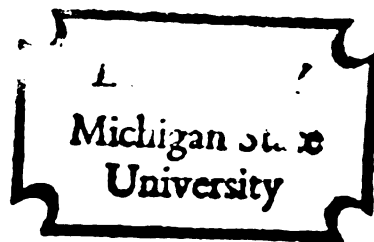


THE LEVELS OF POETRY:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE DICHOTOMY  
BETWEEN NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
AMERICAN POPULAR POETRY  
AND ELITIST POETRY

Thesis for the Degree of Ph. D.  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY  
WILMA JEAN CLARK  
1972



This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

THE LEVELS OF POETRY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE DICHOTOMY  
BETWEEN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN POPULAR POETRY AND  
ELITIST POETRY

presented by

Wilma Jean Clark

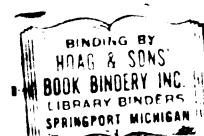
has been accepted towards fulfillment  
of the requirements for

Doctor of Philosophy                      degree in English

                    Rumel B. Nye                      
Major professor

Date May 5, 1972

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## ABSTRACT

### THE LEVELS OF POETRY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN POPULAR POETRY AND ELITIST POETRY

By

Wilma Jean Clark

A study of the dichotomy between popular (widely distributed and responded to by great numbers of people) and elitist (approved by small intellectual and cultural circles generally regarded as authoritative arbiters of taste) poetry in America can yield new understanding of the genre and of critical attitudes about poetry. Modern critics respect only elitist poems, most of which are not accessible to the public at large, and poetry, with a few exceptions, has not been a popular genre recently. But the nineteenth century (1830-1890) was the age of poetry: looking upon poets as mentors, ordinary people read poetry for profit and pleasure; and critics recognized and respected different levels of poetry. While high-level (Whitman, Dickinson) and mid-level (Whittier, Longfellow) poets have been studied thoroughly, there has been little attempt to discover why low-level poems have appealed to tremendously large audiences.

The purpose of this study is to examine in nineteenth-century American literature both the criticism about poetry and the works of several popular poets in order to answer three questions: (1) What



is the source of appeal in popular poetry? How does it function?

(2) Specifically how do popular and elitist poems differ? (3) How do nineteenth- and twentieth-century attitudes differ about the levels of poetry?

To determine nineteenth-century critical expectations for poetry, Part I is a review of the major essays (e.g., Emerson, "The Poet," 1844), prefaces in poetry anthologies, and all articles in 1830-1890 dealing with poetry in the principal journals--United States Democratic Review, Knickerbocker, North American Review, Christian Examiner. Several histories of criticism in the two centuries are used here. Part II examines the work of four popular poets: Lydia Huntley Sigourney (1791-1865), Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1855-1919), Bayard Taylor (1825-1878), Will Carleton (1845-1912). Part III is a comparison of two writers who attempted to answer the critics' call for an American bard: Whitman came from the people and wrote about them and for them, but was never read by the common people; Longfellow, an aristocrat of Harvard Yard, became paradoxically the most widely read and beloved poet in American history.

Levels of aesthetic excellence in poetry are specifically illustrated throughout this study. Higher-level poems exhibit a greater correspondence between form and content, succeed in amalgamating a greater diversity of elements into a unified poem, force the reader's careful attention to words and phrases in the poem, demand the reader's active participation in working out form and meaning, and offer the reader insights of greater challenge and significance. Lower-level poems tend to utilize predictable schemes of rhyme and rhythm; to be simple, clear, and forthrightly didactic; and to employ



only a few elements in a "star system," thus avoiding the complexity of a densely textured poem. Lower-level poems usually reaffirm old convictions rather than challenging the reader to discover new ideas or perspectives.

While usually not offering a fully aesthetic experience, popular poetry of the nineteenth century had other valid functions. It was a medium for instruction, when the people were just beginning to yearn for knowledge and culture, and for entertainment, in an age before radio, film, and television. It had psychological functions of soothing grief and hardship and of bolstering the morale by reassuring readers of individual worth and capability.

Nineteenth-century critics respected lower-level, functional poetry, that dealt with affairs of everyday life and was explicitly didactic, easily understood, interesting, optimistic, and soothing. Modern critics explain the superiority of elitist poetry: it approximates the complexity of life, while lower-level poetry sacrifices truth; it controls feeling rather than exploiting it; it leads a reader to face and transcend reality rather than to escape it. The study concludes by suggesting to critics and teachers a way to reconcile the critical attitudes of the two centuries--to recognize with nineteenth-century writers that lower-level poetry may be legitimately enjoyed for its simpler values by persons not trained in art or persons needing relaxation, and, in view of modern convincing arguments for the superiority of great poems, to work for the improvement of aesthetic taste through education whenever possible.

THE LEVELS OF POETRY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE DICHOTOMY  
BETWEEN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN POPULAR POETRY AND  
ELITIST POETRY

By

Wilma Jean Clark

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

1972

67-658

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1972

## DEDICATION

To the three most tolerant people I know--  
Tom, whose patience and good humor are my  
mainstay, and Susan and Kristina, who have  
grown up thinking that mothers are people who  
study all the time.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to Professor Russel Nye for his direction of this dissertation project. He has been most helpful in suggesting the original idea for the study, in guiding the research, and in editing the manuscript. I appreciate very much the model he provides for excellence in scholarship and teaching.

The other two members of my guidance committee have also been a source of inspiration and encouragement. I want to thank Professor James Pickering for suggestions of readings and for his buoyant enthusiasm which has been appreciated often, and Professor C. David Mead, who has made Whitman a "mountain" in my literary topography.

I would like to extend special thanks to three professors whose styles of teaching I admire and who have, over the years, shown me how to read poems: Henry Pommer at Allegheny College, Jean Malmstrom at Western Michigan University, and Lawrence Babb at Michigan State University.

There is one lady I think of every time I write a paper, Miss Adelaide DeMaison in Meadville, Pennsylvania. Whenever my exposition is clear or sensible, it is because of something I learned from her.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the current surge of interest in popular culture in America, scholars and critics are engaging in serious study of the popular arts to discover what kinds of art appeal to the millions, and why. One result is a new look at all art, a reexamination of sources and forms, a reevaluation of functions and effects. In particular, a study of the dichotomy between popular and elitist poetry in America can yield new understanding of the genre.

A cursory review of the history of the popularity of poetry in America raises the central questions for the study and indicates that nineteenth-century literature (1830-1890) is the most fertile ground for our analysis.

Poetry has not generally been a popular art form in the twentieth century. While the millions have flocked to films, watched television, and devoured myriads of paperback novels, most people have not spent time or money for poetry. When Rod McKuen first tried to interest publishers in his poems in the early 1960's, he was refused because "poems don't sell."<sup>1</sup> I. A. Richards, commenting on his Practical Criticism experiments with Cambridge students in the 1920's, "safely inferred from the protocols that the relatively cultivated youth of our age spends extremely little of its time over poetry."<sup>2</sup>

There is no reason to believe that American professors have since met with students more experienced in the genre.

And yet, in spite of the severely limited reception of poetry by Americans generally in the twentieth century, there have been isolated cases of phenomenal success in selling poems. In 1904 Edgar Guest began writing a verse a day in his Detroit Free Press column. By 1916 he had attracted a large following of readers: Frank Reilly printed 3,500 copies of A Heap O' Livin', then 25,000 copies in the second printing, and 100,000 copies in each additional printing. Over a seventy-year period Guest wrote some 11,000 poems which were collected into books periodically. The Collected Verse of 937 poems, first issued in 1934, is now in its twentieth printing. Guest enjoyed national fame, was a platform speaker in great demand, and was especially beloved by Detroiters who declared an "Eddie Guest Day" in 1951. In 1952 the Michigan Legislature named him state poet laureate, declaring that people have found in his poems "moral support in times of stress and have enjoyed his subtle humor and homespun philosophy."

More recently the musician, arranger, and singer Rod McKuen has been breaking all records in America for selling books of poems. Publisher's Weekly noted in the spring of 1969 that for the first time in seventy years of record-keeping, McKuen was the only author to have three books in the top ten best-sellers within one year--his first three books of poems. These three books have sold more than the combined works of T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Just before Christmas 1969, the first printing of In Someone's Shadow was the largest of any book, poetry or otherwise, in



the history of Random House, and just after Christmas the bookstores were sold out.

The Guest-McKuen phenomenon raises the question that first prompted this study: in an age when poetry is usually shunned with a grimace by most non-academic readers, what is the source of the appeal in these exceptional cases?

The most provocative questions arise, however, not so much from the popularity of the poets as from the reactions of elitist critics to their works: quick contempt and snobbish, final dismissal. In a recent issue of the New Republic one writer pondered "Who reads McKuen? Everybody who doesn't read and no one who does." He pictured McKuen as "weeping nostalgically all the way to the bank or the broker's," and he went about as far as one could in condemning the poems: they are "poems to screw by, for one thing, and to masturbate to, one gathers from internal evidence on page forty-five of In Someone's Shadow."<sup>3</sup> Edgar Guest manifested a warm humanity and amiability that saved him from condemnation of such scathing nature, but his poems have been a joke with elitists who refer to the homely imagery and facile, rhymed moralizing of Eddie Guest when they want to exemplify bad poetry.

This negative critical response to popular poetry raises a problem in definition and provokes the basic questions for the study at hand.

First, definition of popular poetry. Literary critics seem to work on the tacit assumption that when poetry is popular it will necessarily be vulgar and inferior. Even the work of Robert Frost has suffered from this assumption; his work has been popular and





therefore suspect by some critics. Critics equate popularity with inferiority. Some writers, Dwight Macdonald notably, contend that popularity causes vulgarization of the public taste, and T. S. Eliot went so far as to find culture and egalitarianism incompatible: if one chooses egalitarianism as the higher value, fine, but one must thereby relinquish culture.<sup>4</sup>

This automatic equation of popularity and inferiority is both unfair and risky because it precludes both (1) a just estimate of the value in popular poetry, and (2) a thoughtful appreciation of specifically how elitist poetry is superior, if it is. In this paper I will use the word popular, as Abraham Kaplan does, in a quantitative rather than a qualitative sense to refer to poems that have been widely distributed and responded to by great numbers of people. As Kaplan writes, "There is no fixed a priori relation between quantity and quality. . . . Vulgarity . . . in spite of etymology is not constituted by being popular [in the sense of widespread.]"<sup>5</sup>

The contemptuous dismissal of popular poets by elitist critics prompts the questions underlying this paper. Is the snobbism justified? Considering the widespread appeal of these poems which are read, cited, memorized by millions of people, should we not make a fresh examination, without prejudgment, to determine what kinds of value lie in popular poems? And finally, if elitist poetry is discovered to be superior to popular poetry, can we determine more exactly how the elitist poems are superior?

The fact is that neither Guest nor McKuen claimed to be a poet. Guest called himself a "newspaperman who writes verses" or

"rhymes, doggerel, anything you want to call it. I just take the simple everyday things that happen to me and figure out that they probably happen to a lot of other people, and then I make simple rhymes out of 'em and people seem to like 'em."<sup>6</sup> McKuen does not call himself a poet but a "stringer of words." The critics and the two popular poets themselves seem to agree that there are differing levels of aesthetic excellence; the assumption in this paper is that there may be something valuable in the lower levels as well as in the highest. The purpose of this study is to examine some poems from various levels to determine what values lie in each and how they differ from one another.

Although modern writers like McKuen first prompted my interest in the popular-elitist dichotomy in poetry, nineteenth-century literature provides the most abundant material for the study. Mid-nineteenth century was the great age for poetry in America. Carl Bode contrasts the two periods: we are now (1959) in the Age of Prose when "Americans eye a poet suspiciously and dismiss his poems as too difficult or too easy," but the 1800's provided a great audience for poetry. Housewives, merchants, ministers, and clerks read poetry for pleasure and profit.<sup>7</sup> Lydia Sigourney was reaching wide audiences with her poetic effusions in the gift annuals of the 1830's and magazines of the 1840's. Nathaniel Parker Willis published a poem a week for twenty-one years and became widely known through his public relations tactics and versatility in writing.

Russel Nye writes, "The position of the poet in early nineteenth-century society was more elevated and secure than at any



other period in American history." Families read poetry aloud together, from Whittier's Snowbound or Longfellow's Hiawatha, for example. Children memorized poems at home and in school. Anthologies of poetry, sometimes several volumes in length, were published throughout the century: William Cullen Bryant's editions of the Library of Poetry and Song were best sellers; Houghton Mifflin published the nineteenth-century poets in another popular series, "Household Editions." Poets were looked upon as "guides" or "mentors" whose poems could help readers make proper decisions in their daily lives. Nye writes, "Almost every literate person between 1820 and 1900 had a fund of poetry stored in his memory, to be referred to on appropriate occasions, and the majority of the general public held a large body of verse in common."<sup>8</sup>

George Arms, writing on the "Schoolroom Poets" has also emphasized the popularity of poetry a century ago when Lowell, for example, could note a man reading Burns's poetry to a casual traveling acquaintance in a railroad coach; the people used Whittier's poems as songs and the poems of all the schoolroom poets as hymns; Whittier had a Cape Ann fishing boat named after him; and Longfellow's birthday prompted a spontaneous celebration in nearly all schoolrooms.<sup>9</sup> In the 50's and 60's men like Bayard Taylor, world traveler and prose-writer as well as poet, and John Godfrey Saxe, a Vermonter known for his dry wit, took to the road and attracted large, enthusiastic audiences in American lyceum halls.

James Hart points out that as the century reached its end, the people's poets were still those established in the 40's and 50's

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and carried by school and by parent over into the minds of the younger generation.<sup>10</sup> Bryant lamented near the end of his career that no man makes money by poetry "for the simple reason that nobody cares a fig for it," that men were too occupied with politics, railroads, and steamboats to provide an audience for poets. But there was an audience for a different kind of poet, the verse-writer who began appearing in newspaper columns. James Whitcomb Riley, as editor of the Indianapolis Journal, began versifying in 1877; Will Carleton, a Michigan newspaperman writing poems which blended sentimentality, dialect, and rustic humor, sold thousands of books in the 1870's; Ella Wheeler Wilcox made a dramatic entrance into literary fame with her Poems of Passion in 1883, and in 1884 began writing a poem a day for syndicated distribution in newspapers. The "news-paper poets" dominated popular verse after 1890.

Of course, the writers in this summary are not acclaimed as great poets by twentieth-century elitist critics. Modern critics (e.g., Roy Harvey Pearce, Hyatt Waggoner, George Arms) seem to agree that Emerson, Poe, Whitman, Dickinson (and some name Melville and Thoreau) are the superior American poets of the nineteenth century. But Sigourney, Longfellow, Taylor, Saxe et al. are some of the poets whose works were widely distributed and responded to by great audiences, while the elitist poets were being read only by limited numbers of people. F. O. Matthiessen comments on this contrast in the preface to American Renaissance: Whittier's Songs of Labor (1850) and Longfellow's Hiawatha (1855) were best sellers while Emerson's Nature (1836) had been distributed so slowly that a second edition

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was not produced until 1849; Longfellow reported in 1857 that sales of Hiawatha had exceeded three hundred thousand copies while Whitman published Leaves of Grass himself (1855) and probably gave away more copies than were sold. The point here is that while elitist critics have made us familiar with aesthetic value in the highest poetry and recently several (Pearce, Waggoner, Arms, and Norman Holmes Pearson) have attempted to find elitist qualities in Longfellow and the other "fireside poets," little has been done to discover what was going on in poems that were selling to tremendously large audiences. What was the source of the appeal in these poems and how did they differ from the high-level poetry praised by critics and all but ignored by the people? That is the subject of this paper.

I have selected popular poets rather arbitrarily from the catalogue assembled by Russel Nye in The Unembarrassed Muse. These writers were prominent at various times during the 1830-1890 "Age of Popular Poetry" and were chosen because they came from different geographical locations and seem to have appealed to a variety of kinds of audiences: Lydia Huntley Sigourney (1791-1865), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), Bayard Taylor (1825-1878), Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1855-1919), and Will Carleton (1845-1912).

Early in the study I discovered a problem in determining elitist qualities with which to compare and contrast popular poetry. In some cases elitist expectations for poetry in the twentieth century differ markedly from elitist standards in the nineteenth. George Arms has noted modern preference for (1) colloquial diction, (2) realistic subject matter, (3) tension, and (4) complexity, as



directly opposed to nineteenth-century preference for (1) literary diction, (2) poetical-picturesque subject matter, (3) relaxation, and (4) unambiguous simplicity.<sup>11</sup> There is also a difference in elitist attitudes about the basic function of poetry, moderns deprecating the use of the poem as vehicle for rhetorical truth, but nineteenth-century critics respecting the didactic function of poetry. Then, too, most moderns are willing to recognize value in only the highest level of poetry, while nineteenth-century critics, as Russel Nye has demonstrated, were more willing to admit different legitimate functions at different levels of aesthetic achievement.<sup>12</sup>

The first part of this paper is, then, a review of nineteenth-century criticism to determine expectations for poetry in the period. I have considered elitist documents of literary criticism; all articles between 1830-1890 dealing with poetry in the principal journals--United States Democratic Review, North American Review, Knickerbocker, Christian Examiner; and prefaces in nineteenth-century anthologies of poetry. Several histories of nineteenth-century criticism have been very helpful: Clarence Brown, The Achievement of American Criticism; John Stafford, Literary Criticism of Young America; William Charvat, The Origins of American Critical Thought; Robert Spiller, "Critical Standards in the American Romantic Movement," College English, 1947. In Part I, I have summarized ideas of the period about the function of the poet and the function of poetry and pointed up the contrast with twentieth-century criticism wherever significant. This dual standard is frequently considered in those sections of Part II that deal with differences between popular and elitist poems.

Throughout the criticism of the early 1800's there is a call for a national literature and for a poet for the people. It is interesting to note at what points these two requisitions concur and then to consider whether the century did provide a poet for the American people. Part III is a comparison of two contenders for the title of Nineteenth-Century American Bard. Whitman seemed to meet the specifications of some critics in coming from the people and writing about the people and for them. In fact, the U.S. Democratic Review hailed him "An American Bard at last!"<sup>13</sup> He should have been popular--but he was not. On the other hand, Longfellow, an aristocrat of Harvard Yard using the traditionally literary materials of the elite in much of his work, became, paradoxically, the most widely read and most beloved poet in American history.

The purpose of this dissertation, then, is to use nineteenth century materials in American literature to explore the dichotomy between popular and elitist poetry and, specifically, to suggest some answers to three questions:

1. What makes a poet popular--what is the source of his appeal?
2. What are the unique qualities of popular poetry--what values are inherent in it and what function does it serve?
3. As specifically as possible, how do popular and elitist poetry differ--what makes an elitist poem superior?

[illegible]

## NOTES--INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup>Related by Rod McKuen while co-hosting "The Mike Douglas Show" on ABC television, January 12, 1970.

<sup>2</sup>I. A. Richards, Practical Criticism (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929), p. 312.

<sup>3</sup>Louis Coxe, "Money in Art," New Republic, 3 January 1970, pp. 32-33.

<sup>4</sup>T. S. Eliot, Notes Toward the Definition of Culture (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>Abraham Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 24 (Spring 1966), 352.

<sup>6</sup>Royce Howes, Edgar A. Guest (Chicago: Reilly and Lee, 1953), p. 87.

<sup>7</sup>Carl Bode, The Anatomy of American Popular Culture, 1840-1861 (Berkeley: U. of California, 1959), p. 188.

<sup>8</sup>Russel Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America (New York: Dial Press, 1970), pp. 100-01.

<sup>9</sup>George Arms, The Fields Were Green (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1953), p. 4.

<sup>10</sup>James Hart, The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1950), p. 139.

<sup>11</sup>Arms, pp. 3-5.

<sup>12</sup>Nye, pp. 94-95.

<sup>13</sup>"Walter Whitman and His Poems," U.S. Democratic Review, 36 (September 1855), 205 ff. In The Solitary Singer (p. 171) Gay Wilson Allen, citing In Re Walt Whitman (ed. by his literary executors, Philadelphia, 1893, pp. 13 and 27), notes that Whitman later admitted having written this article himself.

PART I

NINETEENTH-CENTURY EXPECTATIONS FOR POETRY

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## CHAPTER I

### TOWARD A POETRY FOR THE PEOPLE

American popular poetry did not begin in the nineteenth century. James Hart has noted "America's first best seller" in 1640, the Bay Psalm Book, a translation of psalms into congregational hymns in which the writer clarified his purpose to work for "conscience" and "fidelity" as opposed to "eloquence" or "poetry."<sup>1</sup> From the beginning, popular poetry was that used to teach moral lessons. Throughout the eighteenth century there was a vigorous and widely read poetry in broadsides, sold on the streets for a penny, and in almanacs. This verse was simple in imagery and vocabulary, factual, direct, and had as its purpose, again, to teach lessons and convey information.<sup>2</sup>

Popular poetry blossomed most fully, however, in the nineteenth century. Several forces pressed for poetry that the people could read, understand, and enjoy. From above, in the hierarchy of aesthetic excellence, critics became interested in the popular audience--wanting to amalgamate a national character, to improve the general morality of the populace, or to acculturate the masses; some writers, for more immediately practical and perhaps less noble motives, saw a way of making money by writing verses that would sell. From below, the newly literate masses were eager for material



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to read and the newly educated created a demand for cultural materials, including poetry. In the early part of the period studied here (1830-1850), the pressure for a popular poetry came from above: the quest for a national literature that had been mainly elitist in origin now assumed concern for the people; while critics calling for a national literature had initially been motivated by pride or by recognizing the necessity to find ways of expressing the uniqueness of the American experience, writers in our period began calling for a national literature "for the good of the people." In the later part of our period, particularly 1850-1870, the pressure for popular poetry came principally from below, from the expanding capabilities, leisure, and cultural desires of the people and from burgeoning business techniques which made mass production of literature, including poetry, an economic fact.

The second point here, the development of the popular patronage of literature in the fifties and sixties, has been explored by William Charvat.<sup>3</sup> During these two decades railroads were extended into the Midwest, carrying culture from the Northeast throughout the whole of a new Northern cultural unit from Boston to the Mississippi with a southern boundary connecting Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati. Primarily because of expanding education among the people, the kind of culture prevailing in this "new North" was different from the patrician culture in the old urban centers in the South. During the fifties and sixties the population of the United States increased by sixty-eight per cent, attendance doubled at public schools where the ability to read well was the important goal, and

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a higher, "useful" education for the many began to supplant the old tradition of a classical education for the few. Increased leisure time for women led to their education, and by mid-century upper and middle class women had become the predominant audience for imaginative literature.

Besides public schools, the lyceum and public lecture systems stimulated interest in culture among the people. The journalistic industry flourished and provided thousands of readers throughout the North with book and lecture reviews, travel letters (e.g., Bayard Taylor), and popular verse of the New York poets. Charvat notes that Bayard Taylor ranked Horace Greeley's weekly New York Tribune "next to the Bible in popularity in the Midwest." By 1870 over four thousand cheap weekly magazines were being published with a circulation of ten and one-half million, or one copy for every two or three adults in the nation. Charvat notes finally that the high cost of business expansion--printing machinery, higher royalties, national advertising--necessitated that a book sell to more than the "elite few." He concludes that "the forces of education and business . . . combined to make the popular patronage of literature an economic fact." The public required that writers communicate in an interesting way to "nonliterary," "nonintellectual," but "intelligent people." Charvat comments on two different ways that writers responded to the popular patronage of literature: some like Emerson and Melville tried to "adapt their best gifts to the needs of their audience" but others like Bayard Taylor "attempted a false dualism" in "subsidizing unprofitable 'art' by grinding out commercially successful work of

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which they were contemptuous."<sup>4</sup> I have attempted to show in Part II of this paper that the century produced yet a third type of writer: the nonelitist poet born and raised among the people and gifted in expressing ideals and sentiments held commonly by them.

Antecedent to the forces for popular literature (1850-70) analyzed by Charvat was the great cry for a national literature in the early half of the century. This movement was initially elitist in motivation but became a force for "improving" the people by creating a national literature for them.

Although the push for a national literature began immediately after the Revolutionary War, the sum of American writing by 1830 was still predominantly imitative. Russel Nye, citing Benjamin T. Spencer, The Quest for Nationality, as the principal source for study of this subject, offers the explanation that while Americans naturally wanted a native, indigenous, original art, "universally beautiful, morally true, expressive of American ideals, and representative of the American spirit,"<sup>5</sup> both writers and the reading public in the early years of the nation lacked self-confidence in literary taste. It was easier to imitate Pope and admire Scott than to hazard a judgment on an American poet or unknown novelist like Cooper.<sup>6</sup>

Attitudes among literary men were increasingly nationalistic, however, and Robert E. Spiller holds that the revolt against imitation was the primary motivation for Romanticism in American literature.<sup>7</sup> The effort for a national literature demanded use of American materials (landscape and people) and American ideas, and therefore

the principles underlying American national being had to be defined. Spiller abstracts four basic qualities of American democratic man that were gradually defined in the early years of the nation: he was (1) an "intense individualist" with a belief in his own rights, opportunities, powers, and destiny, but he also had (2) an "intense social conscience," and maintained that allowing each man to develop personally was the best way to create the perfect society (perfection of the whole being effected through perfection of the parts). He had (3) "a sound practical sense" born of his pioneering, that proved a useful tool in helping him attain (4) ideals deriving from belief in "inexhaustible spiritual and material resources" at the basis of his "buoyant nationalism."<sup>8</sup> Spiller notes that literary men early in the century mistakenly believed that these unique qualities of the American democratic man could be forced into the neo-classical molds of the old-world literature, and that after a succession of absurdities (e.g., Barlow clothing his Adam in the costume of Columbus and supplying the Archangel Hesperus to take him to a mountain from which to point out the glories of America)<sup>9</sup> the literati finally realized that new forms had to be found for expressing the new ideas. In this way Americans broke free from the trap of literary imitation and by 1840 were ready to launch the Romantic movement and to provide the new nation with a literature of her own.<sup>10</sup>

An ironic contrast between subject and function appears in this analysis of the drive for an American literature. The materials in the literature are democratic, the subjects are the people and their unique qualities, but, as Spiller points out, these democratic principles were not the "battle cry of the underprivileged" as would





have been the case in Europe, but were articulated by members of the privileged classes, mainly from the legal and religious professions.<sup>11</sup> These thinkers were concerned with a native elitist literature, and though they realized that such literature would deal with the American people as well as landscape, they were initially not concerned primarily with writing for the people.

An examination of the documents calling for a national literature, however, reveals an occasional interest in creating literature for the good of the people, an attitude that developed fully in the 1840's mainly in articles by Young America critics in the United States Democratic Review where the request became a definite and eloquent appeal for literature for the people.

An important beginning was made by William Ellery Channing in 1830 in his "Remarks on National Literature." Channing advocated an elitist literature in which the expression of the nation's most superior minds would be recorded. The literature would be a concentration of the thoughts of gifted men in the exact sciences, in mental and ethical philosophy, in history and legislation, fiction and poetry. But the purpose Channing had in mind was a "higher work" than merely exercising the gifted intellect in discourse. Gifted men would, through literature, be forming an "intellectual brotherhood," an elitist group surely, but one that existed "to join their labors for the public good." For Channing literature was "the concentration of intellect for the purpose of spreading itself abroad and multiplying its energy." Noting that reading had once been the privilege of a few but was now the occupation of multitudes, Channing emphasized



the power of the printed word which granted the mind "a kind of omnipresence." Like T. S. Eliot a century later,<sup>12</sup> Channing was interested in the development of a high-level literature, not for the sake of preserving a snobbish, elitist class of art, but because of the effect it would have on the populace in general. He wrote, "We know nothing so fitted to the advancement of society as to bring its higher minds to bear upon the multitude; as to establish connections between the more or less gifted." For Channing literature was the "chief means of forming a better race of human beings."<sup>13</sup>

Longfellow used the call for a national literature as the topic for his commencement oration at Bowdoin in 1825 and returned to the subject in 1832 in a North American Review article on Sidney's The Defence of Poesy. He urged poets to write more naturally from their own feelings and impressions: enough of skylarks and nightingales; one "might as well introduce an elephant or rhinoceros into the New England landscape." He called for an original literature that would express the national character--its scenery, climate, historic recollections, government, institutions--and that would "advance the cause of truth and the improvement of society."<sup>14</sup>

Coming closer to a definite statement for poetry for the people, is an idea surfacing at various spots in mid-century criticism: that a principal purpose of a national poetry would be to amalgamate the people into a unified whole. Longfellow's 1832 article on Sidney identified this as one of the highest uses of poetry--to consolidate the character of the nation: "The impressions produced by poetry upon national character at any period are again

reproduced and give a more pronounced and individual character to the poetry of a subsequent period." In 1836 The Christian Examiner entertained a vision of an American poetry that would "fill the air with a new glory"; excite in people's hearts "a chivalric heroism in the arts of peace" and "an onward and an upward buoyancy of soul, which shall bear them to nobler purposes, higher destinies, and more perfect triumphs."<sup>15</sup> The Knickerbocker, which a few years later would throw up its hands in cynical despair over the charges that America was unable to produce an original literature,<sup>16</sup> printed an article in 1837 in which the writer noted that while the power of composing poetry is a gift of the few, the "power of appreciating it is open to all." The writer concluded, "We want more national songs. . . . They give a tone to the feelings of a nation; they unite the hearts of a people."<sup>17</sup>

The United States Democratic Review, of course, joined in the pronouncement that a national poetry is

one of the strongest bonds of common feeling. More particularly does it become so when the subject is domestic. The fame of an author who is universally admired is part of the inheritance of every individual citizen of his country. He adds another ligament to the ties which bind a people together.<sup>18</sup>

Norman Holmes Pearson's favorable estimate of Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride" is predicated upon this value of poetry as a cohesive force among the people of the nation: the purpose of the poem is "to create a figure from the past whose virtues of immediate decision and action will coincide with and catch up the virtues of what had been America's chief moral action as a nation."<sup>19</sup> Walt Whitman, too, frequently expressed the value of poetry as an amalgamative. A

national literature will record the "particular modes of the universal attributes and passions" of the country as well as "its faiths, heroes, lovers and gods, wars, traditions, struggles, crimes, emotions, joys" (Democratic Vistas). Whitman wrote in "By Blue Ontario's Shore":

I listened to the Phantom by Ontario's shore,  
I heard the voice arising demanding bards,  
By them all native and grand, by them alone can these  
States be fused into the compact organism of a Nation.

If poetry is to act as a patriotic binding force, it is necessary that the people be able to read it. And the call for a national literature did evolve into a petition for poetry for the people. Whitman wrote in Democratic Vistas:

I should demand a programme of culture, drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture rooms, but with an eye to practical life, the west, the workingmen, the facts of farms and jackplanes and engineers, and of the broad range of the women also of the middle and working strata, and with reference to the perfect equality of women, and of a grand and powerful motherhood. . . . this programme . . . must have for its spinal meaning the formation of a typical personality of character, eligible to the uses of the high average of men --and not restricted by conditions ineligible to the masses.

The call for a national poetry about and for the people reached its most urgent and eloquent expression in the 1855 preface to Leaves of Grass. "A great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as a woman. A great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning." Whitman, like most of the nineteenth-century American Romantics, had been influenced by

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the liberal, democratic criticism of Young America writers in the forties. In 1858 Whitman wrote that their organ, the Democratic Review, was a "magazine of a profounder quality of talent than any since."<sup>20</sup> And it was Young America writers like Evert A. Duyckinck and William A. Jones who made the most articulate request for a poetry for the people.

The primary interest of these critics was a democratic national literature.<sup>21</sup> In the first volume of the Democratic Review they indicated concern that literature be understood by the people, by defining the role of the critic as mediator between the poet and the people: "criticism is not . . . fault-finding, but interpretation of the oracles of genius. Critics are the priests of literature." For Young America critics, poetry was the highest kind of literature and it was to serve a practical, social function: the most important aspect of poetry was its content of ideas that would contribute toward "the building up of human perfectibility."

William A. Jones addressed himself to this point in attempting to answer the question, what is poetry?

The infusion of popular feeling into our works of speculation, the great aims of reforming, enlightening, and, in a word, educating the people and impressing the importance of the individual--this is one of the great problems of the age, and perhaps the Problem. To render man physically comfortable, and to give him sufficient occupation . . . is the primary duty of society, but, immediately next to that, to seek to elevate and refine, deepen and expand, the characters of all men. . . .<sup>22</sup>

Jones rejoiced in the "culture of the imagination" that the poor then had; he noted "people's editions, cheap libraries without end" and

looked forward to the time when state and private benefactors would put culture within reach of everyone. Jones purported that a "general diffusion" of the "culture of imagination" would benefit all by encouraging truer, more affectionate, more confiding relations among fellow men.<sup>23</sup>

Then, in 1843, Jones' article in the Democratic Review was an eloquent and detailed statement of the value of "Poetry for the People."<sup>24</sup> Jones ranked the "importance and elevation of the mass" as the predominant fact in the nineteenth century. He reasoned that since "poetry always conveys the truest and most striking features" of the age, it would have to reflect and speak to the People in the nineteenth century. He noted the decline of the knight and the baron in poems, and hailed "the poor man, upright, sincere, earnest, with deep enthusiasm and vigorous self-reliance" as the hero in the poetry of the time. The proper subject for poems would not be gallant chivalry, but the "real happiness of domestic love"; not world-wide war and slaughter, but the "struggle of life, war with circumstances" that the common man fought daily.

Jones called for a "Poet of the People," a "Homer of the mass" who would be a champion in working for the "elevation of the people." This poet would express the dignity and worth of the life of the common man, and he would encourage and uplift his readers in spirit. Jones listed the topics for a Poet of the People:

- (1) the necessity and dignity of labor, of endurance
- (2) the native nobility of an honest, brave heart
- (3) the innate claims of genius, virtue over futile conventional distinctions of rank and wealth



- (4) the equality of civil rights and political advantages  
(not meaning social equality in character and education)
- (5) manly charity and generosity
- (6) honorable poverty and a contented spirit

The great aspiration for a national literature did evolve, then, in at least one of its aspects, into a pressure for a poetry about the people, to be read and understood by them, for their own improvement. Jones concluded that a series of poems expressing in popular verse the ideas of Channing for the elevation of the laboring classes would be "the best gift the American Poet could offer to his country." Jones felt certain that "our chef d'oeuvres" would be in that province.

This is one great and important difference between the critical expectations for poetry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Modern critics have been taught by the tenets of the New Criticism to believe that the function of teachers and critics is not so much to raise the popular taste as to keep the elitist taste from further lowering itself. A main branch of nineteenth-century criticism held, on the other hand, that a primary function of poetry was to improve the lot of the masses, spiritually, culturally, and practically, and that to effect these improvements poetry had necessarily to be intelligible to the people.

NOTES--CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>Hart, The Popular Book, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse, pp. 88-93.

<sup>3</sup>William Charvat, "The People's Patronage," in Literary History of the United States, ed. James E. Spiller et al. (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 513-25.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 524.

<sup>5</sup>Russel Nye, The Cultural Life of the New Nation, 1776-1830 (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 246.

<sup>6</sup>Nye, Cultural Life, p. 249.

<sup>7</sup>Robert E. Spiller, "Critical Standards in the American Romantic Movement," College English, 8 (1947), 344-52.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 350.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>T. S. Eliot, Notes Toward the Definition of Culture (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949). Eliot expounds a theory of culture, surprising perhaps to those who think of him as being exclusively elitist, in which maintenance of several levels of culture is necessary for a healthy society. The more superior and conscious part of the culture "draws vitality" from the "humbler" parts of society; the lower cultural levels, likewise, are enriched by the higher. For example, the upper-middle class "would not have been what it was,

without the existence of a class above it, from which it drew some of its ideals and some of its criteria, and to the condition of which its more ambitious members aspired" (p. 38).

<sup>13</sup>William E. Channing, "Remarks on National Literature," 1830, rpt. in The Achievement of American Criticism, ed. Clarence Arthur Brown (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1954), pp. 126-45.

<sup>14</sup>Henry W. Longfellow, "Review of Sir Philip Sidney's The Defence of Poesy," North American Review, 24 (1832), rpt. in The Achievement of American Criticism, ed. Clarence Arthur Brown, pp. 219-31.

<sup>15</sup>C. M., "Prospects of American Poetry," Christian Examiner, 7 (1836), 594.

<sup>16</sup>"Who Are Our National Poets?" Knickerbocker, 27 (1845), pp. 331 ff. The article ridiculed the British criticism that Bryant, Halleck, and Longfellow had written nothing that could not have been written in England, by pointing out that the only persons in America completely free from foreign influences were our Negro slaves, our "true national poets."

<sup>17</sup>"A Few Plain Thoughts on Poetry by a Business Man," Knickerbocker, 9 (1837), 225-32.

<sup>18</sup>A review of Bryant's poems, U.S. Democratic Review, 8 (1840), 430.

<sup>19</sup>Norman Holmes Pearson, "Both Longfellows," University of Kansas City Review, 16 (Summer 1950), 247.

<sup>20</sup>Clarence Arthur Brown, "The Aesthetics of Romanticism," an introduction to one section in The Achievement of American Criticism (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1954), p. 151.

<sup>21</sup>John Stafford has written a history of this group of critics. Literary Criticism of "Young America": A Study in the Relationship of Politics and Literature (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1952).

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Stafford, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>24</sup>William A. Jones, "Poetry for the People," U.S. Democratic Review, 8 (September 1843), 266-79.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FUNCTION OF POETRY

That the function of poetry is to effect various kinds of improvement in its readers implies a didacticism that is anathema to twentieth-century critics. In attempting to determine how expectations for poetry differ in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we need to examine views in the two periods about a basic question: "What should be the relation between aesthetic pleasure poetry provides and the actual, daily life of the reader?"

Twentieth-century critics reacted against the Matthew Arnold view of poetry as "a criticism of life," and his dictum that "for poetry the idea is everything." "A poem should not mean/ But be," as Archibald MacLeish put it for us. T. S. Eliot's candy-covered pill comes to mind as a summary of modern opinion about a "message" in poetry: in former times the poetry was the sugar-coating which induced people to swallow the moral lesson, but today the message has become the candy covering for the pill of poetry. With a different metaphor Eliot phrased the idea again that the chief value of poetry does not lie in its meaning: the

chief use of the "meaning of a poem . . . may be (for here again I am speaking of some kinds of poetry and not all) to

satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog.<sup>1</sup>

That the poem works upon the reader through channels other than intellectual meaning has been current in the criticism of this century. I. A. Richards held that people who are touched only by the "intellectual stream of thoughts" actually "miss the real poem." He advocated a non-intellectual response to poetry in which the full body of words could be apprehended--the sound of the words being received "in the mind's ear," the feel of the words being experienced, the various pictures from the words arising "in the mind's eye."<sup>2</sup> Nearly a half century later Susan Sontag analyzed the function of art, including poetry, in a similar way: art today is not a criticism of life, but an extension of life; not a vehicle for the heavy burden of content (reportage and moral judgment), but an instrument for extending the use of the senses; not a vehicle of ideas or moral sentiments, but an object with an impact which modifies the consciousness and organizes new modes of sensibility in the receiver.<sup>3</sup>

In describing efforts of the New Critics to find a unique function for poetry, Murray Krieger has supplied a cogent study of the history of changing views about the purposes of poetry.<sup>4</sup> I would like to summarize briefly the five positions in Krieger's analysis because this survey provides an historical perspective from which to view nineteenth-century attitudes about poetry.

Early theorists held that the chief function of poetry was (1) to imitate life, or (2) to yield propositional truth. The theory

of imitation was not practical: in the Republic Plato reasoned that since poetry was twice-removed from ideal truths, it had no real value; even Aristotle distinguished art (what may be) from life (what is); Samuel Johnson proposed an imitation of the general and universal in nature, rather than the particular--the result would be a process of abstraction rather than imitation. The propositional truth theory, articulated by Sir Philip Sidney in An Apology for Poetry, had more success. Poetry was seen as superior to history and philosophy in exemplifying imaginatively for men how life ought to be. This concept of poetry as a vehicle for propositional truth was the most popular in the history of criticism; it controlled the views of early nineteenth-century American critics, was evident in Shelley's Defense of Poetry, and later in Matthew Arnold's view of poetry as a criticism of life. However, the propositional truth theory granted poetry only a limited function, that of decoration; it did not define what qualities made poetry, poetry, and not some other thing, as Eliot phrased it.

Not until the nineteenth-century age of science, when knowledge had to be proved in the laboratory in order to be regarded as knowledge at all, was poetry forced into defining itself. Poetry needed to clarify its unique function--something other than conveying truth which could now be discovered and communicated through scientific means. (3) The aesthetic hedonist seized upon form as providing value; art was valuable for art's sake, merely for the pleasure it provided. This defense did not stand, however, because it relegated poetry to an insignificant position among the



playthings of mankind. Poetry offered pleasure, but from the standpoint of man's other time-consuming activities, it did not justify serious effort. (4) The Romantics assigned poetry the role of conveying intuitionl truth received mystically by the poet. Modern critics have rejected this view of poetry's unique function for two reasons: it emphasizes the uninhibited expression of the poet's intuitions and neglects language as a necessary controlling discipline for the realization of the poet's insights, and furthermore, this theory still relegates poetry to the inferior position of vehicle for truth--instead of Sidney's "handmaiden of rational philosophy," the Romantics made poetry into "the handmaiden of mysticism."

Thus, Krieger traces the efforts of poetry throughout the centuries to discover its unique role. He believes the New Critics have succeeded in defining this true function. (5) They defend poetry as an alternative to prose discourse. Prose is rigid and limited [perhaps linear in McLuhan's sense of the word?] and appropriate for conveying the abstract, generic concepts of science that are referential on a one-to-one basis. The poetic context, however, contains "verbal complexities: endless qualifications, double meanings, even outright contradictions provided they are ironically controlled."<sup>5</sup> Poetry is, therefore, a better medium than prose for doing justice to the "many-faceted" aspects of life, the "ever-changing, ever confusing flow of experience." Poetry does not convey the certainty of a proposition nor the prescription for action of a moral tract, but it yields "knowledge of experience in its fullness."<sup>6</sup>



Krieger contrasts "poetic truth-to-life" with "propositional truth-about-life."

The poem is the only construction which can yield the kind of truth it has to offer; thus, New Critics claim an "autonomy of poetry." The poet works, not merely to reproduce the fullness of experience, but to order it. The poem must accomplish some forming of experience; by means of one unifying insight the poet reduces to order the confusions, disorders, and irrelevancies of some aspect of our ordinary experience. Life is, of course, more complex than literature. However, while prose "abstracts painfully" from life, poetry yields more fullness than does prose discourse. And yet poetry is not as complex as life; the function of the poet is to use his insight and the medium of language in order to make the complexities of our full experience more meaningful in poetry than we find them in life.

There are two points worth emphasizing here. First, the nineteenth century was the transitional period, a time of flux and contention in the critical world,<sup>7</sup> producing advocates of art-for-art's sake, poetry for moral truth, poetry for mystical truth, all of which preceded the twentieth-century clarifications of the New Critics. In determining differences between nineteenth-century popular and elitist poems, we have often to distinguish which standards we are using: those not articulated until a century after the poem was written or standards from one of the critical theories accepted in the nineteenth century.



Second, although modern critics reject outright didacticism in poetry, they do not contend that poetry has no connection with the details of human life. T. S. Eliot, for example, notes that "criticism of poetry moves between two extremes," neither of which is sufficient. In becoming involved exclusively with the moral, social, religious implications of the poem (the message), the critic regards the poem as "hardly more than a text for discourse." But the opposite extreme is also faulty. If the critic sticks too closely to the "poetry" and adopts no attitude toward what the poet has to say, he will tend to "evacuate [the poem] of all significance."<sup>8</sup> Krieger notes that in contrast to Richards' interest in the aesthetic experience, the relation between poem and reader, Cleanth Brooks was concerned primarily to discover the unique relationship between poetry and reality.

Even Richards and Sontag, who are more insistent in denying the importance of content, do not claim that the poem will not affect the reader. They both hint, in fact, that a good poem will improve the reader, but not through direct teaching. In defining the process here, Sontag supplies a word which is also useful to describe some nineteenth-century theories: "infradidactic." The first step in this procedure is a shaking up of the sensibility, and, contrary to the pleasure principle in art-for-art's-sake, the process tends to be initially painful. As Sontag puts it, "Having one's sensorium challenged or stretched hurts." Modern art functions as a kind of shock therapy for "confounding and unclosing the senses."<sup>9</sup> And Richards contends that "good reading" of poems helps us overcome "stock responses" but the experience is uncomfortable.



The shock of discovering how alive with new aspects everything whatever is when contact with reality is restored is anaesthetising to minds that have lost their capacity to reorganize themselves; it stupefies and bewilders. Nearly all good poetry is disconcerting, for a moment at least, when we first see it for what it is. Some dear habit has to be abandoned if we are to follow it.<sup>10</sup>

Both writers envision a kind of "improvement" in the reader which follows the disturbance in the sensibility. Richards writes, "these indirect effects of the overthrow of even a few stock attitudes and ideas is the hope of those who think humanity may venture to improve itself."<sup>11</sup> And even Sontag admits that stimulation of the senses may result ultimately in benefit to the intellect: art is "an object modifying our consciousness and sensibility, changing the composition, however slightly, of the humus that nourishes all specific ideas and sentiments."<sup>12</sup> The poet does not determine the truth to be handed over to the reader, but instead stimulates the consciousness out of which the reader will produce his own ideas. Thus, poetry may be construed to have an "infradidactic" function in much of twentieth-century criticism.

With this review of modern criticism in mind, let us return to the nineteenth-century writers to determine how their attitudes about the function of poetry compare with that of moderns on the didactic-infradidactic scale.

In the early third of the century before the tenets of Romanticism had attracted any serious attention, critics called for a moralistic poetry to enlighten and improve readers. Their expectations, based upon the propositional truth theory in which literature was valued for the good it could do for the race,<sup>13</sup> tended to



draw poetry toward the didactic position on our scale. In 1838 a writer in the Democratic Review defined the "passionate yearning after the good, the true and lovely in moral nature" as the "essential spirit of poetry."<sup>14</sup>

These early writers emphasized the religious foundation of the best poetry. Because "man is not a mere creature of this world but connected with the eternal world of higher intelligences . . . where the Creator manifests his immediate presence," "poetry's best inspiration is derived from religion."<sup>15</sup> Another writer, concerned with life in the next world as much as this one, found that the inspired poets "have strung their lyres in the exultation of the glorious hope of immortality"; they are "imbued with the love of goodness, truth, and beauty."<sup>16</sup> As Charvat noted, critics would not allow poetry any derogatory statement about religious ideals or moral standards. One writer in the Christian Examiner expressed the point quite vividly. The poet must have the "true and deep respect for religion; or at least for virtue and moral purity . . . [he] must avoid the introduction of any tainted composition." The writer added,

The man who will put into a book, which from its character is a family and social book, any thing to offend the serious or cause modesty to hold its tongue and hide its head, is not so much a subject for criticism, as for the House of Correction.<sup>17</sup>

There was general agreement in the criticism of the early part of the century that "the just conception and the true expression of moral goodness constitute the supreme excellence of poetry."<sup>18</sup>





Religious and moral poetry was valued for its beneficial effect on society. "Poetry is second only to religion in its refining and elevating influence. Especially in a community like ours where so many harsh and excited voices are sounding, we gladly hear the gentler accents of the bard."<sup>19</sup> The office of the poet was "to raise the thoughts and affections of others to the same elevation with his own."<sup>20</sup> Fictions, images, figures were regarded as "beautiful hieroglyphics, teaching wisdom and virtue" and delighting in proportion to their concordance with "our moral and intellectual nature as it unfolds itself in its progress toward unlimited improvement."<sup>21</sup> In 1832 a writer in the Christian Examiner, while refraining from complete acceptance of popular modes of literature because the instruction in them tended "toward superficial, facile uses of the mind," was, nevertheless, willing to admit some benefits of popular literature including a supply of higher themes for conversation, an improvement of public taste, a propagation of "profitable truths, which before were known only to a few." This writer included the beneficial amalgamation influence of popular literature: it tends to "improve social feeling by bringing all classes of the community together" and serves to "neutralize hostilities and encourage men of all parties to think and act in unison."<sup>22</sup> Longfellow's "Psalm of Life" was praised in the Christian Examiner in 1840 mainly for its positive moral influence upon the reader. The review contrasted Longfellow's Psalm with Byron's poetry from which "the young can learn no generous purpose, no spirit for the stern battle with evil, nothing of that high and holy enthusiasm which forgets self, and



lifts the soul above all low ambition, and all sordid things." Longfellow's Psalm, on the other hand, provided the noblest "hymn of battle" to accompany the young man into the "momentous conflicts" of his adult life.<sup>23</sup> That the main function of poetry is to effect a general moral improvement of society was eloquently proclaimed by E. P. Whipple in 1844.

We want a poetry which shall speak in clear, loud tones to the people: a poetry which shall make us more in love with our native land . . . which shall give visible form and life to the abstract ideas of our written constitution; which shall confer upon virtue all the strength of principle and all the energy of passion . . . which shall make us love man by the new consecrations it sheds on his life and destiny . . . and give new power to the voice of conscience and new vitality to human affection.<sup>24</sup>

In their moralistic bias early nineteenth-century critics reflected artistic values of the Puritans as well as those of the Renaissance rhetoric, Scottish sources of which were standard texts at American universities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From this viewpoint poetry like prose was an art to serve God and make truth prevail; poets searched for profitable learning and doctrine from which to formulate great precepts which the pleasing manner of poetry would make palatable to readers.<sup>25</sup> From the rhetorical rules of Kames and Blair, Americans had learned that poetry was a vehicle for expressing universal sentiment, for telling a story, or that it had primarily the didactic function of teaching moral precepts.<sup>26</sup> Young America critics, too, but for different reasons, were interested in the social utility of poetry rather than its aesthetic value<sup>27</sup> and regarded its didactic function as primary:

poetry was a vehicle for ideas which would pervade the society and result in practical improvements and democratic reforms; poets and critics were to cooperate in exerting "a most salutary influence upon the public mind" so as "to preserve liberty from degenerating into licentiousness, and democracy from falling into popular disorder."<sup>28</sup>

As the century progressed, however, some skepticism about didactic uses of poetry began to appear occasionally in the journals. E. P. Whipple, though praising Longfellow highly in his 1844 review of Griswold's Poets and Poetry of America, found that he had to admit that some of the criticism of the poet's excessive moralizing was justified: "There is, doubtless, a tendency in his mind to evolve some useful meaning from his finest imaginations, and to preach when he should only sing."<sup>29</sup> Whipple had the same growing disapproval of didacticism to contend with in his comments on Bryant: "Metrical moralizing is generally offensive, from its triteness and pretension, but that of Bryant is so fresh and natural . . . bears so marked a character of truth and feeling that even the most commonplace axiom receives a new importance when touched by the outpourings of his heart and colored by his imagination."<sup>30</sup> Later in 1878 the North American Review, while deprecating the erotic verses of Swinburne because they were "bad morals to the average reader," had to admit that there was "a certain truth" in the position that art should be true to itself and its subject and should "not assume the preacher's task."<sup>31</sup>

The most famous formulation of the anti-didactic theory appeared in Poe's "The Poetic Principle" in Sartain's Union Magazine



in 1850. Poe placed the value of the poem in its power to induce in the reader emotional excitement, "elevation of the soul," and an apprehension, "divine and rapturous" however fleeting, of "supernal Beauty." Rather than Truth or Duty which are the concerns of the Intellect and the Moral Sense respectively, Poe found Taste and its instinct for Beauty to be the province of poetry. He spoke out against the "heresy of The Didactic" proclaiming that the assumption that "the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth" and that "every poem . . . should inculcate a moral" had accomplished "more in the corruption of our Poetical Literature than all its other enemies combined."

But Poe's theory of art-for-art's-sake was the extreme view and lay outside the mainstream of nineteenth-century criticism.<sup>32</sup> Even the Romantics, who dominated criticism and literature by mid-century and who rejected a "super-imposed didacticism,"<sup>33</sup> were not willing to divest poetry completely of its moral quality or social usefulness. Lowell referred to the moral influence of poetry: the office of the poet is to reveal and justify the "grace, goodness, the fair, noble, and true" for the men of his own generation.<sup>34</sup> Emerson called for a poetry that would change the hearts of men and direct their actions:<sup>35</sup>

Merlin's mighty line  
Extremes of nature reconciled,--  
Bereaved a tyrant of his will,  
And made the lion mild.

("Merlin," ll. 51-4)

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Whitman was interested in social and spiritual regeneration which great poetry could initiate: what was needed was

a new-founded literature, not merely to copy and reflect existing surfaces, or pander to what is called taste--not only to amuse, pass away time, celebrate the beautiful, the refined, the past, or exhibit technical, rhythmic, or grammatical dexterity--but a literature underlying life, religious, consistent with science, handling the elements and forces with competent power, teaching and training men--and, as perhaps the most precious of its results, achieving the entire redemption of woman out of these incredible holds and webs of silliness, millinery, and every kind of dyspeptic depletion.  
 . . . (Democratic Vistas, 1871)

Typical of the Romantic rejection of art-for-art's-sake as well as indicative of the kind of social function the Romantic poet was to perform are the comments of a reviewer of Tennyson's poems in 1838 in the Christian Examiner.<sup>36</sup> The writer criticizes Tennyson for creating "beautiful poems that shine for nothing," for contenting himself with mere description of surfaces and externals in nature, for settling into an "aesthetic trance." "Why will he not put forth a poet's might, and work the miracle which he can? Why this idle dallying? Why will he not feel that there is something to do?" And what was a poet to do? The reviewer provides the answer that appears again and again in journal articles in the mid-century: he was to speak to the reader's soul; he was to speak "out of the depth of the universal Spirit" and to awaken the reader to faith in his own soul; he was to relate outward forms of nature to inward feelings of thought and to use these relations to convince readers of "the necessity of immortality."





By mid-century the tenets of Romanticism, and particularly of transcendentalism, pervaded literary criticism. The function of the true poet was to transform, idealize, and exalt things seen until they stood as "types of the eternal unseen, which the heart has ever silently believed."<sup>37</sup> In defining the great poet as discoverer and conveyer of mystical truth (the fourth position in Krieger's analysis), the Romantic critics repeatedly distinguished between the poetry of "art," which describes the surfaces of life; and the poetry of "genius" which is a revelation of deity moving through the vessel-poet. Some critics like Thoreau, who provided the terms here,<sup>38</sup> admitted excellence for both types of poetry and seemed to imply that the distinction was between two kinds of elitist poetry. More often, however, the poetry of art and surfaces was relegated to a definitely inferior position so that for this group of mid-nineteenth-century critics, elitist poetry was defined by its ability to show the reader the way between his soul and the essences behind the "dumb real objects." Already in 1834 poets were being called "the priests of nature" whose function was to "commune with the inmost soul of man."<sup>39</sup> In 1835 A. H. Everett, writing about William Ellery Channing, held that the "foundation and source of poetry" was to bring man "relief and joy in imaginings of unseen and ideal being."<sup>40</sup> In an 1838 review of Nature, the Democratic Review was quick to corroborate Emerson's theory about surfaces and essences, and the distinction between the two kinds of poets was made clear: the poet is "not the versifier, nor the painter of outward nature merely, but the total soul, grasping truth, and expressing it melodiously, equally to the



eye and heart."<sup>41</sup> In "The Poet" (1844) Emerson expanded his poetic theory. "Things admit of being used as symbols because nature is a symbol, in the whole and in every part." By means of "an ulterior intellectual perception," the poet uses things as symbols to express the spiritual "life" behind them. "This insight, which expresses itself by what is called Imagination, is a very high sort of seeing." With it, the poet "sees through the flowing vest the firm nature, and can declare it." Lowell articulated the distinction again ("The Function of the Poet," 1855): the poet was a "seer," conscious of the world of spirit as well as of sense, one who discovered and declared the "perennial beneath the deciduous." A great poet depends upon insight rather than observation and description. In "proportion as he has this [insight] . . . he is an adequate expresser, and not a juggler of words." The poet is the "revealer of Deity."

E. P. Whipple commented in 1844 on "the spirit of transcendental speculation" that had deeply infected the poetry of the age and had even become "the inspiration of the most popular verse produced in our own country"--"Voices of the Night" was his example.<sup>42</sup> Accounting for the fact that Longfellow's book was attracting ten times the number of readers as Pope's "Essay on Man," was the change in interest "from the sensual to the super-sensual." In the purest poetry the imagination either (1) evolved "from material objects the latent spiritual meaning they secrete" or (2) superadded to those objects thoughts and feelings which the senses could not perceive. Through his imagination the bard connected forms, colors, sounds with spiritual truths and made "the world a more blessed habitation for even the humblest."



The principal quality of the elitist poet, then, as defined by mid-nineteenth-century critics most of whom shared a transcendental bias, was the ability to do more than describe the surfaces of life (these critics rejected the imitation theory outright). Instead the poet, "by the divine magic of his genius" seized and projected through analogies, "curious removes, indirections" the essences of things (Democratic Vistas). "The poet, endowed with transcendental sight serves as the spiritual eyes of humanity" (1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass).

While the Romantic critics, then, like the moralistic critics of the early century, still maintained that poetry had a moral and social function, they differed in theory about how the poet discovered "truth" and how he conveyed it to the reader. Critics in the early third of the century expected the poet to discover truth through rationalistic means, to formulate precepts, and to present them ready-made in pleasant metrical form as lessons to the reader. The propositional truth theory was therefore quite tolerant of unmitigated didacticism.

"Transcendental speculation," however, sought truth through mystical, intuitional means. This kind of truth was hard to pin down--Emerson maintained that symbols necessarily had to be fluxional, transitive, vehicular ("The Poet"). Essential truth had to be felt and suggested; attempting to box it into a limited container of verbalization would corrupt, destroy it. So the Romantics moved away from the didactic position on the scale.

As early as 1826 Bryant was lecturing on poetry as a suggestive art that employed "instead of a visible or tangible imitation, arbitrary symbols, as unlike as possible to the things with which it deals."<sup>43</sup> For Bryant the function of poetry was still to deliver "direct lessons of wisdom" but not through rational means; poetry was, rather to suggest truths "which the mind instinctively acknowledges." The poet, intuited essences, and he used symbols to encourage his reader to intuit essential truth for himself.

