

# ROSICRUCIAN MYSTIC & MUSE: ELLA WHEELER WILCOX

*Karen Schulz, SRC*



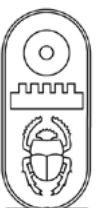
*Ella Wheeler Wilcox, 1917.*

Ella Wheeler was born on November 5, 1855, in a humble Wisconsin homestead. She was the fourth child of a poor but cultured family and Ella often gave her mother credit for impressing her with favorable prenatal influences, writing: “My literary career was in a large measure begun before my birth.” She quoted her mother as saying:

My child will be a girl and she will be a writer. She will follow literature as a profession. She will begin young and she will travel extensively and do all the things I have want-ed to do and missed doing.

While pregnant with Ella, her mother devoured Shakespeare and memorized literature of all sorts which were to exert a beneficial effect upon her unborn child. At the age of seven, Ella wrote her first story on wallpaper scraps and at nine she wrote a novel of 10 chapters on whatever bits of paper she could find. As the years passed, the aspiring young writer poured her heart into her prose and poetry and one day, in her early teens, she received her first check for \$10 from *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* in payment for three short poems.

When a \$40 check arrived in the post for Ella's essays, which were to be printed



in Frank Leslie's magazine, it proved almost a nervous shock. Ella often rode five miles on horseback to the nearest post office to receive her first small cheques, and the inevitable rejection no-tices as well.

### An Old Soul

The "country girl poet" as she called herself, often found life painfully suffocating in her increasingly unhappy household. In her autobiography, *The Worlds and I*, Ella wrote about her reactions to her family's agnostic leanings:

Being an old soul myself, reincarnated many more times than any other member of my family, I knew the truth of spiritual things not revealed to them. I could not formu-late what I knew, but I felt myself the spiritual parent of my elders and longed to help them to clearer sight.

From reincarnated sources, and through prenatal causes, I was born with unquenchable hope and unfaltering faith in God [the Divine] and guardian spirits. I often wept myself to sleep after a day of disappointments and worries but woke in the morning singing aloud with the joy of life.

Full of imagination and romance, Ella wrote indefatigably. One story was refused by 10 edi-tors and then finally sold to an eleventh who paid \$75 for it, a great deal of money in her day.

Miles from a post office, more miles from a railroad and far from any literary center, without one acquaintance who knew anything about literary methods or the way to approach an editor, I pounded away

at the doors of their citadels with my childish fists until they opened to me.

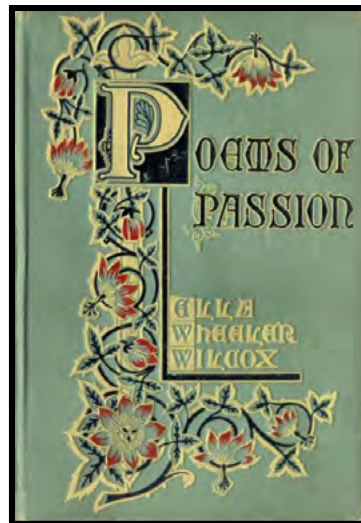
Indeed, the doors of opportunity opened and good fortune responded to this young woman who began to reap the rewards of her courageous efforts. During the span of one sum-mer and autumn, Ella wrote "Maureen," a story in verse which proved to be a moderate success. Then, quite innocently, she gained a blazing notoriety upon the publication of her *Poems of Passion* in 1883. The opening lines of "Courage" are representative of the passion expressed in this collection:

There is a courage, a majestic thing  
That springs forth from the brow of  
pain; full grown,  
Minerva-like, and dares all dangers  
known. . . .

These lines embodied the attitude of the poetess at this phase in her career. For the rest of her life, Ella's poems tended to mirror her personal passages and they are the perfect complement to her autobiography.

Her famous poem, "Solitude," inspired by the sadness of a very young widow riding on a train, was included in this maiden volume. Nevertheless, Ella received both positive and negative literary recognition, for in those days it was quite

immoral to use the word kiss as often as Ella had in her first slim volume of "passion poems!" Naturally, sales of her works increased. She remodeled and added to the old homestead with the first significant proceeds from her book. By this time, she was considered a leading member of the Milwaukee School of Poetry and her circle of social contacts and correspondents widened as her writing matured.



Cover of the first edition of  
*Poems of Passion*.

Like the romantic knight in shining armor, Robert Wilcox, a wealthy and cultured man, rescued Ella Wheeler from her life of exterior drabness and delivered her into one more suited to her natural gifts and temperament. She expressed this in “Love’s Coming” from *Poems of Passion*:

She had dreamed how his coming  
would stir her soul,  
As the ocean is stirred by wild storm’s  
strife:  
He brought the balm of a heavenly  
calm,  
And a peace which crowned her life.

