The Immortal *Immortelles*: Reading Nature as a Dialogue Between the Eternal and the Transient

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Cora M. A. Davis's *Immortelles* portrays the relationship between nature and humanity as a multilayered push and pull, alternating between depicting nature as an antidote for human suffering and as a cause for that suffering. The poems also explore death and immortality in the context of interactions between the natural and human worlds, providing a second axis of juxtaposition that intersects with the first and further convolutes the dynamics of nature-human relations. These themes come together on a micro scale within individual poems, a mezzo scale across neighboring poems, and a macro scale across poems at opposite ends of the book. The multitude of ways in which nature both influences and mirrors human life suggests that nature resonates with human existence on a spiritual, emotional, and physical level, enabling it to function as a lens through which different facets of human life can be understood. The copy of *Immortelles* housed in Northwestern University's Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections explores these relationships through both its material form and textual content, embodying a unique intersection between the physical and abstract factors that assign meaning to a book.

Through its paratextual elements, *Immortelles* introduces the juxtaposition of nature with timespans of human life, setting the stage for the themes of the poems contained within its pages. The title, cover, prefatory materials, and ordering of the poems combine to frame the book as a dialogue between transience and permanence, past and present, and death and eternal life. The title of the book encompasses two definitions: "a name for various composite flowers of papery texture…which retain their color after being dried" and "everlasting" (*OED*). This presents an interesting paradox: flowers are typically regarded as short-lived plants, yet this particular flower's name hints at ideas of longevity and immortality. As shown in Figure 1 below, the book's cover depicts a cluster of flowers, allowing the illustration to serve as a reminder that

immortelles are plants, and thus must eventually die in adherence to the laws of nature. However, the picture is placed next to the title, such that both have equal weight visually. Since "immortelle" has such a similar spelling to "immortal," the title itself serves as a visual pun that brings the word's second definition to the fore. The juxtaposition of the illustration and the title suggests a tension between the ideas of ephemerality and eternity, which become recurring themes across the rest of the book.

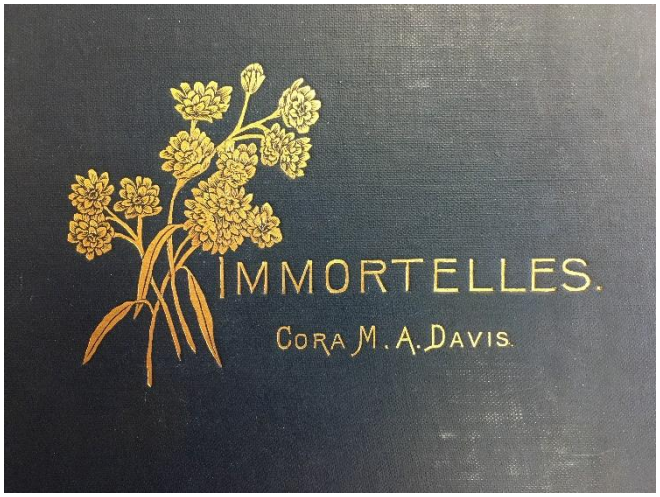

Figure 1: Title illustration on cover of *Immortelles*.

The prefatory materials deepen the connections between these opposing concepts by linking them with the author herself. Davis died in 1885, two years before the publication of her book; it was her husband, F. M. Davis, who published her work posthumously. In a section titled "Prefatory Note," he explains that his wife's poems were originally assembled "with the intention of printing a volume simply for private distribution among relatives and friends, as a memento of her whom they had lost" (iii). However, he asserts that "In the belief…that the poems possess decided merit, it has been decided to place them before the public, which will, it

is hoped, appreciate them at their true value" (iii). Framed in this light, the book simultaneously acknowledges that its author has died *and* functions as a document that sustains Davis's memory, suspending her in a state between permanent death and never-ending existence.