Similarly Whitman was concerned about the moral influence of poetry but did not propose didactic methods. Great poetry must have "a freeing, fluidizing, expanding religious character, exulting with science, fructifying the moral elements, and stimulating aspirations and meditations on the unknown" (Democratic Vistas). More specifically the moral function of poetry was twofold: (1) to make each man aware of his own supremacy (1855 Preface), and (2) to "dilate the soul" of the reader so as to make him aware of the All-- the eternal pulsations of matter and spirit in the universe--and to encourage him toward apprehension of some part of the "moral purpose" underlying the "kosmos" (Democratic Vistas). For accomplishing this moral purpose Whitman proposed a poetics of suggestion, indirection rather than didactic statement.

Now, the question is, how do the Romantic methods of suggestion through symbol and analogy compare with didactic methods accepted in the early nineteenth century and with infradidactic art of Richards and Sontag where the poem does its work on the reader through the senses rather than (or, more than) through intellectual meaning?





Raising the scale into a perpendicular position might be helpful. Didacticism, forthright statement of propositional truth, belongs in the center of the scale, at "ground level." Below it appears Sontag's infradidacticism--a hoeing process, to extend Sontag's metaphor, in which sensual impact from art stirs up and rearranges the "humus" of the sensibility out of which new ideas and sentiments will grow. The important point at this infradidactic level is that the artist-poet has not determined truth ahead of time; he merely works to stimulate, through the senses, the consciousness out of which the receiver's conceptions of truth will formulate themselves. The New Critics, as described by Krieger, would not be willing to descend to this low a position on the scale; they regard the poet's function as controlling his material through a "unifying insight" which he invites his readers to share--not a moral lesson but a "clarification of life" or "momentary stay against confusion," to borrow from Frost, an insight that is determined by the poet and given over to the reader. The art-for-art's-sake theory does not belong on the scale at all, because it denies relationship between poetry and truth or life; and, at the opposite extreme, the imitation theory which claims to reproduce life, could be represented by a horizontal line running along our imaginary "ground level."

Nineteenth-century transcendental Romanticism often suggests a supradidactic method, the poet intuiting essential, spiritual truth and, while not defining and handing over that truth ready-made to readers, nevertheless, working through symbols and other "indirections" to prompt readers to intuit the same essential truth originally "seen" by the poet. However, at other times, the Romantics, in



placing high value on Imagination and on individual insight, appear to belong at the infradidactic position. Romantics envisioned poetry as initiating redemption of mankind, not through moral lessons directly stated and taught (and sometimes not even through pre-determined intuitional truth to be suggested to the reader), but through a process described by Shelley in The Defense of Poetry and reiterated by William A. Jones in the Democratic Review: poetry would stimulate the general enlargement of the Imagination which would result in a greater capacity in each man for Love and brotherly relations with his fellow men--clearly an infradidactic technique and not greatly different in procedure from Sontag's sensual disturbance of the humus-consciousness.

In yet a second way, Romantics like Whitman were interested in infradidactic methods for stimulation of ideas as well as emotional response. The writer did not define ideas or determine them ahead of time: the poem was merely a stimulus to encourage the reader to discover truth for himself. This passage from Democratic Vistas illustrates Whitman's infradidactic theory. He calls for new forms of spoken and written language (the italics are mine):

not merely the pedagogue-forms, correct, regular, familiar with precedents, made for matters of outside propriety, fine words, thoughts definitely told out--but a language fann'd by the breath of Nature, which leaps overhead, cares mostly for impetus and effects, and for what it plants and invigorates to grow--tallies life and character, and seldomer tells a thing than suggests or necessitates it. In fact, a new theory of literary composition for imaginative works of the very first class, and especially for highest poems, is the sole course open to these States. Books are to be call'd for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert,

[illegible]

must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay--the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or framework. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. That were to make a nation of supple and athletic minds, well-train'd, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers.

	x Supradidactic--Transcendental--Using symbols to Romantics suggest intuitive truth
Imitation Theory	x Didactic--Early nineteenth --Explicit --Most century moralists statement popular of propo- poetry sitional truth
	x New Critics--Momentary unifying insight
	x Infradidactic--Sontag-- Sensual disturbance Richards Shelley--Enlargement of imagi- nation and capacity for love Whitman--Stimulation of thinking processes

The scale of theories about relationship between aesthetic experience and truth in the life of the reader is useful for distinguishing among the various kinds of elitist and popular poetry, and particularly for showing that the epithet "didactic" often hurled



at popular poetry is not a discriminating comment. It seems to imply that elitist poetry is not intended to instruct or convey information about life and does not have a moral purpose. Throwing all elitist poetry into one non-didactic lump results in several mistaken notions which this scale helps to correct. The scale indicates, first, that there have been various expectations for elitist poetry in history and that for several centuries, including the early nineteenth, when the propositional truth theory was generally accepted, elitist poetry was expected to be didactic. It reveals, secondly, that most poetic theories are concerned with relation between poetry and truth (art-for-art's-sake being the only exception) and with the immediate or eventual moral improvement of the reader. The purpose of the scale is to diagram kinds of truth involved and degrees of directness with which the poet is expected to convey his meaning to the reader.

At the center of the scale the term didactic refers to poetry in which moral, propositional (what ought to be, what should be, as well as what is) truth is predetermined by the poet and verbalized in clear and forthright terms which the reader can understand relatively easily. Moving up or down from the center of the scale results in poetry that is increasingly indirect and therefore more subtle and more difficult for the reader to apprehend. The upper (supradidactic) position on the scale represents poetry in which intuitional truth is still predetermined by the poet and moral improvement of the reader is still very much a goal, but in which the poet works not by direct statement but by symbols intended to suggest essential truths to the reader. Moving downward, we find first





(New Critics) poetry that drops the moralistic concern in the subject matter of the poem, although the hope is still that the alert reader will benefit from having summoned his responses and therefore having expanded his awareness. The truth (a unifying insight about what life is like) to be conveyed in the poetry at this position on the scale is still predetermined, but the poet works with ambiguity, paradox, irony, symbol to suggest the complexity of life, and these techniques, like the Romantics' use of symbols, increase the difficulty of reader reception. At the lower position (infradidactic) not only the moralistic aspect of the subject, but the ideas themselves, have been dropped; truth is not predetermined. The poet works to stimulate the senses of the reader (Sontag) or to initiate thinking processes (Whitman); the poet is working below the didactic surface to stimulate the parts of the sensibility out of which the reader's ideas will rise. This lower position, like the upper extreme, proves more difficult for the reader in that it does not give him truths ready-made and gift-wrapped but demands that he work to construct meaning for himself.

The scale reveals, then, that (1) history includes positive critical attitudes about didacticism in poetry, and that (2) what distinguishes popular poetry (which usually is the centrally-positioned didactic kind) from elitist poetry is not that it deals with truth and often has a moral purpose--the distinction lies, rather, in clarity, forthrightness in the poem, and ease in reader reception as opposed to subtlety and indirect techniques in the poem and difficulty for the reader.

It is true that most popular poetry will be found at the central didactic position on the scale. One explanation for this in the nineteenth century is that the propositional truth theory had been accepted for several centuries, and was largely unquestioned in the early 1800's. Common readers and elitist critics alike expected poetry to encapsulate truths and teach moral wisdom. As the century progressed and elitist thinkers began to experiment with theories suggesting new, creative effects that were possible for poetry; the people, characteristically slow to change, did not understand or respond to the new types of poems.

Whitman's case is particularly ironic. The broad-minded, anti-authoritarian, democratic basis of his poetics was seemingly calculated to produce a poetry for the people; but his poetry was not widely approved in the nineteenth century. One of the explanations is provided by this scale. Whereas Young America critics had had in mind a poetry of ideas about daily lives of readers, that is didactic poetry, that would have been immediately intelligible to the people; the Romantic inclination to convey truth through symbols personally perceived, symbols that were peculiar to individual poets and not comprehensible to all, produced a poetry that tended to be esoteric, elitist, rather than a poetry that could be understood and responded to by large numbers of people. Ordinary people are untrained in aesthetic subtleties and are suspicious of poetry coming from the supradidactic and infradidactic extremes of the scale. Poetry that does not produce something immediately intelligible makes people uncomfortable, even causes "pain" as Sontag points out. The relatively



untrained reader has had no one to show him that the initial tension and discomfort are worth enduring because of the exhilaration of new understanding which may follow. This uninitiated reader is secure and comfortable with material that he can understand immediately; besides lack of training, it is possible that the popular reader is deficient in intellectual capacity to handle the subtleties of suggestive poetry; in either case, he is not prepared for and refuses to participate in the "gymnast's struggle" to which Whitman invites him.

Another explanation for the popularity of the relatively clear, didactic poetry is that the reader can understand it and experience some response without working hard. Whitman, somewhat like the New Critics, wants the reader to work at understanding and experiencing the poem; the reader should not be half-asleep but awake, alert, active; he should, in fact, construct the poem for himself. Poems from the supradidactic and infradidactic extremes of the scale tend to be read by only a few, and therefore are considered elitist poems, because only a few people have leisure and energy for the intellectual and emotional effort required in responding to and making some sense of these poems. As I. A. Richards wrote, "it would be absurd to ask a million tired readers to sit down and work." This is the reason that "ideas and responses which cost too much labor both at the distributing end and at the reception end--both for writer and reader--are not practicable, as every journalist knows."<sup>44</sup>

Two further comments need to be made about critical expectations for poetry in our 1830-1890 period.



First is the lack of vitality at the elitist levels during the seventies and eighties. Representatives of the New England genteel tradition "set themselves up as a court of final jurisdiction over American letters."<sup>45</sup> The great reputations of Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell inhibited the creativity of men in different parts of the country working in different modes (e.g., Mark Twain). Imitators like Stoddard and Stedman in New York, Boker in Philadelphia, Aldrich in Boston, using the Atlantic Monthly as their spokesman, maintained control of literature, perpetuating the morality, reticence, and now "stale mentality" of the genteel tradition.<sup>46</sup>

Second is a contrast with twentieth-century expectations about poetry and "reality." Modern critics call for a confrontation with reality which often results in a poetry of sordid detail and emotional despair. Nineteenth-century critics held, however, that the function of poetry was to uplift, elevate, cheer the reader, lighten his burden, brighten his day. Rather than to disturb the reader, poetry was to "soothe this restless feeling,/ And banish the thoughts of day." In contrast with Richards who regards the liberation from stock responses as a primary benefit of poetry, the nineteenth-century critic thought differently about the poet's function:

The mission of the poet is neither to deceive nor to undeceive, but to glorify and sweeten existence. . . . He burnishes the rusty, beautifies the ugly, associates the disconnected, and animates the insensible. . . . Always his proper influence is to purify, enrich, and expand the consciousness that communes with his creations.<sup>47</sup>

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Poetry was "to convert into beauty, thankfulness, and content, the actual palpable things of our every-day life."<sup>48</sup> By the poet's "interweaving human sympathies and feelings with the objects of the material world" they lose their character "of mute insensate things and acquire the power to charm and to soothe us, amidst all the cares and anxieties of our life."<sup>49</sup> One writer contended that the highest value of poetry was its contribution to the "pleasure of man's immortal mind" which needed as did the body, "hours of recreation and repose."<sup>50</sup>

The critics rejected Byron because his poetry "stirs and agitates" rather than exalting the mind and lightening the burden of humanity; it scorns and condemns men rather than impelling us "to deserve and obtain the love and respect of fellow humans"; it tends to "gloat over and glory in our guilt and misery" rather than to teach us to be good and happy.<sup>51</sup> Another writer rejected Childe Harold because, although it had the "form," it lacked the "essence" of poetry: the "tone of misanthropy and egotism is unpoetical. . . . Its effect is merely to stir and sting."<sup>52</sup>

Abraham Kaplan wrote recently that a characteristic of popular poetry is its tendency to "prettify" everything, and Russel Nye has noted that no poet of despair has ever been popular with the American people. But optimism and tendency to prettify can not be counted upon entirely as distinctive characteristics in nineteenth-century popular poetry because the taste of the age, both elitist and popular, was for optimistic poetry which offered the reader hope and encouragement<sup>53</sup> and which emphasized and enhanced the beauty in life.



The poet is like one who gives sight to the blind. . . . There is a glory unseen before, cast over the earth. It is . . . transfigured . . . and made radiant with celestial light.<sup>54</sup>

NOTES--CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 151.

<sup>2</sup>I. A. Richards, Science and Poetry (New York, 1926), rpt. in Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment, ed. Mark Schorer et al. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1948), pp. 507-08.

<sup>3</sup>Susan Sontag, "One Culture and the New Sensibility," (1965) in Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961-66).

<sup>4</sup>Murray Krieger, The New Apologists for Poetry (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>7</sup>In an unpublished dissertation, "The Expanding Range of Poetic Function in American Democracy" (Boston University, 1947), Eric W. Carlson studied this period of critical upheaval in which poetry was "liberated from the rhetorical function" it had traditionally held and became recognized as an authentic art form. Carlson credits Emerson and his theory of the "creative symbol" with contributing most to the reorientation of poetry. He notes Whitman's "full freedom from the rhetorical tradition" in Leaves of Grass.

<sup>8</sup>Eliot, Use of Poetry, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup>Sontag, Against Interpretation, pp. 302-03.

<sup>10</sup>Richards, Practical Criticism, p. 254.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.



- <sup>12</sup>Sontag, Against Interpretation, p. 300.
- <sup>13</sup>William Charvat, Origins of American Critical Thought, 1810-1835 (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1936). Charvat emphasizes the early view of poetry as a moral force.
- <sup>14</sup>"Our Neglected Poets, William Martin Johnson," U.S. Democratic Review, 1 (March 1838), 476.
- <sup>15</sup>A review of Southey's Life of Bunyan, North American Review, 36 (1833), 456.
- <sup>16</sup>Knickerbocker, 7 (1836), 107.
- <sup>17</sup>A review of George Cheever's Common-Place Book of Poetry, Christian Examiner, 12 (1832), 91.
- <sup>18</sup>Review of Mrs. Hemans' The Forest Sanctuary, Christian Examiner, 3 (1826), 407.
- <sup>19</sup>"Poetry and Imagination: A Review of Current American Poetry," Christian Examiner, 42 (1847), 251.
- <sup>20</sup>Review of a collection of Psalms and Hymns, Christian Examiner, 1 (1824), 47.
- <sup>21</sup>Christian Examiner, 3 (1826), 405 and 410.
- <sup>22</sup>"Some Thoughts on Self Education, considered with Reference to the State of Literature in this Country," Christian Examiner, 11 (1832), 309.
- <sup>23</sup>Review of Longfellow's Voices of the Night, Christian Examiner, 28 (1840), 244-45.
- <sup>24</sup>E. P. Whipple, Review of Griswold's Poets and Poetry of America, North American Review, 58 (1844), 39-39.
- <sup>25</sup>Brown, "The Aesthetics of Romanticism," pp. 3-5.
- <sup>26</sup>Charvat, Origins of American Critical Thought, p. 92.
- <sup>27</sup>Brown, "The Aesthetics of Romanticism," p. 150.

[illegible]

<sup>28</sup>William A. Jones as quoted in Stafford, Literary Criticism of "Young America," p. 45.

<sup>29</sup>E. P. Whipple, Review of Griswold's Poets and Poetry of America, North American Review, 58 (1844), 25.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>31</sup>Review of Swinburne, North American Review, 127 (1878), 343.

<sup>32</sup>Charvat, Origins, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup>Brown, "The Aesthetics of Romanticism," p. 153.

<sup>34</sup>James Russell Lowell, "The Function of the Poet," (1855), rpt. in Brown, The Achievement of American Criticism, p. 323.

<sup>35</sup>Nelson F. Adkins, "Emerson and the Bardic Tradition," PMLA, 20 (1948), 662-77. Adkins demonstrates that Emerson's poetics called for a "bard" who would perform a social and national function. He quotes from Emerson's Journal, 1842, that the poet should not only be able to use nature as his hieroglyphic but should have an adequate message to communicate.

<sup>36</sup>J. S. D., Review of Tennyson's Poems (1830), Christian Examiner, 23 (1838), 310-25.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>38</sup>A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.

<sup>39</sup>"Life of Schiller," North American Review, 39 (1834), 1.

<sup>40</sup>A. H. Everett, North American Review, 41 (1835), 375.

<sup>41</sup>Review of Emerson's Nature, U.S. Democratic Review, 1 (1838), 320.

<sup>42</sup>E. P. Whipple, a review of Wordsworth's poems, North American Review, 59 (1844), 356-58.

<sup>43</sup>William Cullen Bryant, "On the Nature of Poetry," (first of a series of four lectures in New York in 1826). Reprinted in Brown, The Achievement of American Criticism, pp. 112 ff.

<sup>44</sup>Richards, Practical Criticism, p. 248.

<sup>45</sup>V. L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, III (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927-1930), 50-54.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>"American Poets," Christian Examiner, 86 (1869), 80-81.

<sup>48</sup>Review of poetry of A. H. Clough, North American Review, 77 (1853), 3.

<sup>49</sup>"Descriptive Poetry," Knickerbocker, 23 (1844), 2.

<sup>50</sup>"Poetry of Fitz-Greene Halleck," Knickerbocker, 26 (1845), 557.

<sup>51</sup>"The Stars that Have Set in the Nineteenth Century; No. 1, Byron," U.S. Democratic Review, 10 (March 1842), 226.

<sup>52</sup>Review of Griswold's Poets and Poetry of America, North American Review, 58 (1844), 9.

<sup>53</sup>Charvat, Origins, pp. 17-18.

<sup>54</sup>"Descriptive Poetry," Knickerbocker, 23 (1844), 9.





## CHAPTER III

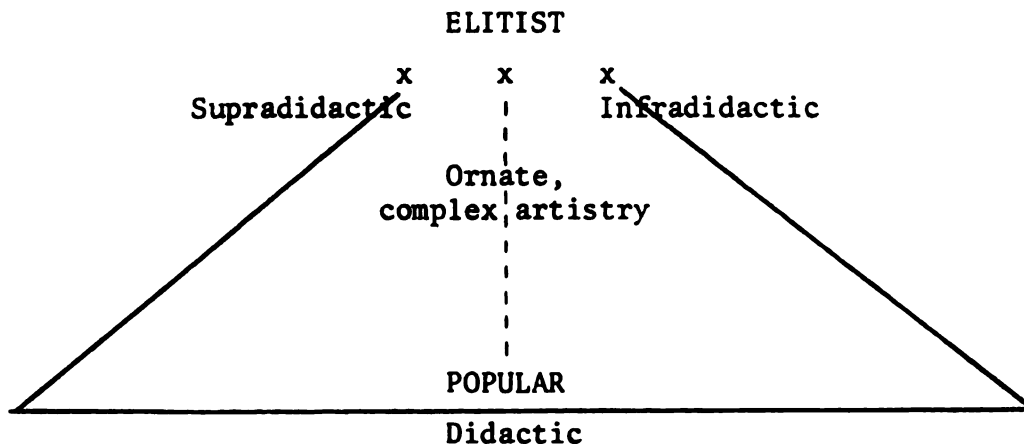
### THE LEVELS OF POETRY: INTELLIGIBILITY

In Chapter II we constructed a scale for kinds of relationship between poetry and truth/reality; the scale emphasized degrees of directness in didacticism and moral effect of poems. The centrally-positioned didactic poems tend to be more clear, forthright, easy to understand and therefore attract greater numbers of readers than the more complicated poems at the extreme ends of the scale. Another approach toward understanding differences between popular and elitist poetry was suggested here--by using (the relationship between poetry and size of audience as the basis,) one might analyze a different set of levels of poetry: a basic, broad level representing the wide-spread appeal of popular poetry and a narrow level representing various kinds of poetry that appeal to audiences of limited numbers.

It is difficult to find a term for the top levels. Popular can be used for lower levels to indicate quantities (in distribution of the art product and in audience response); popular does not necessarily denote aesthetic inferiority. Elitist, on the other hand, is usually taken to refer to both quantity and quality; it describes art objects appealing to a limited number of persons who are usually meant by the term to be socially or intellectually

select, and it connotes aesthetic superiority. Elitist does not refer to quantities alone--sodomasochistic pornographic magazines, for example, would not be termed elitist merely because only a few members of the community read them. Having no other term, I have used elitist for poetry in the upper levels of the diagram, even though much of nineteenth-century criticism preferred the lower, popular levels and found them in some ways aesthetically superior. [ Elitist is used in the paper to refer to poems which have appealed to small intellectual and cultural circles who have been generally regarded as authoritative arbiters of taste. ] The reader is meant to understand, however, that critics have not universally placed aesthetic superiority in the upper levels of poetry.

We might convert our scale from Chapter II into a diagram suitable for illustrating levels of popularity and aesthetic complexity of limited appeal. The didactic point from the earlier scale will be stretched into a broad base for our new diagram; in a process of involution the ends of the scale will be raised to indicate connection between complexity, subtlety, limited audience, and perhaps aesthetic superiority.





The center, dotted line from the broad base to the higher levels represents poetry that is didactic but highly ornate and complicated because of artistic decorativeness.

And now the questions for our discussion present themselves in rapid succession. Are poems at the higher levels of this diagram aesthetically superior? If so, how do they differ from poems at the lower levels? Are poems at the lower levels merely inferior approximations of the high poetry? Or do lower level poems sometimes perform different functions from those in high poetry? Are critical attitudes about these levels different in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

Critics in the twentieth century have been preoccupied with elitist poetry and have evidenced belief, which an occasional writer like William Lynch has regretted,<sup>1</sup> "that there is an unbridgeable distance between the culture of an elite and the popular level of art this elite will always contemptuously call 'kitsch.'" Although some nineteenth-century critics exhibited a similar bias in placing value exclusively in elitist poetry, many writers distinguished among the levels of poetry in a deliberate effort to note different values at different levels. This earlier tolerance for different levels of poetry was first brought to my attention by Russel Nye in The Unembarrassed Muse.<sup>2</sup> Nye points to the distinction "between poetry as high art and poetry as a functional art" that was clarified as early as 1640 in "The Bay Psalm Book" where psalms were translated into hymns "for conscience rather than eloquence, fidelity rather than poetry." Nye traces the distinction in a number of nineteenth-century

poetry anthologies like George Cheever's American Common-Place Book of Poetry in 1831: high poetry was "stately and perfect . . . , containing throughout the true power of spirit and harmony . . . , deep and sublime emotion." "Common-place poetry," on the other hand, was "quiet and unambitious, like a pleasant thought when such are wanted, sweet and chaste in moral influence." William Cullen Bryant's 1872 preface to A Library of Poetry and Song is also cited. Some poems are "acknowledged by the intelligent to be great"; the "great poetry" is created by "acknowledged masters." Some poetry is of a second order but still fulfills a valid function: these poems "though less perfect than others in form, have by some power of touching the heart, gained and maintained a sure place in the popular esteem." Bryant saw this poetry as being of "common apprehension for mankind at large . . . , near to the common track of human intelligence." In 1886 Slason Thompson defined the role of "the humbler poets" as speaking "out from a mind . . . amid the multitude, and not from the heights of the masters." Edwin Markham referred to these poets as the "nearby poets."

With Professor Nye's idea in mind I have examined nineteenth-century criticism to determine more exactly what distinctions were made between the levels of poetry and how attitudes about the levels differed from twentieth-century attitudes.

A fundamental distinction between high and low levels of poetry is to be found, as I indicated in Chapters I and II, in the intelligibility of the poem to the reader. High poetry tends to deal with more profound and subtle thoughts and to be expressed with



more complex materials. Popular poetry is usually easier to understand.

Now, twentieth-century critics tend to value complexity and intellectual strenuousness to the exclusion of more simple, straightforward types of poems, as George Arms, Murray Krieger, and many others have noted. Modern critics expect the reader to rise to the level of the poet; if the writer fills his poem with obscure allusions, several-layered metaphors, and complex ambiguities, it is the reader's responsibility to summon his resources in an effort to respond to this poem. We have to turn about-face in order to understand nineteenth-century expectations because the reverse was usually true: the poet was expected to make himself intelligible to the reader. "It is not the world's business to satisfy the poet's requisitions; it is his duty to conform to theirs." This writer, in the North American Review in 1847, listed the qualifications that a poet ought to require of his readers: plain good sense, an ear for harmony of numbers, excitable feelings, and tolerably quick perception of analogies--all found "among the ordinary endowments of our human nature."<sup>3</sup> A poet was not to presume great learning or "the power of following metaphysical refinements and the nicest subtleties of thought." With a definite anti-elitist bias, the writer concluded, "The people have neither time nor inclination to be initiated into the mysteries of a fraternity."<sup>4</sup>

It must be granted that some nineteenth-century critics exhibited an elitist bias. The Knickerbocker praised Shelley (1856) noting that "None but a poet can fully appreciate Shelley. There is





in him as esoteric beauty, which only the favored few who have passed within the veil of the temple can detect."<sup>5</sup> The same journal (1860) explained that Keats was not popular because the "rich and dazzling flow of words, the sensuous imagery, the dainty handling of rhyme, and the passionate worship of the beautiful are not elements that commend themselves to the masses."<sup>6</sup> If someone cannot understand Keats the deficiency lies in the experience of the reader rather than in the poet: "the soul that lifts its voice in songs of praise to that intangible beauty is not the less the true soul because you or I may not comprehend it." Occasionally, a critic gave vent to his impatience with the "unscholarly restless reader who can feel nothing less harsh than a stab, and will bestow scarce a hasty glance on a sentiment or an idea."<sup>7</sup> This writer (Christian Examiner, 1869) expressed his elitist sympathy quite colorfully: "The dulcet notes of the lute can hardly be expected to work any charm in a rhinoceros, however choicely they are distilled into his ears."

But this elitist bias was the exception rather than the rule in nineteenth-century criticism. Charvat demonstrated the demand for intelligibility throughout the early century. He cited an average critic (North American Review, 1823) who found fault with Southey and Wordsworth in their "disinclination to consult the precise intellectual tone and spirit of the average mass. . . . Theirs is the poetry of soliloquy." This writer noted that classical writers had adjusted themselves to the popular taste, and that a modern poet will be doomed to become a "poet of the few" if he "does not study the common susceptibilities of the mass of his readers, and industriously tune



the key-string of his own soul till it vibrates nearly in unison with the compounded note sent up from the general breathing of human nature."<sup>8</sup> Another critic (American Monthly Review, 1832) was suspicious of the authenticity of poetic truths which were too "subtle" for ordinary minds:

A lofty mind, in its eagerness to know more of our spiritual nature and capacities and of the relations that outward things sustain to us and to each other, may run into errors from mere impatience of what is obvious and near and be tempted to ease its craving and dissatisfaction with violent and whimsical phantasies. . . . A wilful distortion or obscuration of a familiar object or feeling may thus be mistaken for a discovery. . . .

Not that the writer would inhibit intellectual curiosity or speculation.

But even in regions of purest intellegence or passion, or depths never before explored, the poet should tell us only what in a sound use of his powers he has experienced there, and tell this too in a language that comes near to human sympathy. Probably this is always practicable where he does not deceive himself.<sup>9</sup>

Charvat noted an article on Shelley in 1836 that was exceptional in devoting thorough consideration to work "not meant for the generality."<sup>10</sup> As Charvat concluded (he was writing in the mid-1930's), until recently American criticism "has decreed that poetry is not for the esoteric few, but for the many, and that it is the duty of the poet to communicate intelligently and intelligibly whatever he has to say."<sup>11</sup>

The Young America critics, as I noted in Chapter I, were a major force for intelligible poetry. Granting that the minds of the

greatest poets were above the ordinary, these critics made clear in the first volume of the Democratic Review that since poets "do not speak for their own order only," but "desire to address and receive a response from the great majority of minds," it was the special duty of critics to render poetry intelligible to the people.<sup>12</sup> Later in 1851 the Democratic Review published an article contrasting Shelley and Tennyson<sup>13</sup> and maintaining that the popular poet works much harder than the elitist poet; rather than resting content with the admiration of a select few readers, poets like Tennyson have accepted the challenge of popularity and have labored to make their poems intelligible and interesting to general readers. "Writers are learning that the world cannot be benefited until it is interested. . . . The purest principles, loftiest exhortations, most sublime lessons are but thrown away on callous ears, unless the sympathies of that great audience to whom the poet speaks, be awakened, their confidence fully established, and the avenues to their hearts thoroughly occupied." This writer, like most nineteenth-century critics, acknowledged levels of intellectual perspicacity, but unlike modern critics, he did not assume that all the value is found in the highest level, and again unlike modern critics, he expected the poet to adjust to the audience, rather than vice versa:

[Tennyson] no less rapt with the visions of the lofty heaven of song, studies to accommodate himself to the better tastes of a nation of listeners, and feeling that his powers cannot elevate his audience wholly to his own level, condescends a little, to meet them on a broader and more accessible plain, which it is his especial care to beautify and enrich.

One of the reasons for the greater interest in the lower cultural levels in the 1800's was the fact that the "rise of the people" was a recent phenomenon and critics concerned themselves to know how highly the people could become acculturated. Some thinkers cautioned against the loss of excellence that they found resulting from efforts in universal education. Although admitting many good effects from the general belief in "a spirit of intelligence among the great mass of our yeoman population," one writer warned of the "great danger in resting satisfied with superficial knowledge," and in expending so much effort to bring knowledge within easy grasp of the populace.<sup>14</sup> Occasional skeptics were asking as Joseph Wood Krutch did a century later: "Can we have an Age of the Common Man without having also an Age of the Common Denominator?" Can we define democratic culture so as to reserve a place for uncommon excellence, and even in connection with the masses, "emphasize the highest rather than the lowest common denominator"?<sup>15</sup>

Specifically, some writers were concerned that general belief in inequality was injurious to poetry. The Democratic Review lamented the lack of quality in the poems in Griswold's 1842 anthology and claimed it as one consequence "of the general diffusion of a certain degree of education; of the influence of republican institutions suggesting universally that sentiment of equality which scorns to shrink from what other men, named Milton, or Shakespeare, or Byron, or Shelley, or Wordsworth, or Bryant, have attempted and achieved."<sup>16</sup> Earlier a North American Review (1830) writer had complained that "everybody is writing poetry and with little expense of time and

labor." The time that Johnson had prophesied had come in America when

the cock warbles lyrics in the kitchen, and the thresher  
vociferates his dithyrambics in the barn.

The equality concept, again, was at fault: "One of the first efforts of our forefathers was to destroy the monopoly of genius, and to impress upon their children the valuable truth, that man could do again whatever man had done."<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the cautions of a few skeptics, nineteenth-century writers were predominantly optimistic about the cultural possibilities of the average man. Bryant claimed that "every individual is more or less a poet," and that even those who declare no taste for poetry, actually have it but have never cultivated it.<sup>18</sup> An important reason for nineteenth-century positive attitudes toward poetry in the lower, popular levels was a belief expressed repeatedly that (in contrast with moderns who assign elitist critics as sole arbiters of taste) the people themselves were the most accurate judges of truth and good taste.

A North American Review writer noted that "false sentiments, vagaries in taste, absurdities in speculation are faults of classes and small circles of men . . . and do not gain a foothold in the intellect of a whole people." He found a corrective power in numbers and compared the balancing of errors in matters of taste and opinion to a children's choir of thousands at St. Paul's Cathedral in which discords are absorbed in the flood of sound and the general effect

upon the ear is of "perfect accord." Since the general populace tends to judge truly, a man who

sings for the public and cannot find a grateful audience would do better to keep his music to himself. If the multitude neglect him, it is pretty good proof that he ought to be neglected. He may become fashionable with a certain class, the idol of a particular school, the bard of a clique or coterie; but he is no true poet, unless he can excite the imaginations and move the feelings of all men.<sup>19</sup>

In a similar vein in 1851 the Democratic Review claimed to see everywhere the truth that "the people, not in sects, or divisions of money or rank, but as friendly critics, meeting on that common ground of natural taste, which neither prejudice nor misused education can wholly remove, is the only audience worth having."<sup>20</sup> The same trust in the people as judges of truth "in literature as in government" was expressed in Harper's Magazine in 1859: "Popular instincts interpose better checks, both on false thinkers and cunning politicians, than can be provided from outside resources."<sup>21</sup>

These expressions throughout the century of faith in the judgment of the people were perhaps reverberations from earlier thinkers like George Bancroft who placed the source of truth not in individuals but in "the combined intelligence of the people." In an important address in 1835 that served to introduce transcendental speculation of the Germans into American culture,<sup>22</sup> Bancroft claimed that "the people collectively are wiser than the most gifted individual, for all his wisdom constitutes but a part of theirs. . . . The common judgment in taste, politics, and religion, is the highest authority on earth, and the nearest possible approach to an infallible

decision. . . . The judgments and the taste of the public are wiser than those of the wisest critic."<sup>23</sup>

In a major section of the address, Bancroft emphasized what critics throughout the century repeated, that great art historically has been popular art, proving that the taste of the people is to be trusted and patronized.

For who are the best judges in matters of taste? Do you think the cultivated individual? Undoubtedly not; but the collective mind. The public is wiser than the wisest critic. In Athens, the arts were carried to perfection, when the "fierce democracie" was in the ascendant; the temple of Minerva and the works of Phidias were planned and perfected to please the common people. When Greece yielded to tyrants, her genius for excellence in art expired, or rather, the purity of taste disappeared; because the artist then endeavored to gratify a patron, and therefore, humored his caprice; while before he had endeavored to delight the race.

When the arts thrived again, it was again under a popular influence--the people worshipping in churches in the Middle Ages inspired artists.

Homer formed his taste, as he wandered from door to door, a vagrant minstrel, paying for hospitality by a song; and Shakespeare wrote for an audience, composed in great measure of the common people.

Scott and Byron are cited as authors guided by the popular muse.

German literature is almost entirely a popular creation. It was fostered by no monarch; it was dandled by no aristocracy. it was plebeian in its origin, and therefore manly in its results.<sup>24</sup>

Many critics echoed Bancroft in pointing to the satisfaction of popular taste as having resulted in the greatest art. "The Iliad



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was not sung in scorn of the people." Greek plays in the roofless theaters of Attica were performed not for "a few learned critics" but for "a whole people whose unanimous applause has been sanctioned by the calm judgments of after time." The pages of the Father of History were read at great national festivals.<sup>25</sup>

One point made frequently by these writers is that poetry had been expected to function differently at different stages of civilization--written for the people at earlier stages, then becoming more refined and appealing to fewer and fewer as the civilization advanced. These critics, representative of the general anti-elitist bias in the nineteenth century, believed that the quality of the poetry deteriorated as it became more refined and more esoteric. An 1847 article in the North American Review catalogued examples to show that "poetry was eminently popular in its origin": bards sang in honor of the gods at public festivals or at solemn entertainments of chiefs and kings; the earliest poems of most European nations were songs and ballads; early dramas were performed for the multitudes. In the early stages of a society poetry served to form the customs and determine the character of a whole people and had more influence than laws or government. But civilization and refinement change this and "poetry which was designed to be the daily food of the multitude, becomes the exclusive prerogative of the few. As the audience is diminished, so is simplicity, vigor, and freshness."<sup>26</sup> A decade earlier the Christian Examiner had articulated a similar view. In the early stages of society the poet is the chronicler, monitor, prophet: he celebrates the virtues of the dead, stirs the soul to

present action, and carries the hopes of men into the unknown future. "The poet exercises a more immediate and more powerful sway over the bent of the opening mind, and does more to determine the character than perhaps any other laborer in the field of literature." But in a more cultivated period of society, the sphere of the poet's influence is greatly contracted. The article praised Bryant for refusing to deal "in those obscure thoughts and images which present themselves to a small class only of thinkers," and for striving to pour "the soft light of his genius over the common path on which the great multitude is moving."<sup>27</sup>

There was, then, a large body of nineteenth-century criticism that preferred poetry of the lower levels, finding it aesthetically superior insofar as it appealed to the truer tastes of people in great numbers. The anti-elitist bias was verbalized frequently in criticism of the excessive complication, obscurity, and "refinement" of upper-level poetry. The reviewer of Bryant in the previous paragraph praised his poet for avoiding "the literary epidemic of our times, when, out of a morbid fear of saying what has been said before, writers distort not only language but ideas, caricature sentiments, and present the most grotesque images to the fancy."<sup>28</sup> The North American Review writer also cited above expressed the same distaste for overly complicated poetry.

It is [the poet's] business to strike chords which find a response in every bosom, to present analogies which are perceptible to every mind, to command the passions which are the universal attribute of human nature. If his verse needs explanation or comment, if one must be educated before he can understand it, or go through a particular training before he can appreciate it, the busy world will pass it by, and will lose very little by its neglect.<sup>29</sup>



In his preface to A Library of Poetry and Song Bryant noted "two mistakes of current poets" (1870): working to excite admiration through striking novelties of expression and to "distinguish themselves by subtilties of thought remote from the common apprehension." Bryant commented on the fashion of the day for obscurity, for "poetry to which the general reader is puzzled to attach a meaning." The words themselves were simple enough and kept within the "Saxon, 'household' element of our language," but the obscurity lay sometimes in the phrase itself and sometimes "in the recondite or remote allusion." Bryant, while not denying the "genius" of these poets, preferred poets who "write for mankind at large." He found "a luminous style" to be one of the most important requisites for a great poet.<sup>30</sup>

The predominant taste of the age was for clarity and against ingenious complexity. Poetry was written to exalt the fancy, refine the taste, awaken the sensibility, move the heart and soul, and "not certainly to play off ingenuities, and to try to show in how many cunning ways one can distort language and disguise thought."<sup>31</sup> A North American Review article on popular poetry of the Teutonic nations (1836) provides an analogy for the levels of poetry in the nineteenth century. Popular poetry of these nations had proceeded from the common people and operated on the common people. The "skalds," on the other hand, were the elitists of the Scandanavian countries; they were interpreters of the gods and the ambassadors of kings and not organs of the people. And

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how difficult it was merely to understand many of their verses; with what a high degree of skill the Skalds knew how to entangle their words and thoughts, so that they became entirely unintelligible to the uninitiated . . . perhaps with the express purpose to make their art appear more venerable to the common people.<sup>32</sup>

The preference for clarity and forthrightness made the suggestive techniques of the Romantic poets extremely rough-going for some critics. One was completely baffled, or pretended to be, by Emerson's "The Sphinx": it "matters not what portion is extracted, for the poem may be read backwards quite as intelligibly as forwards, and no mortal can trace the slightest connection between the verses."<sup>33</sup> This critic was particularly irritated by Emerson's use of obscure allusions.

Mr. Emerson delights to build a poem on some nearly forgotten anecdote, or myth, or recorded saying of the wise and great, either in ancient times or the Middle Ages. A sort of misty reference to this theme appears here and there in the verses, and if the reader is lucky enough to remember the anecdote he may flatter himself that he can see a glimpse of meaning in them. But if unlearned or forgetful, no reference, no direct statement, no charitable footnote gives him the least hint of the writer's purpose; all is dark as Erebus.

Hamatreya, for example, sounded like Sanscrit, but the writer had not time "to hunt through lexicons and encyclopedias from which it was probably fished up, for a solution to the enigmas."<sup>34</sup> Whitman's Leaves of Grass caused equally severe distress for another critic who proclaimed that "Thought is never valuable unless it is clear and comprehensible. An obscure thought is hueless, tasteless, and devoid of nourishment."<sup>35</sup> This poor man was, of course, greatly disturbed by Whitman's Leaves.

As one stumbles through the uncouth chants, the mixed metaphors, the hirsute style, the ragged similes, and the rickety grammar of the "Leaves of Grass" he begins to feel that he is lost in a wild jungle, and must trust to luck to get out.<sup>36</sup>

In summary of this point, then, there was a bias throughout nineteenth-century criticism for poetry that was luminous, clear, intelligible and appealing to great numbers of general readers. At one extreme critics preferred poetry at the lower, popular levels, finding high-level poetry to be suspiciously complicated and unnecessarily obscure.

But one is immediately reminded of the contrasting twentieth-century view that in order to approximate the many-faceted aspects of real life, in order to move toward truth, a poem necessarily has to be complicated, because truth and life are complex. The main burden of Roy Harvey Pearce's criticism of the popular Fireside Poets is that in order to make poetry palatable and easy enough for the great audience, they contented themselves with serving half-truths. The "Common Readers, in short, had their Common Poets. Such readers . . . had neither the time nor the patience for poets who would rather tell the whole truth than be popular."<sup>37</sup> These poets resolved paradoxes and ambiguities for their readers; "the gain was clarity and certitude. The loss was of that high truth, however 'difficult' and 'obscure,' toward which major poetry aspires."<sup>38</sup>

Yeats lamented that the modern audience for "popular poetry" is a disinherited middle class who have "unlearned the unwritten tradition" and have not yet "learned the written tradition": these people have not the equipment to respond to any sort of allusion or



suggestion but require "direct logic" and "clear rhetoric." Long-fellow, Yeats's example, was popular because "he tells his story or his idea so that one needs nothing but his verses to understand it."<sup>39</sup> Thus, poems have been made easy, but at a great loss of truth, enchantment, and beauty in the poetry.

In a recent essay Abraham Kaplan has noted several qualities that make ease of reception one of the characteristics distinguishing popular from elitist art.<sup>40</sup> He charges that popular art is simple, not in the way that classic art accomplishes simplicity by stripping away the unessential, but simple in stripping away the necessary. He finds formula and stereotype in popular art, both devices allowing for easy composition and easy reception but both resulting in sacrifice of the truth of a full-bodied artistic experience. In great art a formula can be used to analyze the basic structure of the work, but all the details are significant and make a contribution to the aesthetic substance of the whole; on the other hand, in popular art, we have the formula and nothing else--"in formula art the schema is called upon to do the work of the full-bodied original, as though a newspaper consisted entirely of headlines" (p. 354). Popular art thus uses a star-system in which a few dominant elements do all the work and all "unnecessary" complications are avoided. This results in clear and intelligible art, but the significant truths may have been tossed out with those difficult complications. Stereotype, what Kaplan calls "a crystallization of a prejudice," makes for easy reception but is by definition a distortion of truth. Kaplan also points to the formlessness which makes popular art easy to consume.

He defines form as "a displacement onto the object of the structure of our experience of the object" (pp. 344-45). Form, then, requires the active perception and response of the receiver of the art object. "The response to an art object shares in the work of its creation, and only thereby is a work of art produced" (p. 356). However, Kaplan contends that in popular art all the work has been done ahead of time; we do not perceive but only recognize, do not respond but only react. There is nothing for the receiver to make out, no room for significant effort (e.g., the background music in a popular movie--melodious strings for birth of love and chords on the organ for approach of death--includes all the viewer's reactions). Everything is predetermined and we passively follow the course laid out beforehand.

What is unaesthetic about popular art is its formlessness. It does not invite or even permit the sustained effort necessary to the creation of an artistic form.

The result again is ease in reception but a sacrifice of a fully satisfying aesthetic experience: "what you get out of an art experience depends on how much you put in" (p. 355). Kaplan adds yet another quality that makes popular art easy: a marked intolerance for ambiguity. We naturally "shrink from the work of creative interpretation"; and whereas great art challenges us to confront complexity and to resolve ambiguity, popular art simplifies and allows us to relax.

Kaplan's point here was accentuated for me in a letter from Bud Guest answering my question about what he thought his father meant in the distinction between poet and writer of verses.



I do not know where he drew the line between poetry and verse. I know, however, where I draw my own line. When I read the verses of other newspaper writers--Eugene Field, James Whitcomb Riley, and the like--I have no difficulty whatever understanding what they had in mind. I cannot say the same thing about some of the poetry I have read.

It was my privilege years ago to enjoy a close association with the late Dr. William Lyon Phelps, who for so many years was professor of English literature at Yale University. His specialty was Browning and he devoted most of his life to it. I have forgotten the name of the professor at the University of Michigan whose course in Browning I took . . . but I do remember that he and Dr. Phelps violently disagreed on the meaning of almost anything Browning wrote. This, of course, is a facetious notion of my part, and yet I think it has some validity.

Kaplan summarizes modern attitudes about the simplicity of popular poetry: "Popular art is simple basically in the sense of easy. There are lesser demands for creative endeavor on the part of the audience" (p. 356).

In attempting to determine differences between poems in the high and low levels, and values in the two kinds of poems, we have, then, a double set of criteria to keep in mind: the nineteenth-century requirement for clear and intelligible poetry that great numbers of people could understand relatively easily, and the twentieth-century charge that ease and simplicity result in too great a sacrifice of truth and creative aesthetic experience. As Charvat put it, the nineteenth-century prerequisites for literature were "simplicity, concreteness, lightness, eloquence, freshness, and a distinctive (if not distinguished) style. If the writer's ideals also included imagination, power, relentless truth," so much the better, but they were not essential.<sup>41</sup>

In closing it must be noted in fairness to the nineteenth-century writers who valued intelligible, popular poetry, that many of them sensed a lack of profundity at the lower levels. A North American Review writer, after criticizing Griswold for refraining from analysis of Longfellow's "peculiar genius,"--and after praising Longfellow for "addressing the moral nature through the imagination" and for "linking moral truth to intellectual beauty"--admitted that "the sympathies which Longfellow addresses are fine and poetical but not the most subtle of which the soul is capable."<sup>42</sup> The Christian Examiner admitted moral benefits in the lower levels of culture but feared "the tendency to overlook the thorough and profound, which is ultimately the most useful of all."<sup>43</sup> Two decades later a reviewer in the same journal acknowledged that Tennyson was deservedly popular but preferred Browning whose poems were "for the thoughtful few rather than for the thoughtless many." The reader would have to "study" the poems rather than glancing over them "in a few leisure moments," but each new perusal would yield "new beauties and new food for thought . . . new ideas . . . keen insight into the mysteries of character."<sup>44</sup>

In a Christian Examiner article on general education cited earlier in this chapter,<sup>45</sup> the writer regretted that so much effort was being expended to bring knowledge within easy grasp of the populace and that it was generally being forgotten that the mind requires "long and steady efforts of self-discipline to unfold in beauty and proportion." For reasons similar to Kaplan's he was skeptical about popular literature, doubting its effectiveness

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because it required the intellect to be merely a passive recipient.

It may be pleasant enough to dream an hour after dinner . . . over the last novel or poem. It may be an agreeable pastime, and not altogether useless, to listen to a series of popular lectures. But, unless all this results in an increased excitement of the intellect to put forth its powers of action, and find out truth for itself, most of the benefit ends, with the pleasure, at the moment of enjoyment.

Degree of intelligibility is, then, one characteristic distinguishing high and low levels of poetry. There was a predominant bias in the nineteenth century for lower, popular levels of poetry, that rested upon a trust in the taste and instinct for truth of the multitude and a belief that the function of poetry was to address itself to the moral problems in the lives of the people. This impatience with unnecessary difficulty in art was occasionally countered by a skeptical view of the profundity of the truths conveyed in popular poetry, a disparity more clearly articulated in the twentieth century.

1870



NOTES--CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>William F. Lynch, S. J., The Image Industries (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), p. 98.

<sup>2</sup>Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse, pp. 94-95.

<sup>3</sup>A review of Holmes's Urania, North American Review, 64 (1847), 211.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>5</sup>"Shelley," Knickerbocker, 49 (1856), 222.

<sup>6</sup>"Keats," Knickerbocker, 55 (1860), 394.

<sup>7</sup>"American Poets," Christian Examiner, 86 (1869), 77.

<sup>8</sup>Charvat, The Origins of American Critical Thought, pp. 25, 26.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 22, quoting from a review of Bryant in the American Monthly Review (1832).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 82, referring to American Quarterly Review, 19 (1836), 257.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted by Stafford, Literary Criticism of "Young America," p. 44.

<sup>13</sup>"Shelley and Tennyson," U.S. Democratic Review, 28 (January 1851), 49 ff.

<sup>14</sup>"Obstacles to the Progress of Knowledge," Christian Examiner, 8 (1830), 99-100.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, et al., Is the Common Man Too Common? (Norman, Oklahoma: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1954), pp. 13, 19.

<sup>16</sup>Review of Griswold's The Poets and Poetry of America, U.S. Democratic Review, 11 (August 1842), 178.

<sup>17</sup>Review of Sprague's Phi Beta Kappa poem, 1829, at Cambridge, North American Review, 30 (1830), 314-15.

<sup>18</sup>Bryant, "On the Nature of Poetry," (1826), in The Achievement of American Criticism, ed., Brown, p. 118.

<sup>19</sup>Review of Holmes's Urania, North American Review, 64 (1847), 210, 208.

<sup>20</sup>"Our Literature," U.S. Democratic Review, 29 (September 1851), 211.

<sup>21</sup>"Readers by the Million," Harper's Magazine (monthly), 19 (June-November 1859), 840.

<sup>22</sup>George Bancroft, "The Office of the People in Art, Government, Religion," oration delivered before the Adelphi Society of Williamston College, August, 1835, in American Philosophic Addresses 1700-1900, ed. Joseph L. Blau (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1946), pp. 94-114.

<sup>23</sup>Paraphrases by Blau.

<sup>24</sup>Bancroft, quoted in Blau, pp. 103-05.

<sup>25</sup>"Our Literature," U.S. Democratic Review, 29 (September 1851), 211.

<sup>26</sup>Review of Holmes's Urania, North American Review, 64 (1847), 209-10.

<sup>27</sup>Review of Bryant's Poems (1836), Christian Examiner, 22 (1837), 59-62.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 62.

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<sup>29</sup>Review of Holmes's Urania, North American Review, 64 (1847), 209.

<sup>30</sup>William Cullen Bryant, introd. A Library of Poetry and Song (New York: J. B. Ford and Co., 1871-72).

<sup>31</sup>Review of Browning's Men and Women, Christian Examiner, 60 (1856), 139.

<sup>32</sup>Professor Robinson, "Popular Poetry of the Teutonic Nations," North American Review, 42 (1836), 274-76.

<sup>33</sup>F. Bowen, "Nine New Poets," North American Review, 44 (1847), 407.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 410-11.

<sup>35</sup>Walker Kennedy, "Walt Whitman," North American Review, 138 (1884), 599.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 591.

<sup>37</sup>Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), p. 204.

<sup>38</sup>Pearce, p. 249.

<sup>39</sup>William Butler Yeats, "What is Popular Poetry?" (1901), Essays and Introductions (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 3-12.

<sup>40</sup>Abraham Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 24 (Spring 1966).

<sup>41</sup>William Charvat, "The People's Patronage," Literary History of the U.S., p. 524.

<sup>42</sup>Review of Griswold's Poets and Poetry of America, North American Review, 58 (1844), 23, 28.

<sup>43</sup>"Some Thoughts on Self-Education considered with Reference to the State of Literature in this Country," Christian Examiner, 11 (January 1832), 310.



<sup>44</sup>Review of Browning's poems, Christian Examiner, 48 (1850), 362.

<sup>45</sup>"Obstacles to the Progress of Knowledge," Christian Examiner, 8 (1830), 100.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LEVELS OF POETRY: SUBJECT MATTER AND EFFECT ON THE READER

Besides a difference in intellectual difficulty, nineteenth-century anthologists suggested a difference in subject matter in high and low levels of poetry, and concomitantly a difference in effect the poem was to have on the reader.

Two well-known poems provide a focus for examination of these differences: Emerson's "Merlin" and Longfellow's "The Day is Done." For Emerson, the great poet, what Thoreau called the poet of "genius" as opposed to the poet of "art," sings with natural inspiration in tune with the wild and grand forces of nature.

The trivial harp will never please  
Or fill my craving ear;  
Its chords should ring as blows the breeze,  
Free, peremptory, clear.  
No jingling serenader's art,  
Nor tinkle of piano strings,  
Can make the wild blood start  
In its mystic springs.  
The kingly bard  
Must smite the chords rudely and hard,  
As with hammer or with mace;  
That they may render back  
Artful thunder which conveys  
Secrets of the solar track,  
Sparks of the supersolar blaze.

. . . . .

Great is the art,  
 Great be the manners, of the bard.  
 He shall not his brain encumber  
 With the coil of rhythm and number;  
 But, leaving rule and pale forethought,  
 He shall. . . .

. . . . .  
 But mount to paradise  
 By the stairway of surprise.

Longfellow's poem suggests, however, that grand and lofty themes like the "secrets of the solar track" that "make the wild blood start" are not always the best subjects for poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Come, read to me some poem,  
 Some simple and heartfelt lay,  
 That shall soothe this restless feeling,  
 And banish the thoughts of day.

Not from the grand old masters,  
 Not from the bard sublime,  
 . . . . .

For, like strains of martial music,  
 Their mighty thoughts suggest  
 Life's endless toil and endeavor;  
 And tonight I long for rest.

Read from some humbler poet,  
 Whose songs gushed from his heart,  
 As showers from the clouds of summer,  
 Or tears from the eyelids start;

Such songs have power to quiet.  
 The restless pulse of care  
 And come like the benediction  
 That follows after prayer.

These two poems call for two levels of poetry frequently distinguished by nineteenth-century critics. Subjects in higher-level poetry were grand, lofty, sublime, energetic, inspiring to the soul and therefore tended to disturb and excite the reader. Poems in the lower levels dealt with quieter subjects--the home, love,





friendship, quiet beauty in nature--and tended to soothe and comfort the reader.

An important point is that for most nineteenth-century critics, poems in the lower levels, while being less lofty, were not less valuable. One writer in the Democratic Review in 1847 claimed both levels of subject as the province of poetry and criticized Emerson for implying in "Merlin" that the poet should write exclusively in the "major mode."<sup>2</sup>

The voice of the true poet must chime not only with [high level] the grander movements of nature, but with [low level] airs of summer; with bubbling brooks and rustling flowers; not only with [high] manly impulses, the throb of assemblies, the hum of traffic, the resolve and energy of the hero, and the ecstasy of martyrs, but with the [low] fears and hopes of the beloved maiden, the infinite joy thrilling the heart of the young mother, the yearning aspiration and ideal sense of beauty in the artist, the generous trust of friendship; and the sacred philanthropy of the Sister of Charity. Poetry is universal, and has no narrower limits than man. Its soul is the human soul--its sphere the whole of Nature. All emotions and thoughts belong to it. . . . Whatever may be spoken may be poetic; and the poet is he who, in harmonious words, speaks for all men what were otherwise unsaid, or said only in meaner and ruder phrase.

This writer, interested by the way in poetry "for all men" rather than poetry for the select few, found Emerson's theory of poetry in "Merlin" too exclusive and therefore faulty: "he would have his poet write in the major mode; of the richer and more interior harmonies of the minor he is naturally ignorant and wisely says nothing."

James Russell Lowell noted these two levels of subject matter in poetry--the poetry of the soul and the poetry of everyday life--and seemed to value both.<sup>3</sup> A [high level] "poet . . . can best

see and best say what is ideal--what belongs to the world of soul and of beauty . . . he is the revealer of Deity. . . . [low level] he is also an interpreter between man and his own nature. It is he who gives us those key-words, the possession of which makes us masters of all the unsuspected treasure-caverns of thought, and feeling, and beauty which open under the dusty path of our daily life."

Slason Thompson, who used a quotation from Longfellow's "The Day is Done" as an inscription in his collection of newspaper and periodical verse, made clear the distinction between lofty wisdom and concerns of everyday life in the levels of poetry.<sup>4</sup> The "finest wit and maturest wisdom" were opposed to the simple, heart-felt lays that "speak out from a mind feeling the every-day cares of life amid the multitude"; rather than poems that "speak from the heights to which the masters 'proudly stooped,'" Thompson had chosen ephemeral verses in which a soul had seemed to put his thoughts of the day into song; he called high-level poems "scraps from the feast of language" while the lower-level poems had come "from the daily board of wayfaring humanity."

At times the distinction in subject matter was a difference in details--from an aristocratic way of life or from the life of the common man. Calls for poetry about the common man were so frequent in the nineteenth century that little illustration is needed here. Burns was often praised for showing that poetry need not be written about "wars and conquests, the fates of kingdoms, the lives of mighty men of valor, the tilts and tournaments of chivalric times, the grandeur of baronial halls and feudal castles." Burns was "eminently

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the poet of the people" because he had shown that their lives offered subject matter for poetry: he came "to unfold the page of humble life; to claim for man honor because he is a man; to show the world a king's no better than a peasant; to invest the domestic hearth with new sanctities; to pour upon common and lovely objects the baptism of genius."<sup>5</sup> In 1861 the editor of Harper's Monthly expressed a preference, typical of many nineteenth-century critics, for the subject matter in lower-level poems that would appeal to common people.

true genius will care far more to live in the homes of the people than at the courts of kings, and count a loving place in the farmer's cottage as a far higher reward than a stately shelf in the library of the universities.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes the distinction in levels was found to be between art and something which the critic valued more, be it heart or nature, or poetry of the soul.

In "Merlin" Emerson, like Thoreau and Whitman after him, relegated the poetry of "mere art" to an inferior position. From the transcendental viewpoint, elitist (most superior) poetry was that which revealed relationship between the individual soul and the invisible essence of "things." The brain of a great poet was not encumbered with trivialities like "rhythm" and "numbers" or burdened by the "rule and pale forethought" of artistic craftsmanship. A comment by E. P. Whipple reveals the transcendental bias in this matter.

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Probably the subtilty and depth of Wordsworth's insight into nature is even now unappreciated by a large class of highly cultivated men of the world. He tells us, in one of his pre-faces, that the secret of the loftiest poetry is hidden from confirmed worldlings, though they may themselves be competent to write brilliant and telling verses and pass in popular estimation for poets.<sup>7</sup>

Other elitists, however, twentieth-century New Critics ("highly cultivated men of the world") being one familiar example, have, in contrast with the transcendentalists, valued artistry with the linguistic medium very highly. The poetry of soul (genius) vs. the poetry of art is really, notwithstanding the transcendental bias, a distinction not between high and low levels of poetry but between different kinds of elitist poetry.