Over and over again in her autobiography, Ella sings the praises of Robert Wilcox. He must have been an extraordinary man indeed, a man of gentle power, a strong and patient guide for the Muse. They enjoyed an almost idyllic married life for thirty-two years. Of marriage she wrote:

To fill the difficult role of wife,  
to the very best of my ability (aided  
by constant prayers for larger wisdom  
and more understanding) became my  
controlling aim.

Many of Ella’s poems were inspired by Robert Wilcox, as in “We Two,” from *Poems of Power*:

We two, we two, we make our world,  
our weather. . . .  
Our paths lead closely by the paths  
supernal;  
We two, we two, we live in love eternal.

### Swami Vivekananda

In 1893 while attending a lecture by Swami Vivekananda, who was speaking in New York almost one year after the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Ella received her “first lessons in concentration.”

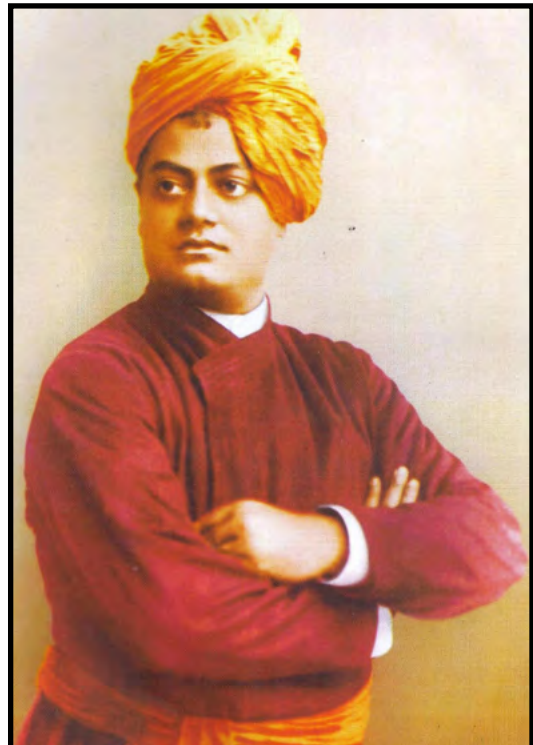
After each lesson (and indeed a portion of each day since that time) I made a practice of sitting quite alone

for a quarter or a half hour, seeking to bring my too active mind under the check rein of my own will. I endeavored to drive out every thought save that of God [the Divine], the one supreme, omnipotent creator of all the worlds which exist or ever existed. Always, from these moments of concentration, I arose with new strength and poise to meet life.

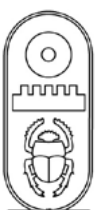
One evening she returned to her study, deeply inspired, after a lecture by the Swami. Almost automatically, the poem “Illusion,” a personal favorite, was written:

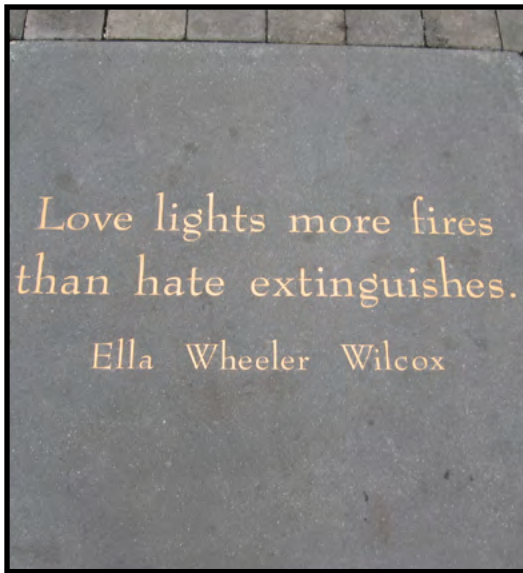
God [The Divine] and I in space  
alone, and nobody else in view, “And where are the people, O Lord”, I said, “The earth below, and the sky o’erhead and the dead whom once I knew?”

“That was a dream” God [the Divine] smiled and said, “a dream that seemed to be true. There were no people, living or dead, There was no earth, and no sky o’erhead: There was only myself. . . , in you.”



Swami Vivekananda, 1893.





*Ella Wheeler Wilcox's poem plaque near the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco Chinatown's Jack Kerouac Alley.*

"Why do I feel no fear", I asked, "meeting you here this way? For I have sinned I know full well. And is there heaven, and is there hell, and is this the judgement day?"

"Say, those were but dreams", the Great God [Divinity] said, "dreams that have ceased to be. There are no such things as fear or sin, there is no you, you never have been, there is nothing at all but Me."

Here, the profound thoughts of the great teacher from India flowed into the mind of the "country girl poet" and she preserved them on paper in her own lyrical style. Printed in her third published volume, *Poems of Power* (1901), it is the only poem of her own that Ella could recall from memory for the rest of her life, so deeply etched were the words upon her heart.