Furthermore, an "In Memoriam" section follows the prefatory note, providing a brief sketch of Davis's life and her relation to her work. Her poems are described as "fresh blooming Immortelles" and "the breathings of a pure and exalted soul struggling for expression through the misty veil of mortality" (vi). The collapse of the poems and the flowers into a single, "fresh blooming" entity frames the poems as transient, yet in perpetual bloom. Such a relation suggests that their capacity to be everlasting ultimately exceeds their capacity for falling into decay, both literally and figuratively (in the sense of being forgotten or unread). In this light, Davis's poetic activity as an attempt to pierce the "veil of mortality" takes on a double meaning: her poems not only represent her efforts while alive to overcome mortal limits of understanding, but also function as her voice speaking from beyond the veil to impart knowledge to the world of the living. The "In Memoriam" section thus invites readers to consider their engagement with the poems as an act of communion between Davis and themselves; each time they read a poem, they revive Davis within their minds.

Furthering Davis's resurrection on the page, the book's frontispiece transforms the author from an abstract idea of a person to a concrete visual presence within the book, thereby heightening the realism of the readers' imaginations of her. As shown in Figure 2 below, Davis's face is depicted in a frontal view that makes it appear as though she is looking directly out of the page at the reader. This orientation of her face and eyes encourages readers to engage more actively with Davis's appearance than if she were depicted looking off to one side or into the distance. In providing a clear view of Davis's face, the book makes it easier for readers to

imagine what Davis would have looked like while she was alive, enabling them to more vividly resurrect her and render her immortal within their imaginations. By presenting readers with an image that prompts them to look directly into Davis's eyes, the book leverages the communicative intent associated with the gesture of locking gazes to urge readers to feel as though Davis is seeking to communicate with them. This reinforces the impression established in the "In Memoriam" section that the poems are a message from Davis to the readers. Readers thus mentally resurrect Davis and grant her immortality on two levels: through visually imagining her appearance based on the frontispiece and through imagining the poems as an act of communication between Davis and themselves.

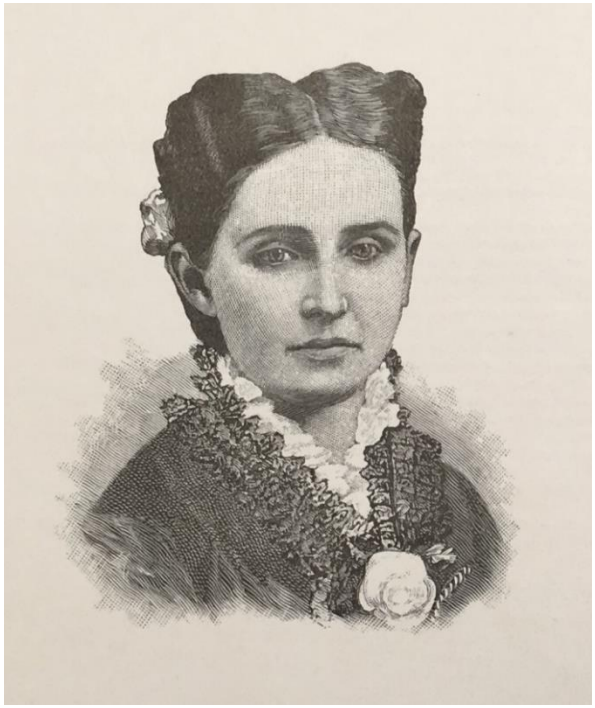

Figure 2: Frontispiece of Davis

The idea of immortality as a construct that relies on the deployment of imagination recurs throughout the book. On a micro-scale within individual poems, Davis explores the tensions between nature's capacity to inspire both unbounded creativity and enduring sadness. Both of these capacities combine to portray immortality as a state of being that is actively constructed within the mind in response to the influence of nature. In "The Lover's Leap," the poem opens with the speaker giving a positive portrayal of nature's capacity to stimulate the human mind:

> Refreshed by mountain breezes pure and sweet,
> I'll rest; and yield me to the dreamy sway
> Of Imagery. Where, amid creation,
> A fairer field for her unfettered flight,
> Than here, upon this beauty-skirted height? (11)