In other cases, nineteenth-century poets and critics in defending the poetry of nature or of heart against the poetry of art seemed to imply that the poetry of art was elitist; it appealed to the few, the cultured of the drawing-room, but it did not appeal to them because it failed to sink deep into "the general heart" or to quicken "the throbbings of the general pulse."<sup>8</sup> A Knickerbocker reviewer praised Whittier for being a poet of nature rather than of art. Rather than drawing from models in literature, "he draws from the inner fountains of the soul. . . . Experience, and not erudition, is the secret of his power. His materials are drawn from the actual observation of life, and not from the study of classic examples."<sup>9</sup> Whittier himself exhibited a preference for poetry of the heart in praising Evangeline in 1848: "It is not merely a work of art; the pulse of humanity throbs warmly through it."<sup>10</sup>





An article in the Democratic Review in 1839 puts this position on the levels of poetry into sharp focus.<sup>11</sup> Poetry of art is admitted to be the highest poetry. It is written by rule and by precedent; it conforms to definitions and conventions. Like a difficult piece of music, it is performed with great skill of execution and our pleasure is in the wonder at the skill. This poetry touches the judgment. The judgment is surprised, pleased, satisfied by harmonious words and flowing sentences, apt antitheses and ingenious rhymes. But

It is no small matter to get up a taste  
for poetry.

"Everyone professes love of Milton, Shakespeare, etc." But few, even of the scholars read them. The writer concludes that even if it is aesthetically superior, "the majority of readers can have no appreciation for the highest poetry." On the other hand, "some pieces (e.g., Gray's "Elegy" or Wordsworth's "We Are Seven") elicit immediate response from the human heart." The poetry of nature evokes sweet harmonies; a sense of the beautiful, of peace, purity, God "struggling up through an imperfect utterance." Subjects in the poetry of nature are affections of woman, love, childhood, evening, flocks, woods, streams, contented labor, family worship, devoted patriotism, God. These poems touch not the judgment but the heart. When we read these poems we experience the same feelings as when "listening to the music of birds or the noise of waterfalls."

In a preface to his anthology of Poetry of the People Charles Mills Gayley emphasizes this characteristic of lower-level poetry of

touching the heart. It is "poetry that the people possess and occupy . . . because it is of their blood and bone and sinew: poetry . . . that lay close to the heart because of the heart; poems that even now beat in the bosom of the Folk and find utterance in the hour of stress; poems which more often than not are all the truer because they are not artful."<sup>12</sup>

In one of her best-known poems Ella Wheeler Wilcox expressed the same preference for lower-level poetry of the heart.

Though critics may bow to art, and I am its own true lover,  
It is not art, but heart which wins the wide world over.

Though the poet may spend his life skillfully rounding a  
measure,  
Unless he writes from a full warm heart, he gives us little  
pleasure.

And it is not the poet's song, though sweeter than bells  
chiming,  
Which thrills us through and through, but the heart which  
beats under the rhyming.

And therefore, I say again, though I am art's own true lover,  
That it is not art, but heart, which wins the wide world over.

In Chapter III, after noticing a difference in intellectual difficulty in high- and low-level poems, we stopped with the problem of assigning value. Are we to agree with nineteenth-century critics that low-level poems are aesthetically superior because they can be understood by great numbers of people? Or are we to consider twentieth-century charges that important truth has been sacrificed in the process of bringing poetry down to this easy level?

In the heart vs. art distinction the same kind of problem arises. Difference has been defined: while high-level poems tend to

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be artistically more skillfully executed, low-level poems are charged with feeling that touches large numbers of readers. But again the dilemma--where to place the greater value? Twentieth-century critics warn us to beware of the sentimental. I. A. Richards defines the word: a response is sentimental when the emotions are too easily stirred; either the emotions of the poet are too great for the occasion or we the readers are too easily moved by the material in the poem.<sup>13</sup> Pursuing the problem further Kaplan analyzes the danger in succumbing to sentimental art. In popular art the feelings themselves are the ultimate subject matter; the art leaves our feelings unchanged, neither transforming them, nor helping us to understand them, nor fulfilling them--popular art merely reminds us of these feelings. The artist thus "exploits" our feelings. Everyone has feelings, real and often intense, but usually lacking in "depth." Popular art is shallow and wallows in emotions without leading us toward greater understanding or greater depth of feeling. Great art, on the other hand, demands creative response on our part and demands "response" even "where antecedent interests are not engaged." The result from experience of great art is a change in our feelings; rather than our being merely reminded of feeling, our "apprehensions are enlarged" and our emotions are transcended."<sup>14</sup> Again we have a double set of criteria to keep in mind when attempting evaluation of poems in Part II: are popular poems to be valued as "truer" for being more emotional and less "artful"? or are they to be criticized for an injurious sentimentality?

The nineteenth-century interest in personal feeling and in subjects of everyday concern resulted in the proliferation of the

lyric form. Some writers lamented that Americans had yet produced no long poem "to which we can sit down, of a winter's afternoon, before a comfortable fire, with the feeling that we hold something in our hands which is to interest and occupy us till bed-time." This writer noted all the "sonnets, madrigals, lines, stanzas" in the magazines, and confessing them to be "very sweet," complained that he was beginning to be "cloyed" with them and wanted something more substantial.<sup>15</sup>

But in spite of the call for an epic, the "genius of the age was lyric" as one critic put it. And in defending the lyric, writers are found to be defending again the subject matter and effects of the lower levels of poetry. Evidencing an anti-elitist bias, a Christian Examiner reviewer introduced some unknown British lyrics in 1850 with the admission that the poems did not exhibit what "microscopical criticism calls the great gifts of poesy." The anti-mystical bias was also evident. These poets were "not known in select circles as wise seers, where time has been studiously occupied in shedding elaborate immortality either on violets or virtue." The writer was defining lower-level poetry when he listed the accomplishments in the lyrics: "they have been content to sing of the human heart, its joys and sorrows . . . they have oftener recorded the darker side of life's experience, and habitually with great beauty and power . . . [they offer] a melody and sweetness, pleasant and welcome to all."<sup>16</sup> A distinction similar to that made by the Emerson and Longfellow poems appears again in this article.

There are occasions in the life of everyone when the louder and loftier measures of the lyre sound like discords out of tune and harsh. . . . There are pauses in the swift-winged flight of time, when the calmer strains of poesy come with a singular sweetness to the weary, fainting pilgrim. It is for such moments that Swain, and Hervey and Alford, with others . . . are living, to cheer, and soften, and purify with a human tenderness the throbbing heart.<sup>17</sup>

Another writer was distinguishing between the levels of poetry when he contrasted the lyric poets with (1) the "great practical poets" (e.g., Shakespeare, Homer, Milton) who "sublime" the thoughts and aspirations of daily life "into a broader spirit and grander power" and with (2) "metaphysical poets" (e.g., Shelley, Goethe, Wordsworth) whose poetry is in some respects "more elevated, loftier," but "less wide in its applicability and less generally appreciated by the masses." This writer, too, praised the lyric poet who was "humbler" but "in his tone far more original . . . than his brethren" in rendering details from everyday life into poetic material. He "depends more upon the loves and fancies of daily life. He deals almost exclusively with the actual as it comes everywhere before us." The great attribute of the lyric poets was singleness, simplicity, the "extreme simplicity preserved in their diction, and a corresponding unity in their thought." These poets were not tempted to "undue use of embroidery."<sup>18</sup> J. C. Shairp wrote in 1884 that the function of the lyric was to convey feeling rather than knowledge; he found man's emotion to be "shy and retiring" and in need of something to stand between it and the world. The formality of meter "furnishes a veil to the modesty and tenderness of deep emotion." One great service of poetry is that it thus "hides our



feelings while it reveals them."<sup>19</sup> Poetry has descended the levels, then, from the exhilarating, "artful thunder" and rude, hard chords smitten by Emerson's bard to this quiet, delicate communication of human feeling.

As one mid-nineteenth-century writer put it, the distinction is between "grandeur" and "tenderness," between the "sublime" and the "tender."<sup>20</sup> This writer held that "Since the days of Homer, no poet has been at the same time truly sublime and truly tender." He maintained that while Shelley's poetry of the sublime "turned [his] earnest and disinterested love back upon himself," Tennyson's poetry of tenderness was more productive because more successful in reaching audiences. "By careful study and patient attention to popular wants, Tennyson has overcome much of that distance which lay between the world and himself. . . . and has learned the modes of access to the human heart."

The indication here is that poetry functions differently at different levels and that both levels are respectable. A Democratic Review article in 1851 defended the respectability of ephemeral types of literature: "They have uses and immediate rewards. No one thinks of ranking them in the future as classics."<sup>21</sup> In a comment on newspapers that could just as well have been applied to some poetry of the day, the writer pointed to a specific benefit of ephemeral literature: it was read even by the poorest artisan and teamster, thus "keeping alive the mental appetite of those whose life would seem one continued war against the intellect." He noted, too, that some popular literature is excellent and will enjoy a





permanence; approval of the people was the most severe test for literature--"the writer whom the people love may well afford to snap his fingers at the critic."

Before examining more specifically how poetry was seen to function in a way that appealed to general audiences, there is another interesting view that we ought to note of the superiority of common readers as the audience for poetry. From this viewpoint, articulated by H. T. Tuckerman in 1845 and by T. S. Eliot in 1933, to choose two widely divergent sources, the uneducated make a more receptive audience for poetry. Tuckerman held that the love of gain and physical comfort as well as the "very intelligence of the higher classes" deadened the finer perceptions of the people and made them unreceptive to poetry. They wanted knowledge, facts that were "useful"; they were incapable of experiencing the gentler, more interior feelings that poetry could convey--for example, the "veneration that awes curiosity by exalted sentiment." Life never seemed miraculous to this higher cultured class; routine had gradually "congealed their sensibilities."<sup>22</sup> Eliot addressed himself to the same problem. The "half-educated" and "ill-educated" were prevented from enjoying poetry: they had been led to believe that poetry is "difficult," and in a kind of "pit or gallery fright" their senses were "obfuscated" by their desire to be clever and to look hard for something, not knowing what. Eliot wrote,

I myself should like an audience which could neither read nor write.<sup>23</sup>

Tuckerman held that the lower classes enjoyed poetry more because it was one of their few luxuries and he praised the more genuine taste of the relatively uncultured reader. "Those to whom reading is almost a solitary luxury . . . seek the world of imagination and sentiment with the greater delight from the limited satisfaction realized in their actual lot." There is "no conformity to fashion or affectation of taste" here.<sup>24</sup>

Then, in signifying how poetry functions with common readers, Tuckerman, like many other nineteenth-century writers, praised poetry for its ability to encourage, comfort, reassure.

To them poetry is a great teacher of self-respect. It unfolds to them emotions familiar to their own bosoms. It celebrates scenes of beauty amid which they also are free to wander. It vindicates capacities and a destiny of which they partake. Intimations like these are seldom found in their experience, and for this reason,--cherished and hallowed associations endear an art which consoles while it brings innocent pleasure to their hearts.<sup>25</sup>

Early in the century a reviewer in the Christian Examiner<sup>26</sup> praised the quiet piety of this low-keyed poetry. He wrote of the poems of H. F. Gould as "sweet and unpretending, so pure in purpose and so gentle in expression, that criticism is disarmed of all severity. . . . It is poetry for a sober, quiet, kindly-affectioned, Christian heart. It is poetry for a united family circle in their hours of peace and leisure." In 1879 A. A. Hopkins redrew the distinction between elitist and popular poetry in his anthology Waifs and their Authors, and he stressed the positive, encouraging function of lower-level poetry.

Not all the singers sit on library shelves, in dainty costume of blue and gold, and sing to select audiences. Some, who sing most sweetly, occupy the "Poet's Corner" of the newspaper, and find listeners in homes where stately singers seldom come. They have their mission. They sing of faith and hope and love, so simply, so tenderly, so sympathetically, that the heart of the people is touched. They strengthen the popular faith; they give new hope to the desponding; they move us all to a broader good-will and a nobler charity.<sup>27</sup>

Slason Thompson, too, defined the function of popular poetry as a positive moral force and a source of encouragement and comfort for the reader. His book The Humbler Poets was to serve as "a balm of hope, encouragement, sweet content to some despondent heart" and to "teach some frail and weary wight that love, truth, and mirth are unfailing comforters, comrades, friends."<sup>28</sup>

A distinction in levels of poetry is apparent, then, in effect on the reader, as it was in intelligibility and subject matter. High poetry is expected to excite, "dilate" the soul and "make the wild blood start." Lower poetry is to calm, soothe, "quiet/ The restless pulse of care." The distinctions themselves are not controversial. The problem arises when we try to determine whether the art functioning at the lower levels has value. Much of nineteenth-century criticism held that popular poetry was indeed valuable in uplifting the reader morally and soothing him psychologically. Although the popular arts have generally been condemned as vulgar in the twentieth century, a few critics have recognized unique and possibly respectable functions in the lower-level arts. Even Roy Harvey Pearce is willing to grant that popular poetry functions differently from high poetry and possibly in a way that can be valued.

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The rule is this: that the poet who would reach the great audience had, willy-nilly, to cut himself down to its size. Such a cutting down does not imply only a falling below the standards of high art; it implies also the production of an art in some respects different in kind from high art, and to be judged and valued accordingly.<sup>29</sup>

Several moderns are more positive in their approval of the popular arts and popular poetry in particular. Oscar Handlin approves popular art when it deals directly with the concrete world intensely familiar to the audience.<sup>30</sup> Gilbert Seldes criticizes fine artists for having turned their backs on the American people, for attacking the emptiness of lives of Americans and yet giving the people little that was relevant to their time and situation. Seldes contends that the popular arts tend to fill the void: popular artists have the power to communicate with everyone whereas fine artists are not even trying to communicate. Seldes concludes, "I don't accept the assertion that the fine arts alone represent all that is worth remembering in the life of a nation."<sup>31</sup> One twentieth-century poet who recognized and deplored the separation between the artist and the people was E. E. Cummings. Cummings believed that functioning art had to appeal to the mass, and he was therefore an antagonist to high art. His poetry celebrates the movement and spontaneity of live beauty (Coney Island amusement park, the circus, the burlesque show) as opposed to intellectual beauty.<sup>32</sup>

Edward Shils, admitting that "mediocre culture" does not measure up to standards employed in judging works of "superior culture," finds, nevertheless, several positive values inherent in the lower cultures: (1) genuine conviviality and good fun; (2) often

earnest, if simple morality; (3) many traditions that express something essential in human life (the brotherhood theme is one prominent example in popular poetry); (4) often a "painfully developed art of coping with the miseries of existence" through routine pieties and decent pleasures.<sup>33</sup>

But not all critics are as positive about the functions of popular art. Some find the soothing, comforting aspect of popular poetry questionable. As they warn that sentimentality in poetry prevents growth in understanding the feelings, so they caution that reassurance stemming from reaffirmation of what we already think we know precludes poetry that can lead us toward discovery of new truth.<sup>34</sup> Emerson did not want his bard to repeat to people what they already knew.

I will not read a pretty tale  
To pretty people in a nice saloon  
Borrowed from their expectation<sup>35</sup>

Likewise, Whitman deprecates poetry that merely reaffirms.

I am he who walks the States with a barb'd tongue,  
questioning every one I meet,  
Who are you that wanted only to be told what you  
knew before?  
Who are you that wanted only a book to join you in  
your nonsense?<sup>36</sup>

In the 1855 Preface Whitman was even more outspoken against poetry that reassures.

A great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning. Has any one fancied he could sit at last under some due authority and rest satisfied with explanations and realize and be content and full? To no such terminus does

the greatest poet bring . . . he brings neither cessation or sheltered fatness and ease. The touch of him tells in action. Whom he takes he takes with firm sure grasp into live regions previously unattained . . . thenceforward is no rest . . .

Great poetry, then, disturbs the reader rather than comforting him, and provokes him into active discovery of new understanding, rather than reassuring him of the validity of what he already knows. One problem for Part II of this paper is to determine whether this distinction holds and whether poetry functioning to comfort and reassure the reader really has a pernicious effect. Is there a sacrifice of important discovery of truth?

The function of popular poetry to reassure and soothe the reader leads to one more question which recent critics force us to ask. What is the relationship between fantasy and reality in the arts? In Chapter II we saw that nineteenth-century critics expected poetry to uplift, encourage the reader and to cast a veil of beauty over earthly things. But in beautifying everything, in ignoring all disagreeable facts as the Brahmins did, is there a danger of refusing to face, and therefore gain control over, important aspects of reality?

Kaplan finds popular art deficient in prettifying everything, especially death, and in "escaping" by shutting out the reality, glossing over it.<sup>37</sup> But this is really no escape. A person can not escape from something he has never attained. "Popular art is escapist only insofar as it turns its back on a world it has never known" (p. 362). True art forces us to face reality, to face the limits of our power, for example. "The magic is that we transcend those limits in our aesthetically structured awareness of them."



William Lynch has expressed a similar concern that the failure of the popular arts of the mass media to differentiate between fantasy and reality is resulting in "a weakening, throughout the nation's audiences, of the power to differentiate between these two things."<sup>38</sup> Lynch defines fantasy: dream, illusion, unreality, distortion of reality, unrooted thought, escape. He defines reality: common sense (not cowardice) to daring (as long as it is rooted in the realistic and possible); reality "includes the whole range of the truly human over against everything that is phony, absurd, illusory, or 'angelic'" (p. 21). He phrases the important question that we must always ask: are we taking the stance of fantasy or are we facing reality with wisdom and courage--are we acting up to the reality or backing away from it in fantasy? (p. 22). True art helps a man face his limitations and transcend them. Popular art tends to soothe, to offer a palliative in which the painful conflicts in men are eased but unresolved--in the end the distress is increased. Art "acknowledges the interior movements in the soul," sets them into action, and the result is some kind of resolution or integration (p. 64).

Lynch has a positive regard for the people and their potentiality for realistic culture. He blames "purveyors of all the techniques for the fixation of the imagination" (p. 64) for stunting the development of the imagination of the people. While granting "distances in capacities and sensitivities," Lynch contends, nevertheless, that true critics can aid amateurs among the people to become increasingly competent in their judgments and tastes (p. 16).



Lynch is convinced that the people have the capacity for responding to a more realistic art, if only they are led to develop their tastes. (Lynch's term realistic includes the "vision" of high art; he uses the term to refer to all that man can attain as well as what they have done.)

Another way of regarding the levels of poetry is suggested here and reinforced by Pearce: it is granted that popular poetry is inferior to high poetry in its approximation to truth and its power of bringing the reader through a transformation in which he gains new control over truth and reality; but popular poetry is respectable as long as it ministers to (and does not exploit) the needs of people who have not yet been prepared for working "through the sort of transformations manifest in elite art."<sup>39</sup> Pearce, like Lynch--and like Kaplan whose thesis is "that popular art is not the degradation of taste but its immaturity . . . [and that it is] produced by a dynamic intrinsic to the aesthetic experience itself"<sup>40</sup>--expresses the faith of a democratic society that the relative size of the audience capable of realizing the products of high art "can be steadily enlarged."<sup>41</sup>

The problems for Part II of this paper are clearly drawn. We will have (1) to illustrate the four distinctions suggested here in Chapters III and IV, and (2) to consider critical attitudes of both centuries in our estimation of value in the levels of poetry.

A summary of these four sets of distinctions may be helpful here.



(1) Popular poetry moralizes directly and is easier to understand. Nineteenth-century critics wanted poetry that improved people, and to do this poetry had to be intelligible. Twentieth-century critics warn that making poetry easy sacrifices truth and a full aesthetic experience.

(2) Popular poetry deals with concrete rather than abstract subjects and tends to "warm the heart" of the reader. Early critics approved poetry of feeling but later writers warn of the dangers of sentimentality, which sacrifices understanding and control of feeling.

(3) Popular poetry deals with common rather than lofty subjects and tends to calm rather than dilate the soul. Early critics realized that soothing poetry about everyday concerns was of a lower level but they saw it performing a valid function. Moderns warn again: to soothe and comfort may be to avoid important truth which true poetry should help the reader to face and control even though the initial step in the procedure is disturbance.

(4) Popular poetry tends to avoid disagreeable subjects that cause the reader despair. Early critics called for poetry to beautify and encourage. Twentieth-century writers hold that fantasy does not relieve distress; that poetry must lead the reader to confront and transcend reality.

The summary distinction is that in popular poetry the reader is relatively passive and comfortable and remains unchanged. High poetry demands active participation of the respondent in the aesthetic experience and results in a positive change, a growth in

the reader. Nineteenth-century critics also expected poetry to improve readers, but through a moral imposed extrinsically onto the reader. Modern critics expect poetry to stimulate growth from within the reader.

My contention is that high poetry is thus aesthetically superior to lower poetry, but that lower-level functions are respectable at certain times (1) when relaxation is necessary and desirable, and (2) when the audience potentiality for high poetry has not yet been developed.

It should not be necessary to develop the point that poetry does not fall neatly into two levels but into an infinite number along a continuing spectrum. Pearce suggests at least three foci on the spectrum with the Fireside Poets hitting "at a level somewhere between Emerson's and Mrs. Sigourney's"; in Pearce's view the lowest level poets lacked the "intelligence to assume their responsibilities," and "catered to and exploited the general (or generalized) reader."<sup>42</sup> In Part II, I have chosen poets who would seem to represent various levels, but, of course, I do not intend to try to rank them in any scientific, numerical way.



## NOTES--CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>"The Day is Done" was written as a proem to The Waif, a collection of lyric poems selected by Longfellow and published (Cambridge: John Owen) at Christmas in 1844. In this poem Longfellow refers to one kind of poetry: soothing, quiet poems appropriate for relaxation at bedtime. He acknowledges, of course, that other kinds of poetry (e.g., "mighty thoughts" of the "grand old masters") have particular functions at other times and for other needs.

<sup>2</sup>"New Poetry in New England," U.S. Democratic Review, 20 (May 1847), 396.

<sup>3</sup>James Russell Lowell, "The Function of the Poet," (1855) in The Achievement of American Criticism, ed. Brown, pp. 313-14.

<sup>4</sup>Slason Thompson, The Humbler Poets: A Collection of Newspaper and Periodical Verse, 1870-1885 (Chicago: Jansen McClurg Co., 1886), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>"Robert Burns," Knickerbocker, 41 (1853), 28.

<sup>6</sup>Editor's Table, "The Masses," Harper's Monthly, 23 (June-December 1861), 263.

<sup>7</sup>E. P. Whipple, "Emerson as a Poet," North American Review, 135 (1882), 6.

<sup>8</sup>A. P. Peabody, "The Intellectual Aspect of the Age," North American Review, 64 (1847), 283.

<sup>9</sup>"Whittier," Knickerbocker, 50 (1857), 407.

<sup>10</sup>John Greenleaf Whittier, "Evangeline," The National Era (Washington, January 27, 1848), in The Achievement of American Criticism, ed. Brown, p. 280.





<sup>11</sup>"The Taste for Poetry," U.S. Democratic Review, 6 (September 1839), 219 ff.

<sup>12</sup>Charles Mills Gayley and Martin C. Flaherty, Poetry of the People (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1904), p. v.

<sup>13</sup>Richards, Practical Criticism, p. 261.

<sup>14</sup>Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," pp. 358-60.

<sup>15</sup>Review of Dana, North American Review, 30 (1830), 279.

<sup>16</sup>J. T. F., "Introduction of some Unknown British Lyrics." Christian Examiner, 48 (1850), 40.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup>Review of "Poems by George P. Morris," United States Magazine, 4 (June 1855), 473-75.

<sup>19</sup>J. C. Shairp, "Friendship in Ancient Poetry," North American Review, 139 (1884), 453-54.

<sup>20</sup>"Shelley and Tennyson," U.S. Democratic Review, 28 (January 1851), 52.

<sup>21</sup>"Our Literature," U.S. Democratic Review, 29 (September 1851), 211-12.

<sup>22</sup>H. T. Tuckerman, "The Poetry of Bryant," U.S. Democratic Review, 16 (February 1845), 185-86.

<sup>23</sup>Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, pp. 151-52.

<sup>24</sup>Tuckerman, p. 185.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>Review of Poems by H. F. Gould, Christian Examiner, 14 (1833), 320-21.

<sup>27</sup>A. A. Hopkins, Preface to Waifs and their Authors (Boston: D. Lothrop and Co., 1879).



<sup>28</sup>Thompson, The Humbler Poets, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup>Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry, p. 246.

<sup>30</sup>Oscar Handlin, "Comments on Mass and Popular Culture," in Culture for the Millions, ed. Norman Jacobs (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1961), p. 66.

<sup>31</sup>Gilbert Seldes, "The People and the Arts," quoted from The Great Audience in Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill.: Macmillan Free Press, 1957), p. 79.

<sup>32</sup>These sentiments on Cummings were expressed by Patrick Mullen of Ohio State University in a paper, "E. E. Cummings and Popular Culture," delivered at the Popular Culture Convention in Toledo, Ohio, October 31, 1969.

<sup>33</sup>Edward Shils, "Mass Society and Its Culture," rpt. in Jacobs, Culture for the Millions, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup>Kaplan, p. 354.

<sup>35</sup>From the original draft of "Merlin," Works (Centenary Edition), IX, 441.

<sup>36</sup>"By Blue Ontario's Shore," canto 4.

<sup>37</sup>Kaplan, p. 361.

<sup>38</sup>Lynch, The Image Industries, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup>Pearce, p. 247.

<sup>40</sup>Kaplan, p. 353.

<sup>41</sup>Pearce, p. 247.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 197.

**PART II**

**FOUR NINETEENTH-CENTURY POPULAR POETS**

## CHAPTER V

### THE CONSOLER: LYDIA HUNTLEY SIGOURNEY

(1791-1865)

Mrs. Sigourney, the "sweet singer of Hartford," dominated American popular poetry for the first half of the nineteenth century. The daughter of a gardener in Norwich, Connecticut, Lydia Huntley moved to Hartford to open a school for girls in 1814 and to publish her first book the following year. She married Charles Sigourney, an educated and successful merchant in Hartford in 1819.

In 1828 she and N. P. Willis shared a \$100 prize offered by The Token, the first successful American annual. It was through the widely distributed, elegantly bound annuals in the 1830's that she became known. By the forties she had transferred her attention to the magazines which began appearing everywhere and which supported her reputation until her death in 1865. Although many thoughtful people, including Mr. Sigourney, deplored the great increase in periodicals, everyone else was buying and reading them. Poe wrote that the "whole tendency of the age [was] Magazine-ward,"<sup>1</sup> and he also lamented the fact that many writers were gaining wide reputations merely by appearing often and regularly in these periodicals, "merely by keeping continually in the eye, or by appealing continually

with little things, to the ear, of that great, overgrown, and majestic gander, the critical and bibliographical rabble."<sup>2</sup> He did not accuse Mrs. Sigourney of owing her reputation to "this chicanery" but concluded that it had been thereby greatly enhanced.

Mrs. Sigourney's reputation was also assisted by her own relatively unsophisticaled, but nevertheless persistent promotional efforts. She kept a large calendar book with lists of birthdays and marriage anniversaries of influential Americans--presidents, governors, generals, and other public figures. Many people who had never met Mrs. Sigourney were surprised that a volume of her poems should just happen to arrive on a special day.<sup>3</sup> In 1840 when she set sail for Europe she took a box full of her works in various bindings suitable for European dignitaries. One beautifully bound volume was presented to the Queen of France and reaped a "curt acknowledgment in the hand of a lady-in-waiting," followed later by a diamond bracelet. This gift became excellent advertisement in the biographical notices thereafter, and popular legend augmented the incident by asserting that the queen had taken the bracelet from her wrist and given it to Mrs. Sigourney herself.<sup>4</sup>

All consideration of the methods for becoming known aside, the fact remains that Mrs. Sigourney's works were distributed in great numbers for fifty years. Between 1815 and 1865 she published sixty-nine books and contributed over two thousand articles to nearly three hundred periodicals. Her Letters to Young Ladies appeared in twenty American and five English editions, and Letters to Mothers in eighteen American and four English editions. Throughout her career

she was besieged with requisitions for poems: by churches for hymns to be sung at consecrations, ordinations, installations; by charitable societies for anniversaries; by academies and schools for exhibitions; by individuals wanting anything from elegies and epitaphs to an ode for a lover to propitiate his mistress upon leave-taking. Mrs. Sigourney commented on the phenomenon: "If there is any kitchen in Parnassus, my Muse has surely officiated there as a woman-of-all-work, and an aproned waiter." These solicitors offered no compensation and the Hartford singer eventually found it impossible to answer all the requests.

The heavy correspondence, however, is one indication of the sensitive rapport between Mrs. Sigourney and her audience. She often received letters from settlers on the frontier in Ohio or Michigan expressing gratitude for the comfort her verses had given in a tragic hour. She was personally admired, many women feeling that they could become more like the pure, holy, virtuous Mrs. Sigourney by reading her poems.

The title of her first volume, Moral Pieces in Prose and Verse, could be applied to the bulk of her work for fifty years during which time there was almost no change in the tone, technique, or content of her poems.<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Sigourney wrote during a time when great numbers of ordinary people--housewives, merchants, ministers, clerks, farmers--read poetry for pleasure and profit. Carl Bode writes that people expected poetry to "titillate their emotions, especially the gentler, melancholy ones, then give them a moral turn."



Mrs. Sigourney wrote her poems expressly for the people and she fully complied with their expectations that poetry be a vehicle for moral teachings. She wished her volumes to be found (and they were) "in the alcove of the library," on "the centertable of the matron."<sup>6</sup> In praising the work of the British poetess, Mrs. Felicia Hemans, Mrs. Sigourney revealed her own prejudice for poetry that reached the masses.

More than any other female poet of the motherland, she has been naturalized in our new western world. Some of them may have possessed bolder inventive and tragic power, like Joanna Baillie; or more of the high old Attic spirit, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Yet their works have lingered rather in the boudoirs of wealth, or relied for full appreciation on the classic or the philosopher. [Mrs. Hemans, on the other hand,] is at home in all sections of our land.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Sigourney pointed out two examples of Mrs. Hemans' popularity with common Americans: even farmers recited the "Pilgrim's Hymn" to their children (It was read on Thanksgiving Day, 1969, on WJR Detroit radio.), and emigrants in their tents in the Rocky Mountains or on the shores of the Pacific sang "Freedom to Worship God." Mrs. Hemans' "genius" lay in her being an "exponent of the great heart of humanity." Like the bee she concocted "not the honey of Hymettus alone, but the aroma of all pure thoughts and noble deeds, from the wilderness to the throne."

In the tradition of American popular poetry, Mrs. Sigourney clearly saw a didactic purpose for her poems. She wrote in her autobiography that in her literary career she had been ever prompted by the "hope and belief that, by enforcing some salutary precept, or prompting some hallowed practice, good may have been done in our race."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Mrs. Sigourney's poems indeed were "moral pieces" directed almost invariably toward the lesson that eternal life in heaven is the reward and goal of life on earth. This lesson evolved in two kinds of poems: using a Religious Formula, she celebrated the moral significance of a religious event; using an Historical Formula, the poetess based a moral on something in the life of an historical person.<sup>9</sup> Throughout her work, in both kinds of poems, death was the favorite subject.

Religious poems describe the "Sabbath Morning" or "The Sunday School" or explain that while human rulers demand homage and cowering obedience, God does not will the slavery of the soul but wishes men to love Him with dignified praise and in a filial spirit ("Joy in Believing," S. P., pp. 144-45).<sup>10</sup> Scenes in nature prompt religious moralisms. "Radiant Clouds at Sunset" (S.P., pp. 162-63) become a metaphor for the eternal life of the soul: the soul shall rise again like the sun, after vapory clouds (worldly ills and sins) have disappeared forever. The poet contemplates the thunderous power of the Niagara Falls and uses them as an emblem for the relative insignificance of the individual soul. God poured the great falls

as a drop  
From his right-hand,--bidding the soul that looks  
Upon that fearful majesty, be still,  
Be humbly wrapped in its own nothingness,  
And lose itself in Him.

The lives of historical persons provided moral lessons for Mrs. Sigourney's poems. "Napoleon at Helena" (S.P., pp. 220-24) uses the powerful and bloody career of the world's conqueror to underscore the "puny pride of man" evidenced by the uninscribed tomb of Napoleon

on the island of Helena. To the echoed question "Who shall write/  
Napoleon's epitaph?" the answer came from Earth, like "one who  
bloods/ O'er unforgiven injuries"--"None."

Pocahontas was one of Mrs. Sigourney's longest poems, and one of her "most successful" according to the 1875 edition of the Cyclo-paedia of American Literature, which ten years after the poetess's death, still commented very favorably on her work. Even Rufus Griswold, who was not a gentle critic and who treated Mrs. Sigourney's works scornfully in his Poets and Poetry of America, regarded this as the best of her long poems and "much the best of the many poetical compositions of which the famous daughter of Powhatan has been the subject."<sup>11</sup>

But Gordon Haight points out how easily Mrs. Sigourney slips into the old formula. The characters portrayed are but the stock figures of religious annuals. The daring cavaliers sent out by the London company become the old puppets, the religious pioneers, as they set about immediately upon landing at Jamestown to erect a "hallow'd dome" in which they may "nurse devotion's consecrated flame." Instead of the labors and adventures in the new country, we read a seven-stanza description of the "Sabbath morn" officiated by the same "holy man, of countenance serene" who presided at all the weddings, christenings, sailors' funerals in Mrs. Sigourney's poems.

The music of the daily service attracts Powhatan and his daughter, and Captain John Smith is rescued, but quickly. His name is not even mentioned. Neither is the name of John Rolfe, and only familiarity with the story cues the reader as to whom Pocahontas

married. Love is barely alluded to. To the "pure breast" of Pocahontas love "was but a name/ for kindling knowledge," a "guiding lamp, whose bright, mysterious flame/ Led on to loftier heights the aspiring mind." Thus, as in all of Mrs. Sigourney's poems, the passion and romance of love is ignored.

In the 1840's and 50's most of the popular poetry was written by women appealing to womanly emotions. Mrs. Sigourney's prototype, Mrs. Hemans, very popular in America in the 40's, wrote poetry that was almost exclusively feminine in interest, covering the "whole sweet circle of domestic affections. . . . the hallowed ministries of woman at the cradle, the hearth-stone, the death-bed."<sup>12</sup> What is obviously missing, as Carl Bode notes, is the marriage-bed. Popular poetry of the time was pure and holy. People believed that Mrs. Hemans and Mrs. Sigourney were impeccable and that they could be too by reading the poems of these women.

Thus, in Pocahontas, one of the world's great courtships is ignored. After her baptism Pocahontas reads sacred history until her wedding is abruptly mentioned. What is emphasized is her quiet domestic life as the timid, trusting, ideal wife in England. The climax of the poem is, of course, her early death accompanied by leave-taking scenes with husband and infant son.<sup>13</sup>

Many other poems have historical subjects. In "Pompeii" the narrator, in reading about that ancient city, contrasts the futile greed of one "haggard skeleton" that clutches hoarded gold in its bony hand, with the "bold and unblenching faith" of a grim soldier who remained steadfastly at his post in spite of a "suffocating wave"

[illegible]

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of fire closing over him. The moral: "Thus may we stand/ In duty's armor, at our hour of doom." (S.P., pp. 270-71). Recalling the anguish that the first settlers in New England must have experienced upon watching their ships return to England, the poetess exhorts the reader in "The Fathers of New England": if Mammon, wealth, luxury tempt you from manly virtue and Christian purpose, "Turn ye to Plymouth-rock and where they knelt/ Kneel, and renew the vow they breath'd to God." (S.P., pp. 79-81). The Mrs. Sigourney formula is clearly evident in the treatment of the Anne Boleyn story. "On seeing the axe with which Anna Boleyn was beheaded," the Hartford singer imagines her favorite ideal woman whose dying prayer is for none other than the carousing, evil king himself: he "springs to mirth" and "winds his bugle horn," and "riots while her blood is reeking"; the noble woman prays in "seraph tone":

"Oh!--be his sins forgiven!  
Who raised me to an earthly throne,  
And sends me now, from prison lone  
To be a saint in heaven.  
(S.P., pp. 36-38)

One large group of poems combined the Historical and Religious Formulas in commemorating the efforts of missionaries. One of the longest of these is a tribute to Zinzendorff, a missionary among the Indians in the Wyoming valley near Philadelphia. Zinzendorff is pictured consoling a dying chief, addressing a multitude on the welfare of their souls, and dramatically escaping death and proving his goodness when the plot of some Indian assassins failed. Zinzendorff is engaged in quiet devotion in his tent when the



planted rattlesnake glides past him unharmed and unharmed. The amazed Indians return to allay the suspicions of their superiors by reporting that Zinzendorff is a god. The poem closes with an eloquent tribute to missionary labor and an exhortation to Christian union.<sup>14</sup>

Many other poems commend efforts of missionaries around the world. In "The Burmans and their Missionary" the natives beg "Jesus Christ's man," the Reverend Dr. Judson, for some news and writings of Christ (S.P., pp. 164-66); "On the Death of Dr. Adam Clarke" celebrates the man who spread forth "the riches of the Gospel--kneeling down To light its lamp in every darkened hut" amid the "Shetlands" (S.P., pp. 307-308). "Departure of Missionaries for Ceylon" (1844, pp. 62-63), "Parting Hymn of Missionaries to Burnrah" (1844, p. 92), "Foreign Missions" (1844, p. 106), "Death of a Missionary in Africa" (1844, p. 122), "Moravian Missions to Greenland" (1844, p. 131)--the list could go on to great length, the poems being very similar and only the names of people and places being changed. One of the aesthetic defects of popular poetry is obvious here--it is often repetitious and monotonous.

In another group of poems combining the Historical and Religious Formulas, the subjects were scriptural persons. In "The Widow of Zarephath" (S.P., pp. 189-93) during a devastating drought in Israel, a "holy man" was directed by God to the coast of Zidon. Through his ministrations to the widow's ailing son and later by his raising the dead son to life, the holy man was able to convert the woman from the heathen worship of Astarte to the belief in the





true and "living God." The message of "Methuselah," similar to that in "Napoleon on Helena," was that all life on earth, no matter how powerful or how long, is in vain if not "lived to God" (S.P., p. 282). In "Barzillai the Gileadite" (S.P., pp. 152-54) the sanctity of motherhood is emphasized, as it is throughout much of Mrs. Sigourney's work. The narrator in the poem is old and no longer derives pleasure from sensual experience: the "wine-cup hath no zest,/ The rose no fragrant breath;/ Music from my ear hath fled." His memory too is disappointing him in letting the treasures of the mind "steal away." He delights in only one thing and it is all he can clearly remember: his "mother's holy smile, that soothed [his] sharpest ill." This is why Barzillai begs the King of Israel to let him be returned home for burial by the graves of his parents.

In Mrs. Sigourney's day a mother had tremendous responsibility in guiding the soul of her child toward heaven. In the little collection of essays Letters to Mothers Mrs. Sigourney begins with this exhortation to mothers--to be aware of the greatness of their position. In "Baptism of the First Born" (S.P., pp. 203-204) the poetess again warns young mothers to be "prompt" in pouring instruction o'er the young heart because a lifetime goes by fast. Scarcely has the baptismal "dew" dried upon the infant eyes, "Ere the thick frost of manhood's care,/ And strong Death's icy seal are there." One of the scriptural poems uses the Noah's ark story as a metaphor for the mother's ardent wish that her own child will find the peace offered by the hand of God. The mother in the poem has often told and led her small daughter to love the story of the ark and the dove. The

mother then reveals how "the warm teaching of the sacred tale" is accompanied by her own voiceless prayer

that when that timid soul,  
New in the rosy mesh of infancy,  
Fast bound, shall dare the billows of the world,  
Like that exploring dove, and find no rest,  
A pierced, a pitying, a redeeming hand  
May gently guide it to the ark of peace.

This is one of the spots in which I would suggest that Mrs. Sigourney has been aesthetically successful. The moral is simple but earnest; a mother's genuine concern is conveyed through an image that is consistent with the rest of the poem and at the same time effective in making us experience the confused wandering and relieved home-coming of a bird, the soul of a child, the child as watched by the mother, the soul of any of us--all felt simultaneously.

In one poem a mother's love is expressed as the only earthly thing that is not changeable. In "The Mother" (S.P., pp. 187-88), complementary to "Barzillai the Gileadite," an ancient woman, full of sorrow and devoid of hope and pleasure, lights up, nevertheless, like a sunbeam at the mention of the name of her absent son.

While earthly love is a theme running through the works of all four of the popular poets studied here, for Mrs. Sigourney, all earthly love comes from God. In "Solitude" (S.P., pp. 70-71) the narrator discovers that solitude is impossible because everywhere he goes there are evidences of God's love present: in the greeting of the violet's eye, the smile of the wild-rose, the kiss of the vine-flower, the glad voices of the garrulous brook and the singing breeze. True solitude can result only when man selfishly "locks his joy, and

shuts out others' grief." The power of love is dramatized in "Nature's Royalty" (S.P., pp. 72-74). Here a powerful king in gorgeous purple robe, ruling the globe from a radiant throne, is yet unsatisfied, suspicious that his sway may not remain firm. The narrator senses that there is no perfect sway "save what is built on love." An innocent babe then succeeds in winning the hearts of "haughty warrior," beautiful woman, and "sage austere," illustrating that the true monarch "conquers beauty, power and pride,/ Thus with a smile or tear" and that love or infant "Innocence doth make/ The human heart its throne."

The love relationship dramatized throughout Mrs. Sigourney's work is love among members of the family. The home is sacred in her poetry. A typical picture of the sanctity of the home is presented in "A Cottage Scene" (S.P., pp. 105-06). A traveler "saw a cradle at a cottage door,/ Where the fair mother, with her cheerful wheel,/ Carolled so sweet a song," that a young bird raised its head to listen. The traveler's heart was gladdened by the leaping clear stream, the "rejoicing bees . . . shining like winged jewelry," and most of all by

mild slumbering innocence,  
And on that young maternal brow the smile  
Of those affections which do purify  
And renovate the soul.

Several poems portray the homesickness of western emigrants and the courage that derives from love binding the family members: in "The Western Emigrant" (S.P., pp. 63-66) wife, children, and

father all miss the birds, trees, their friends in "far New England"  
but the man is comforted by the sight of his wife.

And the gentle smile  
Lighting her brow, the fond caress that sooth'd  
Her waking infant, reassur'd his soul  
That, wheresoe'er our best affections dwell,  
And strike a healthful root, is happiness.

The sanctity of the home curiously underlies another group of poems, those dealing with disobedient sons who, defying parents' wishes, go off to sea and invariably fall from slippery shrouds and occasion the funeral-at-sea scenes which Mrs. Sigourney seemed to enjoy doing. In "The Sea Boy" (S.P., pp. 215-17) the young sailor had often described his home--the household kisses, gentle hands, spoken cheer when "wearied from his school,/ At winter's eve he came"--and had often labored to restrain a deep sigh of remorse for leaving such a home. In "The Disobedient Son" (1836, pp. 190-93), in a poem reminiscent of Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," the young sailor was menaced by spectres of molten lava and a green sea monster but was rescued by an enemy ship and finally returned home to a blind mother who told him that his father had died lamenting the loss of his son. The young man shuddered as he turned toward his cot which in his "crime" he had left.

And of course it is familial love which underlies the deep grief in the multitudes of death poems which Mrs. Sigourney wrote. In her time death was the overriding fact of life and a great deal of her poetic energy was spent in depicting the death scene and

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consoling the mourners with the ever-present final lines on the ascension of the soul into heaven.

Here another formula evolves in the poetry of Mrs. Sigourney. "The spirit floating skyward became the favorite ending for all her poems," Gordon Haight wrote; "One tries as in a sort of game to foresee how poems called The Gift of a Bible, The Conflagration at New York, The Ancient Family Clock, and To the Cactus Speciossimus can possibly be brought around to the same conclusion."<sup>15</sup> A modern reader does find the repetitious conclusion amusing. Why should a Christian "sigh/ In heathen heaviness" when the gate of Death opens to reveal "the shining track/ Up to an angel's heritage of bliss?" ("Joy in Believing," S.P., pp. 144-45). In another poem friends marvel that a young and beautiful girl was cut down at the height of her vitality and yet forsook all earthly pleasure, "unclasping her warm hand/ From friendship's ardent pressure, with such smile/ As if she were the gainer." The poetess exhorts the friends to pray to God for the same hope and faith that had enabled the young girl to "meekly find/ A blessedness in death." ("Blessed Are the Dead," S.P., pp. 205-206). In "The Knell" (S.P., pp. 210-11) the mourner realizes that his grief is selfish. For his own comfort he would have detained his friend here on earth with "all that change and plenitude of ill/ Which we inherit." With sudden faith the mourner relinquishes his grief and experiences "holy joy" in the good fortune of his dead friend: "Go, beloved!/ First, for thou wert most worthy.--I will strive/ As best such frail one may, to follow thee."

The great numbers of dying infant poems comfort the parents likewise: your love for the child was genuine and pleasant, but don't let it detain your babe from the greater joy it will experience in heaven.

Because they cradle-care  
Was such a fond delight,  
Shall Love, with weak embrace,  
Thy heavenward flight detain?  
No! Angel, seek thy place  
Amid yon cherub-train.  
(*"To a Dying Infant," S.P., pp. 243-44*)

A mother laments the loss of her lonely daughter, but then chides herself:

Be still, my heart! what could a mother's prayer,  
In all the wildest ecstacies of hope,  
Ask for its darling like the bliss of Heaven?  
(*"The Lost Darling," S.P., pp. 150-51*)

In one poignant scene a young mother suffered in "childless agony" after the harp-strings of her baby's soul "rang a thrilling strain and broke." But the mother was reminded by a voice in a vision, that God "Loveth a cheerful giver." And the mother smiled in resignation (*"The Cheerful Giver," S.P., pp. 27-28*).

"The Tomb" (S.P., pp. 230-31) is "the parting place." A mother leaves her children behind, a wife the strong supporting love of her husband, the man the worldly honors he has collected; the young woman lays down her beautiful body. But one "blessed trophy" will prove the worth of all the worldly sacrifice: for the penitent and faithful person, the "victor palm of Christ's atoning love" shall



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win "thee entrance when thou stand'st/ A pilgrim at Heaven's gate."  
Even the babe baptized at its mother's funeral is consoled.

So shalt thou, in a brighter world, behold  
That countenance which the cold grave did veil  
Thus early from thy sight, and the first tone  
Bearing a mother's welcome to thine ear  
Be wafted from the minstrelsy of Heaven.

("Baptism of an Infant at its Mother's  
Funeral," S.P., pp. 234-35)

Mrs. Sigourney did have a fixation on the moment of the soul's reception into heaven. It appears in a great number of her poems and is often dramatized in her prose "effusions." The death of Mrs. Hemans, for example, inspired the following.

She seemed to feel the rush of wings, and to hear, breathing  
as from lute strings, "Come up hither!" Angels were watching  
for the pure in heart. The last tie that held her from them  
was gently sundered on Saturday, May 16, 1835. At nine in  
the evening, while hovering on the confines of an earthly  
Sabbath, the gate of paradise opened for her. The soul of  
melody went to its own place, and the mortal put on  
immortality.<sup>16</sup>

When a technique or figure appears too often in a writer's work, it is subject to parody. Thackeray sensed the ridiculous in the heaven-bound-soul formula and wrote this:

As Mrs. Sigourney sweetly sings:--  
'Oh the soul is a soft and delicate thing:  
The soul is a lute with a thrilling string,<sup>17</sup>  
A spirit that floats on a gossamer's wing.'

But I suspect that the metaphor appears ridiculous only because it is used so often. The subject of much of the world's best religious poetry has been, after all, the soul's imprisonment

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in the body and its joyous release at the moment of death. This is the subject of John Donne's "Second Anniversary," and several images comparable to Mrs. Sigourney's appear in that poem.

- (1) The body is the shell of a bullet, shattered into pieces at the moment of discharge, and allowing the bullet itself, the soul, to fly freely.

Think that a rusty piece, discharg'd, is flown  
In pieces, and the bullet is his own,  
And freely flies: this to thy soul allow,  
Think thy shell broke, think thy soul hatch'd  
but now.

(11. 181-84)

- (2) The stars are beads on a string "Whose quick succession makes it still one thing." The soul traverses from earth to heaven by the route of the string, completing the journey in an instant, crossing through the spheres with "speed undistinguished," as though they were beads on a string. "So by the soul doth death string heaven and earth."  
(11. 207-213)

- (3) The moment of death is the moment when lights come on to reveal heaven to the soul. Heaven was there all the time, as objects in a dark room are there, but indistinguishable.

Heaven is as near, and present to her face,  
As colors are, and objects, in a room  
Where darkness was before, when tapers come.  
(11. 216-18)

It must be granted that Mrs. Sigourney lacks the metaphysical genius for finding unexpected similarity; however, some of her poems close

with images as beautiful as Donne's and as appropriate for conveying the sense of separation of soul from body at the moment of death. The soul is deathless and will rise toward heaven like the strong eagle soaring toward the sun in the morning. The insignificant woes and joys of earth will fall from the eagle's wing at that moment like a "spent dew-drop."

Then let the woes  
And joys of earth be to the deathless soul  
Like the spent dew-drop from the eagle's wing,  
When, waking in his strength, he sunward soars.  
("To the Memory of a Young Lady," S.P.,  
pp. 155-57)

In some poems the metaphor dramatizes the resurrection of the body. In "Babe Buried at Sea" (S.P., pp. 315-16) the image of the seed of a water-lily, which blossoms forth beautifully after a winter buried in dark ooze, is used to promise the family that their baby's body will likewise be gloriously resurrected at the proper time.

But tell them too,  
Oh father! as a balsam for their grief,  
That He who guards the water-lily's germ,  
Through the long winter, and remembereth well  
To bring its lip of snow and broad green leaf  
Up from the darkness of its slimy cell  
To meet the summer sun--will not forget  
Their little brother, in his ocean bed,  
But raise him from the deep, and call him forth.  
With brighter beauty, and a glorious form,  
Never to fade, nor die.

Two phrases betray the sentimentality of popular poetry: "But tell them too, Oh father! as a balsam for their grief" and "Their little brother." Emotional phrases like these supply the reaction for the reader, as the popular arts always do (according

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to Kaplan). If more objective phrases were substituted, the reader's response would be stimulated well enough by the beauty and appropriateness of the image itself.

Mrs. Sigourney is capable of good poetry occasionally. The "Death of an Infant" has been cited as a good poem. It was mistakenly attributed to Mrs. Hemans at one time.

Death found strange beauty on that polish'd brow,  
And dash'd it out. There was a tint of rose  
On cheek and lip. He touched the veins with ice,  
And the rose faded.

Forth from those blue eyes  
There spake a wishful tenderness, a doubt  
Whether to grieve or sleep, which innocence  
Alone may wear. With ruthless haste he bound  
The silken fringes of those curtaining lids  
For ever.

There had been a murmuring sound,  
With which the babe would claim its mother's ear,  
Charming her even to tears. The spoiler set  
The seal of silence.

But there beam'd a smile,  
So fix'd, so holy, from that cherub brow,  
Death gazed, and left it there. He dar'd not steal  
The signet-ring of Heaven.

(S.P., pp. 30-31)

Another successful poem, which the Irish poetess Maria Edgeworth found "touching and natural," is "The Lost Darling."

She was my idol. Night and day, to scan  
The fine expansion of her form, and mark  
The unfolding mind, like vernal rose-bud, start  
To sudden beauty, was my chief delight.  
To find her fairy footsteps following mine,  
Her hand upon my garments, or her lip  
Long sealed to mine, and in the watch of night  
The quiet breath of innocence to feel  
Soft on my cheek, was such a full content  
Of happiness, as none but mothers know.

Her voice was like some tiny harp that yields  
To the slight fingered breeze, and as it held  
Brief converse with her doll, or playful soothed

The moaning kitten, or with patient care  
Conned o'er the alphabet--but most of all,  
Its tender cadence in her evening prayer  
Thrilled on the ear some ethereal tone  
Heard in sweet dreams.

But now alone I sit,  
 Musing of her, and dew with mournful tears  
 Her little robes, that once with woman's pride  
 I wrought, as if there were a need to deck  
 What God hath made so beautiful. I start,  
Half fancying from her crib there comes  
A restless sound, and breathe the accustomed words  
"Hush! Hush thee, dearest." Then I bend and weep--  
 Although it were a sin to speak to one  
 Whose home is with the angels.

Gone to God!  
And yet I wish I had not seen the pang  
That wrung her features, nor the ghastly white  
Setting around her lips. I would that Heaven  
Had taken its own, like some transplanted flower  
Blooming in all its freshness.

Gone to God!  
 Be still my heart! what could a mother's prayer,  
 In all the wildest ecstasies of hope,  
 Ask for its darling like the bliss of heaven?  
 (S.P., pp. 150-51)

I have underlined passages which are effective because of psychological reality of vividness of image. The mother's love and delight in her child are well conveyed. That none of the irritating and harrowing moments of parenthood are recalled is psychologically accurate, as the mourner will often subliminate the dead person in his memory. Other realistic details are the mother's fancy that she heard the child's voice in the night, the facial expression and coloring at the moment of death, and the wish that the child could have been spared the death agony, could have been "transplanted" while still a living bloom. One strength of Mrs. Sigourney's Poetry often noted and evident in these two poems is the melodiousness of the verse.



Throughout the poems there are found beautiful lines and striking passages. In "Benevolence" the narrator exhorts the reader to be a co-worker with God in using his riches for the good of others rather than hoarding them--the heirs would only revel thanklessly and waste the hard-earned treasures. Maria Edgeworth claimed that these lines were reminiscent of Shakespeare:

Point out to me the forms  
That in your treasure-chambers shall enact  
Glad mastership, and revel where you toiled  
Sleepless and stern. Strange faces are they all.  
(S.P., pp. 181-82)

Sometimes the strength lies in the beauty of the image: a new mother joyously "marks/ A thrilling growth of new affections spread/ Fresh greenness o'er her soul" ("Baptism of an Infant at its Mother's Funeral," S.P., pp. 234-35). Sometimes the lines are striking because of a truth compactly presented. "Joyous man," it is said, for example, has always ignored heaven's ceaseless warnings and

Turn'd to his phantom pleasures, and deferr'd  
To some convenient hour, the time to die.  
("The Time to Die," pp. 75-76)

We hear truth again in the tired words of a dying old man who would gladly be released from "The purchased care,/ The practised sympathy . . . The weariness, the secret measuring/ How long I have to live." ("The Dying Philosopher," S.P., pp. 245-47).

Mrs. Sigourney's descriptions of natural scenes are often vivid. In "Alpine Flowers" (S.P., pp. 234-35), for example, the narrator wonders at the strength and endurance of the fragile but hardy mountain flowers.

Did some white-winged messenger  
 On mercy's mission, trust your timid germ  
 To the cold cradle of eternal snows,  
 And, breathing on the callous icicles,  
 Bid them with tear-drops nurse ye?

The narrator addresses the flowers standing,

Leaning your cheeks against the thick-ribbed ice,  
 And looking up with stedfast eye to Him.

Man is inspired by the "placid loveliness" and "pencil'd beauty"  
 of the frail flowers.

'Mid the pomp  
 Of mountain-summits rushing toward the sky,  
 And chaining the wrapt soul in breathless awe,  
 He bows to bind ye, drooping, to his breast,  
 Inhales your spirit from the frost-winged gale,  
 And freer dreams of heaven.

The ice and snow images are concrete and original, thus intensifying the tough durability of the flowers and making their power to inspire believable. The exhilaration of the man is conveyed by the invigorating cold air and the fragrance of the flowers at dizzying mountain heights.

The point is that Mrs. Sigourney can occasionally produce good poems or good passages in which the lines ring true or the image is original and striking. The fault is that she does not do it often enough. [Instead of producing something fresh in each poem, she relies heavily on formula, on repetition, on using similar organizational patterns, images, and flowery phrases, again and again.] The result is that although many of her poems appear earnest and



beautiful when considered one at a time, they strike the reader as funny when he reads a whole book of them.

One source of amusement for the modern reader is Mrs. Sigourney's peculiar brand of poetic diction. Haight has great fun in pointing up the absurdities of the "gemmiferous style," in which the most common objects bear the most elaborate names.<sup>18</sup> Small buildings are "mansions"; larger ones are "piles" or "domes" of various kinds. Prisons are "dark domes"; universities are "bright domes"; "holy domes" are, of course, churches. The ocean is always "a storm-toss'd deep" or the "treacherous main" on which "fragile arks" and "sturdy barks" ride "cerulean waves," "sapphire waves" or the more plain "crested waves." One even finds "oary-footed ducks" pursuing "the people of the pool" who turn out to be frogs!

The modern reader is also amused by the excessive religious feeling, what Carl Bode calls "looking ostentatiously heavenward," and is perhaps somewhat irritated by the much sentimentalized Christian consolation. In considering any one poem a reader might find beauty in the consolation. The grieving mother whose greatest concern had been the patient care of her child is reassured that the infant benefits from even better ministering in "His arms, whose changeless care/ Passeth a mother's love" ("'Twas But a Babe," S.P., pp. 196-97). But upon reading through a book of Mrs. Sigourney's one finds that many poems have an identical ending and that heaven is offered not only as a consolation to mourners but also as the resolution of every earthly problem. Every deficiency on earth will find compensation in heaven.



The deaf and dumb will be able to hear and speak in heaven. In "Marriage of the Deaf and Dumb" (S.P., pp. 241-42) the voiceless pair are advised not to mourn "the ear sequestered, and the tuneless tongue" but to anticipate the "eternal dialect of love" where breath is free for every happy soul. "Alice" (S.P., pp. 297-300) was a deaf and dumb girl who is pictured now in heaven joyously listening to the music of "countless harps" and the "ever-tuneful choir" and conversing with the beloved father whom she was never able to address on earth. "The Deaf, Dumb and Blind Girl" (S.P., pp. 225-29) will hear the "seraphic swell," sing "everlasting praise sublime," and scan the face of the Deity in "rapture's deathless ray."

The missionary will enjoy rest from earthly challenge "Where swells no more the heathen sigh,/ Nor 'neath the idol's stony eye/ Dark sacrifice is done" ("The Hopia Tree," S.P., pp. 128-30). The student will be granted "knowledge without pain" ("On the Death of a Sister," S.P., pp. 140-41). The philosopher will finally attain the ultimate truths he's been seeking: "To see the Invisible, to know the Unknown,/ To love the Uncreated!" ("The Dying Philosopher," S.P., pp. 245-47).