While living in Meriden, Connecticut, the joyful life of the young married couple was marred by the transition of their infant son, Robert Wilcox, Jr., who lived only twelve hours. Once again, the milestones,

both joyful and sorrowful, in the life of Ella surface in her heartfelt poem, *A Face*:

All that was taken shall be made good.  
All that puzzles me understood.  
And the wee white hand that I love,  
One day shall lead me into the Better  
Way.

After this painful experience, the Wilcoxes were never to have another child. Ella gathered up her strength and for the rest of her life she channeled her creative energy into her writing, though it is with some remorse that she wrote:

Were I allowed to choose my next incarnation, I would ask to come back an accomplished, capable and agreeable companion of my beloved and to be the mother of his sons and daughters as my only distinction in the eyes of the world.

### **Prenatal Influence**

Though she had no more children of her own, Ella was ever interested in the effects of positive prenatal influence:

Every expectant mother should set herself about the important business God [the Divine] has entrusted her with, unafraid and confident of her divine mission. She should direct her mind into wholesome and optimistic channels, read inspiring books and think lovely and large thoughts. She should pray and aspire, and always should she carry in her mind the ideal of the child she would mother, and command from the great Source of all Opulence the qualities she would desire to perpetuate. And they will be given.

After Robert and Ella Wheeler Wilcox relocated in New York City, the authoress came out with her second successful collection *Poems of Pleasure*, published in 1888. In 1889 she produced a book full of verses for children entitled *The Beautiful Land of Nod*.



## Her Poetry's Wide Appeal

Ella's breadth of vision and natural sympathy for humanity generated many friendships throughout her life. Jack London, Luther Burbank, Sarah Bernhardt, Rose O'Neill and Marie Corelli were luminaries of the day whom the poetess counted among her friends. Of the day she met Marie Corelli, Ella wrote: "The day is marked in memory's calendar with a red letter." This was truly a pleasurable period in her life.

The "poet of the Sierra," Joaquin Miller, had this to say to Ella upon their meeting: "Why, Elly, I didn't think you were so pert and pinky; I imagined you a big-wristed girl out West milking cows!"

Geronimo, the famous Apache chief, took quite a liking to Ella in his 90th year, naming her "Princess White Wings." Ella was indeed a social butterfly and her expansive spirit embraced people in all stations and walks of life.

The Wilcoxes built an "Earthly Eden" in Granite Bay, at Short-Beach-on-the-



*Geronimo, 1898.*

Sound, Connecticut, in 1890. Their bungalow was to remain their summer house and enduring home. Robert and Ella later embarked upon 10 years of roaming which took them all over the world. Jamaica, England, Sicily, India, Ceylon, Japan and Africa marked the itinerary of these planetary adventurers. The poem "On Seeing the Daibutsu" reflects Ella's broad comprehension of the unity of world religions, realized through her years of travel. Describing the 49-foot bronze statue, The Great Buddha just a few miles out of Yokohama, Japan, Ella concludes her poem:

Unknown, the artist, vaguely known  
his creed:

But the bronze wonder of his work  
sufficed

To lift me to the heights his faith had  
trod.

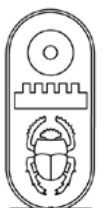
For one rich moment, opulent indeed,  
I walked with Krishna, Buddha, and  
Christ

And felt the full serenity of God [the  
Divine].

Commenting on this Asian encounter in her autobiography, she remarked:

All that those oldest extant books of sacred wisdom, the Vedas, describe as the ecstatic state of realization, which is the ultimate goal of man and all that Buddha taught 300 years before Christ regarding that state is expressed in the "Diabutsu." To look upon it is to know the meaning of that much misunderstood word, Nirvana; not oblivion but the security of attainment and the ecstasy of at-one-ment.

Like many people of genius, Ella possessed many and varied talents in addition to her writing skills. She loved to dance from a very young age and continued this love of dancing into her adulthood. She became a proficient mandolin player and later took up playing the harp. The



art of palmistry was yet another of her fascinating pastimes and she was also fluent in French. She loved cats, collected talismanic jewelry from around the world, and her favorite color was “a cheerful yellow.”

### Rosicrucian Affiliation

With her lifelong interest in all things mystical, it is not surprising that, at some time during her residence in New York, Ella became an associate of Harvey Spencer Lewis, first Emperor of the Rosicrucian Order in North America in the twentieth century. She was invited to serve as a member on the Supreme Council of AMORC in its early days when Dr. Lewis was selected as Supreme Grand Master of America. Until her transition in 1919, she was instrumental in helping to re-establish the Order in the United States. One of her poems, “Secret Thoughts,” from *Poems of Pleasure*, is still quoted in Rosicrucian literature to this day:

I hold it true that thoughts are things,  
Endowed with bodies, breath and  
wings.