The speaker credits the "mountain breezes" with stimulating her imagination, enabling her to leverage the creative force of "Imagery" to see the landscape around her with an open mind. Thus, nature serves as the catalyst to her imaginative freedom. In depicting the mountainside as a "beauty-skirted height," the speaker uses the connotations of enjoyment and happiness associated with the word "beauty" to convey the speaker's pleasure, situating nature as a source of joy. However, the tone shifts halfway through the poem to portray both imagination and nature in a darker way. The speaker muses that "without thine aid, O Imagery, / I might not feel the depths of the despair / That could have given birth to such a leap" (12). Recalling the title of the poem, Imagery becomes reconfigured as the source of the speaker's ability to imagine the turbulent emotions of a lover leaping off the cliff. In this way, nature transitions away from producing joy to generating sadness for the speaker, complicating nature's relationship to human experience.

The poem's exploration of immortality adds yet another layer to the relation between nature and human life by demonstrating how the imaginative force generated by natural landscapes can function as a site for preserving memories. At the beginning of the poem, Davis includes a note that indicates that the poem was "written on a mountain side in Colorado, at the foot of the rocky cliff called 'The Lover's Leap'" (11). By identifying the poem's setting as a cliff in Colorado, Davis makes a truth claim about the speaker's imagined experience of the lover's emotions. Portraying the cliff as a real place with the name "Lover's Leap" suggests that at some point in time, a real person died for love at that specific location. In consequence, the lover's death and his temporary resurrection in the speaker's imagination both represent events with higher stakes. Though the lover has died, the speaker not only resurrects the "the depths of the despair" he experienced, but also portrays nature as a memorial to his passing:

> I pluck beside me from low growing bush,
> Some leaves with crimson edges. Could it be
> That in the death leap he had fallen here,
> And stained the leaves with blood, and every year
> When the new leaves appear – in memory –
> They bear upon their edge this crimson flush? (12-13)

By imagining that the "crimson flush" of the leaves represents the blood of the dead lover, the speaker transforms nature into a site that preserves the lover's memory, reconfiguring nature as a source of potential consolation. Though the lover has died, he lives on in constructed imaginaries of his experience and the physical manifestation of nature itself. However, this physical manifestation is also mediated through the speaker's particular conception of nature; she hypothesizes that the color of the leaves may relate to the death of the cliff's namesake, using her

imagination to frame the physical world of nature as a memorial to the lover. Thus, the lover's immortality ultimately derives from the speaker's imagination, presenting access to immortality as access to a mental capacity for preserving memories via the medium of imagination. Since nature serves as the impetus for engaging the speaker's imagination, the natural world acts as the original root of immortality, in a fitting callback to the book's title.

All of these concepts come together in the final lines of the poem, wherein the speaker laments:

> Unchanged the scene
> In outward seeming, yet a shade of gloom,
> Invisible and undefinable,
> The shadow of a shadow come between,
> Saddens the spirit of the beautiful. (14)

The speaker reaffirms the beauty inherent in the natural landscape and the joy that it originally brought her, while also acknowledging the sadness that pervades the scene. At the same time, by referring to the sadness underlying the scene as "invisible and undefinable" and a "shadow of a shadow," the speaker draws attention to the mentally constructed nature of the scene's associations with the lover's sadness and immortally preserved story. In this case, nature's ability to act as a source of both happiness and sadness provides the imaginative stimulation to sustain a mental construct of the lover's past and history, enabling the lover to have a presence in the living world beyond his death, and thereby granting him a minor claim to immortality. Nature begins the imaginative process by inspiring happiness, but can then sustain further acts of imagination via sadness.