In heaven young girls will never wilt and roses will be forever fragrant ("Roses to the Dead," S.P., pp. 107-109). No parents will grieve or find themselves childless ("Burial of Two Young Sisters," S.P., pp. 110-11). On earth beauty, youth, and powerful mentality all droop and eventually pass away; in heaven "angel tones have never breath'd/ 'Passing Away.'" ("Passing Away," S.P., pp. 133-34). Even the poet is consoled. A poet or scholar may forge dazzling links of beauty or knowledge until his eyes turn dim only

to find a "cold-bosom'd public" ignoring his findings. Regardless of his wisdom he'll return to "farm and merchandise." But a broken vase may serve as an object lesson here, warning--

That the heart's treasures be not rashly risk'd  
In earthen vessels, but in caskets stor'd,  
Above the wrecking ministry of Time.  
("The Broken Vase," S.P., pp. 320-22).

The repetition becomes tiresome and to some amusing. The anthologist looking for high art, elite poetry, will not include Mrs. Sigourney. Instead of the endless variety which art reflects from life, Mrs. Sigourney's poems are mechanical repetitions of the same resolution for every imaginable earthly problem. Ambiguity is central in good poetry. In Mrs. Sigourney all ambiguities are covered over with the simple, explicit promise of heavenly perfection. In the high-level poetry of George Herbert the religious experience is presented as paradoxical, demanding, trying human patience and understanding to the utmost. In Mrs. Sigourney the religious promise of heaven is the palliative for every earthly disturbance; there is a brief mention here or there of need for faith and penance, but it is passed over quickly in favor of the consolation, the promise of heaven freely given to everyone who needs it.

Kaplan writes that art reaches out for truth, for discovery of something new, but popular art stops with reaffirmation of something we already think we know. Instead of a confrontation with reality, we shut out the ugliness we don't want to see; we prettify everything, especially death. Mrs. Sigourney's poems are





reaffirmation of the religious faith of the time and her pictures of upward-soaring souls and joyous voices singing in heaven present death at its prettiest.

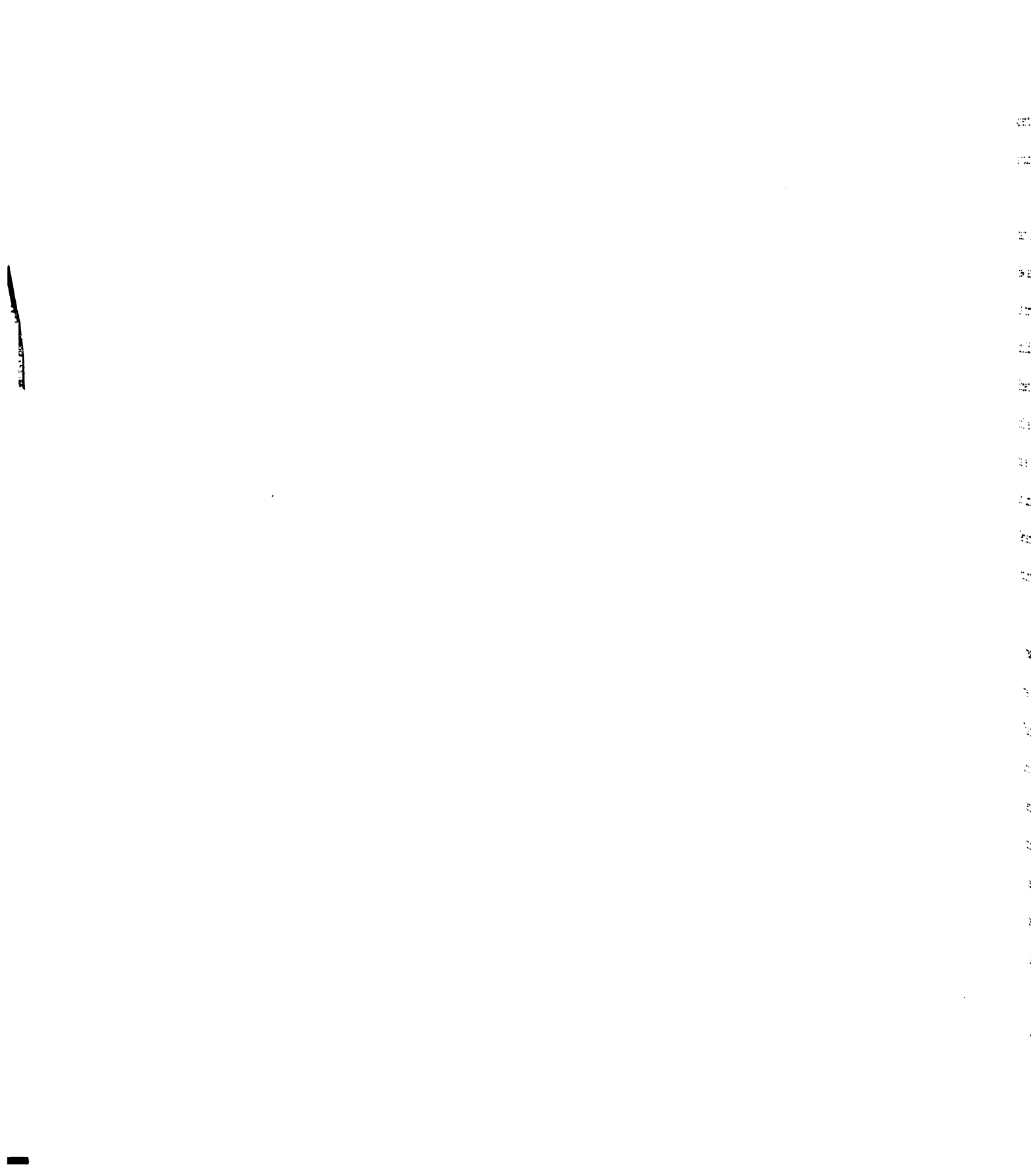
It is easy to recognize that Mrs. Sigourney is not a great poet. One indication of the inferiority of her poetry is the plain fact that she has not been remembered, in spite of the prediction in Duyckinck that "the amiable life and cheerful old age, illuminated by deeds of kindness and charity of this Christian lady will doubtless find an enduring record in American biography." The record is very faint indeed. Gordon Haight had hoped to find some poems that would justify her reputation as America's leading poetess for fifty years. But he soon concluded that "posterity had judged fairly in denying her claim." In 1901 Onderdonk concluded that "There is absolutely nothing of any high order of merit in her poems."<sup>19</sup> He found her poetry too narrow in scope, being "of the prim and placid character adapted to the comprehension of the budding female mind." The one great characteristic of her verse was "Its uniform propriety. It is pure, chaste, and insipid, highly moral but lowly poetical."

Another characteristic of the popular arts is seen as sentimentality, excessive emotion, or feeling without understanding as Kaplan puts it. William Rossetti's comments on the poetry of Mrs. Hemans might apply as well to Mrs. Sigourney on the subject of sentimentality. He refers to a modern "phalanx of poets . . . who persistently coordinate the impulse of sentiment with the guiding power of morals or religion," who seem to think that "everything

must have a lesson and a sentimental gush of emotion." He acknowledges worth in the "love of good and horror of evil of the scrupulous female mind" but complains that right-mindedness does not produce robust poetry or perfection in literary form. "The poet must not write because he has something of his own to say, but because he has something right to feel and say."<sup>20</sup>

We grant the general conclusion that in spite of several isolated passages of real beauty, the bulk of Mrs. Sigourney's poetry is aesthetically inferior. But the fact remains that her poems were very popular, and the source of her appeal is one subject of this study. Poe attributed it, at least partly, to frequency of appearance, Haight to her knowing and corresponding with great numbers of influential people. Bode pointed to the chauvinistic atmosphere in the mid-nineteenth century that forbade blatant criticism of the poetess because she was, after all, American.<sup>21</sup> But something more obvious would be evident to anyone who read a great number of her poems.

After a few days of reading Mrs. Sigourney steadily, a person begins to become aware of what it would have been like living a century and a half ago with the possibility of early death a constant and real threat to everyone regardless of age, sex, occupation, social class. A mere glance at the titles conveys the ubiquity of the fact of death: "Baptism of an Infant at its Mother's Funeral," "Death of the Emigrant," "Filial Claims" (the mother dies), "Indian Girl's Burial," "The Consumptive Girl," "The Mourning Lover," "A Father to his Motherless Children," "On the Death of a Sister While



Absent at School," "Burial of Two Young Sisters," "To the Memory of a Young Lady."

How different from the bland confidence in a relatively certain life that most of us have in mid-twentieth-century America. A few are cut down prematurely and many people experience grief, this is true. But the general expectation is for a full life span: most children do not die; most people live to marry, reproduce, work. Sometimes, in fact, we have become so confident in our ability to solve problems scientifically that as John Ciardi writes, Americans have "tended to be a bit surprised at their own deaths; it all seems so unprogressive. It almost seems that the Constitution, or at least General Motors, should have taken care of that." From this vantage point, Mrs. Sigourney's preoccupation with death is somewhat amusing.

But after reading large numbers of her poems, one comes to realize how often people had to stand by helplessly to watch a loved one die, many times in a slowly agonizing way, to watch "the pang/ That wrung [the] features" and "the ghastly white" that settled around the lips of people they loved. The statistics of the nineteenth century are very different from those of our own age: between 1840 and 1846 (at the height of Mrs. Sigourney's career) in Boston, 46 per cent of all deaths were of persons under five; the average age of death among Catholic-Irish immigrants was thirteen; even by 1892 the average age in the United States was thirty-three, and only six out of one hundred persons lived to be sixty-five years old. Three of *Mrs.* Sigourney's own babies died, and her only son died at the age of *nineteen*. She wrote whereof she knew. In those multitudes of

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heaven-pointing poems she was able to console when consolation was really needed. She was able to "enforce some salutary precept" as she had expressed a desire to do. In this sense, her poetry succeeded in fulfilling a function; her poems had direct relevance to the needs of great numbers of people. Thus, while on most counts Mrs. Sigourney's poetry must be judged aesthetically inferior, one cannot conclude that it had no value at all. Her poetry had the values of the popular arts pointed out by Shils: (1) the poems are earnestly, if simply, moral; (2) they are examples of the "painfully developed art of coping with the miseries of existence."

Mrs. Sigourney wrote for an audience who lived a hard and uncertain life. She had the technical skill that enabled her to express routine pieties in the form of sweetly melodious verse in such a way that great numbers of people were consoled, pleased, and uplifted.



NOTES--CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Gordon Haight, Mrs. Sigourney: The Sweet Singer of Hartford (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1930), p. 77.

<sup>2</sup>Carl Bode, The Anatomy of American Popular Culture: 1840-1861 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1959), p. 80.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>7</sup>Lydia H. Sigourney in a "Memoir" (May 1, 1853) introducing The Poetical Works of Felicia Hemans, ed. William M. Rossetti (London: Ward Lock & Co., 18--), p. 45.

<sup>8</sup>From Mrs. Sigourney's Letters of Life, quoted in Evert A. Duyckinck and George L. Duyckinck, Cyclopaedia of American Literature (Philadelphia: T. E. Zell, 1875), I, 844.

<sup>9</sup>These two formulas were analyzed by Gordon Haight, Mrs. Sigourney: The Sweet Singer of Hartford.

<sup>10</sup>These citations will be used in Chapter V for volumes of Mrs. Sigourney's verse:  
1836--Poems (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Key and Biddle, 1836)  
1844--Poems (Philadelphia: John Lichen, 1844).  
S.P.--Select Poems (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1850).

<sup>11</sup>Haight, p. 128.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted from Mrs. Sigourney's "Essay on the Genius of Mrs. Hemans," in Bode, p. 190.



<sup>13</sup>These comments on Pocahontas come from Haight, pp. 123-28, and Duyckinck, p. 839.

<sup>14</sup>The "Zinzendorff" poem is paraphrased in Duyckinck, p. 839.

<sup>15</sup>Haight, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup>Mrs. Sigourney, "Memoir," p. 40.

<sup>17</sup>Haight, p. 96, quoted originally by H. A. Beers in The Memorial History of Hartford County, ed. J. H. Trumbull (Boston, 1886), I, 163.

<sup>18</sup>Haight, pp. 80-89.

<sup>19</sup>James L. Onderdonk, History of American Verse (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1901), p. 155.

<sup>20</sup>W. M. Rossetti, "Prefatory Notice," The Poetical Works of Mrs. Felicia Hemans (London: Ward, Lock, and Co., 18--).

<sup>21</sup>Bode, p. 196.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE ENERGIZER: ELLA WHEELER WILCOX

(1855-1919)

About a half century after Mrs. Sigourney's work, when American popular verse was dominated by the "newspaper poets," Ella Wheeler Wilcox became the most successful newspaper poet of the era. Ella Wheeler was born in Johnstown, Wisconsin, one year after her parents had migrated from Vermont. Having been a violin and dancing teacher in the East, her father found no pupils on the prairie, and life was hard. Through her writing, Ella raised herself, unaided, from poverty and the deadly monotony of the commonplace which terrified her throughout life. Motivated by dreams of an exciting life in the cities and in the literary world, she wrote, persistently sending her poems and essays off to New York. At 15 her first "effusion" was published in the New York Mercury and at 16 she entered newspaper work when Frank Leslie sent her ten dollars for a poem.

Her big "break" came in 1883 when Jansen and McClurg in Chicago refused to publish her Poems of Passion on the grounds that they were "immoral." Actually the poems had all appeared in random magazines and had been warmly received by her readers. But when

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Miss Wheeler showed the immorality letter to some friends in Milwaukee, the newspapers obtained the material for headlines which secured Ella's reputation for her:

TOO LOUD FOR CHICAGO  
THE SCARLET CITY BY THE LAKE SHOCKED BY  
BADGER GIRL, WHOSE VERSES OUT-  
SWINBURNE SWINBURNE AND OUT-  
WHITMAN WHITMAN

In 1884 in what was to prove a happy match she married Robert Wilcox, an Eastern businessman and a gentleman who enjoyed fine foods, gracious living, the arts, world travel. The couple moved to Connecticut where Mrs. Wilcox lived until her death in 1919. She continued writing prolifically for syndicated distribution as well as for books of her own. She had reached such a wide audience during the nineties through her syndicated prose articles in the Hearst newspapers, that in 1901 the New York American commissioned her to go to England to write an American poet's impression of Queen Victoria's funeral. The poem "The Queen's Last Ride" won her the love and admiration of the British; throughout her career she was more respected in England than in her own country.

In addition to love lyrics in Mrs. Wilcox's work, there are long narrative poems idealizing women, hortatory poems encouraging other "barefoot" boys and girls to raise themselves up as she had done, philosophical works exploring the nature of happiness, life, death, and the "spiritual worlds beyond." The Beautiful Land of Nod was a delicately illustrated collection of poems, songs, and stories for children.



Like Mrs. Sigourney, Mrs. Wilcox participated in a lively interaction with her readers. Folklore began building around her from the time of the Poems of Passion scandal and the public was interested in the details of her private life thereafter. Her New York newspaper column, an Ann Landers prototype, made people feel as though they knew her personally. During World War I Mrs. Wilcox established a sensitive rapport with American soldiers. In one poem she pleaded with them to "Come Back Clean" and one inspired yeoman answered in a poem that was to be printed side by side with hers, "We'll Come Back Clean"! At the age of 62, Mrs. Wilcox embarked upon a visit to the war zone during which she took wounded soldiers out to dinner and the blind for walks; she succeeded in consoling great numbers of frightened soldiers and bereaved families with the Truth of spiritual worlds beyond this one. A great percentage of her poems were written to encourage, buoy up her readers and often she seemed to reach right out of the poem to speak to the individual reader, as in the poem "Listen!":

Whoever you are as you read this,  
 Whatever your trouble or grief,  
 I want you to know and to heed this:  
 The day draweth near with relief.  
 . . . . .  
 Though stunned with despair I beseech you,  
 Whatever your losses, your need,  
 Believe, when these printed words reach you,  
 Believe you were born to succeed.  
 (Collected Poems, p. 267)

In defending her work against severe criticism, Mrs. Wilcox once wrote: "If I chance to be a popular poet it is because I have loved





God and life and people, and expressed sentiments and emotions which found echoes in other hearts."

Some writers date the close of the Victorian age for women as 1901, the year of Queen Victoria's death and of Mary MacLane's passionate confessions of wanting above all "to be loved--oh, to be loved."<sup>1</sup> But the heart-wails in Mrs. Wilcox's Poems of Passion in 1883 had anticipated all this. In a later edition of the volume Mrs. Wilcox explained in a "Preface" how the collection had come about. She claimed to have written about 1200 poems, only forty or fifty of which treated "entirely of that emotion which has been denominated the 'grand passion'--love," and pointed out that only a few of the poems were "of an extremely fiery character."

Jenny Ballou details the mid-Victorian criticism that fell on Ella Wheeler after the volume appeared. Her poems were likened to "songs of half-tipsy wantons"; the Chicago Herald hoped that Miss Wheeler would write some Poems of Decency, and another reviewer called her a distributor of "poisoned candy." In his column Charles A. Dana quoted so many lines in which the forbidden "kiss" was used that Ella received a flood of letters asking where her book could be purchased. Her new publishers judged the moment shrewdly, and capitalizing on the publicity, sold 60,000 copies of the book in two years. Her defense of her subject matter was clear and unequivocal. She wrote to Lucy Larcom, the New England authoress of Idyl of Work:

It would have been wrong for you to write "Poems of Passion" because you would have felt that you did wrong. My impulse was entirely free from wrong--it never occurred to me that

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they would be misconstrued, and I violated no principle in writing them. Nor would I omit one from the collection now.<sup>2</sup>

The theme of passionate love is stated in the opening poem of the book, which begins by asking, "How does Love speak?" and answers:

in the warm,  
Impassioned tide that sweeps through throbbing veins,  
Between the shores of keen delights and pains;  
In the embrace where madness melts in bliss,  
And in the convulsive rapture of a kiss--  
Thus doth Love speak.  
(Passion, p. 11)<sup>3</sup>

In "Delilah" the dying Samson is tormented by visions of his early love.

She touches my cheek, and I quiver--  
I tremble with exquisite pains;  
She sighs--like an overcharged river  
My blood rushes on through my veins;  
She smiles--and in mad-tiger fashion,  
As a she-tiger fondles her own,  
I clasp her with fierceness and passion,  
And kiss her with shudder and groan.

And Samson begs the vision to recede back to the dust and sod because it stands between him and God.

If I, by the Throne should behold you,  
Smiling up with those eyes loved so well,  
Close, close in my arms I would fold you,  
And drop with you down to sweet Hell!  
(Passion, pp. 47-48)

Exactly the reverse conclusion from a Lydia Sigourney poem!



The poem, Mrs. Wilcox explained, was "meant to be an expression of the powerful fascination of such a woman upon the memory of a man, even as he neared the hour of death." If the poem was immoral, the Biblical story inspiring it was immoral. She stubbornly claimed it her "finest effort."

At first glance the poem "Ad Finem" similarly seems to present sexual love as more glorious and attractive than eternal life in heaven. The tormented woman speaking in the poem announces that she would "gladly barter [her] hopes of Heaven/ And all the bliss of Eternity" for just one of the kisses from her former love. In another reversal of the Sigourney formula, Miss Wheeler's heroine goes hell-ward for love.

But I know, too, if an angel beckoned,  
 Standing close by the Throne on High,  
 And you, adown by the gates infernal,  
 Should open your loving arms and smile,  
 I would turn my back on things supernal,  
 To lie on your breast a little while.  
 (Passion, p. 85)

But Mrs. Wilcox had not intended, she wrote later in the preface, to advise women to barter the joys for just one kiss. The poem was instead an image of a moment of "turbulent anguish and vehement despair," of "unreasoning and overwhelming sorrow" which sometimes possesses the human heart at the loss by "death, fate, or force of circumstances, of someone very dear."

The volume closes with "The Farewell of Clarimonde." The passionate Clarimonde admonishes her lover Romauld, who is now entering the priesthood, that none of his rites, duties, fears of



Hell, or hopes of Heaven will be able to erase the memory of her  
love from his soul.

Before the Cross shall rise my fair form's beauties--  
The lips, the limbs, the eyes of Clarimonde.

She adds that holy joys will never compare with the joys he experienced with her in sexual love.

Like gall the wine sipped from the sacred chalice  
Shall taste to one who knew my red mouth's bliss.  
. . . . .  
Think not in all His Kingdom to discover  
Such joys, Romauld, as ours, when fierce yet fond  
I clasped thee--kissed thee--crowned thee my one lover.  
(Passion, pp. 93-94)

The most controversial poems in the volume, then, seem to have been those which confounded religious and sexual gratification. People found this scandalous and evidently very exciting considering the volume of sales. The other seventy-five poems treated the "grand passion" from a number of more subdued and less controversial points of view. As Mrs. Wilcox wrote, these other poems were "quite irreproachable in character, however faulty they [may have been] in construction."

Although it was only a few poems which created the scandal, the scandal was itself significant, in helping to shape the direction of the poetess's career thereafter. First, the critics were led astray in the excitement. Jenny Ballou points out that many of the poems in the early volume were "lovely in their lilt, overbrimming with an authentic freshness of emotion." "Impatience" is cited as an example:

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How can I wait? The nights alone are kind;  
 They reach forth to a future day, and bring  
 Sweet dreams of you to people all my mind:  
 And time speeds by on light and airy wing.  
 I feast upon your face, I no more sing.  
 How can I wait?

Critics consistently read double meanings, perhaps intentional, into such poems, and were tempted into the biographical fallacy. Had Miss Wheeler actually experienced the thrills described in "Farewell of Clarimonde" or was the poem chiefly, as she explained, an imitation of Theophile Gautier?

Second, scandal seemed to give Mrs. Wilcox a taste for sensationalism which she could not live without. The critics responded to the Poems of Passion with mid-Victorian horror, but the book had sold widely and natives of Wisconsin had proudly hailed Ella Wheeler as their "talented, hard-working, cheerful little song-bird," who was "no longer an unknown girl, a soldier on the frontier, but a literary general."<sup>4</sup> Ella Wheeler enjoyed the role immensely and played it the rest of her life.

In fact, her role of popular poetess became more important to her than her poetry. Immediately after the appearance of Poems of Passion a kind of folklore grew up around Ella Wheeler Wilcox. She gloried in her humble origins and took the role of "barefoot-girl-made-good" seriously: she loved perfume and color, wore a large ring on her thumb, and always some chiffon around her neck. In spite of James Whitcomb Riley's criticism of her "frivolous appearance," she continued to wear her hair in bangs and could not resist carrying a bright red parasol to attract attention. She gave

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lavish entertainments at her home in Short-Beach-on-the-Sound in Connecticut. In 1913 she was presented at the Court of St. James at Buckingham Palace; when her publishers afterwards accompanied her back to the steamer, carpets were thrown on lawns, electric "lighting effects" were displayed, music rang, and hundreds did her honor.

She grew to need public adulation, and never had the patience or desire to discipline her work. Typically, alluding to a statement by Edmund Clarence Stedman that he wished he could have undertaken her poetic training from her twelfth year, she answered, "I should have been a better poet, but a less useful financier and citizen."<sup>5</sup>

Like Rod McKuen nearly a century later, Ella Wilcox wrote about the vicissitudes of love affairs. Love, she knew, will not always last.

I am oppressed with this great sense of loving;  
 . . . . .  
 Too deep the language which the spirit utters;  
 Too vast the knowledge which my soul hath stirred.  
 Send some white ship across the Sea of Silence,  
 And interrupt its utterance with a word.  
 ("The Speech of Silence," *Passion*, pp. 70-71)

In "Perfectness" (*Passion*, p. 78) the pathos of perfection is revealed: the supreme moment of love "when the soul unchecked/ Soars high as heaven, and its best rapture knows" contains a "deeper pathos than our woes" because "Resistless change, when powerless to improve,/ Can only mar."

"What Shall We Do?" (*Passion*, p. 27) probes the subject of how to dispose of old love. Shall we hide it? There is not a storehouse large enough in the whole earth. Shall we drown it? If all

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the oceans were combined, the water would still be too shallow. Shall we burn it? It would only thrive and grow since it was fed on fire from its birth. The only answer is to starve it, to deprive it of all food--glance, word, sigh, memory, vain regret. Only then will it die. In several poems the lovers regretfully anticipate the end of love and separation: "Not Quite the Same," "You Will Forget Me," "Friendship After Love."

In a large group of poems lovers look back wistfully on affairs long finished. In "But One" (Passion, p. 36) the year has but one perfect month, one June. When it is finished the robin's song never seems in tune again. The theme is quite skillfully developed in "Queries" (pp. 22-23). "Time the Jew" is a rag-buyer who bargained for the "tattered remains of a threadbare bliss,/ And the worn out shreds of a joy divine" to stuff into his "ragbag of the Past."

Since Time, the rag-buyer, hurried away  
 With a chuckle of glee at the bargain made,  
 Did you discover, like me, one day,  
 That hid in the folds of those garments frayed,  
 Were priceless jewels and diadems--  
 The soul's best treasures, the heart's best gems?

Another group of love poems dealt with the injustices suffered by women who have been used and cast aside. An innocent young maid in "The Change" (C.P., pp. 257-58) is "in earnest" but he "is feigning" as they walk through the garden.

A young life crushed, and a young heart broken,  
 A bleak wind blows through the lovely bower,  
 And all that remains of the love vows spoken--  
 Is the trampled leaf of a faded flower.



The trampled leaf image is used for the woman destroyed by false love in another poem, "A Fatal Impress" (C.P., pp. 199-200). The false lover is "bold Frost" whose enticements the lovely leaf can not resist.

Just for a day she was a beauteous sight,  
 The world looked on to pity and admire.  
 This modest little leaf, that in a night  
 Had seemed to set the forest all on fire.  
 And then--this victim of a broken trust,  
 A withered thing, was trodden in the dust.

In one famous poem, "The Birth of the Opal," Mrs. Wilcox dealt figuratively with the subject of sexual intercourse and conception. With her special gift for creating scandal, she recited the poem publicly while pregnant herself. Ironically, her first and only baby died soon after birth, and she discovered later that the opal was a gem of ill omen. In another poem, "The Creed," she argued that the true legitimacy of a child is determined not by the parents' wedlock, but rather by the reality of their love, an idea repeated in Three Women:

The child  
 Not conceived in true love leaves the mother defiled.  
 Though an army of clergymen sanction her vows,  
 God sees "illegitimate" stamped on the brows  
 Of her offspring. Love only can legalize birth  
 In His eyes--all the rest is but spawn of the earth.  
 (p. 94)

Although Mrs. Wilcox displayed unique audacity in treating sexual desire and some of the intimacies of marriage rather frankly in her verse, she followed the pattern of the sentimental novelists<sup>6</sup> in glorifying woman as noble, motherhood as a sacred function, and





the wife as spiritual model for the husband. Maurine, her long narrative poem, was accurately advertised as "an ideal poem about a perfect woman."

The poem opens with a playful debate between lovers who are soon to declare themselves: Vivian Dangerfield challenges Maurine LaPelle with the argument that the friendship of two women will not survive the jealousy caused by rivalry in love. Maurine's dearest friend, Helen Trevor, soon arrives for a summer visit. There follows a most delicately beautiful and psychologically unbelievable set of circumstances. Helen falls in love with Vivian, and while the three friends are on a sailboat outing, Helen misinterprets a love song intended for Maurine as directed to herself. Maurine can not bear to hurt her fragile friend with the truth, and after an anguished debate within herself between loyalties to love or friendship, Maurine nobly extricates herself from the affair by letting herself be seen--by Vivian, at just the appropriate time--with an old friend Roy Montaine. After the expected period of shock and wounded ego, Vivian falls in love with and marries Helen, and the self-denying friend Maurine goes off to Europe to live a life of spinsterhood and art. Like the heroines in the sentimental novels, Maurine is finally rewarded for this glorious virtue. Helen dies, speaking a final wish that her friend Maurine raise her child. Maurine returns home to devote her life to the "sunny-hearted May, . . . a fair and most exquisite child"; after a period of peaceful years the truths of past events are clarified between Maurine and Vivian, and the true lovers, Maurine now much exalted by her former self-renunciation,

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are united. The poem closes with a touching gesture on the part of the child toward Maurine, a sign of a "silent blessing, which the mother spoke/ Gazing upon [them] from the mystic shore." Womanhood in all the sacred offices--friend, wife, mother--certainly a poem of womanhood in idealized perfection.

Mrs. Wilcox made an interesting confession several years after she had written this poem:

I wrote Maurine from pure Imagination. It proves I think that I knew more of friendship than of love when I wrote it. I am sure I would have allowed all my girl friends and their families to have pined away and died before I would have given up Mr. Wilcox to them, after I met him and loved him!

But the point is that much of the philosophy on womanhood appearing in Mrs. Wilcox's poems--and in her Ann Landers-like prose articles in the New York Journal--deviated not at all from contemporary conservative views of proper womanhood. In spite of enthusiastic movements for the emancipation of women--formation of Women's Press Club in 1889, hailing of the aerial feats of Nelly Bly, tribute to active women at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893--the popular arts continued to place women where they had belonged for centuries--in the home. When a French feminist leader termed her "Battle Hymn of Women" the "Marseillaise" of womanhood, Mrs. Wilcox reminded readers of her Journal column that although "brains are sometimes an assistance to woman in the right use of her affections," nevertheless, "a great deal of the love element had better be interfused with common sense." She assured her readers that "to be a gifted poet is a glory; to be a worthwhile woman is a greater glory."

All of this is reinforced in the long narrative poem Three Women (1897), advertised as a study of the "lives of three good and beautiful women in every phase of weakness, passion, pride, love, sympathy, tenderness." The three women are contenders for the love of Roger Montrose, an extremely attractive but world-weary man for whom life has grown stale. The poem begins with a friendly debate: Maurice Somerville has great faith in the basic nobility of women, but his cynical friend Roger Montrose is a well-seasoned world traveler who has discovered that each woman, if tempted in the proper way, will fall.

Mabel Lee is greatly admired in the town as the "public benefactress," but her closest friends can see that her good works are balanced by her failures in the privacy of home. Mabel Lee's mother is "maid to her daughter"; the father and brother are "slaves at her bidding": "an excellent plan/ To make a tyrannical wife for some man." Mabel Lee is guilty of pride; when Roger Montrose falls in love with her, he finds her frigid, incapable of personal affection. Her interest is aroused in her husband only when he becomes a drunkard and a vagrant, which gives her a chance to control him by working to save his soul, in short to reform him.

Ruth Somerville, the second woman, is a good, old-fashioned housewifely type who would have been completely satisfied as wife and mother. Bitter when Roger is deluded by the attractiveness of a worldly woman, she speaks:



The man whom I worshipped ignored  
 The love and comfort my woman's heart stored  
 In its depths for his taking, and sought Mabel Lee.  
 Well, I'm done with the role of the housewife. I see  
 There is nothing in being domestic. The part  
 Is unpicturesque, and at war with all art.

(pp. 75-76)

With stubborn determination Ruth enters a medical school, and becomes  
 a successful doctor, with the understanding that her career will be  
 dropped instantly at the time of marriage:

Once a wife, I will drop from my name the M.D.  
 I hold it the truth that no woman can be  
 An excellent wife and an excellent mother. . . .  
 The world needs wise mothers, the world needs good wives,  
 The world needs good homes, and yet woman strives  
 To be everything else but domestic. God's plan  
 Was for woman to rule the whole world, through a man.

(pp. 184-85)

The third woman in the poem is Zoe Travers, a young widow  
 emerging from grief and realizing the need for a man again. A foil  
 to Mabel Lee, in whom intellect ruled over heart, Zoe Travers is a  
 warm, passionate woman who yields to the temptation of a passionate  
 affair with Roger Montrose. The affair ends tragically when Roger  
 tires of her and the tormented woman shoots Roger and then kills  
 herself. The two corpses turn up at Ruth Somerville's medical  
 school, and the young lady doctor feels compassion for the "lovely  
 sinner" Zoe Travers, in whom the lightning-passions of Love could  
 have been "like a current of life giving joys" instead of the "death  
 dealing bolt which destroys." The problem was that Zoe had not been  
 trained properly by a conscientious mother who could have taught her  
 to control her passions and properly channel her capacities for love.

Oh, shame to the parents who dared give you birth,  
 To live and to love and to suffer on earth,  
 With the serious lessons of life unexplained,  
 And your passionate nature untaught and untrained.  
 You would not lie here in your youth and your beauty  
 If your mother had known what was motherhood's duty.  
 (p. 178)

Mrs. Wilcox's handling of the subjects of love and women seemed to have a dual appeal to her readers: her poems countered the avant-garde movement for women's rights and reinforced instead the widespread and commonly held views that women were ideally noble in character and belonged in the home; at the same time, many of her poems offered a more overt treatment of sexual love than could be found in other popular literature.

While there was no humor evident in the pious poetry of Lydia Sigourney, humorous poems appear frequently in Mrs. Wilcox's volumes. One young man, engaged in a particularly enchanting love scene, experiencing "thrills of tenderness/ Through all [his] frame," was suddenly stunned when his lady sighed "My Carlos!" and his name was really Paul ("Carlos," C.P., pp. 328-29). Some poems anticipate the light-hearted exasperations so common in Edgar Guest's verses: "Fishing" (C.P., pp. 191-92) presents a sun-blistered, insect-shy young woman trying to understand her lover's fondness for angling.

Mrs. Wilcox was quite clear about the functions of popular poetry, and was occasionally quite explicit about the duties and obligations of a poet. His purpose, plainly, was to comfort the reader, to brighten his world. In the poem "Contentment" (C.P., p. 236), she writes that her labors will have been rewarded

If any line that I ever penned  
 Or any word I have spoken  
 Has comforted heart of foe or friend--  
 . . . . .  
 If in any way I have helped a soul,  
 Or given a spirit pleasure.

In Three Women Maurice Somerville who turned to helping the poor and to writing poetry as therapy for a broken heart, summarized the poetic creed of Mrs. Wilcox:

The souls whom the gods bless at birth  
 With the great gift of song, have been sent to the earth  
 To better and brighten it.

The great sin for a poet was to add in any way to the despair of his reader:

The sin unforgiven  
 I hold by the Cherubim chanting in heaven  
 Is the sin of the poet who dares sing a strain  
 Which adds to the world's awful chorus of pain  
 And repinings.

(p. 66)

The foundation of the optimism that pervaded Ella Wilcox's poetry was her faith in the goodness and order of God's plan. In Three Women Maurice Somerville proclaimed his faith in the "Infinite mind" which can "swing the tides of the sea" and "fling a million of worlds into space" and which "must be great, must be kind," "must be right, could our souls understand." Maurice found consolation in the over-all goodness of Providence, and learned that the "true secret of living" was to "accept what Fate sends" and to grow "out of self, back to him--the First Cause" (p. 191). This faith in the



Plan appears in several of the shorter poems. In "Presumption"

(C.P., p. 264) we read

Whenever I am prone to doubt or wonder--  
I check myself, and say, That mighty One  
Who made the solar system cannot blunder--  
And for the best all things are being done.

Especially reminiscent of Pope's Essay on Man is the poem "Whatever Is--Is Best" which is still appearing, along with several other Wilcox poems, in the current edition of Hazel Felleman's Best-Loved Poems of the American People.

Besides teaching her readers to accept suffering as a part of a bigger, perfect plan, Mrs. Wilcox also offered them the reassurance (as Edgar Guest did later) that pain and suffering improve character. All people suffer at some time; "God pity those who cannot say, 'Not mine, but thine,' who only pray, 'Let this cup pass,' and cannot see/ The purpose in Gethsemane" (C.P., pp. 287-88). In "The Musicians" (C.P., pp. 258-60) Pain, the musician, is the "soul-refiner"; it restrings the strings of the "quivering heart." When the Master of Music plays strain on strain on the bars of misery, the heartstrings are drawn so tight that one fully expects them "to snap in two" and is amazed to discover instead that they have grown stronger. Suffering binds men together: "And I held all men to be my brothers, Linked by the chastening rod."

In contrast with the heaven-pointing Mrs. Sigourney, Mrs. Wilcox's gaze was usually directed steadily at the good earth. If acceptance of suffering and faith in God's plan helped to make life

endurable, then the other chief ingredient of the Wilcox philosophy was the importance of love for others.

So many Gods, so many creeds,  
So many paths that wind and wind,  
When just the art of being kind  
Is all this sad world needs.

"When I am Dead" (C.P., pp. 263-64) treats the idea extensively: better than a marble monument will be words of some who will be able to say I've helped them, given a "refreshing draught," reached up my hand to lead them to a better way, spoken "words of comfort like oil and balm." "True Culture" (C.P., pp. 340-41) is "to speak no ill," "to see beauty and all worth," to keep one's own life discreet and well-ordered, and to avoid causing pain to others.

Mrs. Wilcox reflects a shift in popular sentiment about the essence of religion. In her verse there is a definite move away from the dogma of Mrs. Sigourney's poetry. In "God's Measure" (C.P., p. 313) she explains that a man may stand near God even though "he dwells/ Outside the pale of churches, and knows not/ A feast-day from a fast-day, or a line/ Of scripture even."<sup>7</sup>

For Mrs. Wilcox the religious experience often assumed the form of mystical union with the All, a central experience in much of the nineteenth-century Romantic poetry. Yearning for such mystical union is described in "Searching" (C.P., pp. 212-13):

These quiet Autumn days,  
 My soul, like Noah's dove, on airy wings  
 Goes out and searches for the hidden things  
 Beyond the hills of haze.

With mournful, pleading cries,  
 Above the waters of the voiceless sea  
 That laps the shore of broad Eternity,  
 Day after day, it flies.

But the search is in vain, and the narrator admonishes her soul to "wait" and "rest." In several poems, however, the mystical union is accomplished. In "Life" (C.P., pp. 273-74) the moment of penetrating insight is described:

As when a mighty forest, whose green leaves  
 Have shut it in, and made it seem a bower  
 For lovers' secrets, or for children's sports,  
 Casts all its clustering foliage to the winds,

And lets the eye behold it, limitless,  
 And full of winding mysteries of ways:  
 So now with life that reaches out before,  
 And borders on the unexplained Beyond  
 I see the stars above me, world on world;  
 I hear the awful language of all Spaces;  
 I feel the distant surging of great seas,  
 That hide the secrets of the Universe  
 In their eternal bosoms; and I know  
 That I am but an atom of the Whole.

Large numbers of readers were attracted to her poetry by this element of mysticism in her work, which increased over the years and became especially strong after she and her husband were converted to theosophy.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox wrote poetry that appealed to her readers because it performed several important functions--it bolstered their faith, encouraged them against adversity and sorrow, energized their hopes and ideals. Her own simple, fundamentalist faith enabled her

to write verse that was convincing and encouraging, that engendered in her public the same strong, certain faith she herself possessed. Echoing Emerson, Wordsworth, and the whole Romantic movement, she told her readers to look within for the spirit of God, convinced that each person contains a spark of God himself. Within each man there is a "best self, that pure atom of God/ Which lies deep within each heart like a seed in the sod" (Three Women, p. 180). In "Achievement" (Pleasure, p. 73), she wrote, "Trust in thine own untried capacity/ As thou wouldst trust in God himself. Thy soul/ Is but an emanation from the whole." Lying deep within each of us are "Hidden Gems" (C.P., pp. 354-55).

Reflected from the vasty Infinite,  
 However dulled by earth, each human mind.  
 Holds somewhere gems of beauty and of light  
 Which, seeketh, thou shalt find.

With such power lying hidden in every personality, human potential seemed "Limitless" (C.P., pp. 277-78):

There is nothing, I hold, in the way of work,  
 That a human being may not achieve  
 If he does not falter, or shrink or shirk,  
 And more than all, if he will believe.

When the motive is right and the will is strong  
 There are no limits to human power.

The widespread and long-held American belief in the "power of positive thinking" is reflected throughout Mrs. Wilcox's poems.

Coupled with this religious belief in the possibilities of individual achievement was Mrs. Wilcox's profound faith in the American way. Herself a rags-to-riches product of it, she sincerely

believed in the virtues of work, thrift, and democratic equality. She continually exhorted her readers to try, try again and to avoid idleness. "Oh, idle heart, beware!/ On, to the field of strife,/ On, to the valley there,/ And live a useful life." If they stumbled, she encouraged them to rise up; no force could keep down a person who continued to struggle. She was herself always their shining example; a "pure phenomenon of democracy."

Ella Wheeler Wilcox did not produce what even the most generous critics would call "good" poetry, although there are evidences of talent in her work which, with training and discipline, might have led her to write better than she did. She wrote instead what came naturally to her; she reflected, and wrote for, the average mind. As her biographer, Jenny Ballou, put it, "In a language easily accessible to the weary and semi-literate, she told her readers, hungry for easily swallowed half-truths, that it was unhappiness, and not happiness, that was the exception." She wrote to encourage people, to brighten the world for them. Always chafing at the neglect or scorn of highbrow critics, she maintained that "heart was more important than art," and she explained her poetics in verse:

Though critics may bow to art, and I am  
its own true lover,  
It is not art, but heart, which wins  
the wide world over.

Though smooth be the heartless prayer,  
no ear in heaven will mind it.  
And the finest phrase falls dead,  
if there is no feeling behind it. . . .

And it is not the poet's song, though  
    sweeter than bells chiming,  
Which thrills us through and through,  
    but the heart which beats under the rhyming.

And therefore, I say again, though I am  
    art's own true lover,  
That it is not art, but heart, which wins  
    the wide world over.

NOTES--CHAPTER VI

<sup>1</sup>In The Story of Mary MacLane, By Herself, as noted by Jenny Ballou, Period Piece: Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Her Times (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1940), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Ballou, pp. 93-94.

<sup>3</sup>These abbreviations will be used in Chapter VI for volumes of Mrs. Wilcox's work:

Passion--Poems of Passion (Chicago: Belford Clarke, 1883).  
Pleasure--Poems of Pleasure (Chicago: W. B. Conkey Co., 1888).

C.P.--Collected Poems (London: Leopold B. Hill, (1921).

<sup>4</sup>Ballou, p. 91.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>6</sup>In a Popular Culture seminar at Michigan State University, Leslie Smith discovered that in the novels of Mary Jane Holmes, Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth, and Sylvanus Cobb, all writing between 1819 and 1907, physical sexuality for the heroines is definitely taboo. In this fiction women are completely absorbed in and satisfied by their duties in the home: they are glorified as spiritual models for men, and motherhood is a sacred office.

<sup>7</sup>It is interesting to note the similarity of this poem to a Rod McKuen verse three-quarters of a century later. Mrs. Wilcox wrote:

God measures souls by their capacity  
For entertaining His best Angel, Love . . . ;  
What God wants of us  
Is that outreaching bigness that ignores  
All littleness of aims or loves or creeds,  
And clasps all Earth and Heaven in its embrace.

Compare McKuen:

Each of us was made by God  
beautiful in His mind's eye.  
Those of us that turned out sound  
should look across our shoulders once  
and help the weak ones to their feet.

It only takes an outstretched hand.





## CHAPTER VII

### THE WORLD TRAVELER: BAYARD TAYLOR

(1825-1878)

Bayard Taylor was a world traveler, journalist, lecturer, scholar, and extremely versatile and prolific man of letters. He was so widely popular with ordinary persons in America, England, Germany, and spots as remote as Reykiavik, Iceland, and so intimately acquainted with and respected by eminent men at home and abroad, that his obscurity today is a startling comment on the fickle nature of public reputation. In the field of poetry, to which his highest efforts were dedicated, he goes currently unnoted: Roy Harvey Pearce does not mention him in The Continuity of American Poetry; and Hyatt Waggoner sandwiches his name into a single line of indistinction in American Poets.<sup>1</sup>

More than one writer has implied that Taylor could have produced genuinely superior poetry if he had concentrated his energy in dedication to the Muse, but that the diversity of his intellectual activity prevented him from attaining poetic heights. Stedman wrote that Taylor had written such good poetry by the age of thirty that he could have accomplished great work if he had been willing to



sacrifice "immediate honors, rare experiences, growth in various directions."<sup>2</sup>

Taylor's achievements truly were various, and in summarizing their extent it is difficult to contain the use of the superlative. Like most of the popular poets studied here, Taylor had humble beginnings. As the son of a Pennsylvania farmer he couldn't afford formal schooling past high school, and so published his first volume of poetry at the age of twenty in hopes of financing a trip to Europe as a substitute for a university education. The volume Ximena, which the poet later repudiated, brought in almost no money, so Taylor solicited Philadelphia publishers. The Post and the United States Gazette each granted him fifty dollars in advance for twelve travel letters, and Graham bought several poems. In New York before sailing Taylor approached Nathaniel Parker Willis, whose Pencillings he had admired, and Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune. The main currents of his life were thus determined.

During two years in Europe (1844-1846) Taylor spent only five hundred dollars, earning most of it through letters for the Post, Gazette, and Tribune. At home again, he was encouraged by friends to collect the letters in a book, Views Afoot, for which Willis wrote the preface. Wiley and Putnam agreed to publish and pay Taylor \$100 for every thousand copies sold. The book appeared in 1846 and went through twenty editions in ten years, resulting in instant fame for young Taylor. He sent copies to Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Whipple, Emerson, James T. Fields, and his friends abroad. On his first of many visits to Cambridge, the Brahmins "flocked about him like a

swarm of brothers."<sup>3</sup> He spent an afternoon with Longfellow who was to become a lifelong friend, often to sustain and encourage him by approving his poetry. Taylor moved to New York in 1847 and became assistant editor of Greeley's Tribune.

Much of the rest of Taylor's life was consumed in traveling thousands of miles, writing newspaper articles, collecting his articles into books, and appearing in public lecture halls. A trip to the California gold mines in 1849 resulted in an illustrated prose book, El Dorado, published in 1850. Two thousand copies were ordered before the book was ready and it was well received in England.

Following the death of his wife, Mary Agnew Taylor, in December 1850, Taylor embarked on a two-year sojourn (November 1851-December 1853) in Egypt and Ethiopia and then Jerusalem, Damascus, and Constantinople. Back in London in October 1852, he was commissioned by the Tribune to accompany Commodore Perry into Japan; he journeyed through Bombay, India and Hong Kong before reaching Perry's flagship in May 1853, where he soon became master's mate. Returning to the United States in late December 1853, Taylor began a hectic two-and-a-half-year period of writing and speaking about the journey. He produced three prose travel books: A Journey to Central Africa (August 1854); The Lands of the Saracen, or Pictures of Palestine, Asia Minor, Sicily, and Spain (October 1854); A Visit to India, China, and Japan in 1853 (September 1855).

Two books of poetry were published: Poems of the Orient (October 1854); and Poems of Home and Travel (November 1855) to supersede A Book of Romances, Lyrics, and Songs (1851). During this

frantic period Taylor lectured 285 times while traveling 40,000 miles from New York to Boston and Montreal to Cincinnati, Detroit, Chicago, back to Philadelphia and all points in between. By November 1855 he had prepared a new edition of Views Afoot and by 1856 a Cyclopaedia of Modern Travel in which he "compressed ninety volumes into one" for a Cincinnati publisher. Work on the Cyclopaedia was interrupted by a jaunt to Newfoundland to report for the Tribune a cable-laying attempt between that island and the mainland. Returning from Newfoundland he was faced with "fifty invitations to lecture."

The cycle repeated itself throughout Taylor's lifetime. The next two-year period abroad (July 1856-October 1858) took him first to Sweden and on a mid-winter (December 1856-January 1857) sojourn into Lapland that proved to be a rigorous ordeal. In the spring of 1857 Taylor announced his engagement to Marie Hansen of Gotha, Germany, whom he met through the wealthy German friend, August Bufleb, his companion on the Nile earlier in the fifties. A short trip to England during which he visited with Thackeray, Tennyson, Dickens, and Leigh Hunt, preceded the mid-summer tour of Norway with Bufleb that provided material for Lars, a pastoral poem written six years later. Taylor married Marie Hansen in October 1857; the two spent the winter in Greece and returned to Gotha, Taylor making a brief visit to Russia before their daughter was born in late summer, 1858.

The 1858-62 period was spent in building the lovely mansion Cedarcroft on a broad expanse of acreage adjoining his father's land

in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania; in producing four travel books about Norway, Sweden, Greece, and Russia; in revising the Cyclopaedia of Modern Travel; in writing The Poet's Journal (1862), a lyrical and partly autobiographical poetic treatment of a young man's sorrow, desolation, and discovery of peace in a new love. The book was dedicated "To the Mistress of Cedarcroft" and was "the glorification of family love, in its wholeness and its wholesomeness."<sup>4</sup> Taylor was still lecturing and writing short poems like "The Quaker Widow" (1860), which several have acclaimed his best short piece. In 1862 he had begun The Picture of St. John (1866), a poem about a painter who finds his artistic power "through his sympathy with the joy and with the suffering of life."<sup>5</sup> In 1862 Taylor was also working on his first novel Hannah Thurston, and having gone to Russia in March as secretary to the new Minister, Simon Cameron, was writing papers on Russia for the Atlantic.

By fall, 1863, Taylor was thirty-eight years old. "He had written six volumes of verse, nine books of travel, some five hundred newspaper and magazine articles, and more personal letters than anybody could very well count. Further, he had edited a two-volume cyclopaedia, delivered a thousand lectures, built a fine house, married a second time, and was the father of two children. Still further, he had nearly finished a long poem, The Picture of St. John and was beginning a much longer translation, Goethe's Faust."<sup>6</sup> With almost unbelievable vitality, Taylor was "impatient to conquer still another rich field. He was ready to publish his first novel, Hannah Thurston."<sup>7</sup> The book sold 15,000 copies in four months, made a hit

in England where a friend wrote to Taylor the book was found in every home he entered.<sup>8</sup> In 1867 Thackeray's daughter Anne told the visiting Bayard Taylor that she knew Hannah Thurston by heart.<sup>9</sup> The novel was translated for readers in Germany and Russia.

Taylor was to complete three more novels: John Godfrey's Fortunes (1864), The Story of Kennett (1866), and Joseph and His Friend (1870). The novels sold well. Two and a half years after publication, Hannah Thurston was still in "steady, permanent demand," and more than six thousand copies of The Story of Kennett were ordered in advance of publication.<sup>10</sup> The latter novel was praised by Whittier and by Howells who called it "the best historical (historical in the sense of retrospective) novel ever written in America." In a letter to Stedman, Taylor reported gleefully, "The people in this county are buying it like mad. I was in the West Chester book-store yesterday, and found three men walking out with it in their pockets and two buying it at the counter. I am refreshed, encouraged, stimulated, delighted,--and I don't care who knows it!"<sup>11</sup>

In May, 1866, Taylor wrote to Thomas Bailey Aldrich that he wanted "to produce the English 'Faust.'"<sup>12</sup> In 1870 and 1871 his translation of Faust, Parts I and II was published in Boston, England, and Leipzig, and he wrote to his mother about the success of the work:

The book is considered a more successful (because more difficult) work than either Longfellow's "Dante" or Bryant's "Homer." Everything that I have heretofore done all together has not given me so much reputation as this one undertaking. People say that no one need ever translate "Faust" again, because no one can surpass my translation.<sup>13</sup>



"Faust" was warmly approved in England and Germany; George Bancroft, then Minister of the United States at Berlin, wrote at length of his pleasure in the work, and Germans like Madame von Holtzendorff of Gotha responded enthusiastically: "You not merely have reproduced faithfully word and form,--which I in no way esteem lightly, but you have so entered into the spirit of the wonderful poem and our language . . . that your translation is the perfect equal of the original."<sup>14</sup>

Taylor's German scholarship absorbed much of the intellectual energy of the last decade of his life. He lectured on German literature periodically at Cornell, for women's groups in New York and Brooklyn, and in what became a popular course of twelve lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston. His School History of Germany was published in New York in 1874. He had accumulated a wealth of material for a biography of Goethe and Schiller when good news reached him in February 1878, that the President had appointed him Minister to Germany. The appointment precipitated "one outburst of satisfaction from press and people" both in America and Germany, and Taylor joyously anticipated the "incalculable advantage" to him in writing the biography. Unfortunately, he was overcome by fatigue and disease soon after arriving in Germany and died in December 1878 at the age of only fifty-three. There had not been time to finish the cherished biography.

The versatility of the man seemed boundless. The last decade of his life produced another trip abroad and one more travel book, Egypt and Iceland in the Year 1874. Besides a continuous

production of short stories and articles for the magazines, Taylor was constantly engaged in critical writing of all kinds. He had a genius, much enjoyed by his friends, for improvising in parody and burlesque; these parodies began to appear serially in the Atlantic in 1872 and were collected in The Echo Club and other Literary Diversions in 1876. Taylor's serious criticism was also respected. The 1880 collection of Critical Essays and Literary Notes prompted Stedman to comment in 1885 that "Taylor could have been a great critic."<sup>15</sup> Financial pressure in his later years prevented Taylor from relinquishing arduous duty on the lecture circuit; he traveled 15,000 miles during the 1874-75 season to speak 130 times.

Throughout these hectic years--one of Taylor's biographers described him as "a man who lived from his youth to his premature death within a maelstrom"<sup>16</sup>--Taylor steadily pursued his highest goal of writing fine poetry. He produced a canon of poetry in an amazing variety of forms and modes. Poems of the Orient (1854) are lyrical and sensuous. The rural scenes and characters he knew best appeared in his Pennsylvania poems, collected in Home Pastorals, Ballads, and Lyrics (1875); Lars: a Pastoral of Norway (1873) is an idyl in the mode of Evangeline and Enoch Arden.

Several odes were composed for public occasions, and in 1876 Taylor was invited--after Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, and Bryant had declined--to write the national centennial ode. He accepted and read his poem to an audience outside Independence Hall on July 4, 1876; but the poem has not been remembered, possibly because of the irregular Pindaric metrical pattern.

The Prophet (1874) is a tragedy, treating realistically the vulnerability of an intelligent but uneducated young man who is susceptible to mystical experience. Taylor's Quaker background--and belief in one great unknown God to whom all forms of worship are acceptable--underlie his religious vision in two other dramatic poems. The Masque of the Gods (1872), "a drama of three dialogues in severe and classical fashion,"<sup>17</sup> traces the growth and development of man's conception of God--his "steady spiritual advancement from the worship of the rude forces of nature to a clearer perception of the Deity"<sup>18</sup> in His aspects of Beauty, Law, Order, and Divine Love. The Masque concludes with a statement of faith that Man will grow to apprehend perfect, whole Truth at some time in the future. Prince Deukalion (1878) was Taylor's greatest poetic achievement. It is a lyrical drama expanding upon the apocalyptic theme of the earlier Masque to trace the splendid "progress of mankind from ignominy and suffering to the golden age of the future."<sup>19</sup>

Whether Taylor could have written poetry of the highest level can never be known. He wrote letters throughout his lifetime about his wish to write the highest poetry, and reiterated his passionate desire for leisure to do so, but he had other goals as well. His first published poem evidences a desire for fame.

Yes, I would write my name  
With the star's burning ray on heaven's broad scroll,  
That I might still the restless thirst for fame  
Which fills my soul.<sup>20</sup>

Taylor, who craved broad experience, soon discovered that travel and maintaining a luxurious and hospitable home were extremely expensive.

Financial difficulties forced Taylor into the grueling lecture business and into the drudgery of hack work. Even without desire for fame or need for money, Taylor's compulsion to exercise all his talents would have prevented him from concentrating on any one creative endeavor. He commented on this in a long letter to Stedman in 1874.

Well, if I were to write about myself for six hours, it would all come to this: that life is, for me, the developing, asserting, and establishing of my own Entelecheia--the making all that is possible out of such powers as I may have, without violently forcing or distorting them.<sup>21</sup>

At this point, however, Taylor seemed finally ready to focus on his beloved art. The variety of his past experience would serve him well, he continued to Stedman, now that he was "beginning to concentrate instead of scatter."

In Taylor's case the source of appeal, even more than for any other popular poet studied here, was the man himself. Taylor became known through Views Afoot as the young man who toured Europe on a few cents a day; his reputation as world traveler and adventurer was augmented through the years as thousands read his travel letters, flocked to see him dressed as an Arab or Laplander in the lecture halls, and bought his travel books. Most persons became acquainted with Taylor through the letters in the Tribune, Greeley's weekly newspaper which Taylor ranked next to the Bible in popularity in the Midwest.<sup>22</sup> Even when he became "tired to death of being

introduced to people, answering questions, . . . and being stared at with a mixture of curiosity and awe as 'the man that went to Africa,'" Taylor was gratified at the pleasure his letters had given thousands of readers. Children were as eager for his letters as for Robinson Crusoe; a man in Ohio had ridden several miles in a storm to borrow the Tribune because Taylor's letters had a cheery effect on his sick wife. Knowing that this popularity would be temporary, Taylor described "a great happiness to feel once in your life" that some achievement "has given you an interest in the minds of your countrymen and a warm place in their hearts."<sup>23</sup>

Fascinated readers who were lured to the lecture halls to hear Bayard Taylor were not disappointed. He was a forceful speaker with a good sense of humor. He was tall, erect, with a handsome beard and moustache and the build of an athlete. People admired him greatly because he had seen more of the world than any other man, but they also liked him because he was cheery, unpretentious, and seemed to be an ordinary American like themselves.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes speaking to as many as four thousand people at once, Taylor was one of the most popular lecturers in the country in the 1850's.