And that we send them forth to fill the  
world

With good results, or ill.

*Poems of Power*, published in 1901, was the herald of a new century. It is my favorite collection from the pen of a spiritually mature woman. Life progressed happily for the optimistic Ella, until her husband went through transition suddenly in 1916. She admitted in her autobiography that she completely collapsed and subsequently served her term in “the valley of sorrow.” It was as if the younger Ella had presaged this occurrence many years earlier when she wrote these lines in “One of Us Two,” from *Poems of Pleasure*:

One of us, two shall find all light, all  
beauty,

All joy on earth, a tale forever done;



*Ella Wheeler Wilcox, 1918.*

Shall know henceforth that life means  
only duty.

Oh, God! Oh, God! [Oh, Divinity! Oh,  
Divinity!] Have pity on that one.

Ella’s last three years alone were spent in intense soul-searching which naturally included deep reflections upon the nature of death and the afterlife, and she eventually arrived at this conclusion:

Transition is only a doorway to a larger life and does not destroy the memory or affection or personal characteristics. Transition ushers each soul to the place and plane it has made for itself while on Earth by the nature and habit of its thoughts.

During her last year, when her heart had healed somewhat, Ella travelled to France in the spirit of duty to work with the soldiers of World War I in their hour of need. Surrounded by the illusory specter of death in her last years, Ella pierced through that illusion in this rare poem, entitled “The Finish”:

The thought of that last journey back  
to Him [It]  
When there is no more longing or  
desire  
for anything but God [the Divine] left  
in my soul,  
Shines in the distance like a great white  
flame.

I think the way will lead through  
golden clouds  
Skirting the shores of seas of amethyst!  
And winding gently upward, past old  
worlds,  
Where body after body was outlived.  
Past Hells and Heavens, where I had  
my day  
With comrade spirits from the lesser  
spheres;  
And paid my penalty for every sin  
And reaped reward for every worthy  
act.

Past Realms Celestial and their singing  
hosts  
(Where once I chanted with the  
cherubim)  
Out into perfect silence. Suddenly an  
all-enveloping  
Vast consciousness of long, long  
journeys finished:  
One more turn, then glory, glory, glory  
infinite,  
And selfhood lost in being one with  
God [the Divine].

The ray once more absorbed into the  
Sun,  
The Cycle done.

And so, the rags-to-riches princess  
whose brilliant life had lit the way for  
countless thou-sands, quietly passed on  
to the next plane after a cycle of 69 years  
and the near completion of 10 seven-year  
cycles in the mortal realm. The life and  
work of Ella Wheeler Wilcox might be  
summed up in this little message, "The  
World's Need," that closes *Poems of Power*.

So many gods [deities], so many creeds,  
so many paths  
That wind and wind; whilst just the art  
of being kind  
is all the sad world needs.

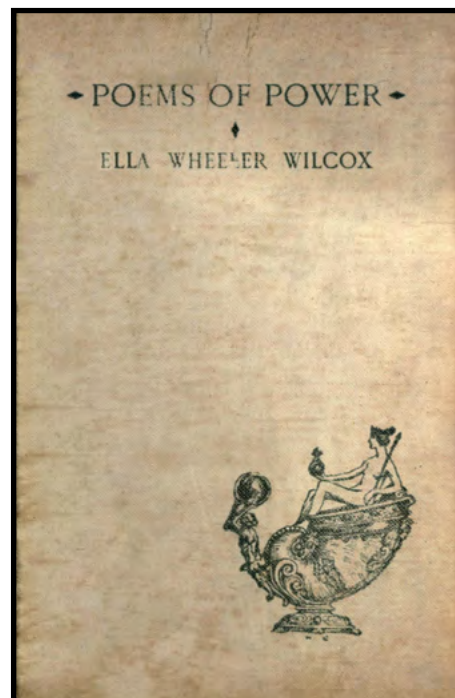
### Note

The direct quotes in this article come  
from *The Worlds and I*, the autobiography  
of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, published in 1918  
by the George H Doran Co. Excerpts from  
"The Finish" are also included in this work.  
The excerpt on prenatal influence is from  
*The Heart of the New Thought*, published in  
1902. The rest of the poems, or portions  
of poems, are taken from the following  
volumes of poetry:

*Poems of Passion* - W.B Conkey & Co.,  
Chicago, 1883 - "Courage," "Love's  
Coming," and "Solitude."

*Poems of Pleasure* - Bedford Clarke &  
Co., 1888 - "A Face," "One of Us Two,"  
and "Secret Thoughts."

*Poems of Power* - Gay and Hancock,  
Ltd., London, 1903 - "Illusion," "The  
World's Need," and "We Two."



First Edition cover of *Poems of Power*.