Davis's deployment of a "beauty-skirted height" as the speaker's imaginative catalyst echoes poems written in the Romantic tradition, especially those of William Wordsworth. Before the speaker becomes inspired to muse upon the lover's fate, she spends a stanza describing the vastness of the landscape around her:

> Above me, skyward, towers the rocky steep;
> Beyond me, the illimitable sweep
> Of distance; there the city's far off gleam;
> Beyond, the plains, soft fading as a dream,
> Farther and fainter, till the utmost edge
> Of hazy purple – seen from this high ledge,
> Wrapped in the distance – seems some shoreless sea
> Upon the border of Eternity. (11-12)

Through repetition of diction and imagery that suggests expansiveness, such as "towers," "rocky steep," "illimitable sweep," "distance," "high ledge," "shoreless sea," and "border of Eternity," Davis emphasizes the sheer size of the landscape that envelops the speaker. Her focus on the immensity of the scenery, particularly before launching into her imaginings on the lover, frame the sublime within nature as the imaginative catalyst that it is often portrayed to be within Romantic poetry. From a paratextual standpoint, the "In Memoriam" section that appears at the beginning of the book reinforces the idea that Davis can and should be read as a Romantic author. It describes Davis as someone who was inspired to write because she "learned to know and to love all that was beautiful and sublime in nature" (vi). With its portrayal of the lover as physically dead but alive within the speaker's imagination, "The Lover's Leap" provides parallels to Wordsworth's "Immortality" Ode.

Wordsworth's ode addresses the idea that death does not imply a permanent cessation of things, as nature enables those who are yet living to attain imaginative access to immortality. Though the speaker begins the poem with doubts about the possibility of transcending loss through immortality, he arrives at the following conclusion:

> In the faith that looks through death,
> In years that bring the philosophic mind.
> And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
> Forebode not any severing of our loves! (Wordsworth)

By identifying different elements of nature such as "Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves" as safeguards against the "severing of our loves" and the basis for a "faith that looks through death," Wordsworth suggests that nature empowers humans to transcend death through the power of their emotions. Love endures in the face of death rather than being "sever[ed]" as a result of nature's ability to sustain and nurture love using the emotions of sorrow. The speaker asserts that "the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" (Wordsworth), suggesting that even the most inconsequential elements of nature are powerful enough to mobilize sadness as a defense against the decay of love and the triumph of death. In the context of "A Lover's Leap," the speaker's sadness for the dead lover, initially inspired by the sublimity of the landscape and sustained by her imagining of the red leaves as a memorial to the lover, becomes a force that allows the lover's love to endure and thus withstand death. Wordsworth and Davis thus both conclude that nature acts as a balm for suffering. However, Davis complicates Wordsworth's portrayal by introducing poems that also portray nature as a cause of death's irreversibility, complicating the relationship between nature and human access to immortality.

Expanding to a mezzo scale, a complex portrayal of nature's relationship to human experiences centered around life and death also emerges between neighboring poems in the book. In "The Snow-slide," nature functions as a cause of death, but in the poem that immediately follows it, "'He Doeth All Things Well,'" nature is portrayed as a source of hope and a reminder of eternal life. The juxtaposition of these starkly different poems demonstrates the complicated and often contentious tug-of-war between nature's capacity to damage and to enliven human life. "The Snow-slide" describes an avalanche destroying a man's home and killing his family, portraying the avalanche as a "pallid, hungry monster" (25) and a "relentless foe, / Destroying all before it" (26). The aggressive diction of "hungry monster," "foe," and "destroying" casts the natural force of the avalanche as something inimical to human survival, suggesting that at least some parts of nature are opposed to human life. The speaker observes that the man's family "must surely sleep / The sleep of death; the sleep that hath no waking" (26), leaving no room to imagine that the family might have survived. In this instance, nature does not serve to inspire an unleashing of imaginative powers that can revive the family as a mental construct. Nature, embodied in the avalanche, instead represents the hard reality that the family is dead and stifles imaginations of any other reality.

However, nature plays the opposite role in "'He Doeth All Things Well,'" functioning instead as a stimulus to imaginations of heaven and everlasting life. The speaker begins the poem by affirming the universality of human suffering, and advises "When such a shadow darkens life's dull sky, / Turn thou to nature's restful solitude" (27). Nature becomes transformed from the "monster" of the previous poem to a site of "restful solitude," demonstrating how nature simultaneously can act as a source of human suffering but also spiritual rejuvenation. The speaker goes on to portray the natural world as the place where:

You catch some strains from that grand symphony
Of the eternal life; a rhythm divine
Will linger in your soul throughout all time.