Over the years hundreds of people he'd never met felt a personal connection with Bayard Taylor. Like Lydia Sigourney and Ella Wheeler Wilcox, he received volumes of letters asking him to deliver orations or poems before college societies, public meetings, charities; to read and criticize manuscripts of would-be writers; to give advice about traveling to Europe; to answer questions about curious and out-of-the-way facts. Schultz includes one specimen in

The Unpublished Letters of Bayard Taylor: a Mr. Bird had written from Toledo asking about hasheesh and how to experiment with it.<sup>25</sup> People were curious, too, about Taylor's house, and he catered to them in a series of At Home and Abroad papers that traced the history of Cedarcroft from the beginning.<sup>26</sup>

In the sale of his books Taylor soon discovered that people were interested in him as a traveler and not a poet. He found it "humiliating" he told Boker in 1852, that "nine-tenths of his literary success" rested in his lectures and travel sketches, while his poetry "passed by unnoticed."<sup>27</sup> There was great demand for the travel books. In 1855 the book on Japan had sold eight thousand copies, and the states of Ohio and Indiana were considering adopting his books for the common schools.<sup>28</sup> The novels, too, sold widely as we have seen. But there was no great market for the work Taylor valued most--his poetry. Poems of the Orient, probably because of their exotic flavor, had the greatest success, fifteen hundred copies selling within six weeks of publication; and by 1863 Taylor's general reputation prompted Ticknor and Fields to request a revised edition of his poems for the "Blue and Gold" series, very popular at the time. But throughout the letters Taylor lamented that his poetry did not sell nearly as widely as his "more ephemeral" prose works. In 1852 Eldorado was selling regularly, but Taylor was arranging to pay James Fields if the publisher lost money from the 1851 Book of Romances, Lyrics, and Songs. He promised J. R. Osgood in 1872 that if Lars did not prove moderately successful, he would thereafter publish his own poems "as a private luxury."<sup>29</sup> Hoping

that public interest might be aroused in The Prophet if it were presented as the work of a new poet, Taylor considered publishing the poem anonymously in 1874; however, his friends persuaded him that because popular taste was so indifferent to dramatic poetry, his name would be needed to make the poem go over at all. Lars was his first poem to be published in England, but the sale in 1873 was "just one hundred and eight copies!"<sup>30</sup> He wrote to a friend in 1877:

The translation of "Faust," to which I gave all my best and freshest leisure during a period of six or seven years, has only yielded me about as much as a fortnight's lecturing.<sup>31</sup>

Albert Smyth recalls Taylor's encounter with a stranger who asked permission to take him by the hand, saying that he had read and enjoyed all his books.

"And what do you think of my poetry?" asked Taylor.  
"Poetry," was the astonished reply, "did you ever write any poetry?"<sup>32</sup>

Taylor's large following was attracted more by his personal charisma than by his poetry. Thousands of people were drawn by his exciting life, physical attractiveness, appealing personality, democratic bearing, and high moral character. They felt a contact with him as a person and adopted him as a model. Even in 1876, late in his career, it was the man rather than the poem that made his reading of the national ode an inspirational occasion.

There was something in his presence, erect, impressive, filled with a solemn sense of the moment, something in his voice, clear, penetrating, sonorous, and charged with

profound emotion, which stilled the noise and tumult of those before him, hushed even the lively creatures in the branches, and made the vast audience listen.<sup>33</sup>

The reading was followed by thunderous applause and cries of "That's Bayard! That's the poet! Hurrah for our poet!", but the ode has not been remembered.

In contrast with writers like Sigourney, Wilcox, and Carleton, Taylor did not aspire to write poetry for the people. He belonged intimately to the elitist circle of poets, artists, scholars in New York, Boston, England, and Germany; and throughout his life his devotion to writing the highest poetry, for himself and other poets, clarified itself.

Taylor's experiences with the most famous of the literati of his day make a fascinating record: despite his present obscurity, he was highly regarded by critics like R. H. Stoddard, George Boker, E. C. Stedman and Thomas B. Aldrich. He received the first praise of his poetry in 1847 when Whittier copied and commented on "The Norseman's Ride" in the National Era. Whittier, Holmes, and Lowell responded regularly to his poetry, and he was greatly encouraged throughout his life by Longfellow's criticism of his work. These New England friends honored Taylor at a dinner celebrating the publication of Faust, Part I, and William Cullen Bryant presided at another celebration when Taylor was named Minister to Germany. Having been encouraged by the literati he most admired, Taylor, in turn, bolstered the efforts of younger poets like Sidney Lanier who described him as being "in soul and stature larger than thy kind."



He knew several British writers intimately, including Thackeray, Browning, and Tennyson.

However gratified Taylor was by financial success of his novels and travel books, in the writing of poetry he was interested not in sales, money, or popularity, but in earning the approbation of the literati whose opinions he respected and in meeting certain high standards of his own. In 1844 he sent his first volume hopefully to Longfellow and to Lowell whom he wrote: "whenever I weary of my burden, the voice of the poet, prophet-like, bids me 'suffer and be strong.' I dare not as yet call myself a brother-bard; but I send you the first breathings of my soul, with the ardent hope they will find a response in your own."<sup>34</sup> By 1851 Taylor was greatly concerned to have attained something of true value in A Book of Romances, Lyrics, and Songs. He wrote to Boker, "I want to make a decent book. . . . The volume, I am sure, will decide the question whether I am to be acknowledged as a true poet."<sup>35</sup> A year later when Taylor, returning from the Egyptian sojourn, happened upon an unfavorable review of the book in a London journal, he was "fired up in an instant" and wrote six poems in two days, vowing to Boker, "If God gives me life and health I shall prove that I am something better than a mere traveler,--a reputation which the world is now trying to force upon me."<sup>36</sup>

In letters to aspiring poets, Taylor often stressed that "the writing of poetry is a serious business, and that the success of any poem depends much more on what is Art than on what is called Inspiration."<sup>37</sup> "A man who means to write poetry must know how to

work. One might as well hope to become a painter without studying the laws of drawing and color, and all the technicalities of the art, as to become a successful poet without devoting an equal study to rhythm, language, and forms of thought."<sup>38</sup>

At first Taylor was disappointed when his books of poetry did not sell widely, but, as the years went by, partly as a protective device against his own disappointment, and partly because his poetic intentions became consciously elitist, he renounced interest in writing poetry for a popular audience. Beginning to think that "the real excellence of a poem is in reverse ratio to its popularity,"<sup>39</sup> he would cease trying to conciliate an "ignorant public."<sup>40</sup> Writing The Picture of St. John had been a joyous experience, and he vowed not "to care a D. whether or not it was popular,"<sup>41</sup> believing that it would be "always liked . . . by the few who make fame for an author."<sup>42</sup> About The Masque of the Gods he was "determined to publish without regard to popularity or profit." He was excited about the poem and wrote to Paul Hayne:

It is something "new and strange," and may make a "sea-change" with me, so far as the critics are concerned. . . . the opinions of poets, and poets only, have a true value.<sup>43</sup>

Taylor did seem to believe, like Whitman and Roy Harvey Pearce later, that the development of a large American audience for the best poetry was theoretically possible. Although he was afraid (1872) to anticipate success for The Masque of the Gods because there was "so little dependence on the whims of the American public,"<sup>44</sup> he did have faith in future audiences. "If this public

won't accept my better work, I must wait until a new one grows up."<sup>45</sup> He wrote to Jervis McEntee in 1872:

You and I will never see the end of glorified crudity in the United States; but we shall see the growth of an independent, cultivated class, the guardians of the temple where we worship.<sup>46</sup>

The point here is that in poetry Taylor was not interested in adapting his gifts to the needs and tastes of the great audience; he wanted to write what he considered the finest poetry for a class of readers able to appreciate it even though he found the members of that class to be few in his own day.

We are dealing, then, with a man whose immense popularity was rooted in almost everything but poetry and whose intentions were those of an elitist poet. And yet, paradoxical as it may seem, consideration of his work can prove fruitful in this study of (1) the source of appeal of popular poetry and (2) the difference between popular and elitist poems.

Taylor's life reveals that here, as in many cases studied in this paper, [there is a close connection between the popularity of the poetry and that of the writer.] Alfred Kreymborg noted in 1929 that although Whitman should have written the 1876 Centennial Ode, Taylor was chosen for his "enormous erudition, everlasting travels, and romantic personality--appealing to an adolescent race."<sup>47</sup> Many of the people who enjoyed themselves by crying ecstatically "Our Poet!" in Philadelphia had probably never actually read Taylor's poems. Many others, no doubt, were drawn to the poems

because, even though poetry is a difficult genre, they were curious enough about Taylor or liked him enough. The poems may have led readers to feel they shared the personal life of the poet they had grown to admire.

For a second reason Taylor's poetry is relevant here: his work provides material to study the differences between lower and higher levels of poetry. His earlier work, Poems of the Orient in particular, did sell to a sizeable audience, and his lyrics became known to a great many people in popular collections like Ticknor and Fields' "Blue and Gold" edition in the 1860's and Houghton Mifflin's "Household Edition" in the eighties. His lyrics were also well represented in the anthologies of popular poetry throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> Even though critics are generally agreed that Taylor did not finally attain the highest achievement in poetry but "was rather a meister-singer,--a guild-singer,--a man of talent, and master of the mechanics of his craft,"<sup>49</sup> there is, nevertheless, ample evidence that Taylor's poetry progressed gradually from a lower and more popular level of sensuous, concrete, easily understandable poetry to the higher abstract, visionary, and more elitist levels.

Taylor, himself, provided a commentary on this ascension up through the levels of poetry. In the "Proem" dedicating Poems of the Orient to R. H. Stoddard, Taylor distinguished between poetry of the spirit, the soul, the sublime, and poetry of the concrete earth.

Stoddard, inspired by Apollo, strained to catch the harmonies from the finer regions of "lost Elysium" and bade us share the

"diviner odors" of Olympian flowers. Taylor, on the other hand, guided by "shaggy Pan" was content to "pitch [his] tent upon the naked sands" and to record the wonders of "the native Earth": the tall palm, one living rose, the change of climes and races, "the warm red blood that beats in hearts of men." In this poem Taylor asserted that both kinds of poetry had value. Stoddard's altar was set on the hill-top and Taylor's in "shadows of the Pine," and yet both were worshipping "the immortal law/ Of that high inspiration, which is Art."

I cannot separate the minstrels' worth;  
Each is alike transcendent and divine.

Yet, early in his career Taylor seemed to change his mind about the value of poetry as a record of surface reality. When an English novelist praised him for being "the best landscape painter in words that he had ever known," Taylor was humiliated: "I want to do more than paint landscapes, or even portraits--St. Johns and Holy Families, at least."<sup>50</sup> Smyth noted that Poems of the Orient ended the lyrical, sensuous stage of Taylor's poetry and that he soon afterwards entered the "psychological stage"<sup>51</sup> of The Poet's Journal and The Picture of St. John, both records of the passing of a sensitive, artistic nature through suffering toward peace of mind and joyous creativity. The third and highest stage, what Smyth called the "religious and the ethical" stage, was prompted by the Goethe studies and was initiated by a program of inspirational reading and a new dedication to a severely classical style. By 1866 he abhorred

everything "spasmodic and sensational"; he had "lost something of lyrical heat and passion, but gained in feeling of proportion and construction."<sup>52</sup>

Taylor often expressed the importance of a gradual but steady climb toward the highest levels of poetry. "What endures is of slow growth. I think a man should be satisfied to let the first twenty years of his literary activity go for foundation-walls, if they will only support a pillar or two above ground afterwards."<sup>53</sup> "I would rather exercise a slow and cumulative influence than enjoy any amount of temporary popularity. There is a great satisfaction in working up towards an ideal which at least seems high to one's own eyes."<sup>54</sup> He believed that his own poetry exhibited this growth. Just before his death, the reception by fellow poets of his crowning work Prince Deukalion confirmed Taylor's view of the value of having steadfastly sought after "the highest expression of his highest nature."<sup>55</sup> Prince Deukalion is no doubt a superior work; even Richmond Beatty, who assumed a supercilious attitude toward most of Taylor's literary work, was prompted to judge the dramatic poem as "wise," "important," and having a content of "high significance."<sup>56</sup>

In his early years Taylor had "coveted the flash and glitter of rhetoric, with little consideration for the substance of poetry."<sup>57</sup> By 1874 he had grown to appreciate the control of thought under "architectural rules" in poetry and to reject "the painted and tinsel palaces which just now dazzle the eyes of the public." He found that "mere grace of phrase, surface brilliancy, simulated fire, cannot endure: we must build of hewn blocks from the everlasting quarries."<sup>58</sup>

His poetic aspirations had been nourished on Lydia Sigourney, Nathaniel Parker Willis, and the prevailing sentimentality of the gift annuals of the forties. As Smyth put it, he "beat his way out of [this] wilderness to symmetrical conceptions and proportioned Art." The important point for our consideration is that this ascension of the levels of poetry was closely paralleled by a decline in the number of readers responding to the poems. Prince Deukalion, finally, was read by extremely few people. Taylor's early and later works thus provide material excellently suited to a study of the contrast between popular and elitist poetry.

NOTES--CHAPTER VII

<sup>1</sup>Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets from the Puritans to the Present (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 226.

<sup>2</sup>Edmund Clarence Stedman, Poets of America (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), p. 409.

<sup>3</sup>Richmond Croom Beatty, Bayard Taylor: Laureate of the Gilded Age (Norman, Oklahoma: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1936), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup>Albert H. Smyth, Bayard Taylor, American Men of Letters Series (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), p. 226.

<sup>5</sup>Smyth, p. 227.

<sup>6</sup>Beatty, p. 229.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>John Richie Schultz, ed., The Unpublished Letters of Bayard Taylor in the Huntington Library (San Marino, California: Huntington Library Publications, 1937), p. 68.

<sup>9</sup>Letter to Stedman, Marie Hansen-Taylor and Horace E. Scudder, ed., Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), II, 474.

<sup>10</sup>Letter to John B. Phillips, Life, II, 452-53.

<sup>11</sup>Life, II, 456-57.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 458.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 549.



- <sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 562.
- <sup>15</sup>Stedman, p. 422.
- <sup>16</sup>Beatty, p. 12.
- <sup>17</sup>Stedman, p. 430.
- <sup>18</sup>Marie Hansen Taylor, Notes to The Dramatic Works of Bayard Taylor (Boston, 1880; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1969), p. 333.
- <sup>19</sup>Stedman, p. 431.
- <sup>20</sup>Life, I, 22.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., II, 644.
- <sup>22</sup>William Charvat, "The People's Patronage," Literary History of the United States, ed. Spiller, et al. (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 519.
- <sup>23</sup>Letter to George Boker, 1854, Life, I, 276.
- <sup>24</sup>David Mead, "Bayard Taylor: Voice of Young America," Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West: The Ohio Lyceum 1850-1870 (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State College Press, 1951), p. 114.
- <sup>25</sup>Schultz, pp. 38-39. Taylor records two experiments with hasheesh during his tour of the Near East.
- <sup>26</sup>Beatty, p. 215.
- <sup>27</sup>Life, I, 227-28.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid., I, 308.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid., II, 608.
- <sup>30</sup>Letter to John B. Phillips, 1873, Life, II, 631.
- <sup>31</sup>Life, II, 703.

<sup>32</sup>Smyth, p. 213.

<sup>33</sup>Life, II, 687.

<sup>34</sup>Smyth, pp. 32-33.

<sup>35</sup>Life, I, 212.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., I, 240.

<sup>37</sup>Schultz, p. 75.

<sup>38</sup>Life, II, 600.

<sup>39</sup>Letter to P. H. Hayne, 1869, quoted in Beatty, p. 264.

<sup>40</sup>Life, II, 588.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., II, 440.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., II, 467.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., II, 578.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., II, 583.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., II, 588.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., II, 602.

<sup>47</sup>Alfred Kreymborg, A History of American Poetry: Our Singing Strength (New York: Coward McCann, 1929), p. 235.

<sup>48</sup>Bryant's Library of Poetry and Song in 1886 included: "The Arab to the Palm," "The Bedouin Song," "The Lute Player," "Possession," and "The Rose." Bliss Carman's The World's Best Poetry in 1904 included: "The Arab to the Palm," "The Bedouin Song," "Possession," and "The Song of the Camp." In 1922 Burton Stevenson's The Home Book of Verse included: "The Bedouin Song," "Nubia," "Promissory Note," "Song of the Camp," "Storm Song," and "Story for a Child." Edwin Markham's 1926 Anthology of the World's Best Poems included "The Bedouin Song."

<sup>49</sup>Smyth, p. 273.

<sup>50</sup>Letter to Boker, 1851, Life, I, 203.

<sup>51</sup>Smyth, pp. 223-24.

<sup>52</sup>Life, II, 459-60.

<sup>53</sup>Letter to Stedman, 1867, Life, II, 479.

<sup>54</sup>Letter to Hannah M. Darlington, 1873, Life, II, 621.

<sup>55</sup>Life, II, 764.

<sup>56</sup>Beatty, p. 349.

<sup>57</sup>Smyth, p. 217.

<sup>58</sup>Letter to Stedman, 1874, Life, II, 643.

## CHAPTER VIII

### BAYARD TAYLOR: INTELLIGIBILITY AND THE LEVELS OF POETRY

In the Proem to Poems of the Orient Taylor distinguished between a lower-level poetry describing concrete objects on the earth's surface, and a high, sublimely rapturous level. He evidently meant that while high-level poems stir the intellect and nourish the spirit, poetry at the lower levels stimulates the senses and entertains the imagination--by a good narrative, for example, or pictures of romantically remote places and people. Although he maintained this distinction of levels consistently throughout his lifetime, Taylor was more interested in his early years in recognizing the value of lower-level poems. In The Picture of St. John, when Egon's wife died, the thoughts of the artist turned from lofty heights as though "in penance" to the lowliest field, and then surprisingly found "mysterious meaning, unimagined worth. . . . The key of Art, rusting in common earth!" (III, li).

Taylor's most popular poems, the early lyrics, are the lower-level kind that delight in the sensuous beauty of the earth. "The Poet in the East" is greeted by "meads of milk-white asphodel," a scarlet tide of poppy's bonfire, and the Rose "half in shade and

half in sun" sitting in her bower waiting "With a passionate thrill in her crimson heart." "Mimosa Blooms," the "darlings of the Nile," "flood the year with balm and spice," and become a type for the repose pervading the Orient: "Pure as a sinless virgin's prayer,/ Sweet as a sleeping infant's breath." Taylor's readers in the ice-bound American North could take down his volume on a cold winter's night and dream of a land of brilliant color, spicy fragrance, and eternal summer.

The poet's love of animal life finds beautiful, detailed expression in several of the lyrics and narrative poems. "The Soldier and the Pard," a dreamy fantasy that appeared in high school anthologies a generation ago, tells of a sleeping soldier deserted by his comrades in an oasis in the Sahara. When the man awoke he found himself alone with a leopard! After his initial terror he grew to love the animal and to believe that it had a soul, but ("Sin will find the way to Paradise") the "restless fancies" of an isolated human being possessed his mind, causing him to suspect the leopard of merely playing with him in cat-and-mouse fashion until the supply of gazelles in the area was exhausted. Then, one day, the "Devil whispering in his ear," he stabbed the leopard and was immediately overcome by remorse. The fantastic story may be one of the "sensations" Taylor later had in mind, when he repudiated his earlier writing. But the descriptions of the animal are detailed and vivid, allowing the reader to see the glittering eye, touch the velvety hide, and feel the heavy--and happily relaxed--paw resting on one's leg.

Thrilling in every nerve, I stretched my hand--  
 She silent, moveless,--touched her velvet head,  
 And with a warm sweet shiver in my blood,  
 Stroked down the ruffled hairs.

. . . . .  
                     She stopped: she rolled  
 A deep-voiced note of pleasure and of love,  
 And gathering up her spotted length, lay down,  
 Her head upon my lap, and forward thrust  
 One heavy-moulded paw across my knees,  
 The glittering talons sheathing tenderly.

The beauty of horses and Arab devotion to them are glorified  
 in many of the poems. Alimàr, poet of his tribe, sang of the wonder  
 horse "Kubleh" who died to save her master, Sofuk:

"Her form was lighter, in its shifting grace,  
 Than some impassioned almeh's, when the dance  
 Unbinds her scarf, and golden anklets gleam,  
 Through floating drapery, on the buoyant air."

"Hassan to His Mare" exhibits intimate affection of the man for his  
 horse.

Come my beauty! come, my desert darling!  
 On my shoulder lay thy glossy head!  
 Thou shalt have thy share of dates, my beauty!  
     And thou know'st my water-skin is free:  
 Drink and welcome, for the wells are distant,  
     And my strength and safety lie in thee.

Bend thy forehead now, to take thy kisses!  
     Lift in love thy dark and splendid eye:  
 Thou art glad when Hassan mounts the saddle--  
 Thou art proud he owns thee: so am I.

This poem was criticized in America for the unbelievability of the  
 man's devotion, but Smyth recorded an incident in which a Syrian  
 dragoman, who had just listened to a reading of the poem, "sprang  
 up with tears in his eyes, and protested that the Arabs talked just

that way to their horses."<sup>1</sup> The devotion of a man for his team in "Eric and Axel" was less passionate and more Anglo-Saxon in spirit, leading one critic to call it the best poem on the horse in our language.

Many of the poems in the "common-earth" period were entertaining simply because Taylor knew how to tell a story with colorful action and dramatic force. In "The Fight of Paso Del Mar" Pablo of San Diego began the descent of the headland down to the beach one foggy morning; a "pescadòr out in his shallop" looked up to see the "Faint, moving speck of the rider" that seemed "hovering close to its fall" as it wound round the narrow pathway on "the terrible wall." Then it happened that "Bernal, the herdsman of Chino," having traveled the shore since dawn in an effort to escape the ranches where he had killed a man, began the dizzying climb up the slippery path. The two met midway.

"Back!" shouted Bernal, full fiercely,  
 And "Back!" shouted Pablo, in wrath,  
 As his mule halted, startled and shrinking,  
 On the perilous line of the path.  
 The roar of the devouring surges  
 Came up from the breakers' hoarse war;  
 And "Back or you perish!" cried Bernal,  
 "I turn not on Paso Del Mar!"

To see what happened the reader will have to consult the poem.

"Amran's Wooing" is one of several dramatic narratives in Poems of the Orient. The speaker's friend, Frank, has asked "how Love is born" in a land "Where envious veils conceal the charms/ That tempt a Western lover's arms" and where "the burden of the silent tongue" necessitates that messages be sent by the eyes alone--

a question that might well have excited the curiosity of American readers. The speaker narrates the story of his love. He had been "a stripling, quick and bold/ And rich in pride as poor in gold" when he rode to Shekh Abdallah's tent on his sole treasure, "a steed/ Of Araby's most precious breed." His first encounter with the Shekh's daughter was narrated with the richly sensuous detail that must have stirred the imaginations of American readers.

The pipe replenished, with its stem  
 of jasmine wood and amber gem,  
 Was at my lips and while I drew  
 The rosy-sweet, soft vapor through  
 In ringlets of dissolving blue,  
 Waiting his speech with reverence meet,  
 A woman's garments brushed my feet,  
 And first through boyish senses ran  
 The pulse of love which made me man.  
 The handmaid of her father's cheer,  
 With timid grace she glided near,  
 And, lightly dropping on her knee,  
 Held out a silver zerf to me,  
 Within whose cup the fragrance sent  
 From Yemen's sunburnt berries blent  
 With odors of the Persian rose.  
 That picture still in memory glows  
 With the same heat as then--the gush  
 Of fever, with its fiery flush  
 Startling my blood; and I can see--  
 As she this moment knelt to me--  
 The shrouded graces of her form;  
 The half-seen arm, so round and warm;  
 The little hand, whose tender veins  
 Branched through the henna's orange stains;  
 The head, in act of offering bent;  
 And through the parted veil, which lent  
 A charm for what it hid, the eye,  
 Gazelle-like, large, and dark, and shy,  
 That with a soft, sweet tremble shone  
 Beneath the fervor of my own,  
 Yet could not, would not, turn away  
 The fascination of its ray,  
 But half in pleasure, half in fright,  
 Grew unto mine, and builded bright  
 From heart to heart a bridge of light.



Knowing that the Shekh would refuse his request, Amran pursued the girl anyway. With a jasmine-flowered arrow, he intercepted her among the young girls walking to the well to fill the water jars; he visited the Shekh's tent again in order to be served the zerf by her. "A rosebud in the zerf expressed/ The sweet confession of her breast." The impassioned Amran spoke for the girl and the Shekh refused-- "The treasure sent/ By God must not be idly spent." The couple exchanged messages: Amran sent a feather of a wild dove, a lock from the mane of his horse, a moonflower; the maiden answered with two roses and a moonflower--the elopement would take place after two days had passed, at moonrise. At the appointed time the two met and climbed onto the back of El-Azrek, soon to be pursued throughout the night by the Shekh's warriors. Near dawn, in desperation, Amran cut the saddle to lighten his horse's burden.

I drew my dagger, cut the girth,  
 Tumbled my saddle to the earth,  
 And clasped with desperate energies  
 My stallion's side with iron knees;  
 While Mariam, clinging to my breast,  
 The closer for that peril pressed.  
 They come! They come! Their shouts we hear,  
 . . . . .

Again, for the outcome, I refer the reader to the poem.

Many of the Poems of the Orient praise the beauty and power of the basic elements in nature. The poet celebrates the "Mysterious Flood,--that through the silent sands/ Hast wandered, century on century,/ Watering the length of green Egyptian lands" ("To the Nile"). He hails "Kilimandjaro," "the sole monarch of African mountains,/ Father of Nile and Creator of Egypt!" and delineates

rather cleverly the climates of the Earth as indexed "zone above zone" up the mountain side. He sings a "Desert Hymn to the Sun": "A golden trumpet in each beam of flame,/ Startling the universe with grand accord. . . . With purple flame the porphyry hills are crowned,/ And burn with gold the Desert's boundless floors." Another hymn sings reverent praise to the air, "mightiest . . . among the Powers of Earth,/ The viewless Agent of the unseen God" and source of nourishment of life and beauty on earth. Running throughout Poems of the Orient is this expression of gratitude for the elemental sources of life; the disparaging remark of one critic that the book is an "aesthetic debauch" of "flaming consummations, pagon abandonments, rapturous immoralities"<sup>2</sup>--seems an unfair conclusion from a hasty examination of only a few poems in the book.

Contrary to this charge of immorality, the point of much of the earth-centered poetry of the early years is the innocence of nature. ] The soldier and the leopard trusted each other in the natural state, before Sin entered Paradise. The pine trees in the California forests were "simple children of a guiltless soil" ("The Pine Forest of Monterey"); likewise, wearied travelers in "The Summer Camp" found refuge under a remote stand of oaks "where noises never came/ From the far world of battle and toil;/ Where God looks down and sends no thunderbolt/ To smite a human wrong, for all is good." Taylor praises the beauty and wholesomeness of the physical body in "The Bath," a poem sounding very much like Whitman: the clothes, "fetters of the falser life,--Weeds, that conceal the statue's form!" are thrown off and the bather stands naked and exulting beside the sea.

I stand a spirit newly-born,  
 White-limbed and pure, and strong, and fair;  
 . . . . .  
 But leave to me this brief escape  
 To simple manhood, pure and free--  
 A child of God, in God's own shape,  
 Between the land and sea!

Taylor was a good "landscape poet," much as he later tried to rise above that fact. With the practised eye of a world traveler and reporter, he could paint in words beautiful scenes from all over the world. He gave his readers a view of the mountain caverns of California:

Of camps by starlight in the columned vault  
 Of sycamores and the red, dancing fires  
 That build a leafy arch, efface and build,  
 And sink at last, to let the stars peep through;  
 Of canons grown with pine and folded deep  
 In golden mountain-sides.

("The Summer Camp")

They could go mountain climbing with a group of robust young Norwegians:

They set themselves to climb the stubborn fell  
 By stony stairs that left the fields below,  
 And ceased, far up, against the nearer blue.  
 But lightly sprang the maids; and where the slides  
 Of ice ground smooth the slanting planes of rock,  
 Strong arms drew up and firm feet steadied theirs.  
 Here lent the juniper a prickly hand,  
 And there they grasped the heather's frowsy hair,  
 While jest and banter made the giddy verge  
 Secure as orchard-turf; and none but showed  
 The falcon's eye that guides the hunter's foot,  
 Till o'er their flushed and breathless faces struck  
 The colder ether; on the crest they stood,  
 And sheltered vale and ever-winding fiord  
 Sand into gulfs of shadow, while afar  
 To eastward many a gleaming tooth of snow  
 Cut the full round of sky.

(Lars, Book I)

They could see and listen to an Oriental waterfall.

A silver javelin which the hills  
Have hurled upon the plain below,  
The fleetest of the Pharpar's rills,  
Beneath me shoots in flashing flow.

I hear the never-ending laugh  
Of jostling waves that come and go,  
And suck the bubbling pipe, and quaff  
The sherbet cooled in mountain snow.  
("An Oriental Idyl")

Like the listeners in his lecture halls, Taylor's readers could visualize the beauty of faraway, sometimes exotic, places. Sensuous delight in the surface of the earth did not stir the intellect or dilate the soul to the satisfaction of nineteenth-century elitist standards; it did not organize concrete materials so as to offer the reader fresh and penetrating insight into the complexity of life as demanded by the New Critics. But it did serve to stimulate the imaginations of hundreds of homebound Americans in the nineteenth century when travel was limited, and little entertainment was available to break the monotony of the workaday world.

Taylor, however, was not at all content with poetry that merely described objective materials. As his poetic powers developed,

Some unsubdued desire began to ask:  
"How shall these soulless images be warmed?  
Or life be learned from matter uninformed?"  
(The Picture of St. John, Book III, lxiv)

Egon in St. John disciplined his artistry by painting sunsets and the "azure-emerald dye" of the peacocks's neck but yearned "to rise above/ The conquered matter" and "climb to passion and supernal

glow/ Of Heaven's beatitude" which he saw typified in the loveliness of his own son--whom he longed to paint as St. John. Taylor, likewise, attempted to rise to the higher levels of art, to write poetry that had intellectual and spiritual significance, and not just sensuous beauty.

A group of three Home Pastorals (1875) exemplify a transitional stage between lower poetry of the earth and the loftier, more "sublime" poetry that Taylor hoped finally to write. The pastorals contain, of course, a great deal of concrete description of the landscape in different seasons. A boy is thrilled by the first signs of spring in "May":

When on banks that slope to the south the saxifrage wakens,  
When, beside the dentils of frost that cornice the road-side,  
Weeds are a premise, and woods betray the trailing arbutus.

Finally, "the young leaf pushes its velvet/ Out of the sheath" and "the stubbornest sprays [begin] to burgeon." In "August" the air is dead and still and

Over the tasselled corn, and fields of the twice-blossomed clover,  
Dimly the hills recede in the reek of the colorless hazes.

"November" is introduced with a memorable image:

Wrapped in his sad-colored cloak, the Day, like a Puritan, standeth  
Stern in the joyless fields, rebuking the lingering color.

In the pastorals<sup>3</sup> Taylor continued to use his skills in description of the concrete, but only as a background for the philosophical burden of the poems. "May-Time" repeats the youthful cry for the free,

unfettered, organic growth of the child whose development should not be stunted by his environment. Early in life Taylor had chafed at the limitations imposed on him by the farm and Quaker background of his family. He had himself sought "a wider heritage . . . a new disenthralment," but had finally discovered after traveling the earth that, as the poem tells us, it is better to possess one home fully and intimately than to know many places superficially. "August," too, evidences the poet's resolution of a problem that had disturbed him in youth. He had found the Quaker sternness unbearable and had struggled to allow his poetic love of beauty and joy in life to express itself.

Orderly, moral, are they,--at least, in the sense  
     of suppression;  
 Given to preaching of rules, inflexible outlines  
     of duty;  
 Seeing the sternness of life, but, alas! overlooking  
     its graces. . . .  
 They . . .  
 Stand aghast at my dream of the sun, and the sound, and  
     the splendor.  
 Mine it is, and remains, resenting the threat of  
     suppression.

But in this poem again the speaker has arrived at a point of reconciliation with his fate. Different as he is from his neighbors he is able to assert: "cradled among them, I know them and love them." And the descent of the August evening shows him a new way to appreciate these people. The dew-fall of the evening makes life "fresher and sweeter" and "the soul of the landscape breath[es] of justified rest" after the hot day, illustrating the "peace developed by patience." The speaker is lured "to feel the exquisite senses that

come from denial." What began as a relatively simple descriptive poem thus concludes with a subtle discussion of the elusiveness of Beauty and the paradox that she is most intensely realized when denied or unattained.

Sharper passion of Beauty never fulfilled in external  
Forms or conditions, but always a fugitive has-been or may-be.

"November" proves the sources of faith and doubt and, like the others, is an attempt to integrate philosophical considerations into a landscape poem.

Taylor felt that his poetry was successfully rising into loftier regions; besides rhythmical beauty and sensuous description, the poems were beginning to include significant content. But with each advance in intellectual complexity he lost readers. The Home Pastorals were praised by Holmes and Longfellow, but there is no evidence that they were read by many besides the poets and a few reviewers--who accused Taylor of imitating "Locksley Hall" and Tupper (heaven forbid!).<sup>4</sup> The unpractised reader would not have wanted to take the time to study the long-lined, relatively dense pastorals or to extract patiently the denials and contrasting affirmations in the poems.

The loftiest conceptions of all, and the most far removed from the intellectual interests and capabilities of the average man, Taylor handled in The Masque of the Gods and Prince Deukalion. Marie Hansen-Taylor called the Masque "a concordant prelude to the larger and more important work," the Masque seeming "to strike the opening

chords" while Prince Deukalion "sets in full-toned, and with orchestral power sweeps through its growing centuries." Two other of Mrs. Taylor's comments are pertinent here. The Masque was different from anything the poet had written and "touched upon a much higher and loftier theme than had been chosen by him before." The drama marked the newly ripened intellectual development of the poet, but "with this first of his dramas he ceased to sing to his old audiences:-- he now sang to himself and to the few who were able to understand him."<sup>5</sup> The transcendental subject of the two dramas--the development of man's conception of God and his apprehension of the Divine All immanent in the universe--demanded greater intellectual perspicacity and effort on the part of the reader than had the early narratives and descriptive poems.

Now, at this point the bulk of Taylor's work had been (in keeping with contemporary expectations of intelligibility) within easy enough grasp of the reader. As Stedman noted, his poetry was simple, direct, obvious rather than suggestive.<sup>6</sup> Taylor rejected obscurity in poems, remarking, for example, along with other critics, that the basis of Browning's Sordello was perplexity and not profundity.<sup>7</sup> The simplicity and directness of the early work assisted its popularity. In the religious dramas, on the other hand, the subject itself was so complex and subtle that direct statement was no longer adequate. A metaphysical vision of the universe with its source in a Deity only partially known but someday to be fully understood; and the history of man's expanding apprehension of the Deity and thus of his own power since God is to be found within as well



as without--the comprehensiveness of this subject required abstraction, suggestion, symbolism, and "indirections." Both works are full of classical and Biblical references that would elude the relatively unschooled.

In the Masque, historical names for the Deity are used as symbols which a common reader would have been hard put to understand. Taylor's central idea in the Masque is that man's conception of God evolves and progresses as his own mental and spiritual capabilities increase. Thus, Odin, Baal, Manito were "colossal reflections of human powers and passions"--strength, sex, and fierceness--"mixed with the dread inspired by unknown forces of nature." When men conceived of Order, Beauty, Law they deified the principles: Jove, Apollo, Elohim. Out of Persian culture developed the conceptions of Good and Evil, and parallel deities, Ormuzd and Ahriman. Emmanuel, most recent to be conceived and deified by the human mind, is Divine Love. The Masque is not really a drama, as much as an abstract, philosophical treatise, the concept of which would have been too "lofty" for most pragmatic nineteenth-century Americans.

In Prince Deukalion the events leading up to the day of "larger faith and charity" and the apocalyptic vision itself are more fully and lyrically developed than in the Masque. The bare abstraction "Man" from the Masque has now been partitioned into (1) Pyrrha, the female who enjoyed respectability in ancient Egypt and who is struggling toward liberation in the new age; (2) Deukalion, the male who in nineteenth-century fashion is evolving toward perfectability; (3) Prometheus, representing the will, aspiration,

and genius in men and their refusal to be suppliant; (4) Epimetheus, the ability of men to perceive the past and thus gain self-knowledge and an "awakened soul." Medusa, apparently a dazzling beauty but really the Gorgon who turned men into stone, is the symbol for the Catholic Church, and Calchas, represents Protestantism during the nineteenth century. Both exact obedience from man and force him into a rigidly narrow way of life, causing him to fear becoming "proud" or "vainglorious" and thus to be the root of his own stunted growth. Deukalion accuses Calchas of controlling men so as to keep them "puppets lest they grow to Gods!" Deukalion, having experienced a mystical vision, is confident of his own immortality and of the fact that men will discover the Deity, not by obeying, but by seeking to "know."

The final act of the drama is an apocalyptic vision of a world approaching perfection. Urania, symbol for science, who helped liberate man from the tyranny of Medusa and Calchas, must now in turn be challenged by man. Agathon, a child of the golden age, disputes her claim to be the ultimate truth and power. "Almighty Love, lord of intelligence" is the ultimately powerful force in the universe. Urania's claim that her "law" will exist after love and intelligence have died prompts Agathon's defense of immortality of the human spirit:

Proven by its need!--  
 By fates so large no fortune can fulfill;  
 By wrong no earthly justice can atone;  
 By promises of love that keep love pure;  
 etc.

This cursory summary is no doubt unjust to a work which is highly imaginative and beautifully wrought. Smyth noted that the metrical variety alone makes it "one of the notable poems of America," and Richmond Beatty praised the "high significance" of the content. The work is reminiscent of Shelley's Prometheus Unbound. Mrs. Taylor noted that at the time of publication (1877) "the intellectual atmosphere was pervaded with thought akin to that expressed in this work." A study of the two dramas by Shelley and Taylor against this background would help determine how successful Taylor was in writing poetry at the highest level.<sup>8</sup> Whether Taylor achieved it is not the central question here. Prince Deukalion does represent some of the qualities of high poetry: its subject is lofty, inspiring; it stimulates the intellect and imagination; it uses symbol and allusion to suggest concepts that are highly abstract. It was not popular because it could not have been understood by readers of blunt imagination, limited intellectual capacity, or limited training in the use of suggestive literary technique.

Most critics would agree that a poem about the immortality of the soul, that inspires man to rise up to his full humanity, is probably a greater work of art than a poem about a palm tree. But the existence of a great poem read by a few people does not prove that a small poem read by many has no worth at all. "The Arab to the Palm" was one of Taylor's most popular lyrics.

Brooks and Warren would have had great fun ridiculing this poem about an Arab who, next to his girl and his horse, loves the palm tree and who boasts that no other poet in the tribe can sing

about it as divinely as he can. If he were a king he would build a palm tree replica of gold, silver, and precious gems, a shrine where poets would sing new praises to the palm day and night, none of the hymns equaling his own of course.

But then paraphrases of most poems sound ridiculous. In the context of the poem's music and imagery, the Arab's descriptions of the palm tree become a lovely fantasy, a daydream to be sure but a harmless one, for some homebound American reader enjoying a moment of vicarious exploration of places and persons faraway. The sensuous detail yields vivid colors, shapes, movements for his mind's eye. The palace palm would have "a shaft of silver, burnished bright,/ And leaves of beryl and malachite;/ With spikes of golden bloom ablaze,/ And fruits of topaz and chrysoprase." The stem of the living palm is more slender than "the marble minarets that begem/ Cairo's citadel-diadem." Lifted arms of dancing girls suggest the graceful sway of the palm.

Here the reader's imagination is titillated by suggestions of love and passion in the mysterious East.

[The palm] lifts his leaves in the sunbeam's glance  
As the Almeh's lift their arms in dance,--

A slumberous motion, a passionate sign,  
That works in the cells of the blood like wine.

In the next couplet the palm is no longer like a female dancer but a male lover, an alternation that Brooks and Warren would have found inexcusable in a good poem, but which would not jar a pleasant fantasy in the mind of the ordinary reader. The palm becomes a

symbol for a type of lover--patient, persevering, and tender.

Eternally separated from his beloved, the palm "breathes his longing in fervid sighs," and by means of the warm south-winds "the breath of his passion" finally reaches her.

The Arab adores the palm because it is a "Tree of Love." And throughout the poem, the intense heat and dryness of a climate extremely different from that of the reader ("The sun may flame and the sands may stir") suggest another reason that an Arab might regard a palm tree with such reverence as to want to erect a shrine. Sensuous, exotic, fascinating, easy to understand--as a momentary diversion the poem performed a valid, if low-level function.

NOTES--CHAPTER VIII

<sup>1</sup>Smyth, Bayard Taylor, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup>Beatty, Bayard Taylor: Laureate of the Gilded Age, pp. 178-79.

<sup>3</sup>The dactylic hexameters in these poems illustrate again the wide variety of poetic forms Taylor attempted.

<sup>4</sup>Life, II, 675.

<sup>5</sup>Dramatic Works of Bayard Taylor, pp. 331-32.

<sup>6</sup>Stedman, p. 411.

<sup>7</sup>Beatty, p. 302. Beatty quotes Taylor: "Wasn't it the Swedish poet, Tegner, who said, 'The obscurely uttered is the obscurely thought'?"

<sup>8</sup>Taylor's dramatic works were recently reprinted (New York: AMS Press, 1969) and Prince Deukalion might well attract a sympathetic audience among current romantic proponents of natural development of the free, uninhibited human personality--the women's liberationists and anti-authoritarians in education and child-rearing.

## CHAPTER IX

### BAYARD TAYLOR: HEART AND FEELING

#### IN POPULAR POETRY

Taylor's early poems, then, illustrate one important quality of popular poetry; they were easy enough for ordinary readers. Not that they were didactic--preaching lessons explicitly. In fact, in contrast with the charge of didacticism often made against popular poems, Taylor's poetry became increasingly didactic as it reached the higher levels: the early lyrics sought mainly to gratify the senses, but a main purpose of Prince Deukalion was to teach men about a way of viewing God that liberated the human spirit. Again, Taylor did not write poetry by formula; he consistently exercised himself in forms and modes "unlike anything" he'd tried before. Neither could he be condemned for use of "stereotype": an Arab defended the authenticity of Hassan's speech to his mare; and when the Atlantic challenged the dramatic truth of "Shekh Ahnaf's Letter from Baghdad," Taylor wrote to William D. Howells: "The letter is genuine; that is, such a letter describing just such a scene, was written from Bagdad by a Morocco Moslem; and I should not much wonder if the very things that might seem out of keeping with the character to a reader, were

the things which the Shekh did write." Taylor had tried to reproduce the tone and manner of the letter which seemed especially Moslem.<sup>1</sup>

The easy accessibility of the early poems derived from the use of concrete materials readily visualized by most people; the later poetry used symbols for complex metaphysical abstractions which were too intellectually demanding for ordinary readers. Deriving from the concrete-sensual/abstract-thoughtful dichotomy, there is another chief characteristic of popular poetry, a quality widely applauded by nineteenth-century critics and amply illustrated in Taylor's early poems: that is, the power of reaching the heart of the reader. The early poems "throb with the pulse of humanity"; they reflect "The warm red blood that beats in hearts of men."

Two groups of these "poems of feeling" invite examination. The sexual love poems, of course, had great appeal; and bearing in mind twentieth-century critical caution about excessive feeling, we ought to try to determine whether poems about married love, the home, death and grief were sentimental.

In the early years Taylor's sensibility struggled to free itself from the restrictions of his stern Pennsylvania Quaker background. In 1849 he returned from the wild, almost savage life of California with a "new sense of a vast energy in nature and humanity"<sup>2</sup> which broke free in his poetry. The new freedom was marked by the sensuous, liquid, passionate "Hylas" which has been compared to Landor's Hamadryad and acclaimed as the best of Taylor's classical pieces.

The poem reveals the beauty of the human body.



Naked, save one light robe that from his shoulder  
 Hung to his knee, the youthful flush revealing  
 Of warm, white limbs, half-nerved with coming manhood,  
 Yet fair and smooth with tenderness of beauty.

. . . . .  
 Downward, the supple lines had less of softness:  
 His back was like a god's; his loins were moulded  
 As if some pulse of power began to waken.

And sexual suggestions pervade the poem as the Naiads proceed to force "Hylas" to their caves at the bottom of the Scamander. With "glimmering bosoms"; cold, smooth arms; and tangling swell of loose purple hair; they trap Hylas in their clammy embraces and pull him below the water's surface.

"We have thee now--we hold thy beauty prisoned;  
 Oh, come with us beneath the emerald waters!  
 We have no love: we have thee, rosy Hylas.  
 Oh, love us, who shall nevermore release thee:  
 Love us, whose milky arms will be thy cradle  
 Far down on the untroubled sands of ocean,  
 Where now we bear thee, clasped in our embraces."

"Hylas" is the first of Taylor's predominantly sensual pieces. Although the sexual experience is not as explicitly drawn here as in some of his later poems, "Hylas" is significant in revealing that Taylor was finding a way to write about sex without offending delicate sensibilities of the day.

The early part of the poem is a celebration of the sacredness and "joy of youthful feeling." In contrast the poem closes with the intense sorrow of Hêracles, mourning the loss of his beloved young friend. Hylas' pleas to Apollo, god of warmth and life, go unheeded:

The ripples hid his forehead,  
 And last, the thick, bright curls a moment floated,  
 So warm and silky that the stream upbore them,  
 Closing reluctant, as he sank forever.

The poem closes with the mournful cries of Hêracles.

And when he called, expectant, "Hylas! Hylas!"  
 The empty echoes made him answer,--"Hylas!"

The poem was acceptable because it is not really about sex but about the tragic waste of young life.

Like Ella Wheeler's Poems of Passion (1883), Taylor's Poems of the Orient (1854) sold at least partly because it appealed to a genteel public whose imagination was starved for literature about sex. There were not many poems about sexual desire in the volume (poems on religious subjects outnumbering them more than two to one), but the passion poems became the most popular. "The Bedouin Love Song" has been by far Taylor's most popular poem: it was set to stirring music and sung by college glee clubs earlier in this century; it appeared in all the anthologies in which Taylor was represented, often being the only poem of his included; Smyth called it "a distinct addition to the imperishable things of our literature."

The accomplishment of the poem is a sublimation of sexual desire in the religion-of-love tradition: the lover comes out of the desert "on a stallion shod with fire"; he sighs, burns in fever, and faints beneath his lady's window; he begs her to open the door of her heart and her room to let him teach her with his kisses that his love is eternal--as the refrain proclaims.

## BEDOUIN SONG.

From the Desert I come to thee  
 On a stallion shod with fire;  
 And the winds are left behind  
 In the speed of my desire.  
 Under thy window I stand,  
 And the midnight hears my cry:  
 I love thee, I love but thee,  
 With a love that shall not die  
     Till the sun grows cold,  
     And the stars are old,  
     And the leaves of the Judgment  
         Book unfold!

Look from thy window and see  
 My passion and my pain;  
 I lie on the sands below,  
 And I faint in thy disdain.  
 Let the night-winds touch thy brow  
 With the heat of my burning sigh,  
 And melt thee to hear the vow  
 Of a love that shall not die  
     Till the sun grows cold,  
     And the stars are old,  
     And the leaves of the Judgment  
         Book unfold!

My steps are nightly driven,  
 By the fever in my breast,  
 To hear from thy lattice breathed  
 The word that shall give me rest.  
 Open the door of thy heart,  
 And open thy chamber door,  
 And my kisses shall teach thy lips  
 The love that shall fade no more  
     Till the sun grows cold,  
     And the stars are old,  
     And the leaves of the Judgment  
         Book unfold!

Here we have Shelley's "The Indian Serenade" with an  
 Oriental flavor. Twentieth-century readers would no doubt find the  
 poems of both Shelley and Taylor exaggerated, unconvincing, probably  
 laughable. But the charge of "sentimentality" is not really the

explanation. Although the poets don't supply the context for the experience (the Brooks and Warren criticism of Shelley's poem), the lives of thousands of human readers have supplied context enough. The definition of sentimentality as "display of more emotion than the situation warrants" is a troublesome one. Men and women do fall passionately in love in real life; sexual desire is real and the tendency to sublimate the desire and to idealize the beauty and powerful attractiveness of the loved person is authentic. The thousands of readers who responded to Taylor's "Bedouin Song" must have recognized the authenticity of the "sweet thrill" experience.

It is difficult to read "Bedouin Song" now without amusement, but this is not because there is too much feeling in the poem or an inaccurate account of feeling, but because tastes in technique have changed. It is no longer fashionable to declare sexual passion directly and in "pretty" language. Understatement and methods of suggestion are the poetic techniques in vogue for conveying intense emotion.

A more helpful definition of sentimentality for our purposes is Abraham Kaplan's comment that sentimentality is the exploitation of feeling--in sentimental poetry the reader is reminded of feelings he's had but is offered no means of understanding the emotional experience more deeply or of bringing it under control. In the nineteenth century, lower-level poetry was expected to touch the heart, remind the reader of emotional feeling. Deeper understanding, intellectual perception of the emotion was a function of higher-level

poetry. Reminding one of feeling was not yet seen as exploitation, and the "Bedouin Song" evidently served as a respectable aesthetic outlet for sexual feeling.

In some of Taylor's love poems, the desire is intense and vividly expressed, but overcome just in time, a victory that leaves the almost-victimized lover with a triumphant sense of soul-satisfaction. The narrator commands the "Daughter of Egypt" to veil her eyes because they are "altars of desire" fed an "unholy light" from "natures gone astray/ In passion and in night." They are stars "of Beauty and of Sin" that would lure him to destruction the way beacons lure a "fascinated bark" to ruin. She must "veil their glow" before his "struggling manhood" drowns in the black waves of her hair. "Charmian" is a "daughter of the sun" who holds the "keys of passion" and through "powerful sorcery" seeks to win the struggling soul of the narrator. But the man resists successfully.

Strong Goddess of Desire, I will not be  
One of the myriad slaves thou callest thine,  
To cast my manhood's crown of royalty  
Before thy dangerous beauty: I am free!

The secret of success in Taylor's love poems seems to have been that they expressed in a variety of acceptable ways what nobody could acknowledge publicly but what everybody wanted to read about--sex. A lover could experience all the thrills of sexual desire and then abstain. Or he could indulge, as long as he experienced the proper remorse on the following day; in fact, in "The Temptation of Hassan Ben Khaled" the sex act constituted a "fortunate fall" for

the protagonist. Before succumbing Hassan had self-righteously cursed all sinners in his songs in the streets of Cairo. Then all in one night he was overcome by pride and led to indulge in food, music, wine, and a lute-playing maiden.

Dizzy with passion, in mine ears the blood  
 Tingled and hummed in tumultuous flood,  
 Until from deep to deep I seemed to fall,  
 Like him, who from El Sirat's hair-drawn wall  
 Plunges to endless gulfs. In broken gleams  
 Glimmered the things I saw, so mixed with dreams  
 The vain confusion blinded every sense,  
 And knowledge left me.

Hassan awoke the next morning with a double pang in his heart--"the bitter smart/ Of evil knowledge, and the unhealthy lust/ Of sinful pleasure." But he threw dust on his own head to bury his pride, and the people cried out to him:

'May God reward thee, Hassan! Truly, thou,  
 Whom men have honored, addest to thy brow  
 The crowning lustre of Humility.  
 As thou abasest, God exalteth thee!"

Sexual desire was always appropriately disguised in a filmy haze of poetic language. In "Charmian" the looks of the Sorceress

unseal  
 The undisturbed mysteries that press  
 Too deep in nature for the heart to feel  
 Their terror and their loveliness.

The narrator's reaction is further described:

Forced by the magic thrill that runs before  
 Thy slowly-lifted eyes[,]  
 I tremble to the centre of my being  
 Thus to confess the spirit's poise o'erthrown.

Even consummation of the love was sanctioned at least once, the act being veiled of course under the properly euphemistic drapery of language, when Amran and the Shekh's daughter were alone together for the first time.

By Allah! like a bath of flame  
 The seething blood tumultuous came  
 From life's hot centre as I drew  
 Her mouth to mine: our spirits grew  
 Together in one long, long kiss--  
 One swooning, speechless pulse of bliss,  
 That throbbing from the heart's core, met  
 In the united lips. O, yet  
 The eternal sweetness of that draught  
 Renews the thirst with which I quaffed  
 Love's virgin vintage: starry fire  
 Leapt from the twilight of desire,  
 And in the golden dawn of dreams  
 The space grew warm with radiant beams,  
 Which from that kiss streamed o'er a sea  
 Of rapture, in whose bosom we  
 Sank down, and sank eternally.

The remote setting also permitted readers to enjoy these love poems without too much guilty discomfort--all the passion was happening in the conveniently faraway Orient and not just down the street.

But let us examine some of the poems about feelings other than sexual love. Like most American popular poets Taylor sanctified married love and the home in his poems. In The Poet's Journal Ernest returned home with a new wife and infant son to visit the brother Philip who hadn't seen him for ten years. Ernest had left home,

grief-stricken, after the death of his first wife, and when Philip asked about the intervening time, Ernest read from his journal on each of three evenings a series of lyrics which revealed his deep grief and how the passage of time and the arrival of new love helped him to overcome it.

The descriptions of domestic contentment during the evening interludes are quite ordinary, but they are saved from sentimentality by the use of precise detail from the environment. Rain had been predicted on the third day:

We heard the tree-toad trill his piercing note:  
The sound seemed near us, when, on farms remote,  
The supper-horn the scattered workmen hailed:  
Above the roof the eastward-pointing vane  
Stood fixed: and still the wild-dove cooed for rain.

By evening it was raining:

So we,  
Cosily nestled in the library,  
Enjoyed each other and the warmth of home.  
.....  
The roses writhed about  
Their stakes, the tall laburnums to and fro  
Rocked in the gusts, the flowers were beaten low,  
And from his pigmy house the wren looked out  
With dripping bill  
.....  
She with her needle, he with pipe and book,  
My guests contented sat: my cheerful dame,  
Intent on household duties, went and came,  
And I unto my childless bosom took  
The little two-year Arthur, Ernest's child,  
A darling boy  
.....  
Ah me! the father's heart within me woke:  
The child that never was I seemed to hold.



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Readings on the third evening recalled the return to life after the long winter-death of grief and then the guilt about falling in love again. Here the poet does resort to a sentimental resolution of the problem: a vision of Ernest's first wife appeared to reassure him that his new love had her blessing!

"Canst thou forgive me, Angel mine,"  
 I cried, "that Love at last beguiled  
 My heart to build a second shrine?  
 See, still I kneel and weep at thine,  
 But I am human, thou divine!"  
 Still silently she smiled.

Proceeding to relate the moods during the courtship and bridal day, the lyrics recounted commonplaces but were no doubt successful in warming the heart of a reader who enjoyed remembering or dreaming about his own wedding.

Occasionally the warm feeling is supported by a lovely, if not strikingly new, image--the couple had been married one month when the husband expressed the beauty of their union:

I was the crescent; thou  
 The silver phantom of the perfect sphere,  
 Held in its bosom: in one glory now  
 Our lives united shine, and many a year--  
 Not the sweet moon of bridal only--we  
 One lustre, ever at the full, shall be:  
 One pure and rounded light, one planet whole,  
 One life developed, one completed soul!  
 For I in thee, and thou in me,  
 United our cloven halves of destiny.

E. E. Cummings comes to mind: "One's not half two/ Its two are halves of one." The year passes bringing "The Mystic Summer" of pregnancy. The closing poems about the mysteries and joys of

giving birth to a new person are written with honestly intense feeling.

On a wildly windy autumn night, the father waits ('A Watch of the Night'). Taylor succeeds, within the limits of a very small poem, in contrasting the destructive and creative forces of the universe and he uses this contrast to accentuate the anxiety and hope combined in the father's nervous anticipation.

Blow, winds of midnight, blow!  
The clouds, fast-flying, chase  
Across the pallid face  
Of yonder moon, and go!

Sweep, as ye list, the land:  
Hurl down the heavy corn,  
And wrench the trees forlorn  
That struggle where they stand!

Though mighty to destroy,  
To me ye bring no fear;  
But in your voice I hear  
An echo of my joy.

Life--life to me ye bring:  
The precious soul, that takes  
Its life from mine, awakes,  
And soon shall crown me king.

I stand with silent breath,  
To hear one little cry  
Ring through the roaring sky,  
And worlds of Life and Death.

Wake, timid soul, and be!  
Two fathers wait thy birth:  
The love of Heaven and Earth  
Stands by to welcome thee!

I do not contend that this is a high-level poem. It contains no strikingly original lines and does contain several inept ones--"and go!" in line four is a weak attempt to fill in the rhyme scheme, and

the line "And soon will crown me king" is trite. I offer it, however, as an example of a popular poem expressing intense, authentic feeling about an experience with which many people were familiar. It "throbs with the pulse of humanity" without becoming sentimental. An expectant parent does feel a mixture of trepidation and impending joy, and the poem makes us experience this quite forcibly.

The Poet's Journal closes with appropriate redefinition of "The Father," "The Mother," and "The Family." In sanctifying married love and the home, Taylor satisfied his readers' expectations for poetry that reinforced the value of domestic piety. It is true that he failed, in most of these poems, to meet twentieth-century demands that the poem say something new so as to expand the reader's consciousness. But it is also true that he is not often open to the charge of sentimentality--excessive or unwarranted feeling.

The same conclusions apply to the poems of mourning prompted by the death of Taylor's own first wife. Various stages of grief are represented, the moods authentic and powerfully conveyed; the feeling, though intense, is controlled by severely simple language. The initial stupor of grief is expressed:

The thread I held has slipped from out my hand:  
 In this dark labyrinth, without a clew.  
 Groping for guidance, stricken blind, I stand,  
 A helpless child that knows not what to do.  
("Darkness")

Later the moments of excruciating pain set in; the mourner has put his sorrow out of his mind for a blessed moment when suddenly trumpets blare and a funeral march is passing by him in the street.



Then hollow horns took up the fatal strain,  
 Till tongues of fire went flashing through the air,  
 The myriad clamors of a sole despair,  
 The cry of grief that knows its cry is vain.

One poem is reminiscent of the medieval elegy Pearl. Visiting the cemetery the mourner found two roses on the grave of his beloved. The "lurid" eye of a dark, red rose seemed to mock his "calm and chastened grief."

I tore it, stung with sudden pain,  
 And stamped in earth each bloody leaf.

And down upon that trampled grave  
 In recklessness my body cast:  
 "Give back the life I could not save,  
 Or give deliverance from the Past!"  
 ("Church-Yard Roses")

Then a white rose brushed his cheek reminding him of his wife's saintly presence in Heaven and the purity of his own love that had been sanctified by Death.

In "A Symbol" images of a violent thunderstorm represent the wrenchings of a grieving soul on its way back toward recovery:

"Thunder-spasms the waking be/ Into Life from Apathy."

