

1. BEGINNINGS OF MODERN AMERICAN POETRY: POE, WHITMAN, DICKINSON

The major American poets of the late nineteenth century, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Edgar Allan Poe rebelled against the didacticism and formal conventions of the mid-century Fireside Poets. The movement that influenced their poetry (even though differently), was transcendentalism. The poet who came the closest to Emerson's vision of the American poet as "the seer" was Walt Whitman.

Walt Whitman was born on Long Island, New York. At the age of 11 he left school to go to work. He was mainly self-taught. His collection *The Leaves of Grass* that Whitman kept revising all his life, was inspired largely by Emerson's writings, especially his essay "The Poet." The poem's innovative, unrhymed, free-verse form, open celebration of sexuality, democracy, and extreme Romantic assertion that the poet's self was one with the poem, the universe, and the reader permanently marked the development of American poetry. More than any other American poet or writer, Whitman invented the myth of democratic America.

The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States is essentially the greatest poem. . . . Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes... Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves (Whitman, *Leaves*, 5).

When Whitman wrote this, he questioned the general opinion that America was too rough and raw to be poetic. For him:

The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions ... he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake. His spirit responds to his country's spirit ... he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes (Whitman, *Leaves*, 6).

Whitman's poetic qualities are visible in many of his poems, among the most famous being: "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," an elegy on Abraham Lincoln's the death. Another important work is his long essay "Democratic Vistas" (1871), written during the materialism and industrialism, the so called "Gilded Age." In this essay, Whitman criticizes America for its "mighty, many-threaded wealth and industry" that mask an underlying "dry

and flat Sahara" of soul. He calls for a new kind of literature to revive the American.

The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for encouraging competitors.... They shall be kosmos ... without monopoly or secrecy ... glad to pass anything to any one ... hungry for equals night and day. They shall not be careful of riches and privilege ... they shall be riches and privilege ... they shall perceive who the most affluent man is. The most affluent man is he that confronts all the shows he sees by equivalents out of the stronger wealth of himself. The American bard shall delineate no class of persons nor one or two out of the strata of interests nor love most nor truth most nor the soul most nor the body most ... and not be for the eastern states more than the western or the northern states more than the southern (Whitman, *Leaves*, 12).

Whitman became a printer's apprentice for the *Patriot*, a Long Island newspaper, and later worked for the Whig weekly *Long Island Star*. He also began attending theatres and became involved in local politics. In 1836 he taught for two years, but then returned to journalism. He founded the *Long Islander* and later edited the *Aurora* and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. As he openly opposed the conservative wing of the Democratic party and was involved with the Wilmot Proviso, which proposed to prohibit the expansion of slavery into new territories, he was dismissed from the *Daily Eagle*. In 1848 he founded the Free-Soil newspaper *The Brooklyn Freeman*.

Whitman's journalistic work did not prevent him writing. He published a novel, *Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate*, in 1842. During the early 1850s he abandoned journalism to work as a carpenter in Brooklyn; meanwhile, he began writing poetry that later appeared in *Leaves of Grass*, which he published anonymously in June 1855 at his own expense. The book included an engraving of Whitman and contained twelve untitled poems, and one poem titled "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and "Song of Myself" in the 1860 edition of the volume.

In the 1867 edition the poem was divided into fifty-two stanzas. Whitman explores his identity as a poet and American, but he also sees the interconnectedness of himself, others, and the universe, which was a concept associated mainly with Transcendentalism. The poem includes long descriptions of battles and disasters as well as depictions of fugitive slaves, workers, and various urban and natural scenes. Part of its significance lies in its explicit descriptions of sexuality.

"Song of Myself" and the other poems included in *Leaves of Grass* were unusual for their use of free verse instead of conventional meter and end rhyme. They were breaking poetic conventions of rhyme, meter, and subject matter, and inspired many American modernist poets, such as Carl Sandburg, e. e. cummings, or Beat poet Allen Ginsberg.

Whitman sent a copy to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who praised his work and attitude. Whitman included Emerson's letter in the second edition of the

book in 1856, which included several new poems. He republished the book six more times throughout his life, adding new poems to each edition. The poems were often criticized for sexual explicitness, including homosexual passages.

Yet Whitman was not only writing poetry. He worked for the Brooklyn *Daily Times* in the late 1850s and during the Civil War he served as a nurse in Union Army hospitals in Washington, D.C.; This experience was an inspiration for the collection of poems *Drum-Taps and Sequel* (1865–1866) and his prose work *Memoranda during the War* (1876). He stayed in Washington after the war, working for the Indian Bureau until being fired for moral reasons in 1865 when Secretary of the Interior James Harlan discovered Whitman's 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

He published *Passage to India*, a collection of poems, in 1870 and his political essay *Democratic Vistas* in 1871. In 1873 he got a stroke and was paralyzed. In addition to republishing *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman published another prose work, *Specimen Days*, in 1881. He died on 26 March 1892.

EMILY DICKINSON (1830–1886) was one of the most prolific and original American, even though only a few poems were published during her lifetime. She was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, at a time of religious revivals. She never married, and for that time she led an unconventional life: she spent her whole life in her father's house and dedicated all her free time to writing poetry. She was inspired by nature and New England countryside.

She wrote more than eighteen hundred poems, some of which she copied into homemade manuscript books which she called fascicles. Dickinson did not receive much formal education (she left the Female Seminary after one year), but she knew the Bible, the works of William Shakespeare, and works of classical mythology. She was born into a family of strong Puritan tradition. Dickinson fostered friendships with many people, including public figures such as Samuel Bowles, the editor of the *Springfield Republican*, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an influential literary man and reformer.