Thus, folded close to nature's throbbing heart,
You feel yourself to be of God…(28)

By linking closeness to nature with closeness to God, the speaker portrays nature as a site of religious fulfillment and as an access point to eternal life in heaven. Furthermore, the speaker's claim that nature provides one with awareness of "a rhythm divine" that will persist in one's soul for "all time" suggests that nature can provide a type of everlasting knowledge, bringing eternity into the physical world while also hinting at the eternity of the heavenly, spiritual world. This insistence on nature's connection to eternity, located immediately after a poem centered around death, seems aimed at providing reassurance and comfort in the face of the inevitability of death. By acknowledging death in one poem while affirming access to eternal life in the next, the ordering of the poems portrays nature as a conduit for immortal life *following* death. In this sense, access to immortality depends on believing in heaven, which nature promotes by fostering closeness to God. Immortality thus still functions as a mental construct within the material world, and does not become actualized until one passes through death into the spiritual world.

The tensions between immortality and death are also explored on a macro scale in the way the poems are organized across the entire book. The first and final poems serve as bookends to one another, providing contrasting outlooks on nature's role in relation to everlasting life and death. In the first poem, "Earth's Fulfilment," the speaker climbs a mountain and laments the inevitable decay of all things but ultimately affirms the possibility of immortality:

I cried: “Must thus the beautiful and bright

Just as we grasp them vanish from our sight!”

And then – slow shaping in my mind – a thought

Was born; that grew in beauty till it caught

The glory of a longed-for certainty.

A promise – as it seemed in words of gold

Written in every wind-waved filmy fold

Of the cloud sea – of immortality. (3)

The speaker’s faith in immortality comes as a result of interacting with nature, as it is the sunlight shining through the “cloud sea” at the top of the mountain that inspires the speaker’s epiphany.

However, in the book’s final poem, “Growing Old (A Revery),” the speaker expresses the opposite opinion about both nature and immortality. She first muses:

Is it because the storm to-day

Hath gathered low its clouds of gray

……

That hope, whose bright alluring gleam

Hath made so real my life’s sweet dream,

Grows dim and pale…(177)

The clouds, previously a source of hope and inspiration, become the antithesis of hope by the end of the book. Nature once again serves to limit the imagination and preclude the possibility of conceiving of immortality as an option. The speaker seems to affirm the permanence and inalterability of death in the poem’s final lines, declaring:

My life will reach its dim twilight,

Be almost o'er;

I, drifting down the shadowy stream,

Weary of life's feverish dream,

Close to the other shore.

The phrase "close to the other shore" portrays nature in terms of the natural landscape, making death integral to nature itself. The use of italics gives the phrase an intensity that seems to convey the speaker's yearning for the shore of death, suggesting that perhaps Davis is in a better place now that she has died. The "shadowy stream" and the "other shore" become things to be desired and celebrated, implying that death is actually a desirable state of being. By ending with a poem centered on death, the book reminds its audience that its author has died, emphasizing how death cannot be reversed back into a state of life. Yet at the same time, by creating this linkage between the poem and Davis's death, the book also brings Davis to the forefront, imaginatively resurrecting her in the awareness of the readers. Ultimately, then, the book suggests that although death may be a permanent state, it can be overcome within the realm of the living through imaginative memorial acts.

Within individual poems, across neighboring poems, and across the entire book, the poems within *Immortelles* portray nature as a site of endless imaginative possibilities and a source of sorrow and suffering. As a result of this confluence of meanings, nature renders the boundary between death and immortality permeable and fluid, opening up possibilities for immortality to persist after death or even within the context of death. In the context of the book's paratextual elements memorializing Davis as an author and teacher who lives on through the book, the poems' themes and subject matter reinforce the idea that death and immortality can

collapse into each other – an idea perhaps most aptly embodied by the everlasting yet transient immortelle flower for which the book is named.

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