One poem is particularly forceful in accentuating the loneliness of the bereaved and, at the same time, the importance and sanctity of the family circle.

The rain is sobbing on the wold  
 The house is dark, the hearth is cold;  
 . . . . .  
 The winds are moaning, as they pass  
 Through tangled knots of autumn grass  
 . . . . .

I sit alone, I wait in vain  
Some voice to lull this nameless pain;  
But from my neighbor's cottage near  
Come sounds of happy household cheer.

My neighbor at his window stands,  
His youngest baby in his hands;  
The others seek his tender kiss,  
And one sweet woman crowns his bliss.

I look upon the rainy wild:  
I have no wife, I have no child:  
There is no fire upon my hearth,  
And none to love me on the earth.

The picture of the neighbor seems maudlin, although it might be true to the mourner's vision. But the desolate sounds and austere images in the first and last lines of this poem combine into a mood of stark loneliness. Most of the grief poems in Taylor's work succeeded in touching the heart without sentimentality.

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Smyth, Bayard Taylor, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup>Life, I, 167.



## CHAPTER X

### BAYARD TAYLOR: REALITY AND THE LEVELS OF POETRY

One further important difference between popular and elitist poetry is exemplified by three of Taylor's poems: Lars, The Prophet, "The Quaker Widow." Lars (1873) and The Prophet (1874), a pastoral and a tragedy, are both dramatic treatments of religion and love, Lars illustrating nineteenth-century standards of lower-level popular poetry and The Prophet, in contrast, meeting twentieth-century demands that the poet lead the reader toward new awareness and control of reality.

Religious experience was the subject of many of Taylor's poems, from the attempt to express the Hindu myth of the suffusion of the universe with the divinity of love, in "Camadeva" in Poems of the Orient:<sup>1</sup>

All breathing life a newer spirit quaffed,  
A second life, a bliss beyond a name,  
And Death, half-conquered, dropped his idle shaft  
When Camadeva came.

to romantic apocalyptic vision in Prince Deukalion.

In Lars the subject was a conflict between the gentle pacifism of the Quaker faith and the easily aroused savage wrath of the "old Berserker blood" of the Norwegians. The pulse of humanity throbbed in the poem: the rivalry of Lars and Per for raven-haired Brita was tensely drawn and was climaxed by the Norwegian custom of a wrestling match between the rivals who were bare to the waist, hooked together at the beltline, and armed with knives. Lars won the match, but sailed for America soon afterwards in deepest melancholy, not because of remorse for Per's death or fear of revenge by the brother, Thorsten, but because Brita had finally decided that Per was the one she had loved all along. In America Lars made his way to a Quaker farm in Delaware, where he was gradually led toward conversion to the Quaker faith of the Mendenhall family. He later married Ruth Mendenhall and the two returned to Norway as Quaker missionaries.

Lars's new pacifist faith was dramatically tested twice. The Berserker rage returned and almost overcame him when Abner Cloud, a suitor for Ruth Mendenhall, played upon his weaknesses and taunted him about the wild ways of his savage background--"Hast thou ever eaten human flesh?" But through the influence of Ruth and the silent meetings of the Quakers, which were convincingly reproduced in the poem, Lars acquired the "power to subjugate the devil in his heart." The second test was the climax of the poem. Back in Norway Lars was sought out by Thorsten for a blood-revenge match. Lars was stripped and belt-buckled waist to waist with Thorsten, but he refused to fight. It was not cowardice but a dramatic victory for moral courage over violence:



Once more looked Thorsten in those loving eyes,  
 And shrank and shuddered, and grew deadly pale.  
 . . . . .  
 He loosed the clutching belts, and sat him down  
 And hid his face.

Lars is an exciting narrative, full of life and color, and it was fairly popular, especially among Friends in the Philadelphia area. But the resolution of religious and ethical problems is too easy in the poem. Lars's radical conversion from one extreme to the other comes about too quickly and without enough anxious soul-searching to be convincing. Then, too, the poem has the reliably happy ending of popular literature: in Part I, the good-luck brooch Brita's grandmother gave her fell into the sea--an evil omen anticipating the tragedies of her lonely life; at the end of the poem Brita discovered the brooch on the beach and was prompted by this miracle to forgive Lars and to live with Lars and Ruth, who had befriended her--Brita now living out her years as a Quaker woman of "good works." The final lines are lovely and soothing in reassuring the reader that goodness prevails in the universe--thus performing a function respected in the nineteenth century but questioned in the twentieth:

The purpose of their lives  
 Was lifted up, by something over life,  
 To power and service. Though the name of Lars  
 Be never heard, the healing of the world  
 Is in its nameless saints. Each separate star  
 Seems nothing, but a myriad scattered stars  
 Break up the Night, and make it beautiful.

The Prophet is a fascinating drama based on Mormon history. A brief summary of the plot is necessary for our purposes here. David Starr, son of a New England farmer, had a mystical experience and

became convinced (like Joseph Smith) that God intended him to lead a group to the Promised Land in the West. The sect believed in the miraculous renewal of the spiritual gifts bestowed by the Apostles on the early Christians: healing, prophecy, the gift of tongues. The Prophet was an intelligent but naive young man and, having made the fatal error of believing in a literal interpretation of the Biblical text that often ignored its spirit, Starr became vulnerable to easy manipulation by opportunists.

Livia Romney, a wealthy but bored woman of the world, was an early American feminist figure in literature. She refused to be any longer "shamed" by the outside world where men tried to "coddle" her power into weakness. Desiring to be paired equally with a man of exciting intelligence, she spotted Starr speaking to the crowds during the Western migration, and pretending to have received the gift of tongues she attracted his attention. She had a genius for organizing people and making them enjoy what she wanted them to do: she ingratiated herself with Starr and with the people in arranging a crowning ceremony for The Prophet in the new city; in the final scenes she ecstatically led the people in battle against local authorities trying to drive out the sect because of its polygamy--her "counter-plot" had been motivated by love for David but also by the desire to come alive through action and control of other people:

I live at last!  
 . . . I live and move,  
 Bid others live and play the parts I set,  
 Concentrate petty forces to one end  
 Which grandly must succeed or grandly fail,--  
 But either way, I act! The top of life,  
 Methinks, is action, when the field is broad;  
 For power of nature cannot truly be;  
 Till it is proved on others.

Seeing an opportunity for personal power, Nimrod Kraft attached himself to The Prophet in New England. Nimrod engineered the building of the new city Zion so as to control the people by making them comfortable and secure:

we must give them rest,  
Fitting their shoulders to an easy yoke,  
Filling their cribs, and warmly bidding them,  
Till they will rather serve within our fold  
Than rule outside of it.

Later Nimrod convinced David that polygamy was necessary for rapid growth of the sect, and that the women could be persuaded to obedience and self-abnegation in the matter. At about this time, David's own growing passion for Livia Romney encouraged him to overcome his misgivings about polygamy. A few dissenting members of the Council of Twelve, seeing that the congregation was hopelessly baited by the faith and obedience line, planned a counterattack in which Jonas would let out the secret of polygamy and assist outsiders in enforcing marriage laws in Zion. Nimrod bribed Hugh to inform him about the rebellion. The curse of sin was now falling heavily on The Prophet: Nimrod convinced David that Jonas ought to be killed for the good of the sect. David refused to order the execution, but implored God's vengeance on Jonas' head.

Taylor wrote about The Prophet to Osgood and Aldrich in 1873:<sup>2</sup>  
"The poem is a two-edged sword, cutting the fossilized Orthodox to the heart no less than the Mormons." One of the most dynamic speeches of the drama is that of the New England camp-meeting preacher in Act I, in which the sordidness of fire-and-brimstone Christianity is vividly revealed:

Oh, there are more among ye shall be plucked  
 As brands from out the burning! By the hair  
 I'll seize you,--even by the single hair  
 That holds you from the pit! My hands are singed  
 With loosening the Devil's grip on souls;  
 And you, who should strike out with fists and feet,  
 Leave me the fight, the cowards that you are!

When challenged by the preacher, David asserted his own simple faith--  
 to the astonishment of the congregation: "Whether I love Him, and how  
 well, He knows." And later:

For what should I repent? Why pray as these  
 Who cry from secret consciousness of sin?  
 I never let a fault against me stand  
 For day of settlement, then balanced all  
 By pleading bankrupt, only to begin  
 A fresh account. Acceptance, yea, and faith,  
 Are mine already, tenfold more than yours,  
 Who neither ask, nor know what ye should ask.

Taylor also wrote to Osgood and Aldrich: "The plot is the  
 result of years of constant thought; as a piece of literary art the  
 poem will rank vastly higher than 'Lars.'"

Whereas Lars offered the reader simple reassurance of what  
 he already thought he knew, The Prophet invited the reader into an  
 exploration of realistic complexities of human nature. David was a  
 good man who sincerely believed that the Holy Ghost worked within him,  
 but he was a human being, and humans are vulnerable. When he fasted  
 in the wilderness in New England, his first wife Rhoda, out of love  
 and concern, left food in the area, which David believed had been  
 provided by God. In Act III when Rhoda, innocent of its importance  
 to David, revealed her part in supplying the food, David was dumb-  
 founded. The foundations of his faith were knocked from under him





and there was only "hollowness where rock should be." Going to the temple, hoping for a reassuring sign from God, he was deceived again when Livia played organ music duplicating the harmonies he'd "heard" in the original New England vision. And having prayed for God's vengeance, David, completely innocent of Nimrod's murder plans, received the news of Jonas' death as evidence of his own divine power! The reader is not comfortably reassured about the workings of the Holy Spirit in men, but is challenged to reconsider the validity and sources of all religious faith.

Likewise, in The Prophet as opposed to The Poet's Journal or Lars, domestic felicity is not such an easily acquired state. David is initially taken with Rhoda because of her simple faith and complete trust in and love for him--foundations for the blissful marriage expected in nineteenth-century literature. But more successful in mirroring the true complexities of life as demanded by modern readers, The Prophet reveals the unrest and anguish building within David as the limited intellectual and spiritual capacity of Rhoda proves disappointing. The Prophet becomes easy prey for the ingenious Livia Romney whose motives in turn are not simple--she is hungry to be part of the action of the world but she also loves David.

The Prophet was not popular in its own day, even with critics. The realism--of farm life and talk, the camp-meeting, the development of a religious sect, complexities of the human personality, the intricacies of political chicanery inherent in any group effort--was not in keeping with nineteenth-century taste for the beautifully reassuring. But The Prophet is tense with drama, ambiguity, and

complexity which ought to commend it to twentieth-century arbiters of high-level poetry.

"The Quaker Widow," (1860) one of the Pennsylvania ballads and one of Taylor's best poems, can serve here to bring into sharp focus the differences between lower and higher levels of poetry in the nineteenth century and the differences between elitist expectations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The poem is a dramatic monologue in which a Quaker woman reminisces just after the funeral of her husband. A friend, Hannah, listens as she recalls her courtship and the contentment of the married years and reveals how religious faith has enabled her to accept the death of two children and now of her husband.

#### THE QUAKER WIDOW.

##### I.

Thee finds me in the garden, Hannah,--come in! 'T is kind of  
thee  
To wait until the Friends were gone, who came to comfort me.  
The still and quiet company a peace may give, indeed,  
But blessed is the single heart that comes to us at need.

##### II.

Come, sit thee down! Here is the bench where Benjamin would  
sit  
On First-day afternoons in spring, and watch the swallows flit:  
He loved to smell the sprouting box, and hear the pleasant bees  
Go humming round the lilacs and through the apple-trees.

##### III.

I think he loved the spring: not that he cared for flowers:  
most men  
Think such things foolishnes,--but we were first acquainted then,  
One spring: the next he spoke his mind; the third I was his wife,  
And in the spring (it happened so) our children entered life.

## IV.

He was but seventy-five: I did not think to lay him yet  
 In Kennett graveyard, where at Monthly Meeting first we met.  
 The Father's mercy shows in this: 'tis better I should be  
 Picked out to bear the heavy cross--alone in age--than he.

## V.

We've lived together fifty years: it seems but one long day,  
 One quiet Sabbath of the heart, till he was called away;  
 And as we bring from Meeting-time a sweet contentment home,  
 So, Hannah, I have store of peace for all the days to come.

## VI.

I mind (for I can tell thee now) how hard it was to know  
 If I had heard the spirit right, that told me I should go;  
 For father had a deep concern upon his mind that day,  
 But mother spoke for Benjamin,--she knew what best to say.

## VII.

Then she was still: they sat awhile: at last she spoke again,  
 "The Lord incline thee to the right!" and "Thou shalt have  
     him, Jane!"  
 My father said. I cried. Indeed, 'twas not the least of shocks,  
 For Benjamin was Hicksite, and father Orthodox.

## VIII.

I thought of this ten years ago, when daughter Ruth we lost:  
 Her husband's of the world, and yet I could not see her crossed.  
 She wears, thee knows, the gayest gowns, she hears a hireling  
     priest--  
 Ah, dear! the cross was ours: her life's a happy one, at least.

## IX.

Perhaps she'll wear a plainer dress when she's as old as I,--  
 Would thee believe it, Hannah? once I felt temptation nigh!  
 My wedding-gown was ashen silk, too simple for my taste:  
 I wanted lace around the neck, and a ribbon at the waist.

## X.

How strange it seemed to sit with him upon the women's side!  
 I did not dare to lift my eyes: I felt more fear than pride,  
 Till, "in the presence of the Lord," he said, and then there came  
 A holy strength upon my heart, and I could say the same.

## XI.

I used to blush when he came near, but then I showed no sign;  
 With all the meeting looking on, I held his hand in mind.  
 It seemed my bashfulness was gone, now I was his for life:  
 Thee knows the feeling, Hannah,--thee, too, hast been a wife.

## XII.

As home we rode, I saw no fields look half so green as ours;  
 The woods were coming into leaf, the meadows full of flowers;  
 The neighbors met us in the lane, and every face was kind,--  
 'Tis strange how lively everything comes back upon my mind.

## XIII.

I see, as plain as thee sits there, the wedding-dinner spread:  
 At our own table we were guests, with father at the head,  
 And Dinah Passmore helped us both,--'twas she stood up with me,  
 And Abner Jones with Benjamin,--and now they're gone, all three!

## XIV.

It is not right to wish for death; the Lord disposes best.  
 His Spirit comes to quiet hearts, and fits them for His rest;  
 And that He halved our little flock was merciful, I see:  
 For Benjamin has two in heaven, and two are left with me.

## XV.

Eusebius never cared to farm,--'twas not his call, in truth,  
 And I must rent the dear old place, and go to daughter Ruth.  
 Thee'll say her ways are not like mine,--young people now-a-days  
 Have fallen sadly off, I think, from all the good old ways.

## XVI.

But Ruth is still a Friend at heart; she keeps the simple tongue,  
 The cheerful, kindly nature we loved when she was young;  
 And it was brought upon my mind, remembering her, of late,  
 That we on dress and outward things perhaps lay too much weight.

## XVII.

I once heard Jesse Kersey say, a spirit clothed with grace,  
 And pure, almost, as angels are, may have a homely face.  
 And dress may be of less account: the Lord will look within:  
 The soul it is that testifies of righteousness or sin.

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## XVIII.

Thee must n't be too hard on Ruth: she's anxious I should go,  
 And she will do her duty as a daughter should, I know.  
 'Tis hard to change so late in life, but we must be resigned:  
 The Lord looks down contentedly upon a willing mind.

In the nineteenth century "The Quaker Widow" was not considered a high-level poem. It was not "lofty" in subject or "sublime" in tone. Its poet was not smiting the chords rudely and hard with hammer and mace. It did not evidence complex imagery, obscure allusion, the "finest wit," the most sophisticated wisdom of elitist art. It did not dilate the soul in some mystical way. Taylor did not rank the ballads, pastorals, or narratives among his highest poetic achievements.

"The Quaker Widow" did, however, satisfy the major requirements for a lower-level poem--and in doing so worked to fulfill the functions highly valued by most nineteenth-century critics. There is tenderness rather than grandeur. The poem is clear and intelligible to average readers and deals quietly and soothingly with concerns in the lives of ordinary people: enjoyment of the simple pleasures of nature--flitting swallows, bees humming around the lilac and apple trees; anxiety about a father's approval of marriage to a man who was not Orthodox; exhilaration of a young girl upon becoming a wife; the death of two children and the trial of watching two others develop ways of life different from those of their parents. It reaffirms the values of marriage, home, family, neighborly companionship, and religious faith. The woman's courageous acceptance of her husband's death and her daughter's divergence from the strict Quaker ways succeeds in "touching the heart"

and teaching moral truth at the same time: God "looks down contentedly upon a willing mind" and faith in Him will result in the strength to accept whatever happens in one's life.

Twentieth-century critics have not been interested in levels of poetry. A poem has value or it does not. Rather than classifying poems into levels and admitting different values and functions at each, modern critics regard poems as "good" or "bad." But contrary to nineteenth-century distinctions, moderns do not require that a piece deal with the lofty and sublime in order to be a good poem. It is not the loftiness of the subject matter but the approximation to truth and complexity of experience that counts. A good poem may well deal with concerns of everyday life and common people. Its subject may be the grief and reconciliation of an ordinary Quaker woman if the poem succeeds in broadening or deepening the reader's awareness of life. Thus, a simple, heartfelt ballad that Taylor relegated to the lower levels of his work, may be accepted as an elitist poem by modern standards.

It seems to me that "The Quaker Widow" almost makes it as a good poem by modern standards, and that to understand its particular failure is to understand an important quality of high art.

First, the successful aspects of the poem. It conveys feeling without becoming sentimental. The widow does not wallow in emotional display of grief; in fact, the firm control of feeling intensifies the effect of the poem. The widow's loss is not explicit but suggested--through her gratitude for having one neighbor to hear her out; through her memories of a contented marriage;

through the change in life style now facing her. Our sense of her loneliness is intensified in stanza XIII, for example, when we learn that the three other members of her wedding party are all now dead.

The form of the poem enhances the subject, the long hexameter line allowing for the thoughtful recollections and deliberations of the widow, the simple aabb rhyme scheme reinforcing the simplicity of the Quaker ways and the steadfastness of a life firmly anchored in religious faith.

Several touches of psychological realism yield significant insight about the nature of life. Stanza III pinpoints the paradoxical need of men to appear hardened to the gentle beauty of the world even when they are deeply sensitive to life and love. Stanza XII recalls that no fields look so green as our own on a blissful day. The source of the widow's consolation is forcefully suggested:

And as we bring from Meeting-time a sweet contentment home,  
So, Hannah, I have store of peace for all the days to come.

The greatest achievement of "The Quaker Widow" by twentieth-century standards is that instead of exploiting feeling, instead of reminding the reader of grief and leaving him where he started, the poem reveals a way to control feeling. Instead of offering the "escape" of fantasy, the poem exhibits a convincing character who has met unpleasant reality, come to terms with it, and transcended it. ] The widow is not invulnerable. She has wished for death herself (stanza XIV), but has been aided by God's spirit to endure patiently. She has been disturbed by Ruth's having married a man of a different sect ("she hears a hireling priest") and by her gay



dress and worldly life: "young people now-a-days/ Have fallen sadly off, I think, from all the good old ways." But the widow is in process of convincing herself to overlook what cannot be helped: she emphasizes that Ruth is "still a Friend at heart"; she "keeps the simple tongue," is still kindly and cheerful, and will act responsibly toward her mother. In fact, the most admirable characteristic of the old woman is not so much her courage in enduring alone after fifty years of marriage as the fact that she has not let strict laws of Quakerism squelch her sensitivity for Life and Goodness beneath the surfaces:

I once heard Jesse Kersey say, a spirit clothed with grace,  
And pure, almost, as angels are, may have a homely face.  
And dress may be of less account: the Lord will look within:  
The soul it is that testifies of righteousness or sin.

And perhaps the most winning detail of all--the widow is able to recall the "temptations" of her own girlhood (stanza IX).

But in spite of all its strengths, the poem lacks one important ingredient of the highest poetry. It is formless; that is, the poem does not require the reader "to displace on the object the structure of his own experience of the object," as Kaplan puts it. The poem does not involve the reader in the transformations undergone by the widow. The widow has been so desolate as to wish for death herself but by the time she mentions it to Hannah she has already worked out her salvation--we have had no part in her emotional struggle. Likewise, she has been disturbed by Ruth's way of life and by having now to turn to her daughter, but by the

time we overhear the widow, her reconciliation is completing itself.

In the greatest poetry by contrast--Frost comes to mind, probably because the Quaker talk and rustic ways in Taylor's poem are reminiscent of Frost's representations of the speech and behavior of New England farmers--something is left unresolved. In "Home Burial" the bereaved parents are severely agitated because neither understands that emotional reactions, to death of a child for example, are different in men and women. The wife has misinterpreted the husband's practical acceptance of the death as hardened unconcern for the child, and she refuses to share her grief with him because she is convinced that he is incapable of her deep feeling. The husband is completely frustrated by her refusal both to let him understand her and to let him grieve in his own way: "A man can't speak of his own child that's dead." The poem ends with the wife leaving in desperation and the husband threatening to bring her back by force. They are emotionally spent, but neither has gained in understanding the other. Resolution is left up to the reader. It is the reader who earns new understanding of men and women by having worked through the poem and by having participated in its crisis.

In "The Death of the Hired Man," again, we participate as Mary works to convert Warren to a more tender view of Silas, before it is too late. As the two consider the man, our own insight into the character of a migrant farmhand deepens; we feel Warren beginning to change. But even after he has discovered Silas dead, Warren's

feelings, and our own, are not free from ambivalence. We are left to work out the meaning of the ambivalent feelings for ourselves.

On the other hand, while "The Quaker Widow" is in many respects a good poem by the standards of nineteenth-century lower-level art and twentieth-century elitist art, it does not involve the reader in meeting and transcending reality. We sit by, listening to a woman who has gained control over reality, but the transformations are completed before the poem is presented to us. Its effect on us is lessened because we have not participated in the process.

NOTES--CHAPTER X

<sup>1</sup>Smyth, Bayard Taylor, p. 223.

<sup>2</sup>Life, II, 635.

## CHAPTER XI

### POET OF THE FARM: WILL CARLETON

(1845-1912)

The Michigan school code, according to a recent Michigan educators' newspaper,<sup>1</sup> states that it is the duty of all school teachers to observe "proper and appropriate commemorative exercises" on significant days--including the birthdays of Washington, Lincoln, and Will Carleton (October 21). Although Carleton is unknown today, he was, in the late nineteenth century, Michigan's foremost poet.

Carleton, like Bayard Taylor, made his living in journalism, lecturing, and writing poetry, but unlike Taylor, Carleton chose deliberately to be a "Poet of the Natural Man" and to write for a wide, popular audience. Early in his career he discovered the possibilities of colloquial verse in homely ballad form. Developing his talent in "poetic veins of unworked ore,"<sup>2</sup> he found a way to appeal to a kind of poetic fancy neglected by elitist writers. With the appearance of an idiomatic ballad "Betsey and I Are Out" in 1871, Carleton enjoyed immediately a popularity that lasted throughout his life. In 1887 Frank McAlpine included Carleton in his anthology, Popular Poetic Pearls, and declined to criticize the poetry: "We would rather see an appreciative public continue to admire his works,

in the firm belief that, when his lifework is ended, the unerring critic will rank him among the greatest writers of the present."<sup>3</sup>

When Carleton died in 1912, Harper's Weekly wrote that America had lost

the most popular of her poets and the one whose writings have been more widely read and appreciated than those of any poet since the days of Whittier and Longfellow. There is hardly an English-speaking home in America--it might also be said in the English-speaking world--where "Over the Hill to the Poor-House" and "Betsey and I Are Out" are unknown.<sup>4</sup>

Born in 1845 in Hudson, Michigan and raised among farmers, Carleton "knew the rural Western mind and character and the homely vernacular that went with it."<sup>5</sup> After graduating from Hillsdale College in 1869, he held a series of editorial positions on the staffs of rural newspapers including The Western Rural, an illustrated agricultural and family weekly from Chicago; the Hillsdale Standard; and the Detroit Weekly Tribune. In the same period he was filling frequent requests for poems for The Toledo Blade, Detroit Tribune, Kansas Magazine, and others. Carleton had earned money for college by reading his poems to small audiences in nearby towns, and by the early 70's he was reading on an average of five nights a week in several states and receiving \$75 to \$100 for each lecture-recital.

National fame began with "Betsey and I Are Out" which first appeared in March 1871, in the Toledo Daily Blade and then in newspapers throughout America. After having the poem illustrated and republished for Harper's Weekly in May 1871, S. S. Conant asked Carleton for other ballads of similar originality, rustic character, and truth of feeling. In mid-1871 a series of what became Carleton's

best-known farm ballads appeared in Harper's Weekly: "Out of the Old House Nancy," "Over the Hill to the Poor House" (which still appears in Hazel Felleman's The Best Loved Poems of the American People), and "Gone with a Handsomer Man." These and three later poems--"How Betsey and I Made Up," "Over the Hill from the Poor House," and "The New Church Organ"--became the best known of Carleton's farm ballads, upon which his reputation as a writer of colloquial verse was based.<sup>6</sup>

Benefiting from the Harpers' facilities for woodcuts and steel engravings, Carleton collected the ballads into a book in 1873. By August, 10,000 copies of the illustrated Farm Ballads had been sold. In eighteen months 40,000 copies had been disposed of and Carleton wrote several letters reproaching his publishers for not forwarding additional copies to dealers more promptly. Carleton's biographer, A. E. Corning, wrote: "Possibly no other volume of poems up to that time, unaided by the prestige of a great name, had had a more immediate success." The book was still selling in 1917 when Corning wrote his monograph about Carleton.

In two decades Harpers illustrated and published six volumes of poems by Carleton: Farm Ballads, 1873; Farm Legends, 1875; Farm Festivals, 1881; City Ballads, 1885; City Legends, 1889; City Festivals, 1892. Although all the books were widely distributed throughout the English-speaking world, the "city" volumes were not as well received as those of the farm, and none of the final five volumes ever equalled the popularity of Farm Ballads. In 1887 Frank McAlpine wrote about "Betsey and I Are Out" and "How Betsey and I

Made Up": "These two poems carried the name and fame of the author as on the wings of the wind, and stamped them on every reading mind in the land."<sup>7</sup> Corning nominated "Over the Hill to the Poor House" and "Over the Hill from the Poor House" as Carleton's two "most deservedly popular poems," their appeal deriving from "the human note which runs through every line."<sup>8</sup> There is presently a marker in Hillsdale, Michigan commemorating the spot which inspired Will Carleton to write "Over the Hill to the Poor House," a poem familiar to thousands of Americans at the end of the nineteenth century.

Will Carleton's career illustrates one factor common to all the popular poets studied here: there was a close personal relationship between the poet and his audience. Many new parents named their children after Carleton and several wrote asking him to stand as godfather for an infant. On one occasion a shabbily dressed old lady approached him after an evening lecture asking if she might have his handkerchief because she felt confident that it would support her for a year. Carleton learned later that she had embroidered his name on it and raffled it off for several hundred dollars, enough for a year's sustenance.<sup>9</sup>

Carleton's popularity as a lecturer and elocutionist reveals his particular attraction for non-elitist audiences. In college he had discovered that "several small towns in the country which could not afford expensive lectures wanted and would pay for something to amuse them for an evening; that there existed among these people a class who were tired of burnt-cork and sleight-of-hand shows, and wanted something which professed to be intellectual."<sup>10</sup> Carleton wrote later that his country audiences "had as good hearts and as



healthy brains as could be found in city or university, and [he] always went away in love with [his] audience."

While working for Chicago's The Western Rural, Carleton built a local reputation as a reciter for "Moody's Ragamuffins." Dwight L. Moody, then at the beginning of his evangelical career, would gather large groups of newsboys, bootblacks, and other common workers and entertain them with music and readings. These uncultivated youths were the most critical of audiences, but Carleton so completely captivated them at his first appearance that they would have no one else for several evenings afterwards. They would urge him to recite poem after poem until, exhausted, he would be compelled to escape through a side door.<sup>11</sup>

In an early 1870's letter Carleton wrote of farmers driving ten to twelve miles to hear him and of the streets being lined with teams from the country. Week after week, for over forty years, he traveled throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe, giving a combination of didactic lecture and poetry recital, some of his lecture titles being: "The Chain of Success," "Written and Unwritten Poetry," "Every Man a Poet."<sup>12</sup> In 1884, when he toured Europe as a public lecturer, a recital at Nottingham Institute before 1500 persons produced this notice in The Guardian: "It was a strange and interesting effort, a poetical monologue, judiciously interspersed with delightful recitations of beautiful poems, which went straight to the heart."<sup>13</sup>

Carleton's files of correspondence contained hundreds of letters from readers thanking him for the good his poems had done

them. The "Poorhouse poems" had a particularly wide and beneficent effect: recreant sons and daughters wrote to Carleton that the poems had stimulated them to regard their parents with greater love and veneration; "superintendents of poorhouses . . . reported a decrease in the number of inmates, occasioned by the withdrawal of old people whose children were ashamed of their neglect."<sup>14</sup> "Let the Cloth Be White" (City Ballads) was another poem that inspired people of all classes to write to Carleton. The poem describes Farmer Harrington's resolution, upon returning home from a period of city life, to board groups of poor, city children for monthly periods in his comfortable, wholesome country home where they could get "a breath of God's untainted air," see the daisies and hear the raindrops on the roof, and "carry back, from out our plenteous store,/ Enough to keep [themselves] a fortnight more." Many readers wrote to Carleton that his poem had provoked their increase in charity to the country's disadvantaged children.

Carleton's poems, then, influenced his readers, and the poet was in turn affected by response from his readers. In response to one letter about "Let the Cloth be White" Carleton wrote: "You are too kind in the mention of my poor rhymes. But allow me to say, my dear friend, that while I am proud that you like them, I am more than proud--happy, to know that they have brought you a single pleasure or soothed a single pain. Not your praise, but your sympathy and appreciation, incites me to further efforts." Corning emphasized that Carleton's purpose was not to earn the admiration of a few critics who might praise a master poet for excellence in form or for

obscuring commonplace ideas under surface intricacies of thought,<sup>15</sup> but that Carleton sincerely preferred "to interpret in homely diction the simple annals of the plain people." In the preface to each of his books Carleton expressed gratitude for the "kind and generous" reception of his poems, and made clear that he had written specifically to communicate didactic content and warm feeling to a wide audience of common readers.

It is the hope of the author that his book . . . will rouse your pity of pain, your enjoyment of honest mirth, your hatred of sham and wrong, and your love and adoration of the Resolute and the Good, and their winsome child, the Beautiful.

In which cases he shakes hands with his large and loved constituency, and continues happy.

(Preface, City Ballads)

[The author] takes another opportunity to thank his large family of readers for their continued faithfulness and loyalty, and to assure them that he is still laboring to deserve their respect and affection.

(Preface, City Legends)

This direct, personal contact and mutual understanding between poet and audience is typical of the popular poets studied here.

When unfriendly critics charged Carleton with being more interested in making money than creating art, he responded with a characteristic comment that reveals quite clearly his poetic intention to write for the people:

I want my books to sell, for two reasons. First, so that what good there may be in them may do the greatest possible good; secondly, so that I may retain enough financial independence to enable me to write as I think and feel. The time was when a poet was kept so poor that he could not live, except with the kind permission of some earl or duke; the time has now come when the people are the lords, and they appreciate a writer who says what he thinks and expects them to pay him for his work, just as they would anybody. This is the only sense in which I can be called "a money-making poet."<sup>16</sup>

Acknowledging from the outset, then, that Carleton did not aspire to write for a select few, I want to examine his poems in order to answer the two basic questions in this study: (1) What was the source of the appeal of his poetry? How did it function in satisfying reading tastes of great numbers of ordinary, mostly rural persons? (2) Specifically, how do his poems differ from elitist poems on similar subjects? I want to deal with the first question in this chapter and question 2 in Chapter XII.

Since Carleton's work is not well known today, it seems useful to quote his four most popular ballads before attempting to analyze the appeal of his poetry. "Betsey and I Are Out" and "How Betsey and I Made Up" are quoted in full in Chapter XII. The Poorhouse poems appear below.

#### OVER THE HILL TO THE POOR-HOUSE.

Over the hill to the poor-house I'm trudgin' my weary way--  
 I, a woman of seventy, and only a trifle gray--  
 I, who am smart an' chipper, for all the years I've told.  
 As many another woman that's only half as old.



"OVER THE HILL TO THE POOR-HOUSE, I'M TRUDGIN' MY WEARY WAY."

Over the hill to the poor-house--I can't quite make it clear!  
Over the hill to the poor-house--it seems so horrid queer!  
Many a step I've taken a-toilin' to and fro,  
But this is a sort of journey I never thought to go.

What is the use of heapin' on me a pauper's shame?  
Am I lazy or crazy? am I blind or lame?  
True, I am not so supple, nor yet so awful stout;  
But charity ain't no favor, if one can live without.

I am willin' and anxious an' ready any day  
To work for a decent livin', an' pay my honest way;  
For I can earn my victuals, an' more too, I'll be bound,  
If any body only is willin' to have me round.

Once I was young an' han'some--I was, upon my soul--  
 Once my cheeks was roses, my eyes as black as coal;  
 And I can't remember, in them days, of hearin' people say,  
 For any kind of a reason, that I was in their way.

'Tain't no use of boastin', or talkin' over free,  
 But many a house an' home was open then to me;  
 Many a han'some offer I had from likely men,  
 And nobody ever hinted that I was a burden then.

And when to John I was married, sure he was good and smart,  
 But he and all the neighbors would own I done my part;  
 For life was all before me, an' I was young an' strong,  
 And I worked the best that I could in tryin' to get along.

And so we worked together: and life was hard, but gay,  
 With now and then a baby for to cheer us on our way;  
 Till we had half a dozen, an' all growed clean an' neat,  
 An' went to school like others, an' had enough to eat.

So we worked for the child'rn, and raised 'em every one;  
 Worked for 'em summer and winter, just as we ought to 've done;  
 Only perhaps we humored 'em, which some good folks condemn,  
 But every couple's child'rn's a heap the best to them.

Strange how much we think of our blessed little ones!--  
 I'd have died for my daughters, I'd have died for my sons;  
 And God he made that rule of love; but when we're old and gray,  
 I've noticed it sometimes somehow fails to work the other way.

Strange, another thing: when our boys an' girls was grown,  
 And when, exceptin' Charley, they'd left us there alone;  
 When John he nearer an' nearer come, an' dearer seemed to be,  
 The Lord of Hosts he come one day an' took him away from me.

Still I was bound to struggle, an' never to cringe or fall--  
 Still I worked for Charley, for Charley was now my all;  
 And Charley was pretty good to me, with scarce a word or frown.  
 Till at last he went a-courtin', and brought a wife from town.

She was somewhat dressy, an' hadn't a pleasant smile--  
 She was quite conceity, and carried a heap o' style;  
 But if ever I tried to be friends, I did with her, I know;  
 But she was hard and proud, an' I couldn't make it go.

She had an edication, an' that was good for her;  
 But when she twitted me on mine, 'twas carryin' things too fur;  
 An' I told her once, 'fore company (an' it almost made her sick),  
 That I never swallowed a grammar, or 'et a'rithmetic.

So 'twas only a few days before the thing was done--  
 They was a family of themselves, and I another one;  
 And a very little cottage one family will do,  
 But I never have seen a house that was big enough for two.

An' I never could speak to suit her, never could please her eye,  
 An' it made me independent, an' then I didn't try;  
 But I was terribly staggered, an' felt it like a blow,  
 When Charley turned ag'in me, an' told me I could go.

I went to live with Susan, but Susan's house was small,  
 And she was always a-hintin' how snug it was for us all;  
 And what with her husband's sisters, and what with child'rn three,  
 'Twas easy to discover that there wasn't room for me.

An' then I went to Thomas, the oldest son I've got,  
 For Thomas's buildings'd cover the half of an acre lot;  
 But all the child'rn was on me--I couldn't stand their sauce--  
 And Thomas said I needn't think I was comin' there to boss.

An' then I wrote to Rebecca, my girl who lives out West,  
 And to Isaac, not far from her--some twenty miles at best;  
 And one of 'em said 'twas too warm there for any one so old,  
 And t'other had an opinion the climate was too cold.

So they have shirked and slighted me, an' shifted me about--  
 So they have well-nigh soured me, an' wore my old heart out;  
 But still I've borne up pretty well, an' wasn't much put down,  
 Till Charley went to the poor-master, an' put me on the town.

Over the hill to the poor-house--my child'rn dear, good-by!  
 Many a night I've watched you when only God was nigh;  
 And God'll judge between us; but I will al'ays pray  
 That you shall never suffer the half I do to-day.



"MANY A NIGHT I'VE WATCHED YOU WHEN ONLY GOD WAS NIGH."



## OVER THE HILL FROM THE POOR-HOUSE.

I, who was always counted, they say,  
 Rather a bad stick any way,  
 Splintered all over with dodges and tricks,  
 Known as "the worst of the Deacon's six;"  
 I, the truant, saucy and bold,  
 The one black sheep in my father's fold,  
 "Once on a time," as the stories say,  
 Went over the hill on a winter's day--  
     *Over the hill to the poor-house.*

Tom could save what twenty could earn;  
 But *givin'* was somethin' he ne'er would learn;  
 Isaac could half o' the Scriptur's speak--  
 Committed a hundred verses a week;  
 Never forgot, an' never slipped;  
 But "Honor thy father and mother" he skipped;  
     *So over the hill to the poor-house.*

As for Susan, her heart was kind  
 An' good--what there was of it, mind;  
 Nothin' too big, an' nothin' too nice,  
 Nothin' she wouldn't sacrifice  
 For one she loved; an' that 'ere one  
 Was herself, when all was said an' done.  
 An' Charley an' 'Becca meant well, no doubt  
 But any one could pull 'em about;

An' all o' our folks ranked well, you see,  
 Save one poor fellow, and that was me;  
 An' when, one dark an' rainy night,  
 A neighbor's horse went out o' sight,  
 They hitched on me, as the guilty chap  
 That carried one end o' the halter-strap.  
 An' I think, myself, that view of the case  
 Wasn't altogether out o' place;  
 My mother denied it, as mothers do,  
 But I am inclined to believe 'twas true.  
 Though for me one thing might be said--  
 That I, as well as the horse, was led;  
 And the worst of whisky spurred me on,  
 Or else the deed would have never been done.  
 But the keenest grief I ever felt  
 Was when my mother beside me knelt,  
 An' cried an' prayed, till I melted down,  
 As I wouldn't for half the horses in town.  
 I kissed her fondly, then an' there,  
 An' swore henceforth to be honest and square.

I served my sentence--a bitter pill  
 Some fellows should take who never will;  
 And then I decided to go "out West,"  
 Concludin' 'twould suit my health the best;  
 Where, how I prospered, I never could tell,  
 But Fortune seemed to like me well,  
 An' somehow every vein I struck  
 Was always bubblin' over with luck.  
 An', better than that, I was steady an' true,  
 An' put my good resolutions through.  
 But I wrote to a trusty old neighbor, an' said,  
 "You tell 'em, old fellow, that I am dead,  
 An' died a Christian; 'twill please 'em more,  
 Than if I had lived the same as before."

But when this neighbor he wrote to me,  
 "Your mother's in the poor-house," says he,  
 I had a resurrection straightway,  
 An' started for her that very day.

And when I arrived where I was grown,  
 I took good care that I shouldn't be known;  
 But I bought the old cottage, through and through,  
 Of some one Charley had sold it to;  
 And held back neither work nor gold,  
 To fix it up as it was of old.  
 The same big fire-place wide an' high,  
 Flung up its cinders toward the sky;  
 The old clock ticked on the corner-shelf--  
 I wound it an' set it agoin' myself;  
 An' if every thing wasn't just the same,  
 Neither I nor money was to blame;  
     *Then--over the hill to the poor-house!*

One blowin', blusterin' winter's day,  
 With a team an' cutter I started away;  
 My fiery nags was as black as coal;  
 (They some'at resembled the horse I stole);  
 I hitched, an' entered the poor-house door--  
 A poor old woman was scrubbin' the floor;  
 She rose to her feet in great surprise,  
 And looked, quite startled, into my eyes;  
 I saw the whole of her trouble's trace  
 In the lines that marred her dear old face;  
 "Mother!" I shouted, "your sorrows is done!  
 You're adopted along o' your horse-thief son,  
     *Come over the hill from the poor-house!*

She didn't faint; she knelt by my side,  
 An' thanked the Lord, till I fairly cried.  
 An' maybe our ride wasn't pleasant an' gay,  
 An' maybe she wasn't wrapped up that day;  
 An' maybe our cottage wasn't warm an' bright,  
 An' maybe it wasn't a pleasant sight,  
 To see her a-gettin' the evenin's tea,  
 An' frequently stoppin' and kissin' me;  
 An' maybe we didn't live happy for years,  
 In spite of my brothers' and sisters' sneers,  
 Who often said, as I have heard,  
 That they wouldn't own a prison-bird;  
 (Though they're gettin' over that, I guess,  
 For all of 'em owe me more or less);

But I've learned one thing; an' it cheers a man  
 In always a'doin' the best he can;  
 That whether, on the big book, a blot  
 Gets over a fellow's name or not,  
 Whenever he does a deed that's white,  
 It's credited to him fair and right.  
 An' when you hear the great bugle's notes,  
 An' the Lord divides his sheep an' goats;  
 However they may settle my case,  
 Wherever they may fix my place,  
 My good old Christian mother, you'll see,  
 Will be sure to stand right up for me,  
     *With over the hill from the poor-house.*

One obvious characteristic of Carleton's poetry, illustrated by these four poems, is the simple, straightforward presentation. Carleton, in accord with many nineteenth-century critics, maintained that poetry should be intelligible to the average reader. If poetry was to improve people, they had to be able to understand it. Besides, no idea was so great or complex that it could not be expressed in lucid terms understandable by ordinary people.

[the subject matter of poetry] should never be above the comprehension of the average mind and thought of the world--if the author expects to write for the people in general, and not for the short-lived praises of a small, transient, artificial admiration society. There is no thought so great, so complicated, so ineffably sublime, that it cannot be resolved into elements easily understood by the average human intellect. It should be the work of a poet, not to make plain thought or lack of thought complex, and difficult of being understood, but to simplify and interpret nature and art to his readers; not to produce a series of rhymed riddles and enigmas, but epics, dramas, or lyrics such as the human race can understand, enjoy, and use, for their entertainment and instruction.

(Preface, City Festivals)

Carleton's readers were thus spared the paradox, ambiguity, obscure allusion, and complex figures of speech that make much of twentieth-century poetry a wrestling match for readers. They were also spared the "sublime flights" of the poetry of the soul perpetrated by some nineteenth-century critics. In City Legends Carleton satirizes this kind of verse: two "decayed poets," in passing judgment on a series of deeply moving Negro dialect poems, protest heatedly:

Ignorant rhymester! delver 'mongst the clods!  
 Why should he choose such undeserving themes?  
 Why can't he take stars, angels, demons, gods,  
 And other subjects fit for poets' dreams?  
 Why doesn't he hint what can not be expressed?\*

(City Legends, p. 128)

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At the bottom of the page, Carleton's footnote is a quotation from "a recent book review":

\*There is no poetry higher than that which by its expression hints at a wealth of aspiration, desire, yearning, that is unexpressed because inexpressible.

Carleton's poems, on the other hand, dealt with the clearly expressible. In "Gone With a Handsomer Man" a recently married farmer came home to read a note from his wife that she'd gone off with another man. After a few minutes of pure agony the farmer was greeted by his returning wife. It had been a joke; she'd been out riding with her father and she chided John for having "thrown things all around!" The poem ends with a metaphor farmers would easily understand and then a moral explicitly stated:

'Twas one of her practical drives--she thought I'd understand!  
But I'll never break sod again till I get the lay of the land.  
But one thing's settled with me--to appreciate heaven well,  
'Tis good for a man to have some fifteen minutes of hell.  
(F.B., 32)<sup>17</sup>

Another obvious explanation for the appeal of these poems is that they dealt with homely, realistic details from the everyday lives of common people. In the poem just mentioned, John had "worked in the field all day, a plowin the stony streak"; he'd "chok'd a dozen swears . . . When the plow-p'int struck a stone and the handles punched [his] ribs." Carleton's figures of speech were often original and effective because they incorporated concrete, if homely, materials from the everyday lives of his readers. In "The First Settler's Story" (F.F., 19) a pioneer farmer describes the homesickness of his wife. He counsels married men in general not to

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repeat his mistake of thinking that a wife can find complete satisfaction with just one person. His metaphor comes straight from the farm home sewing basket:

Don't think your wife can all wrap up in you,  
 Don't deem, though close her life to yours may grow,  
 That you are all the folks she wants to know,  
 Or think your stitches form the only part  
 Of the crochet-work of a woman's heart.

The first section of this poem builds a skillful mother/mother-in-law analogy to describe the trials of a "first settler's" initial attempts to subdue his territory. Moving into new country "ain't the funniest thing a man can do" because "Nature--who moved in first--a good long while--/ Has things already somewhat her own style." She "don't want her woodland splendors . . . Her rustic furniture broke up and scattered" or her paintings done by the Sun "torn down and dragged in Civilization's gutter" so "she kind o' nags the man who does it." She plants acres of weeds, sends the blackbirds to tend his corn, "gives him rain past any duck's desire," thoughtfully sends the rattlesnakes his way. She supplies wolves and bears to keep him company and always takes the Indian's part in any dealings. She nags every day so as to "scare him out, and hustle him back East." Then finally when she sees he means to stay,

she turns 'round, sweet as anything,  
 And takes her new-made friend into the ring,  
 And changes from a snarl into a purr:  
 From mother-in-law to mother, as it were.

Even though most of Carlton's readers were nonliterary people, they were able in such instances to participate in the poetic process of





vivid comparison because the metaphor's tenor and vehicle were both drawn from experience familiar to them.

The two "decayed poets" in City Legends deplored the presence of common-life subjects in poetry:

The proper subjects for poetic flights  
 Are clouds, stars, skies, courts, tournaments, and kings,  
 And sickly love-tales . . .  
 To think that pen and type should be defiled  
 Upon the funeral of a negro child!

(C.L. 126)

But Carleton, of course, meant just the opposite: that delineation of the lives of common people was a good, true subject for poetry. And one of the reasons thousands of people read his poems must have been that they enjoyed looking into a mirror that reflected their own lives and culture. Why do couples allow themselves to get so "cross and spunky" about a broken bowl, or a religious argument, or the cause of death of a cow? What does (should) one do to accommodate an aged parent in a small house already crowded with children and a string of the husband's sisters?

In "Out of the Old House, Nancy" a farmer and his wife bade goodbye to the log house they had built twenty years earlier when wolves, bears, and wildcats were the nearest neighbors.

Never a handsomer house was seen beneath the sun  
 Kitchen and parlor and bedroom--we had 'em all in one;  
 And the fat old wooden clock that we bought when we come West,  
 Was tickin' away in the corner there, and doin' its level best.

Many "a little squatter" had slept in the home-made cradle; the preacher had come with Bible and hymn-book when Jennie lay in the

"little whitewood coffin on the table"; a "fit of sickness" and even the wife had "a'most let go." The new house was waiting. "Tall and big and handsome" and "never a debt to say"; they owned it all themselves. But the couple left the old house reluctantly:

Fare you well, old house! you're naught that can feel and see.  
But you seem like a human being--a dear old friend to me;  
And we never will have a better home, if my opinion stands,  
Until we commence a'keepin' house in the house not made with hands.

Rural people would have seen much about themselves reflected in this poem: the hard labor of settling new land; the pride in building one's own home and being debt-free; the joy and responsibility of raising a large family; the tender devotion between husband and wife born of sharing hard work and the anxieties of sickness and death; the simple faith in the life hereafter.

This mirror quality that made the poems appealing to the farm people of Carleton's day also makes the poetry a valuable modern source for study of the culture of late nineteenth-century rural America. Settings for the "chains" of narrative poems in City Legends reveal a detailed view of Deacon Kindman's country kitchen, the local schoolmaster's custom of conducting a storytelling session around the fire, the straitened courting customs as represented by Ethel and Fitz Clintonne. Though humorously written, poems like "Our Traveled Parson" (F.F., 68) and "The New Church Organ" (F.B., 77) reflect the importance of a local Protestant church in the lives of these people. In the days before electronic media, people found entertainment at the skating rink (C.B., 40), the toboggan slide (C.L., 24), the county fair (F.F., 110), the "slugging match"



(C.B., 130), and the traveling carnival. We learn, for example, in a note to "Song of the Side-Showman" in City Festivals that "Hey Reub! is the showman's warcry; and he is bound in honor to rush to the support of any of his comrades who by this means indicates that he is engaged in pugilistic conflict with some member of the general public."

A whole section of City Festivals is devoted to the "freaks" in a carnival side show. There was a rage for bicycling (C.B., 155), traveling (C.B., 143), and ballooning! City Festivals offers a series of fantastic balloonist poems, including "A Leap for Love" (84) in which a bride and groom participated in a balloon exhibition to earn money "to launch their wedded life in prosperous seas." The descent was too rapid, however, and after throwing out all ballast and disposable items, the groom realized that he could save his bride only by plunging out of the balloon-basket himself--which he did. The countryside is full of picnickers ("Picnic Sam," F.B., 134), train wrecks ("Under the Wheels," C.F., 140, and the wreck at Dundee, F.F., 79), and con-men like "The Lightning Rod Dispenser" (F.F., 69). When two country men, the student Arthur Selwyn and Farmer Harrington, visit the city in City Ballads, we are given a series of vignettes of starving sewing girls (64), children dying from the poisoned air (53), and the good work of the Salvation Army (136). City Legends presents topical poems on the evils of alcohol ("The Serpent of the Still," 114) and the need for America to rouse herself from lethargic complaisance and to prepare a strong military defense ("Song of the Unbuilt Ship," 110).

Corning concluded that Carleton's greatest achievement lay precisely in the portrayal and popularization of the life of the farm. His poems recorded and preserved a life style and a cultural period against the time when the rural life of our early nation would be a thing of the past.<sup>18</sup> This prognosis is valid. A modern student of cultural history will find in Carleton's poems a detailed record of rural life in America in the 1870's and eighties.

Besides being readily comprehensible and made of familiar materials, the poems appealed to general readers for at least three other reasons: they were entertaining, didactic, and full of feeling.

Carleton could tell a good story in verse with many a surprise, and often happy, ending; the *Betsey* and *Poorhouse* poems and *"Gone With a Handsomer Man"* are all good examples. In *Farm Festivals* a Scotchman relates in verse an incident that, according to his "paper," happened recently in Dundee. A devastating storm is described and the poet-narrator begs the tempest not to destroy the "far-famous," two-mile bridge of the Tay until after the train has passed. But the tempest plows on "with the death-pointed cyclone," and "the cheer-freighted train" rolls on toward its terrible fate. It carries one "wanderer, who long o'er the ocean has been./ His age-burdened parents are watching from the window that looks on the firth,/ For the train that will come with their darling--their truest-loved treasure on earth." His letter said he'd arrive on the seven o'clock train and the parents were to sit waiting at the "southernmost window" from which vantage point

They see the bold acrobat-monster creep out on the treacherous  
 line;  
 Its cinder-breath glitters like star-dust--its lamp-eyes they  
 glimmer and shine.  
 It braces itself 'gainst the tempest--it fights for each inch  
 with the foe--  
 With torrents of air all around it--with torrents of water  
 below.  
 But look! look! the monster is stumbling, while trembles the  
 fragile bridge-wall--  
 They struggle like athletes entwining--then both like a  
 thunder-bolt fall!

This kind of poetry would easily hold the reader's attention: the  
 scene is vividly portrayed, the action is thrilling, and the suspense  
 is dramatic. Leaving the mother in a death-like faint, the father  
 flies out into the night in a frenzied attempt to "look for the  
 lost!" Crowds rush to the river but can tell at a glance, "There's  
 nae help for our loved ones, save God's mercy for them who have  
 died!"

The next morning finds the grief-stricken couple in anguish:

"O Robin, my bairn! ye did wonder far from us for mony a day,  
 And when ye ha' come back sae near us, why could na' ye come  
 a' the way?"

Just then a strong voice answers: "I hae come a' the way." The  
 bearded, sun-tanned son has come home.

"I cam' on last nicht far as Newport; but Maggie, my bride  
 that's to be,  
 She ran through the storm to the station, to get the first  
 greeting o' me.  
 I leaped from the carriage to kiss her; she held me sae fast  
 and sae tight,  
 The train it ran off and did leave me; I could na' get over  
 the nicht.

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The scene of joyous reunion is concluded with thanks to God that his "well-tempered mercy came down with the clouds from above,/ And saved one from out the destruction, and him by the angel of love."

In the nineteenth century readers expected poetry to teach as well as to entertain them. For Carleton the most important aspect of poetry was its didactic function. He wrote in the preface to

City Festivals:

the most important consideration of a book or a poem . . . is the motive, which should be connected either with the substantial improvement, or the rational entertainment of the human race.

The author who has the attention of any great number of people, and does not use it to make them better and truer, is to be pitied, as well as his readers.

It is clear from his poems that Carleton's conception of poetry that improves was poetry that was explicitly didactic. He did not experiment with supradidactic or infradidactic methods, discussed in Chapter II, methods that demand great mental effort if the reader is to understand and respond to the poem. Carleton chose to write poems that conveyed propositional truth in clear, forthright terms. The poems were understood easily; otherwise, they would have gone unread by his great audience, made up largely of men and women who had labored long hours during the day and who would not have had energy for difficult poetry. Most of Carleton's poems combined humor, pathos, and rustic dialect to convey some propositional truth. According to the Betsey poems, a floundering marriage may be saved if each partner will consider the good points as well as the imperfections of the spouse, and if each is willing to try to correct his

own charitableness toward aging parents--and his prejudices toward persons who may be unfairly branded because of one mistake.

The prevailing message in Carleton's work, as in that of most popular artists, is the reaffirmation of the values of the great working middle class: home and family are sacred; hard work is respectable; God's plan is perfect even when we don't understand it perfectly; America is a great country and those who have fought and died for it are to be remembered with gratitude; above all, brotherhood, charity towards one's fellow men, is the most valued aspect of humanity.

The importance of the home, marital fidelity, parenthood are pervasive in Carleton's verse. Arthur Selwyn proclaims in City Ballads that a solid, loving home is the best defense against Satan.

So the Science of Home is the chiefest of all:  
To ward off these dangers that ever befall;  
To beat back these devils of discord and sin,  
That always are striving to steal their way in;  
To use all the means God hath placed in our sight,  
To keep our homes innocent, happy, and bright;  
For a home that rejoices in love's saving leaven,  
Comes deliciously nigh to the splendors of Heaven!

Several poems moralize about this in especially dramatic ways. In Farm Legends "Rob, the Pauper," a crazed wildman with the strength of three, escapes periodically to terrorize the neighborhood, cursing all men and women of "lecherous scheming" but caressing every youngster "as wild/ As a mother would kiss a rescued child." Before Rob's death at the end of the poem, it is disclosed that he had tormented his wife with careless flirtations with other women. Then one day the solemn and shameful confession of Rob's wife that she

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had been unfaithful precipitated the shock and rage from which he never recovered. The poem ends with a clear message to the reader:

Rob, the Pauper, is lying in state.  
 In a box of rough-planed boards, unpainted,  
 He waits at the poor-house grave-yard gate,  
 For a home by human lust untainted.

After crowding around to get a close look at the corpse, the residents of the area return to their own "cooing and wooing and mating" and blundering.

They will never quite get it understood  
 That the Pauper's woes were for their good.

In City Ballads a young convict reveals that though he had a home and his parents were good providers, the most important ingredient was missing--love. "The house couldn't have been any colder, with snowdrifts in every room!" His parents never let him bring friends home. "Whenever the project was mentioned, they'd somehow look blue like and chill,/ And mention another engagement they felt it their duty to fill." The boy's going astray was clearly caused by his aging parents' lack of love and warmth toward him. Now, on his way to jail, he tells the sheriff, "maybe the strain and the trouble won't quite so much o'er me prevail,/ As 't would be to some one who wasn't brought up in a kind of a jail.!" The final poem of the six volumes is an idealized drama in which the sanctity of the family is rendered literally. In "The Festival of Family Reunion" the children and the father have all died and been joyously reunited in heaven, where they await the mother who finally joins them; all will, presumably, live happily ever after.

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The respectability of hard labor, woven into the fiber of most of the poems, is taken for granted and is seldom the subject of an explicit message. Several death poems retain the Sigourney motif of the soul's release into heaven; in "The Fading Flower" (F.B., 126), for example, a young girl who is very ill has given up praying for life and now prays instead

That she, when her frail body yields,  
And fades away to mortal eyes,  
Shall burst through Heaven's eternal fields,  
And bloom again--in Paradise.

Frequent deaths of persons of all ages was still a reality in the late nineteenth century, and popular poetry was still providing consolation for mourners and even for those about to die.

Carleton cannot be called a religious poet, and yet many of his verses reflect the commonly held Christian belief that a beneficent God rules the world with a plan which, though often incomprehensible to man is nevertheless perfect. In City Ballads ("Fire," 75) a cynic sneers as a church burns to the ground. "If this is His abode beyond a doubt,/ Why doesn't He raise his hand and put it out?" But Farmer Harrington is quick to retort, "Young man, please do not try to aid/ With your advice the mighty Power that made/ What little there is of you. That are still/ Schemes you don't comprehend, and never will." Earlier Farmer Harrington puzzling over the miseries of city people, decided that God had some plan; though the only part he understood was that it was leading him "by methods queer,/ To be some help to these poor people here" (C.B., 48). Similarly, Deacon Kindman reminded his guests, who included the poor and the maimed,

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that though Misfortune's hand  
 Has reached us all for reasons that God can understand,  
 While we, short-sighted creatures, shrink murmuring from its  
 touch,  
 Yet there are those who suffer a thousand times as much.  
 (C.L. 90)

Although patriotic poems do not make up a large portion of Carleton's verse, there are a few strong reminders that loyalty to America is of utmost importance. A series of dramatic poems in City Legends reveals the despicableness of Benedict Arnold's treachery. Arnold himself admits at the end of the poem, "I have no friend in earth, or heaven, or hell!" At Judgment Day not one person will speak in his defense; even Satan finds him disgusting: "You are too vile to come as others do--/ Too treacherous--you would give away the pass!/ Delve midst the sulphurous filth outside, and then/ Sneak upward from beneath!"

