letters From a Prairie Garden*, p. 10.

261. Correspondence from Mr. R. P. Guyot to the writer, April 11, 1962.

262. Underwood and Chu, trans., *Tu Fu*, p. xlix.

263. Correspondence from Mr. R. P. Guyot to the writer, April 11, 1962.

264. Letter from Mrs. Mattie Schmidt to the writer, April 18, 1962. Mrs. Schmidt supervises Edgetown Manor Nursing Home, Winfield, Kansas.

265. Letter from Mrs. Mattie Schmidt to the writer, March 30, 1962.

266. *Ibid.*

267. *Ibid.*

268. Underwood, *Letters From a Prairie Garden*, p. 5.

269. Letter from Mrs. Mattie Schmidt to the writer, March 30, 1962.

of her writing contains worthy attributes: appreciation of beauty and sensitivity to color and texture, indicative of acute observation; expression of ideas emanating from a cultivated mind; independent thought, tempered by the concepts of eminent artists and intellectuals in many ages and of varied nationalities.

Faults in her writing tend to obscure the less frequent flashes of brilliance. In her novels she fails to achieve an artistic whole, for she persistently resorts to exposition detrimental to plot, narrative, character, and action. Characters in her novels and short stories usually have limited portrayal, lacking memorable impression; they rarely unfold through inner growth and are not fully developed. In prose and poetry, much of the author's writing has a tendency to be decorative or mannered, which hinders lucid expression. Even the mechanics of her writing are frequently a source of irritation, for she punctuates with abandon and emotionalizes by italics.

In justice, the above criticisms must be qualified by the recognition that if the whole of her efforts is not highly ranked, there are portions of her work which exhibit estimable achievement.

Mrs. Underwood was, in many ways, a rather remarkable woman. She commanded a wide range of literary knowledge and acquaintance, in a diversity of languages; she was diligent in her chosen task, to convey through her own prose and poetry the throng of ideas crowding her mind, and to transfer from many languages into English the ideas of others. Her accomplishments deserve commendation, for to the degree her abilities permitted, she contributed to the world an exchange of men's knowledge and vision.

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