

Lowbrow wisdom: The priestess of positive thinking

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Ella Wheeler Wilcox—does the name ring a bell? Described by the *London Times* in 1919 as “the most popular poet of either sex and of any age, read by thousands who never open Shakespeare,” she wrote upbeat verses that endure mainly in needlepoint kits and motivational pamphlets: “Laugh, and the world laughs with you / Weep, and you weep alone.” “Don’t look for the flaws / As you go through life, / And even though you find them / Be wise and kind, and somewhat blind, / And look for the virtues behind them.” I recently read her autobiography, *The Worlds and I*, and was unexpectedly charmed; hers must be one of the most endearingly preposterous Horatio Alger stories in the annals of American spirituality.

Born in 1850 in a small town near Madison, Wisconsin, Ella spent her impoverished childhood soaking up the domestic melodramas of Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth, imagining herself the romantic heroine who defies convention and conquers adversity. At the age of seven she wrote a story “about the love of Mr. Larkspur and Miss Hollyhock, and the jealousy occasioned by a roving bee.” By nine she had produced a novel of 11 chapters, bound in paper peeled off the kitchen walls. At 13 she sent two essays to the *New York Mercury* under the pseudonym Eloïne. The essays were published and, she relates, “the world seemed to grow larger and life more wonderful from that hour.” Fortune came in 1882, when a Chicago publisher rejected as indecent her mildly bosom-heaving *Poems of Passion*, thereby assuring her success. From then on, as her biographer Jenny Ballou puts it, Ella was no longer a minor poet but an immensely popular “bad major poet.”

In 1884, Ella married a silver merchant named Robert Marius Wilcox, who caught sight of her in a jewelry establishment and impressed her with an elegant letter requesting an introduction. The 30 years of marriage that grew out of this correspondence was by all accounts radiantly happy. They kept a pact to display only uplifting affections. He supported her in her spiritual and artistic career, while she never ceased to idealize him as her portly and mustachioed knight in shining

armor. Their one grief was the loss of their only child, who died a few hours after birth. But they prospered together, wintering in New York, summering in a grand Victorian “bungalow” in Connecticut and traveling the world. In France Ella retraced the steps of Heloise and Abelard and breakfasted with Sarah Bernhardt. In England she was presented to the king and queen at Buckingham Palace. In Africa she carried her mandolin and learned the “native airs.” She drank in the wisdom of the East, ogled the fashions of the harem, deplored the sexual trafficking by which she saw women degraded, and marveled at the spiral of progress by which the human race was at last ascending. She wore flowers, feathers and fans, and kept Angora cats in her lap.

Through her reading and travels Ella acquired the elements of a simplistic creed, an eclectic blend of sometimes absurd theosophical notions and therapeutic pragmatism, with an unabashed delight in the achievements of the Gilded Age (“The wonderful age of the world I sing / The age of battery, coil and spring . . . Oh, ho! for the age of the motored thing!”). She was an educational reformer, lamenting that “little children go to Sunday-School all their young lives, and grow up to be devout church members, and never hear one word about the importance of *deep breathing* .” She was an inexhaustible font of New Thought maxims. “Wake in the morning with a blessing for every living thing on your lips and in your soul,” she advised. “Say to yourself: ‘Health, luck, usefulness, success, are mine. I claim them.’” “You never can tell what your thoughts will do / In bringing you hate or love, / For thoughts are things, and their airy wings / Are swift as a carrier dove. / They follow the law of the universe / Each thing must create its kind, / And they speed o’er the track to bring you back / Whatever went out from your mind.” One is reminded of *The Little Engine That Could*.

The little engine ran out of steam, however, when Ella’s husband died of pneumonia. After many desperate attempts, she succeeded, she said, in contacting him through a Ouija board, and under his instruction set out on a morale-building tour among the American soldiers in France, regaling them with advice on such topics as how to avoid venereal disease. A poem of the period exhorts, “Soldiers, Come Back Clean.” For his part, Robert continued working on the Other Side, helping soldiers just killed in battle adapt to the spirit world.

Ella’s account of her life sails so far off the charts of modesty that it seems paradoxically humble. She frankly admits her pleasure in being “the little country girl with the inspired pen” whom the public adored. A photograph shows Ella in her

New York apartment, draped across a settee, holding a feather fan, ready to receive the homage of her visitors.

It's easy to make fun of this high priestess of positive thinking, this heroine of her own romance of seen and unseen worlds. Yet she was a thoroughly decent human being, kind to children, generous to strangers, encouraging to aspiring poets and unconcerned with the opinion of literary friends who sneered at her devotion to Robert. Many souls have been rescued from misery by her Dr. Seuss-like rhyming couplets, who in higher art would have found only counsels of despair. The sophisticated literati who made fun of her, from Virginia Woolf to Ambrose Bierce, could have done worse than to take a drink from the well of her lowbrow wisdom. Mrs. Wilcox has the last laugh, it would seem, for she had the more wholesome life.