A number of poems exhort readers to honor the war dead, and in one of these, "Private Brown's Reflections" (C.F., 17), Carleton reveals an uncharacteristic sharpness in his didacticism. Private Brown, an old veteran visiting the graves of his comrades, reflects on the shallowness of the Memorial Day commemoration just finished. Johnny Smith had "furnished heart for fifty fights" but when the war was over he had hunted vainly "for work a crippled man could do."

They let you die, with want and debt to be your winding  
 sheet;  
 But this bouquet of flowers they sent is very nice and  
 sweet.

Jimmy Jones came home in a coffin draped in black; his funeral sermon  
 "glittered well" about how bravely he had died--now his old mother



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in the poorhouse has nothing to lean upon "but country and her God."  
Phelander Johnson, left on the plains for dead with a side full of  
lead, had crawled to a "prison pen" to starve for his country's good,  
and then had escaped in time to help save the day at Gettysburg. His  
reward had been a delay of his pension, year after year, because his  
"papers were lost."

You cost the Nation little now,--old hero of the fray--  
It sent some very pretty flowers to strew you with today.

Brotherhood is the preeminent theme in Carleton's didactic  
verse. Sometimes, like "Private Brown's Reflections," his poems work  
negatively to spotlight the lack of charity in so many of us. In  
gratitude to Elder Lamb (C.F., 60), who had labored diligently for  
his parish for three years, the congregation decided to get up "a  
generous large donation"--which consisted of old clothes that fit  
none of his family, "potatoes of inconsequential size," bruised  
fruits that "the autumn gales had picked."

All things unappreciated found this night their  
true vocation,  
In that great museum of relics, known as Elder  
Lamb's donation.

In the section on carnival freaks (C.F., 101) Carleton  
reveals "man's inhumanity to man" in the humiliating questions the  
crowd hurl at a sideshow giant: When you're sick do you suffer  
more than people of regular size? How much per day does your land-  
lord charge? Did you weigh forty-five pounds at birth? In a note  
to the poem Carleton invites his readers to adopt a more charitable  
and sensible attitude toward life's unfortunates:

We are all peculiar, not to say queer, in some way, and the only advantage, perhaps, that we have over the regularly recognized freaks, is that we can conceal the peculiarities of mind which they have to display in the body.

. . . . .  
So we must not consider these queer people whom we see at the museums as a separate race. They are for the most part intensely human, and appreciate good and kindly treatment from their curiosity-seeking brothers and sisters. Many of them toil at the wearying, laborious, and oftentimes humiliating profession of exhibiting themselves, because it is the only means they possess of earning a living. Most of them support families and friends, who, by being, unfortunately, in possession of all their limbs, in good and proper shape, are unable to earn a subsistence for themselves.

(C.F., 164)

In much of his verse, Carleton combines (1) didactic teaching of love and brotherhood with (2) poetry of warm feeling--one final, most important quality that made his work so widely appealing. He wrote about the importance of "hearty, deep, sincere" feeling in books and poems in the preface to City Festivals:

Whatever the feeling which the author strives to express, he must first experience himself, in order to communicate it to his readers. No writer can touch the heart of his audience, unless his own heart has first been touched. The only sure way to the brain is through the heart.

Surely it was this pull on the heart-string that helped make the Betsey and Poorhouse poems sensationally popular. When Betsey's spouse insisted that she have half of all the farm and livestock after they were divorced, she was overcome; her "face a 'streamin' with tears," she kissed her husband "for the first time in over twenty years!" One college-educated adult recently told me that the final stanza in "Over the Hill to the Poorhouse" was the saddest verse she had ever read.

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In "The Child Thief" (C.F., 79) a balloonist enjoying a lovely July sky-ride was blown off course by a current gale. He descended to a lonely spot with a single cabin-hovel from which a little golden-haired, blue-eyed girl came running.

"Oh, I knew you'd come," she said,  
 "From the country overhead,  
 Where my mamma went to visit when they told me she was dead;  
 For I prayed by day and night,  
 And then hoped with all my might,  
 She would send some one to take me into happiness and light!"

She displayed bruises from the cruel blows of the uncle, who had gone to Independence Day celebrations in town, and begged the balloonist to take her to heaven. Our protagonist told her the truth, that he was "no angel, but a coarse and faulty man." But she was sure her mother had sent him, so the two ascended into the sky, the uncle never knowing or caring "where his little birdling flew." The poem ends with a piece of sentimental fantasy:

This sweet bit of ballast, she  
 Since has dived along with me,  
 And has loved me like a daughter, far as I could feel and see;  
 And if ever I can rise  
 Past the clouds, to Paradise,  
 It will be because that darling steers my soul into the skies.

"The Convict's Christmas Eve" (C.L., 93) illustrates Carleton's typical combination of heart-string tug and moral didacticism. A man, released from prison on Christmas Eve, wanders throughout a town of merry shoppers and joyous children, every one of whom recoils from him in fear or disgust. "The world itself seemed to be every bit/ As hard a prison as the one I'd quit." The

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poem has a double moral: an admonition to the innocent to remain law-abiding--"It's death to drop among the lawless classes!"--and a plea to the ordinary citizen for a more charitable attitude toward convicts:

Love flowed like water, but it could not make  
The world forgive me for my one mistake.

The poem emphasizes both lessons in its dramatic climax. The convict, having entered a church to hear a children's choir, was quick to act when the Christmas tree caught fire. While the crowd seemed dazed, the convict grabbed some of their rich cloaks and wrapped them and himself around "one sweet child . . . screaming, with her white clothes all ablaze!" Having saved the child, he proceeded to tear "the blazing branches from the tree;/ Till all was safe, and no one hurt but me." Although the man could not sleep that night because of stabbing pains from his own burns, he was happy because he felt he had earned a place among his fellowmen again by suffering for them. He expected "a mother's thanks--perhaps a child's sweet kiss" and the father's warm gratitude that would find a way to help him be a man again.

But the letter which the convict opened the next day struck him cruelly to the heart.

You have upon my kindness certain claims,  
For rescuing my young child from the flames;  
. . . . .  
The blackest sinner may find mercy still.  
(Enclosed please find a thousand-dollar bill.)  
Our paths of course on different roads must lie;  
Don't follow me for any more. Good-by.

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The convict robbed a store that night and confessed the theft so he might return to prison where, though he prowled "'mid every sort of sin that's known" he, at least, did "not walk alone."

One trait that made Carleton's verse appealing was the mixture of humor and pathos in many of the situations. In "Picnic Sam" (F.B., 128-36), for example, the young, ill-clad, street-fighting, "home heathen" Sam had a penchant for visiting Sunday school picnics. He was always "snubbed and frozen and made quiet game of," and the narrator is sorry for the hurt that Sam hid but felt nevertheless. "Because a boy is greedy, dull, and droll,/ It need not follow that he hasn't a soul." At the height of the poem Sam manages to dive into a stream to save the life of a pretty, golden-haired drowning girl. The point of the poem, with the moral lesson again, is that Sam drowned in the process and that people made a great fuss over him after he was dead. "His casket was the finest and the best./ He went to his own funeral richly dressed," etc. The real surprise in the poem is Carleton's adoption of a humorous tone at the precise moment of the tragedy:

But Sam, poor boy, exhausted, choked, and beaten  
With the prodigious dinner he had eaten,  
Strangled and sank beneath the river's brim;  
And no one seemed to care to dive for him.  
Indeed, 'twas hard from the cold waves to win him,  
With such a large part of the picnic in him.

This mixture of humor with pathos saved many of Carleton's poems from utter mawkishness and worked upon his reader's sensibilities in a peculiarly appealing way. An English newspaper commented on it:

Jest and earnest, gayety and gravity, were deeply interwoven, laughter and tears alternated for the mastery, people being compelled to laugh through their tears and cry in the midst of their laughter.<sup>19</sup>

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NOTES--CHAPTER XI

<sup>1</sup>"Of course . . . you celebrated Carleton's birthday," Teacher's Voice, published by the Michigan Education Association, November 15, 1971.

<sup>2</sup>A. Elwood Corning, Will Carleton (New York: Lanmere Publishing Co., 1917), p. 33.

<sup>3</sup>Frank McAlpine, Popular Poetic Pearls (Philadelphia: Elliott and Beezley, 1887), p. 121.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in the MEA article in Teacher's Voice.

<sup>5</sup>Corning, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>McAlpine, p. 121.

<sup>8</sup>Corning, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 55-56.

<sup>10</sup>Carleton as quoted in MEA article in Teacher's Voice.

<sup>11</sup>Corning, p. 63.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 66-67.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>15</sup>Corning, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Corning, p. 85.

<sup>17</sup>These abbreviations will be used for the volumes of Carleton's poems:

|                         |      |                         |      |
|-------------------------|------|-------------------------|------|
| <u>Farm Ballads</u> :   | F.B. | <u>City Ballads</u> :   | C.B. |
| <u>Farm Legends</u> :   | F.L. | <u>City Legends</u> :   | C.L. |
| <u>Farm Festivals</u> : | F.F. | <u>City Festivals</u> : | C.F. |

<sup>18</sup>Corning, p. 98.

<sup>19</sup>The Guardian, 1884, as quoted in Corning, p. 67.

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## CHAPTER XII

### WILL CARLETON: AESTHETIC EXCELLENCE IN THE LEVELS OF POETRY

Thousands of people enjoyed Carleton's poems in the 1870's and 80's. Their sources of appeal were, in addition to Carleton's own personal rapport with his audience: ready intelligibility, didacticism, warm feeling, interesting narrative, homely detail from the everyday lives of common people. It remains to determine how Carleton's poems differed from high-level poems, in order to understand (1) specific ways in which great poetry is superior, and (2) the unique functions of popular poetry.

One distinction that has been made between popular and elitist art is that while the elitist work is often appreciated for excellence in technical execution itself, the popular work must meet the demands of the wide audience for content. Carleton's avowed purpose was to teach and entertain; artistic devices like "figures," "measures," and "rhymes" were merely the "humble, though perhaps glittering, slaves" of the important qualities of "motive," "feeling," and "subject-matter" (Preface to City Festivals). It is easy to note lack of concern for technique in much of Carleton, but for our purposes here it might be useful to examine a brief passage closely, contrasting it with a higher-level poem to determine specific technical differences.

In City Festivals ("A Modern Cassandra," p. 130) a young girl describes a train by comparing it to a horse.

"I see," she said, "in yonder vale a horse of iron go speeding,  
And bushels oft of blazing coals are measured for his feeding!  
His head is iron, his body iron, his feet--the earth while  
    scorning--  
His breath is like the chimney-smoke upon a winter morning!  
He's harnessed up in brass and steel, the buckles wide and  
    gleaming;  
His neigh is like the autumn gales when through the forest  
    screaming.

Compare Emily Dickinson's "The Train."

I like to see it lap the miles,  
And lick the valleys up,  
And stop to feed itself at tanks;  
And then, prodigious, step  
  
Around a pile of mountains,  
And, supercilious, peer  
In shanties by the sides of roads;  
And then a quarry pare  
  
To fit its sides, and crawl between,  
Complaining all the while  
In horrid, hooting stanza;  
Then chase itself down hill  
  
And neigh like Boanerges;  
Then, punctual as a star,  
Stop--docile and omnipotent--  
At its own stable door.

In both poems the tenor of the metaphor is a train and the vehicle is a horse. Skillfulness in handling the figure itself must be granted both poets. In Dickinson's poem the tenor is named in the title, but the poet never uses the word horse; she allows the reader the pleasure of discovering the comparison gradually--with a collocation of horse words: laps, licks, feeds, steps, peers, ribs, crawls, complains, chases itself, neighs, stops at a stable.





Carleton names the vehicle immediately (and in a cliché), "horse of iron," but does not use the word train. Although not artistically subtle (we know immediately that it is a train being compared to a horse), his method is appropriate because Cassandra, imagined to be foreseeing the invention of a train, expresses the wonderment of a person at first sight of a machine doing more powerfully and more noisily what horses had done before. The uninitiated would see in terms of a horse and would not yet have named the machine: instead of bushels of oats, it ate bushels of coal; head and body were made of iron; its feet were iron wheels; its breath (steam) was like chimney-smoke; the neigh was a shrill whistle like autumn gales in the forest.

But a close examination of form in both poems reveals an important difference between poetry of low and high levels. Carleton works to make his comparison immediately understandable in a series of simple sentences in which several of the comparisons are explicitly stated. There is no apparent relationship between form and content; the main formal concern is to continue an unvaried, predictable rhythm and simple (aabbcc) rhyme scheme that his readers expect. In order to fill the form, he uses some unnecessary words and awkward constructions. "Yonder" (l. 1) and "oft" (l. 2) are archaic expressions obviously chosen to fill in the measure. Shorter forms for "go speeding" and "for his feeding" would be more effective. In l. 4 the could be cut and upon changed to on. The rhyme scheme forces awkward inversions and meaningless phrases. Line 6 should read His neigh is like autumn gales screaming through the

forest, and it is questionable whether screaming is accurate for the wind in the forest. Line 3 is the worst line. The repetition of iron for head and body but not for feet leaves the phrase his feet hanging ridiculously with no syntactical connection to the sentence. The parenthetical expression the earth while scorning causes us to expect a verb for his feet, but none appears. While scorning the earth would be the normal and more effective word order, and it is not clear in what sense the feet (wheels) "scorn" the earth. They are separated from the earth by rails, to be sure, but they do roll heavily there.

Dickinson's poem, on the other hand, as Laurence Perrine has shown,<sup>1</sup> exemplifies the relationship between form and content of the highest poetry. The poem is written in one sentence which does not stop until the train stops. Each of the first three stanzas ends with a run-on line that reinforces the continuous forward movement of the train. Perrine's analysis of how Dickinson brings the train to a stop is particularly apt:

first, the word stop itself stops suddenly, ending with an explosive consonant; second, though in a normally unstressed position, the word receives a strong metrical stress; . . . third, it is followed and preceded by grammatical pauses; fourth, it is followed and preceded (on the other side of the grammatical pauses) by stressed syllables, with one of which it has assonance and with the other of which it alliterates. All these features emphasize or isolate the word stop in a remarkable way.<sup>2</sup>

In other ways, Perrine continues, the sounds in the poem reinforce the sense. The regular meter and repeated l's in the first two lines give the train speed, while the monosyllabic words ending in

p or k imitate the clickety-clackety sound of iron wheels going over joints in the rails. In line 4 the long word prodigious, set off by commas, slows the train down as it approaches a curve. "The division of what would normally be line 9 into two lines, comma-interrupted, again slows the train down, this time to a crawl, as it goes through a tunnel." Other technical excellences could be found in this small poem--like the slant rhyme of the second and fourth lines in every stanza. I use it as one small but specific illustration of a kind of aesthetic pleasure found in high-level poetry--an appreciation of integration of form and content. Readers of nineteenth-century popular poetry delighted in regular rhyme and rhythm; they wanted their poems to be "melodious." But their main interest was in content--what the poem taught them, how it soothed or entertained them. Carleton knew how to reach this audience, but at the expense of technical artistry.

To understand other differences between poems of differing levels of aesthetic excellence, we may focus on perspectives from C. S. Lewis's book, An Experiment in Criticism. Lewis concentrates on ways of reading rather than aesthetic values in books themselves. He holds that the many (the "unliterary") read only for the "Event" and that "their attention to the words they read is so insufficient" that they need a large dose of "hackneyed clichés" and an exciting, suspenseful narrative to hold their attention, along with a happy ending to satisfy their need to have the tensions in the work resolved for them. "The pleasure consists in the continual winding up and relaxing of vicarious anxiety."<sup>3</sup>

Now characterization of poems as "events" exclusively is not entirely valid for Carleton, and here we find one important positive quality that made his poems widely appealing. Besides a good story, they did offer many a detail or an emotion "concrete in its full particularity." The farm metaphors, for example, are original and appropriate. The estranged husband in "Betsey and I Are Out" proclaims to the lawyer:

We, who have worked together so long as man and wife,  
Must pull in single harness for the rest of our nat'ral life.

Then, too, most of the poems offer an incisive revelation of some particular human characteristic common to most men. The husband in "The First Settler's Story" (F.F., 19-30) spoke rashly to his wife in a fit of temper. "The heft of all our life on me must fall;/ You just lie round, and let me do it all." A minute later he regretted his words and would have given anything to "kill and bury that half-minute speech." The futility of such a wish is expressed with some originality and would have been recognized by his readers as a universal fact of human life:

Boys flying kites haul in their white-winged birds;  
You can't do that way when you're flying words.

During a sleepless night when the husband "half heard and half felt" his wife weeping, he yearned to draw her face close and to beg her forgiveness, but he could not bring himself to apologize. Even in the morning, as much as he wanted to set things "square and true," he started for work with dinner pail and sharpened axe and curt

"good-bye." He worked his frustration out in his wood-chopping:  
 "I all the forenoon gave my strength full rein,/ And made the  
 wounded trees bear half the pain." The difficulty of apologizing,  
 even to those we love most--another universal--is rendered not in  
 clichés, but in particular, excruciating detail. Carleton under-  
 stood and could express the strengths and weaknesses of human beings,  
 and his readers must have appreciated him at least partly because  
 they read with "obedient attention" to what he could tell them about  
 themselves. Their experience of his poetry was not completely  
 "unliterary," as Lewis defines it. In fact, this insight into the  
 character of real human beings is precisely what caused Carleton's  
 poems to be received on a sensationally wide scale when other rural  
 rhymsters and versifiers went unnoticed.

But Lewis's suggestion that the "unliterary" reader "attends  
 to the words too little to make anything like a full use of them"  
 is pertinent here. By comparing Carleton's "Betsey" poems with  
 three other poems on the same subject--relationship between a farmer  
 and his wife--we will notice differences: (1) in attempt of the  
 poetry to command full, obedient, and imaginative attention to the  
 words themselves, and (2) in the kind and depth of insight into  
 human experience that the poems reveal. We will also observe the  
 particular way in which Carleton's poems, on a lower aesthetic level,  
 functioned to satisfy the taste of his audience.

I would like to compare Carleton's Betsey poems with three  
 other poems about a man and wife in a rural setting: "Lucinda  
 Matlock" from Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology; "West-Running  
 Brook" by Robert Frost; and Anne Sexton's "The Farmer's Wife."<sup>4</sup>

## I

BETSEY AND I ARE OUT.

Will Carleton

Draw up the papers, lawyer, and make 'em good and stout;  
For things at home are crossways, and Betsey and I are out.  
We, who have worked together so long as man and wife,  
Must pull in single harness for the rest of our nat'ral life.

"What is the matter?" say you. I swan it's hard to tell!  
Most of the years behind us we've passed by very well;  
I have no other woman, she has no other man--  
Only we've lived together as long as we ever can.

So I have talked with Betsey, and Betsey has talked with me,  
And so we've agreed together that we can't never agree;  
Not that we've catched each other in any terrible crime;  
We've been a-gathering this for years, a little at a time.

There was a stock of temper we both had for a start,  
Although we never suspected 'twould take us two apart;  
I had my various failings, bred in the flesh and bone;  
And Betsey, like all good women, had a temper of her own.

The first thing I remember whereon we disagreed  
Was something concerning heaven--a difference in our creed;  
We arg'ed the thing at breakfast, we arg'ed the thing at tea,  
And the more we arg'ed the question the more we didn't agree.

And the next that I remember was when we lost a cow;  
She had kicked the bucket for certain, the question was only--How?  
I held my own opinion, and Betsey another had;  
And when we were done a-talkin', we both of us was mad.

And the next that I remember, it started in a joke;  
But full for a week it lasted, and neither of us spoke.  
And the next was when I scolded because she broke a bowl,  
And she said I was mean and stingy, and hadn't any soul.

And so that bowl kept pourin' dissensions in our cup;  
And so that blamed cow-critter was always a-comin' up;  
And so that heaven we arg'ed no nearer to us got,  
But it gave us a taste of somethin' a thousand times as hot.

And so the thing kept workin', and all the self-same way;  
Always somethin' to arg'e, and somethin' sharp to say;  
And down on us came the neighbors, a couple dozen strong,  
And lent their kindest sarvice for to help the thing along.

And there has been days together--and many a weary week--  
 We was both of us cross and spunky, and both too proud to speak;  
 And I have been thinkin' and thinkin', the whole of the winter  
 and fall,  
 If I can't live kind with a woman, why, then, I won't at all.

And so I have talked with Betsey, and Betsey has talked with me,  
 And we have agreed together that we can't never agree;  
 And what is hers shall be hers, and what is mine shall be mine;  
 And I'll put it in the agreement, and take it to her to sign.

Write on the paper, lawyer--the very first paragraph--  
 Of all the farm and live-stock that she shall have her half;  
 For she has helped to earn it, through many a weary day,  
 And it's nothing more than justice that Betsey has her pay.

Give her the house and homestead--a man can thrive and roam;  
 But women are skeery critters, unless they have a home;  
 And I have always determined, and never failed to say,  
 That Betsey never should want a home if I was taken away.

There is a little hard money that's drawin' tol'erable pay:  
 A couple of hundred dollars laid by for a rainy day;  
 Safe in the hands of good men, and easy to get at;  
 Put in another clause there, and give her half of that.

Yes, I see you smile, Sir, at my givin' her so much;  
 Yes, divorce is cheap, Sir, but I take no stock in such!  
 True and fair I married her, when she was blithe and young;  
 And Betsey was al'ays good to me, exceptin' with her tongue.



Once, when I was young as you, and not so smart, perhaps,  
 For me she mittened a lawyer, and several other chaps;  
 And all of them was flustered, and fairly taken down,  
 And I for a time was counted the luckiest man in town.



Once when I had a fever--I won't forget it soon--  
 I was hot as a basted turkey and crazy as a loon;  
 Never an hour went by me when she was out of sight--  
 She nursed me true and tender, and stuck to me day and night.

And if ever a house was tidy, and ever a kitchen clean,  
 Her house and kitchen was tidy as any I ever seen;  
 And I don't complain of Betsey, or any of her acts,  
 Exceptin' when we've quarreled, and told each other facts.

So draw up the paper, lawyer, and I'll go home to-night,  
 And read the agreement to her, and see if it's all right;  
 And then, in the mornin', I'll sell to a tradin' man I know,  
 And kiss the child that was left to us, and out in the world  
 I'll go.

And one thing put in the paper, that first to me didn't occur:  
 That when I am dead at last she'll bring me back to her;  
 And lay me under the maples I planted years ago,  
 When she and I was happy before we quarreled so.

And when she dies I wish that she would be laid by me,  
 And, lyin' together in silence, perhaps we will agree;  
 And, if ever we meet in heaven, I wouldn't think it queer  
 If we loved each other the better because we quarreled here.

#### HOW BETSEY AND I MADE UP.

Give us your hand, Mr. Lawyer: how do you do to-day?  
 You drew up that paper--I s'pose you want your pay.  
 Don't cut down your figures; make it an X or a V;  
 For that 'ere written agreement was just the makin' of me.

Goin' home that evenin' I tell you I was blue,  
 Thinkin' of all my troubles, and what I was goin' to do;  
 And if my hosses hadn't been the steadiest team alive,  
 They'd 've tipped me over, certain, for I couldn't see where  
 to drive.

No--for I was laborin' under a heavy load;  
 No--for I was travelin' an entirely different road;  
 For I was a-tracin' over the path of our lives ag'in,  
 And seein' where we missed the way, and where we might have been.

And many a corner we'd turned that just to a quarrel led,  
 When I ought to 've held my temper, and driven straight ahead;  
 And the more I thought it over the more these memories came,  
 And the more I struck the opinion that I was the most to blame.

And things I had long forgotten kept risin' in my mind,  
 Of little matters betwixt us, where Betsey was good and kind;  
 And these things flashed all through me, as you know things  
     sometimes will  
 When a feller's alone in the darkness, and every thing is still.

"But," says I, "we're too far along to take another track,  
 And when I put my hand to the plow I do not oft turn back:  
 And 'tain't an uncommon thing now for couples to smash in two;"  
 And so I set my teeth together, and vowed I'd see it through.

When I come in sight o' the house 'twas some'at in the night,  
 And just as I turned a hill-top I see the kitchen light;  
 Which often a han'some pictur' to a hungry person makes,  
 But it don't interest a feller much that's goin' to pull up  
     stakes.



"AND INTENTLY READIN' A NEWSPAPER, A-HOLDIN' IT WRONG SIDE 'UP.'"

And when I went in the house the table was set for me--  
 As good a supper's I ever saw, or ever want to see;  
 And I crammed the agreement down my pocket as well as I could,  
 And fell to eatin' my victuals, which somehow didn't taste good.

And Betsey, she pretended to look about the house,  
 But she watched my side coat pocket like a cat would watch a mouse;  
 And then she went to foolin' a little with her cup,  
 And intently readin' a newspaper, a-holdin' it wrong side up.



"AND KISSED ME FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OVER TWENTY YEARS!"

And when I'd done my supper I drew the agreement out,  
And give it to her without a word, for she knowed what 'twas  
about;

And then I hummed a little tune, but now and then a note  
Was bu'sted by some animal that hopped up in my throat.

Then Betsey she got her specs from off the mantel-shelf,  
And read the article over quite softly to herself;  
Read it by little and little, for her eyes is gettin' old,  
And lawyers' writin' ain't no print, especially when it's cold.

And after she'd read a little she give my arm a touch,  
And kindly said she was afraid I was 'lowin' her too much;  
But when she was through she went for me, her face a-streamin'  
with tears,  
And kissed me for the first time in over twenty years!

I don't know what you'll think, Sir--I didn't come to inquire--  
But I picked up that agreement and stuffed it in the fire;  
And I told her we'd bury the hatchet alongside of the cow;  
And we struck an agreement never to have another row.

And I told her in the future I wouldn't speak cross or rash  
If half the crockery in the house was broken all to smash;  
And she said, in regards to heaven, we'd try and learn its worth  
By startin' a branch establishment and runnin' it here on earth.

And so we sat a-talkin' three-quarters of the night,  
 And opened our hearts to each other until they both grew light;  
 And the days when I was winnin' her away from so many men  
 Was nothin' to that evenin' I courted her over again.

Next mornin' an ancient virgin took pains to call on us,  
 Her lamp all trimmed and a-burnin' to kindle another fuss;  
 But when she went to pryin' and openin' of old sores,  
 My Betsey rose politely, and showed her out-of-doors.

Since then I don't deny but there's been a word or two;  
 But we've got our eyes wide open, and know just what to do:  
 When one speaks cross the other just meets it with a laugh,  
 And the first one's ready to give up considerable more than half.

Maybe you'll think me soft, Sir, a-talkin' in this style,  
 But somehow it does me lots of good to tell it once in a while;  
 And I do it for a compliment--'tis so that you can see  
 That that there written agreement of yours was just the makin'  
     of me.

So make out your bill, Mr. Lawyer: don't stop short of an X;  
 Make it more if you want to, for I have got the checks.  
 I'm richer than a National Bank, with all its treasures told,  
 For I've got a wife at home now that's worth her weight in gold.

## II

### LUCINDA MATLOCK

Edgar Lee Masters

I went to the dances at Chandlerville,  
 And played snap-out at Winchester.  
 One time we changed partners,  
 Driving home in the moonlight of middle June,  
 And then I found Davis.  
 We were married and lived together for seventy years,  
 Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,  
 Eight of whom we lost  
 Ere I had reached the age of sixty.  
 I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,  
 I made the garden, and for holiday  
 Rambled over the fields were sang the larks,  
 And by Spoon River gathering many a shell,  
 And many a flower and medicinal weed--  
 Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the green valleys.  
 At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,

And passed to a sweet repose.  
 What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,  
 Anger, discontent, and drooping hopes?  
 Degenerate sons and daughters,  
 Life is too strong for you--  
 It takes life to love Life.

## III

## THE FARMER'S WIFE

Anne Sexton

From the hodge porridge  
 of their country lust,  
 their local life in Illinois,  
 where all their acres look  
 like a sprouting broom factory,  
 they name just ten years now  
 that she has been his habit;  
 as again tonight he'll say  
 honey bunch let's go  
 and she will not say how there  
 must be more to living  
 than this brief bright bridge  
 of the raucous bed or even  
 the slow braille touch of him  
 like a heavy god grown light,  
 that old pantomime of love  
 that she wants although  
 it leaves her still alone,  
 built back again at last,  
 mind's apart from him, living  
 her own self in her own words  
 and hating the sweat of the house  
 they keep when they finally lie  
 each in separate dreams  
 and then how she watches him,  
 still strong in the blowzy bag  
 of his usual sleep while  
 her young years bungle past  
 their same marriage bed  
 and she wishes him cripple, or poet,  
 or even lonely, or sometimes,  
 better, my lover, dead.

## WEST-RUNNING BROOK

Robert Frost

"Fred, where is north?"

"North? North is there, my love.  
The brook runs west."

"West-running Brook then call it."  
(West-running Brook men call it to this day.)  
"What does it think it's doing running west  
When all the other country brooks flow east  
To reach the ocean? It must be the brook  
Can trust itself to go by contraries  
The way I can with you--and you with me--  
Because we're--we're--I don't know what we are.  
What are we?"

"Young or new?"

"We must be something.  
We've said we two. Let's change that to we three.  
As you and I are married to each other,  
We'll both be married to the brook. We'll build  
Our bridge across it, and the bridge shall be  
Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it.  
Look, look, it's waving to us with a wave  
To let us know it hears me."

"Why, my dear,  
That wave's been standing off this jut of shore--"  
(The black stream, catching on a sunken rock,  
Flung backward on itself in one white wave,  
And the white water rode the black forever,  
Not gaining but not losing, like a bird  
White feathers from the struggle of whose breast  
Flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool  
Below the point, and were at last driven wrinkled  
In a white scarf against the far shore alders.)  
"That wave's been standing off this jut of shore  
Ever since rivers, I was going to say,  
Were made in heaven. It wasn't waved to us."

"It wasn't, yet it was. If not to you  
It was to me--in an annunciation."

"Oh, if you take it off to lady-land,  
As't were the country of the Amazons  
We men must see you to the confines of  
And leave you there, ourselves forbid to enter,--  
It is your brook! I have no more to say."

"Yes, you have, too. Go on. You thought of something."

"Speaking of contraries, see how the brook  
 In that white wave runs counter to itself.  
 It is from that in water we were from  
 Long, long before we were from any creature.  
 Here we, in our impatience of the steps,  
 Get back to the beginning of beginnings,  
 The stream of everything that runs away.  
 Some say existence like a Pirouot  
 And Pirouette, forever in one place,  
 Stands still and dances, but it runs away,  
 It seriously, sadly, runs away  
 To fill the abyss' void with emptiness.  
 It flows beside us in this water brook,  
 But it flows over us. It flows between us  
 To separate us for a panic moment.  
 It flows between us, over us, and with us.  
 And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love--  
 And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;  
 The universal cataract of death  
 That spends to nothingness--and unresisted,  
 Save by some strange resistance in itself,  
 Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,  
 As if regret were in it and were sacred.  
 It has this throwing backward on itself  
 So that the fall of most of it is always  
 Raising a little, sending up a little.  
 Our life runs down in sending up the clock.  
 The brook runs down in sending up our life.  
 The sun runs down in sending up the brook.  
 And there is something sending up the sun.  
 It is this backward motion toward the source,  
 Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,  
 The tribute of the current to the source.  
 It is from this in nature we are from.  
 It is most us."

"Today will be the day  
 You said so."

"No, today will be the day  
 You said the brook was called West-running Brook."

"Today will be the day of what we both said."

In I, a farmer speaks to a lawyer in a dramatic monologue.<sup>5</sup> In the first poem the farmer explains the causes of his estrangement from his wife and instructs the lawyer to draw up the divorce papers. In the second poem the farmer, revealing how the agreement effected a reconciliation, offers to show his gratitude by paying the lawyer a generous fee. II is a monologue, a wife imagined to be speaking from the grave about her long, full, rich life. IV is a dialogue between a newly married couple meditating on "contraries" in nature, in their own personalities, and in human existence itself. III appears at first to be narrated by an omniscient observer, but the speaker slips in the final line, "better, my lover, dead," and part of the impact of the poem comes from our realization that the speaker has used a fictitious third-person point of view in an attempt to objectify, distance, and gain some control over her own painfully frustrating experience. The speaker in III is, then, the wife herself.

The poems vary in commanding obedient, imaginative attention to specific words, images, and figures of speech.

In I the details interest the reader because they reflect realities of human nature: Betsey tried to appear unconcerned when her husband returned from the lawyer's, but she kept glancing at the pocket holding the agreement, like a cat watching a mouse, and she revealed her anxiety in spite of herself by pretending to read a newspaper that she was holding wrong side up. There are clever lines: for example, when the farmer admitted that the religious arguments brought the couple no closer to heaven, but instead gave them "a taste of somethin' a thousand times as hot." When the



couple made up, Betsey cleverly used a bank metaphor in suggesting that instead of arguing about heaven, they start "a branch establishment" here on earth. Puns and clichés are mixed for humorous effect: when the cow died, she "kicked the bucket for certain" and the couple finally agreed to "bury the hatchet alongside of the cow." But it is hard to find words used in fresh and interesting ways. The comparisons are easily grasped and usually used for a humorous effect; the husband was "hot as a basted turkey" when he had a fever. Most of the comparisons are clichés: "crazy as a loon"; "a heavy load" for the farmer's emotional burden on the way home from the lawyer's office; the husband tracing the "path" of their lives again in his preoccupation as the horses drive themselves. Wanting to destroy the agreement, he reminded himself, "when I put my hand to the plow, I do not oft turn back."

In vocabulary, syntax, and figurative language, II like I is not a complex poem. The sentences are simple and straightforward; there are no difficult words, no obscure allusions, and no similes or metaphors. Lucinda Matlock seems to have lived a simple rural life like Betsey's, being courted and falling in love, raising a family, doing the household work--spinning, weaving, caring for the sick. And yet, use of the two criteria at hand, reveals II to have more aesthetic appeal than I. First, the kind of insight is more thought-provoking, more penetrating, and therefore more interesting. In I the couple becomes aware that habitual quarreling is their problem and that it can be controlled when each person is willing to check himself rather than attacking faults of the other. Surely

an important insight into everyday relationships between persons. But implications of Lucinda Matlock's insight are broader and deeper: rather than how to get along with a spouse, it considers how to find positive value in life itself. The "long" word degenerate and the ambiguities in the final two lines of the poem invite full, imaginative attention of the reader. Lucinda hurls Degenerate from her grave to castigate living persons who indulge in sophomoric despair rather than summoning strength and energy to affirm the beauty and value of Life by engaging themselves positively in life's activity.

An important reason that the poem is appealing is that its "meaning" is not stated explicitly. Carleton's poem says everything that it means.

Since then I don't deny but there's been a word or two;  
But we've got our eyes wide open, and know just what to do:  
When one speaks cross the other just meets it with a laugh;  
And the first one's ready to give up considerable more than half.

But in Masters' poem the reader ponders the final three lines and discovers the meaning himself. "Life is . . . strong" and "It takes life to love Life" invite the reader's "interpretation." To do this he reconsiders the words in the early lines of the poem; in particular he observes a series of concrete details and deduces what Lucinda Matlock meant by the ambiguous phrase "Life is . . . strong." (1) Life, as an agent acting upon a human sensibility, is rich (as a rich flavor is strong to the taste) and physically powerful. It contains the pleasures of youth (dances at Chandlerville) and falling in love ("Driving home in the moonlight of middle June, . . . I found Davis"). It offers joy, love, hard labor, and grief of

marriage and family ("enjoying," raising twelve children, spinning, nursing the sick, losing eight of the children before the mother is sixty). It offers sensuous pleasures, in larks, shells, wooded hills, green valleys. (2) Besides being an agent, Life is also the acted upon. When a human sensibility is alive it will feel and respond to the impact of the forces acting upon it. "Life is . . . strong" in that the human sensibility is tough, tenacious (it endures hard labor and survives grief) and forceful in its responses (Lucinda shouts to the wooded hills and sings to the green valleys). This ambiguity is summarized in the final line of the poem: "It takes life [a vigorous response that endures grief and heightens pleasure] to love Life [Capitalization indicates that Life is used in its most comprehensive sense--the interrelation between things and occurrences that act upon a consciousness and the energetic, vigorous responses of the person acted upon]."

This way of reading Masters' poem reveals that perspectives offered by Abraham Kaplan and C. S. Lewis are useful in distinguishing the characteristics of high-level poetry. As we ascend the aesthetic scale, poems at higher levels invite increasing amounts of reader participation in making out what the poem is and what it means (Kaplan--"The response to an art object shares in the work of its creation, and only thereby is a work of art produced.")<sup>6</sup>, and the higher the level the more the reader participates in the form of the poem by attending obediently and imaginatively to its words (C. S. Lewis). Likewise, the insights in higher-level poems are increasingly interesting because they are more imaginative, novel, provocative, true, significant, or some combination of these attributes.

Poem III is more aesthetically appealing than I and II for all these reasons. The farmer's wife expresses her hatred of a mentally and spiritually barren rural life and marriage; she confronts honestly her deep disappointment and frustration with a husband whose relationship with her is physical and nothing more. The simple people in Carleton's poems would probably not be capable of self-awareness of this depth, and his readers would have been made too uncomfortable by disturbing insights like this. Readers of lower-level rural poems would not tolerate being challenged to examine the bases of their own marital relationships; they wanted poems that reinforced their conviction that husbands and wives who worked out a life together, naturally loved and respected each other.

Besides the penetrating, if disturbing insight, poem III is more aesthetically excellent than I and II because it has a greater number of interesting words, phrases, and figures; and because it is in pondering these that the reader makes out the significance of the poem--Sexton does not say that the wife is frustrated mentally and spiritually; she suggests it.

Word substitutions in the first three lines of the poem surprise the reader and emphasize why the wife is dissatisfied. Expecting hodge podge, we read hodge porridge and get the effect of both: a pejorative term, hodge podge, suggesting that their country life is nothing but unorganized triviality, and porridge, connoting simple, but low-class and mindless rural life of the nursery rhymes and folk tales. The quality of their life together is the subject of the poem. The word life is emphasized by the substitution country

lust for country life in line 2 and by local life instead of rural life in line 3. The problem is suggested immediately: the main element of their life in the country is physical experience (lust). Local in line 3 becomes ambiguous: (1) their lives do not extend beyond the limits of an immediate locale in Illinois, and (2) the life is local in the sense of involving only a restricted part of an organism. As a local anaesthetic numbs only the jaw and fails to affect the rest of the body, their local life includes only physical experience and fails to involve mental or spiritual experience.

To emphasize the physical aspects of the farm that the wife finds so distasteful, the poet utilizes pejorative connotation in a well-chosen detail and a simile. The wife hates "the sweat of the house they keep," and she sees the cornfields as dull and ugly: "all their acres look/ like a sprouting broom factory."

The only relief from the monotony is sex. Raucous bed invites "obedient attention" because the adjective is unusual. Bed is a metonymy for love-making which, the adjective signifies, is lively, in fact boisterously so. In spite of the harsh and strident noisiness suggested by raucous, the wife does regard their sexual relationship as gratifying. She "wants" sex. Her husband treats her gently as two original figures let us know: he fondles her with "a slow braille touch"; during the love-making his great physical bulk relaxes into a tender gracefulness--he is like "a heavy god grown light." Alliteration and metaphor are skillfully combined in brief, bright, bridge (accentuated too by alliteration with braille) to emphasize that the sexual intercourse is pleasant and that it does unite the couple, for however short a time.

But the next metaphor "pantomime of love" immediately reveals that although the couple, like mime actors, go through the physical, bodily movements of love, there is no mental or spiritual union (she is "mind's apart from him, living/ her own self in her own words), and this is the source of the wife's loneliness and frustration. Although the lines of the poem do not rhyme, the wife's predicament is accentuated by a collocation of l sounds in key words (of the poem's thirty-two lines, eleven end with an l word): lust, local, life, look, living, light, love, alone, last, living, lie, while, lonely, lover. The sex is pleasant but the wife yearns for more: "she will not say how there must be more to living." Yet after intercourse, the two are utterly separate--"it leaves her still alone"; as she regains composure--"built back again at last"--, she lives "her own self in her own words"; they lie in separate dreams. The husband seems mindless and insensitive; if only he were a poet with a sensibility to respond to her own. But to complicate her frustration, he is also entirely self-sufficient. He is physically strong ("still strong" and "heavy like a god"), and she wishes him a cripple so he might depend on her. He is unbothered by what she regards as a deficient existence; he falls, exasperatingly to her, into his "usual sleep." If only he were lonely he might need her.

The situation appears hopeless. The husband is insensitive to the wife's needs, and she "will not say" how she feels. The relationship is not only deficient but static. For ten years now "she has been his habit"; a collocation of words emphasizes that the sources of her frustration repeat themselves relentlessly: "as

again tonight he'll say/ honey bunch let's go," "that old pantomime of love," "it leaves her still alone," "built back again," he is "still strong," "his usual sleep," "their same marriage bed." The only thing that has changed is that she seems to be growing old, as the personification of her young years bungling past the marriage bed reveals. As she realizes that spiritual fulfillment with him is impossible, the single instance of line-end rhyme in the poem emphasizes the climax of her frustration: if all there will ever be to their love is sex--bed--, it would be better for her to have him dead.

"The Farmer's Wife" is a high-level poem partly because of the density of its texture. In a short poem there are a great number of spots in which the words invite obedient attention: striking metaphors, surprising adjectives and word substitutions, effective sound repetition. Since there is no explicit message, the reader can make out the significance of the poem only by attending carefully to its components.

Aesthetic ranking of poems does involve examination of parts: how original are they, how many interesting parts are amalgamated into a unified poem, how well do they fit together? But aesthetics has also to involve meaning: how significant is the matter conveyed in the poem. As Laurence Perrine puts the question: besides delighting the senses and stirring the imagination, does the poem nourish the soul?<sup>7</sup> "Great poetry . . . is knowledge--felt knowledge, new knowledge--of the complexities . . . that characterize human experience. . . . The greatness of a poem is in proportion to the range and depth and intensity of experience that it brings to us."<sup>8</sup>

III ranks high because of the intensity of the experience conveyed. But IV ranks even higher aesthetically because of the range and depth of experience it offers a responsive reader. Because "West-Running Brook" has been widely acclaimed and carefully explicated by critics, a thorough discussion would be redundant here. Granting that the poem is well-made, I want merely to indicate the high-level quality of the insights into human experience.

The poem is an exploration of contraries.

(1) "All the other country brooks" in the area "flow east/ To reach the ocean," but this one flows west. The wife is curious and names it West-running Brook.

(2) The couple are newly married, and the wife ventures that they are trusting themselves "to go by contraries." Fred is the practical sort who speaks for fact: he knows north from west; he checks the fantasy of his wife--he knows the brook is not waving to them. Running counter to his factual grasp of experience, the wife gives her imagination full reign: the brook was waving to them; or if the brook did not wave to him it did to her in an "annunciation" of the unity in the new marriage and of the essential kinship between the brook and the couple. As an arm thrown over the partner in sleep symbolizes unity of the marriage, a bridge over the brook could symbolize the unity of the couple and the brook--unified because they both maintain vitality by running according to contraries.

3. The brook runs west, but in one spot the black stream catches on a sunken rock flinging one white wave back eastward toward the source of the stream. The wave looks like a white bird



riding "the black forever," and the flecks of white foaming out from the point of disturbance look like the feathers from the struggling white bird.

(4) Meditating on the white wave, Fred has a vision in which even existence itself operates by contraries. Existence does not spin on one foot in a ballet (pirouette) like pantomime characters in a ballet (Pirouot and Pierette) returning always to its beginning point and therefore sure to last forever. Fred sees existence like the black stream, slowly, continuously, relentlessly running away. "It seriously, sadly, runs away." All of existence follows one great entropic pattern--involving both substantial and unsubstantial entities like "time, strength, tone, light, life, and love." Extending the stream metaphor, Fred's vision penetrates to see all existence as a "universal cataract of death/ That spends to nothingness." Having "seen" existence in its essential character, Fred also comprehends the nature of the life force: its symbol is the white wave, in which the stream throws "backward on itself" in an effort to resist the drift toward nothingness. "It is this backward motion toward the source,/ Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in." The main thrust of Fred's vision is the distinctive characteristic of life which derives its meaning and value from resisting the tendency of all existence to run away.

Curiously, the poems at the extreme points on our scale are similar in moving out of tension toward harmony. In I Betsey and her husband discovered that they wanted to, and could, control their arguing. At the end of IV Fred and his wife give each other credit

for what each has contributed to the conversation and the vision. The vision was Fred's but it was initiated by the wife's perception of the contrary direction of the brook. Her fantasy and his factual observations of brook and wave are both parts of the final intuitive vision. The poem closes on a note of reconciliation: "Today will be the day of what we both said." I and IV are similar in structure then; but IV demands greater participation by the reader in figuring out what the contraries and resolutions are, and IV is much greater in the scope of experience with which it deals.

In this chapter I have tried to illustrate a theory that poems can be ranked according to aesthetic excellence. The process is significant for two reasons. It reveals specifically how high-level poems are aesthetically superior, and it forces us to ask why some low-level poems have been so popular.

Some specific components of aesthetic excellence in poetry have been isolated and illustrated here.

(1) Interdependence between technical artistry and content, in which form and content reinforce each other.

(2) Necessity for the reader to attend carefully to the parts of the poem (words, phrases, figures of speech, patterns) in order to make out the meaning of the poem and to feel its effects--thus necessity for the reader to participate in discovering, in fact creating, the form and meaning of the poem.

(3) Insights of significance so that in working out the poem the reader discovers new knowledge that deepens and extends the scope of his awareness of life.

That there are differences in aesthetic achievement has been granted and illustrated. But several observations seem pertinent here.

(1) The criteria listed above reflect, at least partially, a twentieth-century bias. We ought to note again that many nineteenth-century critics did not emphasize that the reader work vigorously to get at the poem. Explicit statement was more acceptable and lower-level poems were more respected for their simpler values than they are now.

(2) The twentieth-century tendency to treat seriously only the poems at the extreme height of the scale has resulted in an art form that has become increasingly exclusive as it is increasingly difficult to understand. C. S. Lewis wrote:

. . . modern poetry is read by very few who are not themselves poets, professional critics, or teachers of literature. . . . The more any instrument is refined and perfected for some particular function, the fewer those who have the skill, or the occasion, to handle it must of course become. . . . When the art of reading poetry requires talents hardly less exalted than the art of writing it, readers cannot be much more numerous than poets.<sup>9</sup>

(3) Much popular poetry falls at the lower levels of aesthetic achievement, but many popular poems have had substantial aesthetic value. Lydia Sigourney's "Death of an Infant" is exquisite in the use of images and metaphors and in the depth of feeling conveyed. Whittier's Snowbound tells a simple, idyllic story but invites readers to participate in fire/life symbols at quite a high philosophical and imaginative level. Because poems that have appealed to large numbers of people have various degrees of aesthetic value, it is not accurate to lump all popular poetry

into a "nonliterary" junk heap. A more productive way to work is to read each poem for what it can offer and to judge it according to its intrinsic merits.

(4) Even when a poem falls at the low end of the aesthetic scale, if it has been widely popular, it will be found to contain some aesthetic value. Carleton's readers delighted in rhyme and rhythm and thus responded in a simple way to the form of poetry. Though many of them are clichés, there are figures of speech in the Betsey poems, and Carleton did appeal to his readers with clever and humorous expressions--this is participation in the language, "attention to the words." Although the insights were not philosophically profound or psychologically deep, they were true reflections of everyday strengths and foibles of most people. Rather than placing popular poetry outside the "pale" that C. S. Lewis erects to separate literary from nonliterary works, it seems more accurate to regard it, as Abraham Kaplan does, as satisfying a yearning, though immature, taste for literature.

My thesis is this: that popular art is not the degradation of taste but its immaturity . . . produced by a dynamic intrinsic to the aesthetic experience itself.<sup>10</sup>

(5) A poet can be popular only if he adapts his work to the abilities and tastes of great numbers of readers. The Betsey poems rank low in scale of significance of insights, but Carleton's readers were farm people interested in practical problems of human relationship rather than in philosophically profound visions. Likewise, selection I ranks low in our comparison because the poems say

everything they mean explicitly, and they are full of lines padded with extra words to fill out the rhythm and rhyme scheme. The poet could have condensed his lines radically. But Carleton's audience was composed of farm laborers rather than cultivated readers practiced in puzzling out the meanings of tensely compacted lines of poetry. The padded lines have a function; they give a reader full time to absorb the poem's meanings.

In another way the Betsey poems are skillfully adapted to the interests of a rural audience. Although the speakers in all four poems studied here are the farm people themselves, only I uses regional-social dialect markers of a rural person. Several word choices are those of a rural dialect: specs (spectacles), victuals (food, dinner), swan (rustic euphemism for swear), betwixt (between), critter (creature), blamed cow-critter, skeery critters (anxious women).

Throughout the poem, deviations from standard grammar mark an uneducated speaker. He uses the double negative, we can't never agree, and nonstandard verb forms: catched (caught), bu'sted (burst), ain't no (isn't any). Like is used as a conjunction: "She watched my side coat pocket like a cat would watch a mouse." Subject-verb agreement is consistently nonstandard throughout the poems with plural subjects matching with singular verbs: "we both of us was mad," "we was both of us cross and spunky," "she and I was happy."

Rustic pronunciations are indicated: arg'ed (argued), sarvice (service), the a prefix to verbs--a-gatherin', a-comin', a-talkin'. Besides the clipped in' for ing, other ellipses in

pronunciation are indicated: make 'em, that 'ere, 'lowin' her (allowing her). In some cases what the linguists call "eye dialect" is used. Han'some and pictur', for example, reveal nothing about pronunciation because they are rough phonetic spellings, but the ellipses suggest that the speaker is uneducated.

In II, III, and IV words, structures, and pronunciations are all those of the standard English of educated speakers. We need to remember in examining the poems for skillful use of language and for insights of psychological and philosophical depth, that the speakers in the poems are persons of varying degrees of intellectual perspicacity and imaginative power. Carleton's farmer speaks the language and reflects the perceptions of thousands of ordinary rural people. The characters in the other poems speak the language of intellectuals and display the sensitivity of artists. In reaching increasingly higher levels of aesthetic achievement, poems II, III, and IV appeal to readers capable of greater literary responsiveness. But poem I is successful in using the language and perceptions appropriate for its speaker--a pragmatic farmer with warm feelings but not necessarily deep thoughts. And although readers of poem I are obviously less cultivated, their tastes less mature, Carleton's poems must be judged successful in satisfying the tastes of the audience they were written for.

## NOTES--CHAPTER XII

<sup>1</sup>For this analysis of Dickinson's poem I am indebted to Laurence Perrine in the instructor's manual for Sound and Sense, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>C. S. Lewis, An Experiment in Criticism (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965), Chapter IV, "The Reading of the Unliterary," pp. 27-39.

<sup>4</sup>The reader may wonder why the three poems chosen for the comparison are from the twentieth century. It is difficult to find a nineteenth-century elitist American poem about a farmer's marital life. During the reign of the Transcendentalists, a "kingly bard" was expected to "smite the chords rudely and hard" and great poems were expected to "make the wild blood start" and to "dilate the soul." Critics like William A. Jones in The Democratic Review called for a poet for the people, but when he appeared in the form of Whitman, he addressed the soul rather than details of everyday life. Carleton and Whitman both professed to write for "average" men, but the arguments of Carleton's humble farm fellow and his wife can't stand in any comparison to Whitman's sublime flights in "Song of Myself." Whitman writes about man and woman in "I Sing the Body Electric," but in an exalted mood about men and women in general. Carleton described one particular farm couple and the trivialities of their estrangement. One cannot imagine reading these two poems within the same hour, much less comparing them in a detailed study.

The nineteenth-century definition of "levels" of poetry seemed usually aimed at this kind of distinction: high-level poetry was sublime and exalting; low-level poems, written in a minor key, dealt with mundane matters. Distinctions according to subject matter can be made, and are easy to make. But after the movements toward realism at the end of the nineteenth century, the best poets began to write about intimacies in the daily lives of ordinary people. Thus, we have some twentieth-century poems on a similar subject with which to compare Carleton; this kind of study yields understanding of specific aesthetic differences in use of language and kinds of insight imparted.

One might argue for comparison with one of the popular rustic poems of the nineteenth century. Wordsworth had ushered in the century

with a proposal for poetry about "common life . . . in a language really used by men." He had written poems of "humble and rustic life" like "Michael" and "The Brothers," and two of the best-selling American poems of the century dealt with humble, rural life:

Evangeline and Snowbound.

If "Michael" were an American poem it might belong in our study. It deals with a farmer's relationships with his son and wife, but it is more useful in illustrating the distinctions in literary taste between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (as outlined by George Arms) than in illustrating levels of aesthetic excellence in poetry. Compare, for example, Wordsworth's literary diction with the colloquial diction in Anne Sexton's poem. Michael, "Albeit of a stern unbending mind" loved to have his son--"the Young-one"--in his sight, "when he Wrought in the field" or "on his shepherd's stool Sate with a fettered sheep." Contrast: "From the hodge porridge [play on hodge podge] of their country lust," "all their acres look like a sprouting broom factory." Michael's "Helpmate was a comely matron"; Sexton's farmer invites his wife to bed with "honey bunch let's go."

The two poems illustrate another distinction in taste: nineteenth-century preference for poetical-picturesque subject matter and twentieth-century taste for realistic subject matter. In "Michael" we read not about the crudities of farm life, but about a rustic life, idealized in the pastoral mode, with spinning wheel hum, "basket piled with oaten cakes," a "life of eager industry," the lamp burning late in the cottage--becoming a "public symbol of the life/ That thrifty Pair had lived" and shining so far and so regularly as to win the name "Evening Star" for the humble abode. The farm house in Sexton's poem smells of "sweat" and is inhabited by a couple who go to bed together but who remain spiritually and psychologically estranged.

Evangeline is an idyll and, like "Michael," throws a shimmering veil over reality. We are spared unpleasant details of farm labor, insects in the swamp lands of the lower Mississippi River Valley, the fact that Gabriel's companions in the Far West were profane mountain men. This is no criticism of the poem. As Howard Mumford Jones has written in an introduction to the poem, the details of Evangeline may not be true to life but they are true to the idyll. "Every literary form has a right to make assumptions proper or traditional to that form."

Because Carleton's Betsey poems use colloquial diction and realistic subject matter; the poems by Masters, Frost, and Sexton are more appropriate for our comparison than any poems I can find in the nineteenth century (Snowbound would work if there were a section on husband-wife relationship).

Various modes are popular at different times; but in this chapter I wanted to isolate differences in aesthetic achievement, rather than in mode or subject matter.

<sup>5</sup>For this method in Chapter XII of contrasting specific elements of poems, I am indebted to Laurence Perrine in Sound and Sense, and to Jean Malmstrom in Teaching English Linguistically (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971), pp. 175-82.



<sup>6</sup>Kaplan, "The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts," p. 356.

<sup>7</sup>Laurence Perrine, Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), p. 278.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Lewis, pp. 96-98.

<sup>10</sup>Kaplan, p. 353.

PART III

TWO AMERICAN BARDS

## CHAPTER XIII

"HOMER OF THE MASS": WALT WHITMAN

(1819-1892)

When Will Carleton, in the flush of his success with the farm volumes, visited Walt Whitman at Camden, New Jersey in 1876,<sup>1</sup> he asked who did his publishing. "Oh, I do it myself," Walt replied. "That is, I get my printing done in New York. The publishers won't see me. There was never but one publisher who would take hold of my works, and he busted."<sup>2</sup>

Whitman came from the people; he knew and loved them and wrote poetry specifically for them. As Gay Wilson Allen emphasized throughout The Solitary Singer, "Nothing else meant so much to him as to be accepted by the American people as a poet, and preferably as the American poet."<sup>3</sup> In his notes for a lecture he never delivered (An American Primer), Whitman wrote:

The great writers are often select of their audiences.--The greatest writers only are well-pleased and at their ease among the unlearned--are received by common men and women familiarly, do not hold out obscure, but come welcome to table, bed, leisure, by day and night.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the prefaces and Democratic Vistas Whitman calls for "orbic bards," "divine literatures" who are to be prophets of "the People-- of their measureless wealth of latent power and capacity, their vast artistic contrasts of lights and shades." Whitman wrote for the people on a grand scale to which he believed they would eventually, if not immediately, be able to respond: "(The Proof of a poet shall be sternly deferr'd till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorb'd it.) . . . I am willing to wait to be understood by the growth of the taste of myself." ("By Blue Ontario's Shore")

And yet Whitman has never yet reached the people. Kreymborg called it a tragedy in 1929.

The book was intended for the divine average and the average ignored it, as to this day they ignore it. In the literature of the world, there is no greater irony, no greater tragedy, than the neglect paid by the people to a man of genius embracing the gamut of the common American and lifting it to a continuous chant resounding around the earth.<sup>5</sup>

By 1950 the situation was not essentially different, as Charles Willard revealed in Whitman's American Fame. Whitman's name had become widely known but few outside the small circles of scholars and enthusiasts knew his poems.<sup>6</sup> Even the most recent books acknowledge that while Whitman is probably America's most famous poet and "certainly the most pervasively influential,"<sup>7</sup> he has never become popular. People know his name and picture but not many have read the poems.

This chapter is an attempt to illuminate levels of poetic taste by examining the curious and paradoxical case of Walt Whitman, a would-be popular poet.

As we saw in Chapter I, a significant aspect of the American quest for a national literature in the early nineteenth century was a frequently repeated call for a "poet for the people." In retrospect, we cannot help but notice how specifically critics seemed to anticipate Whitman. Charvat quotes J. G. Percival who was, as early as 1822, emphasizing free poetic technique for a distinctly American literature.