While biographies of Dickinson often mark her correspondence with Higginson after his 1862 article "Letter to a Young Contributor" appeared in the *Atlantic* as the moment when Dickinson took herself seriously as a poet, she had been writing for many years and had found conversation about that writing with her closest friend and sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson. She also sent poems in letters to many of her regular correspondents, including her cousins Frances and Louisa Norcross and family friends Josiah and Elizabeth Holland, displaying quite publicly the fact that she was a writer. When asked by Higginson which writers she best liked to read, she answered: "For Poets—I have Keats—and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose—Mr Ruskin—Sir Thomas Browne—and the Revelations." While these authors might have been Dickinson's favorites, she read much more widely than this short list

reflects—in her letters she refers to works by, among others, William Shakespeare, William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alfred Tennyson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and the Bible—and could quote lines from poems and novels from memory.

When Dickinson died in 1886, Lavinia burned her sister's correspondence (as Dickinson had instructed her to do); but when she came upon the box containing her poems, she decided to have them printed. After first giving them to Susan, and then becoming restless with her slow pace on the project, she turned to Mabel Loomis Todd, a young woman who, despite never having met Dickinson, was connected to the literary community. Todd and Higginson edited *Poems*, which was published just in time for the Christmas holiday in 1890. Although this book was met with mixed reviews, Todd and Higginson produced two more editions of *Poems* in 1891 and 1896, and Todd edited the first edition of Dickinson's *Letters* in 1894. Dickinson's poems had many editions over the first half of the twentieth century, but not until 1955, when Thomas H. Johnson compiled *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, were they all printed together. Further research has challenged previous editors' transcriptions and analyses of her writing. Most recently, Ralph Franklin edited *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1998), which was published in three volumes.

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809-1849) was born in Boston. After his parents died, he was adopted by Mr. Allan and moved to Virginia. He is classified as a Southern writer though most of his works are set in Europe. Yet he had considerable influence on Southern literature. Poe published his first volume of poetry in 1827 under the title *Tamberlane and Other Poems*. His vision of poetry was formed by the critical works of British romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. „Poe sees the poet as a priest or shaman, using his arts to entice us into rejection of the her and now - even a kind of magician who is attempting in effect to enchant us, or simply trick us, into forgetting the laws of ordinary world.“ (Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 120) Emerson even called him a „jingle man“ (May 20, 1894, *New York Times*, "Emerson's Estimate of Poe"): "Whom do you mean?" asked Emerson with an astonished stare, and on the name being repeated with extreme distinctness, "Ah, the jingle man!" returned Emerson, with a contemptuous reference to the "refrains" in Poe's sad lyrics. Yet Poe was a Transcendentalist, he was interested in what transcends man and he represents the darker side of Romanticism, the romantic despair and agony.

As Poe remarked in his essay „Poetic Principle“ (published posthumously in 1850):

While the epic mania, while the idea that to merit in poetry prolixity is indispensable, has for some years past been gradually dying out of the public mind, by mere dint of its own absurdity, we find it succeeded by

a heresy too palpably false to be long tolerated, but one which, in the brief period it has already endured, may be said to have accomplished more in the corruption of our Poetical Literature than all its other enemies combined. I allude to the heresy of *The Didactic*. It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a morals and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. We Americans especially have patronized this happy idea, and we Bostonians very especially have developed it in full. We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force: – but the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem *per se*, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake.

He married his cousin Virginia and started to work as an editor and critic for various magazines. His only novel was accepted much later. As *Pym* begins, Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, Massachusetts, and his good friend Augustus Barnard go out on Pym's sailboat, are run down by the whaler ship *Penguin*, and narrowly escape death. Eager for adventure, Pym then hides as a stowaway in a coffin-like space in the hold of Augustus's father's ship, the *Grampus*, bound for the South Seas. He has enough food to last him four days, but as those days pass, he discovers that there is no way out to the main deck. He waits—nearly dying of starvation and dehydration—several days for Augustus to return to help him. In the meantime, he discovers that sailors on the *Grampus* have mutinied and cast off Captain Barnard in a small boat.

One of the drunken sailors, Dirk Peters, helps Pym and Augustus to hide and provides them with food. They manage to kill all of the mutineers except one, Parker, but then endure a terrible storm at sea. Although they survive, they are left without food for days. In desperation they draw lots and decide to kill Parker so that the other three men can live off his flesh. In the meantime, Augustus has suffered an arm injury and dies. His body is cast overboard and is devoured by sharks as soon as it hits the water. Peters and Pym, almost dead from thirst and surviving only on barnacles, are eventually rescued by the *Jane Guy*, a sealing and trading ship from Liverpool bound for the South Seas. They voyage toward Antarctica, but when the weather turns bad, they land on the island of Tsalal, which is inhabited by mysterious and murderous natives who live in complete “savagery.” Everything on the island is of a dark color and the natives display nervousness over anything that is white. To drive off the white men, the natives cause an earthquake by activating a landslide. They drive the sailors off, but follow them to the ship and continue to hunt them there, inadvertently blowing up the ship as they upset some stored ammunition. Only Pym, Peters, and a native they've taken hostage survive and escape in a canoe that they find unattended. Drifting

south, they enter a warm sea and grow very drowsy as an ashen material continually falls on and around them. Suddenly, the boat rushes into a chasm and a huge white figure with outstretched arms appears in their path. There the narrative breaks off. An appended editorial note explains that Pym died unexpectedly and that the last chapters of the narrative are missing. For the book version of *Pym*, the narrator (Pym) writes an editorial preface in which he comments that "Mr. Poe," a well-known editor, had written a narrative based on Pym's experiences more than a year earlier; since these initial episodes were well received by readers, he now offers the rest of the story himself. The readers should have no trouble, he adds, in seeing where Poe's style and his own diverge.