I do not like poetry which bears the mark of the file and burnisher. I like to see it in the full ebullition of feeling and fancy, foaming up with the spirit of life, and glowing with the rainbows of a glad inspiration. . . . I contend that this free and careless style is the natural one for a dawning national literature.<sup>8</sup>

In 1830 William Ellery Channing, in emphasizing the importance of literature as the "chief means of forming a better race of human beings," and in designating "true" religion as the basis of an improved, national literature, seems to have been forecasting the Leaves of Grass.<sup>9</sup> Literature under the influence of true religion (the italics are mine)

will penetrate farther into the soul; will find new interpretations of nature and life; will breathe a martyr's love of truth, tempered with a never-failing charity; and, whilst sympathizing with all human suffering, will still be pervaded by a healthful cheerfulness, and will often break forth in tones of irrepressible joy, responsive to that happiness which fills God's universe.<sup>10</sup>

Working in free forms and from a religious foundation, the national poet would also be required to identify with the people, as William Gilmore Simms wrote: the nation's "poets and artists to feel her

wants, her hopes, her triumphs, must be born of the soil and ardently devoted to its claims." Jonathan would have not only to wear home-spun but to speak to his servant as to an equal.<sup>11</sup>

At mid-century Whitman was absorbing suggestions from various sources about what a people's poet should be. Benjamin Spencer notes that Simms's "insistence that genuine national attitudes are to be derived not so much from partisan politics as from 'walks among the people' became one of Whitman's cardinal prescriptions for the American literatus."<sup>12</sup> In the 1840's Young America critics wrote frequently about national literature in the U.S. Democratic Review, the influence of which Whitman acknowledged later. He must have read William A. Jones's "Poetry for the People" in 1843,<sup>13</sup> which held that a "wise poetic teacher" was needed "to educate the public feeling and direct the energies of popular impulse." The great "end of the Poet for the People" was "the Elevation of the People." A great poet would "dignify the daily life of ordinary men" and "strengthen and elevate the moral impulses of the mass." Jones wrote:

The great Poet of the People, the world-renowned bard,  
the Homer of the mass, has not yet appeared.

The most famous petition for a national bard is Emerson's essay on "The Poet" (1844). Lines from this essay echo throughout the Leaves of Grass and the 1855 preface. "There is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature; and the distinctions which we make in events and in affairs, of low and high, honest and base, disappear when nature is used as a symbol." "All the facts of

the animal economy, sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change and reappear a new and higher fact." The sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body." The poet must "abdicate a manifold and duplex life"; he must "lie close hid with nature" and avoid the "Capitol" and the "Exchange." He must "pass for a fool and a churl for a long season."

Like W. A. Jones, Emerson declared that the American bard had not yet arrived by the early 1840's.

I look in vain for the poet I describe. . . . We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials . . . Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung.

Even though Whitman sometimes tried to minimize the fact, we know--not only from his writing but from his own expressions of indebtedness--that he was profoundly influenced by Emerson. In the 1856 edition of Leaves of Grass he hailed Emerson as "Master." He told John Trowbridge in 1860 that the two greatest influences on his mind and poetry had been the Italian opera and reading Emerson. "He freely admitted that he could never have written his poems if he had not first 'come to himself,' and that Emerson helped him to 'find himself'." He had been "simmering, simmering, simmering" and Emerson had brought him "to a boil."<sup>14</sup> When Emerson detailed characteristics of an ideal national poet, Whitman tried to fill that prescription.

It is generally believed that Whitman attempted consciously and deliberately to become the national poet called for by Emerson and earlier by other nineteenth-century writers. In an unsigned article for the Democratic Review in 1855, Whitman hailed himself: "An American bard at last!" Ostensibly he seems to have met the requirements: he wrote about the common man; he experimented with new free forms for expressing American ideas; he attempted to amalgamate and elevate the national character by stimulating development of individual personality.

But one further requirement for a national poet was that he be read and understood by the people. Even Emerson emphasized the communication between poet and reader in his description of the function of the poet. The "highest minds" explore "the double meaning . . . or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact." Now all men receive impressions of nature through their senses, but, although they need to express themselves ("we [all] study to utter our painful secret"), most "cannot report the conversation they have had with nature." The poet has the greatest capacity for receiving impulses from nature through the senses and for reproducing them in speech. He represents men by expressing for them what they all need to have expressed. The poet also functions as a "liberating god" in that he uses symbols to exhilarate the minds of his readers and help them transcend time and space through the imagination. "This emancipation is dear to all men, and the power to impart it . . . must come from greater depth and scope of thought." For some readers Whitman's poetry succeeds powerfully in exhilarating the imagination



and in expressing significance of sensuous facts. Why the poetry has not accomplished these ends for readers in general is the problem of this chapter.

We have ample evidence that Whitman wanted to be the kind of national bard who would write not only about the people but for them. He made clear in the 1855 preface his profound respect for the individual person. The poet's superior ability in perceiving and expressing does not make him greater than any ordinary man or woman. "He sees health for himself in being one of the mass. . . . The Master [poet] knows that he is unspeakably great and that all are unspeakably great . . . that to be is just as great as to perceive or tell." The poet does have a message for ordinary people: "folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls." Poets are concerned about communicating to common readers: "The messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are not better than you, . . . Did you suppose there could be only one Supreme? We affirm there can be unnumbered Supremes."

In Democratic Vistas, Whitman's analysis of the essential functions of literature in a democratic society would seem to require that the poet be received by great numbers of common readers. Whitman held that in 1871 a genuinely democratic society had not manifested itself in the United States. He prophesied that fruition of democracy was possible far in the future, if the confidence,

personality, and character of individual human beings were developed and if a loving comradeship among individuals were inspired. Literature and the arts were important in a country primarily because "they furnish the materials and suggestions of personality for the women and men of that country, and enforce them in a thousand effective ways."

Whitman was not interested in elitist art, in literature as a means to "pander to what is called taste." Elitist art worked against his doctrine of Personalism as the basis of a viable democratic society: "taste, intelligence and culture (so-called), have been against the masses, and remain so." Only the "rare, cosmical, artist-mind, lit with the Infinite" could comprehend the great, "oceanic qualities" of the people. What was needed was (the italics are mine): "a literature underlying life, religious, consistent with science, handling the elements and forces with consistent power, teaching and training men." Literature was to supplant religion in modern democratic society. "The priest departs. The divine literatus comes." Most important, the poet was to bolster self-respect, and respect for others, among readers by encouraging them to apprehend that "there is a moral purpose" underlying all of Nature and thought. If the poet could convey the "great Idea"--"the idea of All, with the accompanying idea of eternity, and of itself, the soul, buoyant, indestructible"--he would have helped readers to recognize the great and equal value in every individual person. Whitman's poetics demanded a poetry comprehensible by those ordinary,

individual persons making up the great democratic aggregate. He wrote in "By Blue Ontario's Shore":

I listened to the Phantom by Ontario's shore,  
I heard the voice arising demanding bards,  
By them all native and grand, by them alone can these States  
be fused into the compact organism of a nation.

Whitman's lack of reception among the public at large is interesting, particularly because there are so many reasons that he should have been popular. One way to study levels of poetry is to examine Whitman's career to see why techniques and poetic characteristics that proved to be a source of popular appeal for other nineteenth-century writers did not work for Whitman, in spite of the fact that he has been hailed as the greatest American poet by many critics.

Whitman, like other popular poets, did advertise. It is true that he never published well; having facilities like those of Harpers, available to Will Carleton, might have helped his public reception considerably. But believing that he had an important message, Whitman did attempt throughout his life to make his work known. Like Lydia Sigourney, he sent copies of his early Leaves to the people he thought could do him the most good. Whittier threw the book into the fire, the Quaker being offended, no doubt, by the arrogant self-pride of the poet as well as by his sexual frankness.<sup>15</sup> But Emerson's response, one of the most famous in American literature, was extremely helpful to Whitman. On July 21, 1855, Emerson wrote, among other compliments for the new poet:

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were not illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty.

Whitman used the letter in a variety of ways that seem a breach of etiquette, if not of ethics. He let Charles Dana print it, without Emerson's permission, in the New York Tribune on October 10, and he included the newspaper clipping in copies of his book sent to prominent men like Longfellow.<sup>16</sup> The letter and Whitman's response were printed in the 1856 edition of the Leaves, again without Emerson's permission. On the backstrip of the book, Emerson's signature and a line from the letter were printed in gold: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career." Emerson was evidently surprised by the young writer's audacity but not so disturbed as to refrain from recommending the book (and the man) to friends like Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Moncure Conway, and Thomas Carlyle. Emerson's "endorsement" provoked response from several reviewers who would otherwise have been unaware of the poet.

Whitman wanted the book to be popular. He asserted optimistically in the response to Emerson's letter: "the work of my life is making poems. I keep on till I make a hundred, and then several hundred--perhaps a thousand. The way is clear to me. A few years, and the average annual call for my Poems is ten or twenty thousand copies--more, quite likely."<sup>17</sup> Not content with the publicity he was receiving, Whitman began utilizing his journalistic experience on his own behalf. Three articles written by himself appeared in September, 1855: "Walt Whitman and His Poems," in the

United States Review (formerly the Democratic Review); a joint review of Tennyson's Maud and Other Poems and Leaves of Grass in the American Phrenological Journal; a journalistic account of the poet and his book on September 29 in the Brooklyn Times. Holloway notes that in 1871 Whitman was still acting as his own press agent: having delivered a poem at the opening of the annual exhibition of the American Institute in New York, Whitman wrote about the occasion for the Washington Chronicle and then included a clipping from the article when the poem was published in a small book.<sup>18</sup> Whitman even contributed generously to books that his friends wrote about him; over half of John Burroughs' 1867 booklet, Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person, was probably written by the poet himself.<sup>19</sup>

Like that of some of the other popular poets, Ella Wheeler Wilcox notably, Whitman's reputation was occasionally boosted by sensation or scandal. When the poet was dismissed from his clerkship in 1865 by James Harlan, Secretary of the Interior (probably because of the shocking content of the Leaves of Grass) a number of friends came eagerly to his support. William Douglas O'Connor wrote a glowing panegyric of The Good Gray Poet in 1866 and Burroughs' Notes followed in 1867.

Then, evidently in a mood of despondency during his illness in 1876, Whitman wrote about his lack of popularity in an article printed in Camden's West Jersey Press.

The real truth is that with the exception of a very few readers (women equally with men), Whitman's poems in their public reception have fallen stillborn in this country. They have been met, and are met today, with the determined

denial, disgust and scorn of orthodox American authors, publishers and editors, and, in a pecuniary and worldly sense, have certainly wrecked the life of their author.

The article emphasized the Harlan affair and the poet's paralysis and continued to lament that after twenty years his poems had made little or no impression.

Still he stands alone. No established publishing house will yet print his books. Most of the stores will not even sell them. In fact, his works have never been really published at all.<sup>20</sup>

Whitman sent a clipping of the article to William Rossetti who promptly had it printed in the London Athenaeum on March 11, 1876. Two days later in the London Daily News Robert Buchanan wrote a scathing attack on Americans for neglecting their greatest man of letters.<sup>21</sup> An international dispute flared up and raged for a few months, resulting in increased critical awareness of Whitman. The publicity did not succeed in attracting common readers for the Leaves, however. Just as The Good Gray Poet drew literary attention to him, but resulted in "no great response in the form of increased demands for the condemned book,"<sup>22</sup> so the 1876 dispute reveals Whitman "in all his foreign recognition a poet for the sophisticated reader; the common man does not know him as a poet and never encounters his work."<sup>23</sup>

Not even being "banned in Boston" in 1882 worked as effectively for his fame as did the Poems of Passion scandal for Ella Wheeler in Chicago in the following year. The 1883 sensation stimulated a notoriety for Mrs. Wilcox that drew readers for the rest of

her life. But when the District Attorney of Boston classified Leaves of Grass as obscene literature, and Whitman, refusing to let Osgood delete disputed poems, took his book to a Philadelphia publisher, David McKay, the stimulation of sales was only temporary. For about a year the book sold better than it had ever before, but, as Allen writes, "unfortunately American literary taste had not really changed, and the artificial stimulation of sales gradually subsided."<sup>24</sup>

Besides the persistent and sometimes deceptive efforts to publicize his book and the fortuitous sensations which spread his name, if not his poetry, there are other factors in Whitman's career that could have been expected to prompt a popular response in the nineteenth century. One important Whitman characteristic emphasized throughout Thomas Brasher's study of Whitman as Editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle was the poet's didactic tendency. As a newspaper editor and book reviewer Whitman was the "earnest pedagogue" believing as he did that "the people of the United States (hence, those of Brooklyn) [were] a newspaper-ruled people and therefore amenable to education and improvement through the medium of news-print."<sup>25</sup>

In June 1846, in the editorial, "Ourselves and the Eagle," Whitman clarified two functions of an editor that he was later going to claim for the poet: he sincerely wanted to reach out to communicate with his readers and he emphasized that a main duty of an editor is to educate people.

We really feel a desire to talk on many subjects, to all the people of Brooklyn; and it ain't their ninepences we want so much either. There is a curious kind of sympathy (haven't you ever thought of it before?) that arises in the mind of a newspaper conductor with the public he serves. . . . Daily communion creates a sort of brotherhood and sisterhood between the two parties. . . .

. . . . .  
much good can always be done with such potent influence as a well circulated newspaper. . . . To wield that influence, is a great responsibility. There are numerous noble reforms that have yet to be pressed upon the world. People are to be schooled, in opposition perhaps to their long established ways of thought.<sup>26</sup>

Brasher amply illustrates Whitman's didactic teachings in both editorials and book reviews. One editorial, for example, defended the Irish against prejudices of the Nativists:

Ah, Mr. Native, or Mr. Whig, you are true to your instincts, we see. The Irish laborers are ignorant in book-lore we grant--and perhaps uncouth in manners. But they are men like us, and have wants and appetities, affection for their offspring, and anger for all kinds of tyranny, and if they don't get work or food, they will starve to death.

Whitman's earliest pronouncement on a national literature was an editorial in the Eagle on May 12, 1846.<sup>27</sup> Brasher emphasizes, however, that in the 425 book reviews by Whitman in the Eagle, there was little said about the need for an indigenous literature. "The didactic merit of any work was the quality which really engaged the attention of Whitman as a book reviewer."<sup>28</sup> One example will suffice. Whitman wrote about John Alden's Lawyer's Daughter in 1847:

We have spoken before in the highest terms of Alden's writings: they are not brilliant in the way of genius, but they are always charming for their good sense and truth to nature, always inculcate a moral, and leave no reader



at the end of their perusing without a hint toward good. Such books deserve well of criticism, for they perform a wide and deep benefit in the sphere of their operation.<sup>29</sup>

Brasher notes that "Whitman's fervent belief in the superiority of democracy over all other political creeds was an emphasized topic in his reviews," only specialized publications, in religion or health for example, escaping didactic comment on the preeminence of democracy.<sup>30</sup>

Even before assuming the editorship of the Eagle, Whitman had exhibited didactic technique in a series of sentimental, moralizing short stories that appeared in the Democratic Review and a maudlin novel, Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate, about a country boy who goes to the city, becomes a drunkard, breaks a woman's heart, etc., then earns his redemption from alcohol by rescuing a child from drowning. Whitman was later ashamed of this novel, but it was, ironically, the best-selling piece of his career.<sup>31</sup> In the introduction to Franklin Evans, the author declared the book to have been written "for the mass"--not for critics "but for THE PEOPLE."

Throughout his life Whitman was thoroughly saturated with the nineteenth-century critical expectation that literature should teach and improve the lives of readers, and always he hoped to establish direct communication with a wide audience. But the irony is that while he had succeeded in reaching that audience in his early fiction and newspaper writing, when he became inspired with his great message--that everything has an eternal soul<sup>32</sup>--he was

able to attract only a few hearers. Several reasons for this suggest themselves.

The early fiction held the attention of readers with a soap-opera story line, and Charvat, in analyzing the popularity of Longfellow, has marked the importance of narrative for nineteenth-century readers. About eighty per cent of Longfellow's verse was written in some kind of story, mostly historical. According to Charvat, history, in one form or another, was the chief substance of most successful writing in the early nineteenth century, no matter what the literary genre.<sup>33</sup> There was, of course, no story in Leaves of Grass to hold the attention of an ordinary reader, or to supply a secure foothold for one unprepared to walk a bewildering route of subtle "clews and indirections."

Then, too, the early pieces, even the newspaper editorials, were full of the sentimentality that pleased mid-century readers. In one Eagle editorial, Whitman, warning young boys about the numerous drownings off the Brooklyn docks, advised them to imagine the anxiety of a mother whose boy was late in returning home. The moment is dramatized in the heart-tug style of Will Carleton: "a knock is heard at the door"; the knock is an omen of the news immediately following that the son has drowned; the mother's shock and grief are then pictured in sentimental detail.<sup>34</sup> We have only to think of "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" or "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" to see how differently Whitman handled grief in his greatest poetry.

But again, the greater the poetry, the more inaccessible it has proved to be to common readers. When Whitman was forthrightly didactic--drinking is bad and only when Franklin Evans has rescued a child and redeemed himself from alcohol will he win his fortune and live happily ever after--his readers understood the lesson. But then the poet became infused with a great and universally comprehensive message--"the pulsations in all matter, all spirit, throbbing forever--the eternal systole and diastole of life in things--wherefrom I feel and know that death is not the ending, as was thought, but rather the real beginning--and that nothing ever is or can be lost, nor ever die, nor soul, nor matter."<sup>35</sup> It was not possible to convey this message forthrightly, in an editorial, for example, or in a narrative poem ending with the lesson: you, reader, will never die; I am sure that your soul will last forever. If the thing had been said like that--explicit, simple, clear--readers might have understood but they wouldn't have believed in any profound way. The poet had to do a great deal of hard artistic work to stimulate readers into experiencing his message, not merely with the head but with the senses and heart--and soul.

To accomplish this purpose, forthright didacticism was inadequate, and the poet had necessarily to move to the infradidactic and supradidactic extremes of our scale in Part I. Lilac, star, and bird, smells and sights and sounds, are carefully, intricately interwoven so that the reader experiences grief, mourning,

resolution of grief in new understanding of death--"praise! praise!  
praise!/ For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death."

The materials of the poem had to be infinitely complex so as to induce the reader to share the poet's mystical apprehension of eternity. A single line near the end of the poem may serve as one example of artistic complexity.

O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night

We see the color and luminosity of the evening star. Throughout the poem the star has represented President Lincoln--his power, leadership, his ability to guide ordinary men from almost supernatural heights. The fallen star in the West has symbolized the tragic death of the president--Lincoln having been born in the West and returning there for burial, and the West representing in mythology and traditional literature the destination of souls after death. But the president is now "comrade"--a loving and equal brother to the poet and thousands of others while living on earth, "unspeakably great" but not greater than any of them. And the soul of the comrade president still lives; this is not stated, but suggested by the images of brightness ("lustrous" and "silver") and life ("comrade" and "face") against the image of death or eternity--"night." The immortality of the soul is also suggested in this line by its kinship with the endings of several great pastoral elegies in the English language. Milton's "Lycidas" (Edward King, or Milton himself, or creative man in general--probably all of these) is, at the end of the poem, not dead:

Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor,  
 So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,  
 And yet anon repairs his drooping head,  
 And tricks his beams and with new-spangled Ore,  
 Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.

The immortality of Shelley's "Adonais" (John Keats, and his thoughts and poetry), likewise, is symbolized by a star.

burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,  
 The soul of Adonais, like a star,  
 Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

The receptive reader, responding to the sensual beauty as well as the intellectual and spiritual meanings of the symbols in the poem, will share the experience of the poet:

Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul.

But most people cannot make sense of the poem because they have not had the necessary practice in reading--in paying careful attention to words, in imagining sensuous experience evoked by words, in composing themselves so as to receive complex suggestions of symbols and at the same time, remaining alert so as to respond actively to these suggestions. This active receptivity is a paradoxical requirement that makes reading high-level poetry complicated and "difficult." It made Whitman's poems inaccessible to the audience he cared most about.

Whitman wrote repeatedly that he wanted to produce a literature for the people, "eligible to the uses of the high average of men--and not restricted by conditions ineligible to the masses." J. A. Symonds, who published the first important British study of Whitman in 1893,

wrote that the arts of the great civilizations of the past had a "certain unconscious and spontaneous rapport with the nations which begot them, and with the central life-force of those nations. . . . Art expressed what the people had of noblest and sincerest and was appreciated by the people. No abrupt division separated the nation from the poets who gave a voice to the nation."<sup>36</sup> Symonds emphasized Whitman's attempt to eliminate this division between the poetry of America and its people. He quoted Whitman: no writer, artist, or lecturer had yet "confronted the voiceless, but ever erect and active, pervading, underlying will and typic aspiration of the land, in a spirit kindred to itself." No artist had yet "really spoken to this people."<sup>37</sup>

Most of the popular poets studied here were born and raised among the people, and understanding common men helped the poets write for this audience. The principal factor in Whitman's career that could have been expected to aid him in his goal of producing a widely-received poetry was that he surpassed all other American poets in the extent to which he lived among, enjoyed, and loved ordinary people. Part of this was pose as most biographers have admitted, even as they seem to agree that Esther Shephard exaggerated the fact in Walt Whitman's Pose (1938).<sup>38</sup> Emory Holloway noted that Whitman "knew the value of creating a role for himself in the public mind as a 'people's poet,' and took delight in doing what poets who traded in 'respectability' did not care or dare to do."<sup>39</sup> Holloway was commenting here on the poet's propensity for public display of "commonness"--sitting on the curb of a Washington avenue eating watermelon with Peter Doyle, for example.

Whitman did seem to work deliberately at creating an image-- with blunt speech, unconventional attire, freedom from conventions and proprieties. He probably relished the effect that the stark simplicity of his room and board in the Washington garrets and the Mickle Street house in Camden had on his visitors. He played his role easily and naturally. When Lord Houghton called on him at his brother's house in Camden, Whitman, with characteristic composure, served his guest the only food that happened to be in the house, baked apples. George was evidently embarrassed, but Walt was not.<sup>40</sup> Granting a public pose and even granting what Leadie Clark demonstrated in Walt Whitman's Concept of the American Common Man<sup>41</sup>--that Whitman was not entirely free from human prejudice--, we still have an overwhelming amount of evidence that Whitman's love for common people was genuine and that he had a profound understanding of their emotional needs. That he could not write poems for these people is a puzzle worth investigating in a paper on levels of poetic taste.

Walt was born of the "artisan class," son of a never-successful Long Island carpenter, whose children included an alcoholic, a feeble-minded son, a syphilitic who died in an asylum, and a neurotic, perhaps psychotic daughter. Walt's mother, a simple, hard-working woman with Quaker origins, was gentle, sweet-tempered, and fond of her children. Whitman was solicitous of her all his life, sharing the responsibility for the family after his father died in 1855, often supporting her morale and sending her money when he could. In "Starting from Paumanok" he called her a "perfect mother." He wrote her volumes of letters from Washington, but not about poetry. When he was at home

she adjusted to his erratic time schedule as best she could, defended him to visitors, was evidently proud of his being a literary man; but neither she nor any of his family could ever read the poems he wrote.

Whitman's preference for the company of "powerful uneducated" persons is illustrated in every biography. Allen writes that "even as a boy, his companions were outdoor men, especially uneducated herdsmen, farmers, pilots, fishermen."<sup>42</sup> He made friends among ferry-boat operators and frequently visited sick stage-car drivers in a Brooklyn hospital just before the Civil War. Allen notes that at this time Whitman had more in common intellectually with a group of literary Bohemians at Pfaff's restaurant, even with the doctors at the hospital, but that he seemed to prefer above all the company of the uneducated drivers: "In their ancestry, social backgrounds, experiences, habits, speech, and simple good nature they were like Walt's grandfather Van Velsor or even his own brothers. With them he could relax and be himself."<sup>43</sup>

John Burroughs recorded a touching scene in which Whitman, riding alongside the conductor on a crowded Washington horse car, assisted a young mother "of the working class" by relieving her of the fretful and unruly child that was driving her almost to tears.

The astonished and excited child, partly in fear, partly in satisfaction at the change, stops its screaming, and as the man adjusts it more securely to his breast, plants its chubby hands against him, and pushing off as far as it can, gives a good long look squarely in his face--then as if satisfied snuggles down with its head on his neck, and in less than a minute is sound and peacefully asleep.<sup>44</sup>



By this time the passengers had thinned out and Whitman, still holding the child, assumed the duties of the conductor who could now take a break for his first meal and relief of the day.

When the Unitarian clergyman Moncure Conway visited Whitman in New York in 1855, he was impressed during their walks in the city that so many workingmen greeted the poet with a warm hand-clasp. Curious, he asked one of them what sort of man Whitman was. "A fust-rate man is Walt. Nobody knows Walt but likes him; nearly everybody knows him--and loves him."<sup>45</sup> When Conway and Whitman visited a prison, Holloway reports, "The inmates crowded around him, as to a father confessor, unburdening their various complaints."<sup>46</sup>

It was, of course, Whitman's role as "wound dresser" in the army hospitals in Washington that most dramatically illustrated his tender and genuine concern for the common man. In Specimen Days he described some of his hospital activity: he washed and dressed wounds, ("I have some cases where the patient is unwilling anyone should do this but me"); he read passages from the Bible, wrote letters home for those too weak to write themselves, and distributed writing paper, fruit, and small sums of money. Whitman wrote to his friend Abby Price in 1863:

O how one gets to love them, often, particular cases, so suffering, so good, so manly & affectionate--Abby, you would all smile to see me among them--many of them like children; ceremony is mostly discarded--they suffer & get exhausted & so weary--lots of them have grown to expect as I leave at night that we should kiss each other, sometimes quite a number, I have to go round. . . .<sup>47</sup>

He would sit patiently at the bedside of a dying soldier to alleviate the anguish during the final hours, and his descriptions of dying men like John Mahay and Stewart Glover are some of the most moving passages in Specimen Days. Often, his mere presence at critical times seemed to help the dying man recover.

To anyone dying, thither I speed and twist the knob of the door,  
Turn the bed-clothes toward the foot of the bed,  
Let the physician and the priest go home.

I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will,  
O despairer, here is my neck,  
By God, you shall not go down! hang your whole weight upon me.  
("Song of Myself," 40)

The best testimonial to the authenticity of Whitman's genuine concern for these soldiers is found in letters they wrote him.<sup>48</sup> Elijah Douglass Fox, for example, wrote from the Washington hospital when Whitman had gone to Brooklyn in November 1863:

You will allow me to call you Father wont you . . . both of my parents . . . dead . . . Walt, you will be a second Father to me won't you, for my love for you is hardly less than my love for my natural parent. . . . how any person could know you and not love you is a wonder to me.

Whitman responded from Brooklyn on November 21, revealing again the preference he had throughout his life for the social company of "uneducated persons."

I don't wish to disparage my dear friends and acquaintances here, there are so many of them and all so good, many so educated, traveled &c, some so handsome & witty, some rich &c, some among the literary class--many young men--all good--many of them educated & polished & brilliant in conversation, &c--& I thought I valued their society & friendship--& I do, for it is worth valuing.--But, Douglass, I will tell you the truth, you are so

much closer to me than any of them that there is no comparison-- there has never passed so much between them & me as we have-- besides there is something that takes down all artificial accomplishments, & that is a manly & loving soul--My dearest comrade, . . .<sup>49</sup>

One of Whitman's closest and most long-lasting friendships was with Peter Doyle, a young Confederate soldier turned horse-car conductor in Washington after the war. Whitman met him on a street-car in December 1865, and Doyle's description of the instantaneous affection between them corroborates what all the biographers have emphasized--Whitman's natural affinity for simple people.<sup>50</sup> The friendship lasted until Whitman's death in 1892, the poet offering parental affection and advice to the lonely youth in a city of strangers, and Doyle providing Whitman someone to love and look after, as well as a companion whose relaxed company he enjoyed. In 1868 the poet wrote to Doyle from Providence, Rhode Island, where he had spent a week in the "really intellectual" company of "pleasant society" including the William F. Channings and a group of educated women, "refined and polite, not disposed to small talk, conversing in earnest on profound subjects." It was all right "for a week or two." But he clearly missed the plain company of his young friend. "It is all first-rate, good and smart but too constrained and bookish for a free old hawk like me."<sup>51</sup>

Of course, Whitman also attracted intellectuals like O'Connor, Burroughs, Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, Anne Gilchrist, who were ardently devoted to him and formed the nucleus of an enthusiastic discipleship of the poet. The point here is that Whitman did also,

more than any other American poet, seem to have sincere regard for and genuine understanding of common people.

Biographers have speculated on homosexual tendencies as the basis for Whitman's relationship with soldiers and workingmen like Tom Sawyer, Elijah Fox, and Peter Doyle. Allen notes a social inferiority making Whitman ill at ease in drawing-room gatherings and causing deliberate crudities, the over-compensation of "a man instinctively and innately refined but accidentally unfamiliar with the superficial habits of polite society."<sup>52</sup> The question here is not why Whitman was drawn to intimate friendship with simple, uneducated persons, but rather why they did not read his poems. The fact is that just as his mother had never understood his writing, so Peter Doyle could not read the poems, nor did the ranks of his beloved soldiers in the Washington hospitals know or care that he was a poet. Edwin H. Miller notes that Whitman's letters to the soldiers were deliberately "unpoetic." "He wished in their eyes and hearts to be a comrade, not a poet."<sup>53</sup> Whitman's poetry has never, up to the present day, been received by the common man. By the mid-nineteenth century scholars and critics had made Whitman's reputation secure among the intelligentsia, and Leaves of Grass appears on lists of "Books Worth Reading" or "American Classics,"<sup>54</sup> but the common man has never known the poetry. General ignorance of Whitman's work is amply illustrated in Willard's book with examples like the 1947 Camden newspaper article about the conversion of Whitman's Mickle Street house into a shrine: "It was in this building that Whitman wrote Blades of Grass and Captain, O, My Captain, a tribute to President Lincoln."<sup>55</sup>

The answer seems to lie in the fact that although Whitman enjoyed immensely the company of common people with whom he could relax and although he was extremely sensitive to their emotional needs and generous in giving of himself to meet those needs, he had little understanding (and seemingly no interest in) their intellectual needs and limitations. He never seemed to care that his soldier comrades, his family, or Peter Doyle did not read his poetry. He was mainly concerned with having it recognized in his own day by the intelligentsia. Acceptance by the people would come at some future time.

Granville Hicks concluded that "the common men and women for whom Whitman wrote were little interested in his poems" because they were concerned with amassing wealth rather than being spiritually revitalized.<sup>56</sup> Leadie Clark too charged that the reason Whitman's poetry had no popular appeal was that he had no practical message. One would have to agree that Whitman's poems do not offer a "realistic program" to show a man the way through his present crises as he strives toward the world to come,<sup>57</sup> but this writer goes too far in declaring that "Whitman did not understand the average man of his own day. His bus drivers and ferry riders were romanticized into members of the powerful uneducated group, and as long as they greeted him with a smile, Whitman could ignore the interest they might have had in the price of bread, the wages paid to labor, or the length of the work-day."<sup>58</sup> It is obvious that Whitman did romanticize common people in the poems, but the volumes of correspondence and books about his relations with his family, uneducated friends, beloved soldiers testify

that he most emphatically did understand the emotional and practical need of the average man.

The problem was not that he idealized the people he knew, but that he idealized his readers. It probably never occurred to him that Peter Doyle or his mother would ever be able to read his poems, yet he visualized a common man in the future, likewise uneducated, but somehow able and willing to engage in the "gymnast's struggle" which his poems invited. He seemed to have given no thought to how this improvement in reading ability would come about.

Whitman's work and the literature about him reveal a missing link between his thinking about the common people he knew personally, and the common readers that he considered in the abstract. He knew that the taste of general readers in his own day was undeveloped, and he lamented their preference for "cataracts of trash."<sup>59</sup> It was discouraging that for writers who could strike "the mean flat average, the sensational appetite for stimulus, incident, persiflage" and who could depict "to the common caliber, sensual, exterior life"; the audiences were "limitless and profitable." In his own day audiences "for workmen portraying interior or spiritual life" were "limited, and often laggard." And yet in some miraculous way readers in the future would respond if only the poetry were "bold, modern, . . . kosmical," spiritually inspiring. "Erect, inflated, and fully self-esteeming be the chant; and then America will listen with pleased ears."<sup>60</sup> When envisioning future readers, Whitman was evidently not thinking of men and women that he knew. In fact, he seemed so charmed

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by real uneducated persons as to be completely uninterested in whether they ever learned to read. He wrote in the 1855 preface:

Faith is the antiseptic of the soul . . . it pervades the common people and preserves them . . . they never give up believing and expecting and trusting. There is that indescribable freshness and unconsciousness about an illiterate person that humbles and mocks the power of the noblest expressive genius.

At the ends of those poems in which Whitman seemed to be most ardently trying to reach out to "touch" readers, he evidently hoped that the relationship would be between person and person rather than between poet and reader.

Camerado, this is no book,  
Who touches this touches a man.  
("So Long!")

Like many critics, Allen has stressed the "ambition which grew with Whitman in each successive edition of Leaves of Grass . . . to identify himself so closely with his book that the reader would have the illusion that the book was the man himself."<sup>61</sup> Sexual imagery like that at the close of "So Long!" has led to the interpretation of Whitman's desire to touch the individual reader personally, as a sublimation of his own unfulfilled longings--the poet and reader become lovers.

Other writers suggest that Whitman hoped to exude the same magnetism for readers that he had for personal friends. As he wrote in Specimen Days,



In my visits to the hospitals I found it was in the simple matter of personal presence, and emanating ordinary cheer and magnetism, that I succeeded and help'd more than by medical nursing, or delicacies, or gifts of money, or anything else.

When he visited an army camp in 1864, he wrote to his mother, "I have no difficulty at all in making myself at home among the soldiers, teamsters, or any--I most always find they like to have me very much; it seems to do them good."<sup>62</sup> He believed that anyone could develop his own personality "by temperance, by a clean and powerful physique, by chastity, by elevating the mind through lofty discussions and meditations and themes, and by self-esteem and divine love" so as to be able to go into a room, or along the street, and exhale "an atmosphere of command and fascination" upon everyone in the area.<sup>63</sup> Finding that he did emit a magnetism himself, he tried actually to inject it into his poems. As one writer put it recently, "he hoped that his readers would feel its peculiar 'electric' force emanating from his 'leaves' or when in actual bodily contact with his book."<sup>64</sup>

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

. . . . .  
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop someplace waiting for you.

("Song of Myself")

Dear friend whoever you are take this kiss  
I give it especially to you, do not forget me,  
. . . . .  
Remember my words, I may again return,  
I love you.

("So Long!")

Consciously attempting to become a national bard, hoping to inspire and amalgamate the nation by revitalizing spirit and personality of individual common readers, Whitman never came to terms with the fact that a book--and the man it contains even if he is magnificently appealing in the flesh--can be received only if the person holding the book can read. In "Song of Myself" he disparaged books and the act of reading: "Have you practis'd so long to learn to read? Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems? . . . You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books." His book was to be an instrument for helping persons to become independent of books, but he did not face the fact that for his book to accomplish its purpose, it would have to be read.

Though some critics conclude that Leaves of Grass never attracted a wide audience because the overtly sexual poems offended critics and gave the book a bad reputation,<sup>65</sup> it is difficult, in light of the good fortune of Ella Wheeler in 1883 and many other writers who have since been launched into fame by sensational publicity regarding sex, to accept sexual subject matter as the reason for lack of popularity of any American writer. A more accurate and revealing explanation seems to be that the book has proved inaccessible to the "divine average" because it is just plain too difficult for them.

We have already seen that the difficulty (as well as the pleasure) in great poetry arises from demands upon the alert response

of the reader to words and symbols in the poem. There are other reasons, too, that Whitman's poetry has proven too challenging for common readers. Whitman wanted to teach, but indirectly. The nineteenth century expectation was that poets should teach their readers, acting as mentors and guiding them with clearly-formed pieces of practical wisdom, but Whitman refused to do that: "You are also asking me questions and I hear you,/ I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself." Besides, as recent writers like Abraham Kaplan have pointed out, most people do not really want to learn something new, but to have what they already know reinforced and confirmed. In an age when a man's soul was still expected to master his fleshly desires, Whitman declared: "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul." "Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul." "I have said that the soul is not more than the body,/ And I have said that the body is not more than the soul." While thousands responded to "A Psalm of Life"--"Let us then be up and doing,/ With a heart for any fate,/ Still achieving, still pursuing,/ Learn to labor and to wait."--Whitman sang, ecstatically out of tune with conventional expectations of his day: "I loafe and invite my soul,/ I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass." In a time when the conventional concept of an external and omnipotent God was still commonly held, the people were not ready for the declaration of American Romanticism: "And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is." Whitman refused to gratify the basic desire of people to have their convictions reinforced:

I am he who walks the States with a barb'd tongue,  
     questioning every one I meet,  
 Who are you that wanted only to be told what you  
     knew before?  
 Who are you that wanted only a book to join you in  
     your nonsense?

Besides painfully challenging cherished ideas, the poems also proved difficult for ordinary readers in their novel and baffling form. In the Leaves of Grass readers did not find the rhyme which they expected or the soft, regular beat that had helped make Hiawatha so popular in 1855. Not only was there no story to hold the interest of the average reader, but the poems lacked normal transitions to tie the parts sensibly together. Of course, it was not Whitman's intention to wrap up a patly phrased moral inside a package with a neatly prescribed form. As the contemporary poet Robert Duncan emphasized recently, Leaves of Grass is not a paradigm of some existing external form, but has the structure of process: the book expresses "the ever flowing, ever Self-creative ground of a process in which forces of awareness, Self-awareness, of declaration and of longing work and re-work in the evolution . . . of a creative intention that moves . . . not toward progress and improvement but toward variety and awareness of variety,"<sup>66</sup>--the method is infradidactic, disturbing the sensorium so as to heighten awareness. In this kind of poetry the end is not logical and transitions are not appropriate, but ordinary readers, expecting a poet to be explicit, cannot make sense of poetry which is seemingly formless. They expect a beginning, a middle, and an end and have been baffled by Whitman's book which expresses above all the motion, change, flux of reality, which is without beginning or end.

The ferries, crowds, the waves on a beach, the sea, death--all are symbols, as Paul Elmer More wrote, of "change, beautiful and beneficent, purging and renewing, yet still a gateway into new roads, and never a door opening into the chambers of home."<sup>67</sup> Confrontation with change and flux underlying all reality makes a person uncomfortable. Edwin Miller recently commented on how Whitman and the painter Jackson Pollock are similar: in recognizing the "omnipresence of flux . . . ceaseless change" they frightened--and lost--their audiences. "Because the mind prefers simplifications, human nature is reduced to types, humours, character sketches, in other words, to a consistent, predictable pattern which is blatantly false to the inconsistencies, the fluctuating moods and opinions, and the contradictions of man."<sup>68</sup> Whitman's work--however cheerful, optimistic, spiritually promising--did not provide, either in its form or content, the consoling illusion of permanence or stasis (Miller's phrase) that ordinary readers want in poetry.

Apparently oblivious of the difficulty caused common readers by the lack of transition and explicit statement, Whitman fully intended his poetry to be interpreted variously, as it surely has been. He wrote in Democratic Vistas that "the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem . . .--the text furnishing the hints, clue, the start or framework. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does." Ambiguity, disturbing to unpracticed readers, is the source of some of the greatest pleasure and value in high poetry. That Leaves of Grass has succeeded in inspiring

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richly various aesthetic experience is borne out by the volumes of critical interpretation it has stimulated.

Levels of poetry can be illustrated here. In Mrs. Sigourney, such a great percentage of the poems end with the promise of heaven as a palliative for every earthly imperfection that the concept-- however comforting it was to her readers many of whom had experienced the death of a loved one--became a formula, simplistic, mechanical, even amusing to experienced readers. The same idea appears in Whitman's "The Sleepers." The narrator, after identifying with sleepers over the whole earth, declares order in the universe and the fact that each thing has a place and waits for fulfillment. He envisions a time when:

The scholar kisses the teacher and the teacher kisses the  
scholar, the wrong'd is made right,  
The call of the slave is one with the master's call, and  
the master salutes the slave,  
The felon steps forth from the prison, the insane becomes  
sane, the suffering of sick persons is reliev'd,  
The sweatings and fevers stop, the throat that was unsound  
is sound, the lungs of the consumptive are resumed,  
the poor distress'd head is free,  
The joints of the rheumatic move as smoothly as ever . . .  
. . . the paralyzed become supple.

In Mrs. Sigourney the promise of heaven is stated simply and meant literally. Having offered consolation to many, no doubt, the idea appears now as merely a pretty, "wishful," and empty thought. In Whitman, however, the material culminates a richly complex poem which has been interpreted as a "fantasia of the unconscious" by Malcolm Cowley, a revelation of the poet's sexual psychology and re-enactment of ancient puberty rites by Edwin Miller, and a symbolization of

death, regeneration, and rebirth by Gay Wilson Allen.<sup>69</sup> In Whitman's poem the vision of perfection after death has more impact on the reader because it is not as in Mrs. Sigourney the Christian myth of heaven. Noting that Nietzsche would have called it "wishful thinking," Freud the desire to return to the womb, and that Whitman did call it the "myth of heaven," Allen concludes that "the healing, restoring sleep is more than death, releasing the soul from the encumbering body." The poem is "a myth of rebirth, with some resemblance to the Hindu reincarnation." Besides the symbolic journey and dreams of the protagonist and his identification with sleepers, the vision of the poem is also enhanced, as Allen notes, by the "ritual language and rhythms" which give the poem "overtones of religious revelation and prophecy."

Burt Bacharach, composer of popular music, recently commented about hit songs in a way that is applicable to popular poetry.

There are certain things that grab people in a song. In the business, we call them "hooks." . . . Maybe the end of the phrase, maybe just the way the lyric turns . . . you wait for it every time and it's so good that you would tolerate the rest of the song just to hear that.<sup>70</sup>

An important distinction between levels of poetry is that while a low-level poem "hooks" readers who return to it for the same effect again and again, a high-level poem offers an alert, responsive reader something different at each encounter. A great poem like "Song of Myself" has thus been interpreted in a wide variety of ways. For E. H. Miller, Whitman's poem is a psychological search for the depths



of his being, an imaginative return to childhood enjoyment of oral and tactile contacts with his mother.<sup>71</sup> D. H. Lawrence read Whitman's yearning to "merge" as a death wish, a desire to lose his identity by letting it leak out into the universe.<sup>72</sup> James Miller, on the other hand, claims that the self is not submerged or annihilated but celebrated, the physical becoming transfigured into the spiritual.<sup>73</sup> Richard Chase reads "Song of Myself" as a comic poem and Roy Harvey Pearce as an epic. Recent critics have interpreted the poem in the light of Vedantic mysticism and existentialism.<sup>74</sup> The complexity and ambiguity that made the poem unintelligible to the average reader idealized by Whitman have succeeded in eliciting deep response from those willing to engage in the "gymnast's struggle."

The implication is not, of course, that Whitman's poetry was of a uniformly high level. Most critics, admitting that large portions of Leaves of Grass are programmatic and prosaic, have devoted their attention to a few great poems--e.g., "Lilacs," "Song of Myself," "The Sleepers," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," "Passage to India." Using the criteria explained in the previous chapter--(1) interdependence between form and content, (2) necessity for the reader to attend carefully to the parts of the poem and to participate in the poem, (3) insights of significance--we might easily find Whitman poems to illustrate every level of the aesthetic scale. I would rank "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" at the very top. Falling along the center of the scale would be poems like "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing,"

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"A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim," "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun."

Ranking near the bottom of the scale would be "O Captain! My Captain!," ironically Whitman's most famous poem. Leslie Fiedler, noting that the poem appeals to "bureaucratic bad taste" for the "trite and sentimental," claims that "The perpetuation of 'O Captain! My Captain!' [in school anthologies] is the secret revenge of the bourgeoisie on the poet who most challenged it."<sup>75</sup> A more likely explanation for the poem's selection for anthologies is that it was widely popular after Lincoln's assassination. The people could not understand "Lilacs," probably did not even see a connection with Lincoln. But they found their shock and grief mirrored in "Captain" in terms that made sense to them: just as they had been exulting at the ending and outcome of the war--"the prize we sought is won"--and they had turned eagerly to hail their chief, he was cut down. Our generation knows the numbed disbelief that attends news of an assassinated president--"It is some dream that on the deck,/ You've fallen cold and dead." But recognizing the source of the appeal of the poem, we must still admit that after once experiencing the sensuous and artistic richness and profound feeling of "Lilacs," a reader will probably find "Captain"--with its hackneyed metaphor (Our nation is a ship, and the president is the captain.) and blatant exploitation of shock and grief ("O heart! heart! heart!/ O the bleeding drops of red")--actually an ugly poem.

Another irony among many in Whitman's career is that this poet, who wanted most of all to write poetry for the people, contributed to the poetic technique of T. S. Eliot, who, denying the possibility of a universal democratic poetry, wrote for an isolated intellectual group. In deviating from traditional rhyme and rhythm, in using vernacular words and writing poems with rich background sources, in expecting the reader to work at understanding poems, Whitman set precedents which Eliot used to produce a definitely elitist poetry.<sup>76</sup>

And yet, difficult as the great poems are and limited as their reception has been, Whitman's work remains potentially a poetry for the people. Its exuberance, buoyant optimism, praise of beauty and goodness in all things and all men, certain faith in the immortality of souls--these are basic qualities that appeal to great audiences. I would suggest two ways in which readers could be helped to overcome initial difficulties with the poems.

One way of reaching the people would be to perform the poetry. Whitman wanted to write poems that would, like oratory and music, express "more than meanings." Bryant's description of the orator suggests a way in which a skilled reader of Whitman's poems might reach the audience.

. . . the orator is himself so affected with the feelings he would communicate, that his eyes glisten, and his frame seems to dilate, and his voice acquires an unwonted melody, and his sentences arrange themselves into a sort of measure and harmony, and the listener is chained in involuntary and breathless attention. This is the very enthusiasm that is the parent of poetry.<sup>77</sup>

Clarence Stedman, having heard Whitman lecture on Lincoln in New York, wished that the youths of the land could hear the poet read his own work.

I saw that he was by nature a rhapsodist, . . . and should be . . . a reciter of the verse that so aptly reflects him. . . . I felt here was a minstrel of whom it would be said, if he could reach the ears of the multitude and stand in their presence, that not only the cultured, but "the common people heard him gladly."<sup>78</sup>

In conveying the feeling aroused by the oratorical and Biblical rhythms of the poems, a talented performer could bring Whitman's work within range of the people.

My second suggestion for making Whitman accessible to people is by teaching. I remember my own bafflement as a college freshman upon first seeing a Whitman poem, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Sitting with a group at a professor's house, I couldn't follow the discussion and the words looked strange on the page. What has happened since then is long exposure, growing accustomed to Whitman's special phraseology, reading about his life, hearing about mysticism in a good course, learning by writing papers (and by teaching) how to engage in the "active receptivity" kind of reading.

The highlight of an introductory college poetry class I taught recently was "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Emphasis had been on learning to read, to imagine figures and sensuous descriptions, to interpret various suggestions of symbols, to participate in the poem. Only a few of the students had heard of the poem and no one remembered what it was about. Near the end of the term,

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after explaining the four main symbols and making a few other comments about the organization of the poem--to enable students to get their bearings--, I played a recording of Alexander Scourby's reading of the poem. The concentration in the room was intense; the class was profoundly moved, their appreciation of the poem having been made possible by classroom teaching, by several weeks of steady practice in reading, and by their hearing it read well.

One recent book that is an excellent attempt to introduce Whitman to common readers is Barbara Marinacci's O Wondrous Singer! (1970). As Marinacci notes, Leaves of Grass is addressed to you, whoever you are, and she remarks to her reader:

Whoever you are . . . you will probably find many things in Whitman's poetry to intrigue, delight, and move you--particularly if you are patient and diligent, and know how and where to look for them.<sup>79</sup>

NOTES--CHAPTER XIII

<sup>1</sup>Corning, Will Carleton, pp. 51-52.

<sup>2</sup>Whitman was referring to Thayer and Eldridge of Boston who published the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass and went bankrupt in 1861.

<sup>3</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960), p. 337.

<sup>4</sup>Walt Whitman, An American Primer, ed. Horace Traubel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Univ. Press, 1904), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup>Alfred Kreyborg, A History of American Poetry: Our Singing Strength (New York: Coward-McCann, 1929), p. 207.

<sup>6</sup>Charles B. Willard, Whitman's American Fame: The Growth of his Reputation in America after 1892 (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University, 1950).

<sup>7</sup>Barbara Marinacci, O. Wondrous Singer! an Introduction to Walt Whitman (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1970), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>Charvat, Origins of American Critical Thought (p. 100), quotes from J. G. Percival's preface to Prometheus, Part II (New Haven, 1822).

<sup>9</sup>Over a century later Emory Holloway did define Whitman as both philosopher and religious teacher as well as poet: "The philosopher seeks to explain the universe and man's relation to it; the religious teacher would inspire men with a desire to dwell in the harmony the philosopher sees, and Whitman, in his curiously realistic, mystical, democratic way, hopes to be both philosopher and religious teacher." Free and Lonesome Heart: The Secret of Walt Whitman (New York: Vantage Press, 1960), pp. 14-15.



<sup>10</sup>William Ellery Channing, "Remarks on National Literature," (1830), rpt. in Brown, The Achievement of American Criticism, pp. 142-43. Channing wrote that our chief hopes of an improved literature rest on our hopes of an improved religion--not the "prevalent Christian theology of darkness and gloom," but a true faith in a disinterested virtue and spiritual excellence as the supreme good.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Spiller, "Critical Standards in the American Romantic Movement," College English, 8 (1947), 350.

<sup>12</sup>Benjamin T. Spencer, The Quest for Nationality (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1957), p. 221.

<sup>13</sup>"Poetry for the People," U.S. Democratic Review, 13 (September 1843), 266 ff.

<sup>14</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 242. Allen quotes from Trowbridge's autobiography, My Own Story (Boston, 1903), p. 360.

<sup>15</sup>Emory Holloway, Whitman: an Interpretation in Narrative (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), p. 133.

<sup>16</sup>Allen notes (The Solitary Singer, p. 563, note 58) that the copy Whitman sent to Longfellow, with the clipping still in it, is in the Craigie House at Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 179.

<sup>18</sup>Holloway, In Narrative, p. 246.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 234-35.

<sup>20</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 469.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 470.

<sup>22</sup>Willard, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 500.

<sup>25</sup>Thomas L. Brasher, Whitman as Editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), p. 191.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 189-90.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>31</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, pp. 57-58. The novel appeared in November 1842, and was still being advertised the following August. About 20,000 copies were supposedly sold. In 1846 Whitman reprinted the novel in the Brooklyn Eagle and stressed its didactic purpose in an editorial: "We consider temperance one of the grand regenerators of the age; and that all who, in truth of heart, labor its promulgation, deserve well of heaven and men."

<sup>32</sup>Life, death, rebirth, transcendence, that everything has an eternal soul--that is Whitman's basic theme as analyzed by critics like Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman: Revised Edition (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1969), p. 79, and Hyatt Waggoner, American Poets (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 164-65.

<sup>33</sup>William Charvat, Literary Publishing in America: 1790-1850 (Philadelphia: U. of Pa. Press, 1959), p. 66.

<sup>34</sup>Brasher, p. 59.

<sup>35</sup>Democratic Vistas.

<sup>36</sup>John A. Symonds, Walt Whitman: A Study (London: J. C. Nimmo, 1893), p. 106.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., pp. 114, 117.

<sup>38</sup>Willard Throp, "Whitman," p. 293 in Eight American Authors: A Review of Research and Criticism, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: MLA, 1956).

<sup>39</sup>Holloway, In Narrative, p. 238.

<sup>40</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 468.

<sup>41</sup>Leadie M. Clark, Walt Whitman's Concept of the American Common Man (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1955).

<sup>42</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>44</sup>Quoted by Holloway, In Narrative, p. 236.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>Edwin Haviland Miller, ed., Walt Whitman: The Correspondence, I (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961), 162-63.

<sup>48</sup>These letters are all quoted by E. H. Miller, Correspondence, I, 12: "I shall never forget the first time you came in after David and I got there. We Loved you from the first time we spoke to you." "When I first made your acquaintance, somehow or other you seemed like a father, why it was I am unable to say, yet such was the case, & I hav'nt the least doubt but such has been the case with thousands of other fellow soldiers." "May God bless you forever. I can't find words to tell you the love thier is in me for you. I hope you & I may live to meet again on this earth, if not I hope we shall meet in the world where thier is no more parting."

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>50</sup>Allen quotes Doyle in The Solitary Singer, p. 363: ". . . the storm was awful. Walt had his blanket--it was thrown round his shoulders--he seemed like an old sea-captain. He was the only passenger, it was a lonely night, so I thought I would go in and talk with him. Something in me made me do it and something in him drew me that way. He used to say there was something in me had the same effect on him. Anyway, I went into the car, We were familiar at once--I put my hand on his knee--we understood. He did not get out at the end of the trip--in fact went all the way back with me. From that time on we were the biggest sort of friends."

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>53</sup>E. H. Miller, Correspondence, I, 4.

<sup>54</sup>Willard, p. 229.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>56</sup>Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War (New York: Macmillan, 1933), p. 30.

<sup>57</sup>L. Clark, p. 150.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>59</sup>Brasher, p. 190.

<sup>60</sup>Democratic Vistas.

<sup>61</sup>Allen, Revised Edition, p. 70.

<sup>62</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 312.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 425.

<sup>64</sup>Marinacci, p. 141.

<sup>65</sup>e.g., Allen, writing about the Drum-Taps editions in 1865 (The Solitary Singer, p. 359) comments: "On the whole the prosodic form is still that of Whitman's long free-verse line, but his more frequent inversions, less realistic language, and more conventional diction should have reconciled many of his contemporary readers to his poetic form--though perhaps by this time his literary reputation was so bad that nothing could have reconciled the countless admirers of Longfellow and Lowell to anything published under the name of Whitman."

<sup>66</sup>Robert Duncan, "Changing Perspectives in Reading Whitman," in The Artistic Legacy of Walt Whitman, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1970), p. 76.

<sup>67</sup>Paul Elmer More, Shelburne Essays on American Literature (1906), ed. Daniel Aaron (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), p. 251.

<sup>68</sup>Edwin Haviland Miller, "The Radical Vision of Whitman and Pollock," in The Artistic Legacy of Walt Whitman, p. 59.

<sup>69</sup>These interpretations are summarized by Allen in A Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), pp. 180-86.

<sup>70</sup>Quoted in Duluth News Tribune, Cosmopolitan section, March 19, 1972, p. 4.

<sup>71</sup>Edwin Haviland Miller, Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), Ch. 5, pp. 85-114.

<sup>72</sup>D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1923), Ch. 12, pp. 241-64.

<sup>73</sup>James E. Miller, A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957).

<sup>74</sup>V. K. Chari and E. F. Carlisle. The thinking of these men is summarized in Allen, A Reader's Guide, pp. 141-55.

<sup>75</sup>Leslie A. Fiedler, No! in Thunder: Essays on Myth and Literature (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), "Walt Whitman: Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Hero," p. 65.

<sup>76</sup>S. Musgrove demonstrated Whitman's influence on the poetic technique of Eliot in T. S. Eliot and Walt Whitman (Wellington, New Zealand, 1952; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1966).

<sup>77</sup>William Cullen Bryant, "On the Nature of Poetry" (1826) rpt. in Clarence Brown, The Achievement of American Criticism, p. 117.

<sup>78</sup>Clarence Stedman, Poets of America (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), pp. 391-92.

<sup>79</sup>Marinacci, pp. 2-3.

## CHAPTER XIV

### ARISTOCRATIC BARD: HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

(1807-1882)

The man who did become poet of the people was unlike Whitman in almost every way. In contrast to Whitman's life of stark simplicity among common people and preference for the great outdoors, Henry Longfellow was a scholar and aristocrat, professor of Modern Languages at Harvard for eighteen years (1836-1854); translator of Dante's Divine Comedy (1865-1867); frequent traveler to Europe and transmitter of European culture to America in translations and in borrowings in his own poetry. He presided as gracious host in his luxurious Cambridge home, Craigue House, presented to him and Frances Appleton as a wedding gift in 1843 by her father, a wealthy cotton mill proprietor. Longfellow's associates were learned men like George Bancroft and George Ticknor, who encouraged his European study; James Russell Lowell and Charles Eliot Norton, who assisted him in the translation of Dante and met with him weekly in the Dante Society that they formed; Charles Sumner, a Boston lawyer, orator, abolitionist and Senator who inspired Longfellow's slavery poems. In the Saturday Club, a Boston literary club which founded the Atlantic Monthly, Longfellow met with the leading literary men of

New England, including Emerson, Lowell, Dana, Holmes, Whittier, and Norton.

Longfellow mingled with elitists at home and abroad (e.g., Carlyle, Freiligrath, Dickens) rather than with common people, but he somehow happened to supply exactly what the people wanted and needed in poetry. He became the most widely read and beloved poet in American history, in fact, the most popular English-speaking poet of all time.

At the beginning of Longfellow's popularity, when "A Psalm of Life" was sensationally received in 1838, no one was more surprised than the poet himself. The poem had been written out of personal experience, as Lawrance Thompson has shown.<sup>1</sup> Still grieving over the death of his first wife in 1835, and his new love for Frances Appleton being currently frustrated, Longfellow was struggling to find a way out of the dream-world refuge offered by romantic German writers like Novalis. Goethe's exhortations in Faust, Part II--to find peace in labor and bold activity--appealed to the poet at this time, thus: "Let us then be up and doing,/ With a heart for any fate;/ Still achieving, still pursuing,/ Learn to labor and to wait." The "Psalm" had such deep personal meaning for the poet that he kept it hidden at first and refrained from signing it when it was first published. He wrote in his journal: "I kept it some time in mss, unwilling to show it to anyone, it being a voice from my inmost heart, and expressing my feelings at a time when I was rallying from the depression of disappointment."<sup>2</sup> The poem, signed merely "L" when it first appeared in the Knickerbocker in September 1838, was soon copied

in New York newspapers and recopied in Boston "until the lines became familiar, like a glorified popular song that had caught more than the fancy of the young nation. . . . 'A Psalm of Life' was quoted, discussed, and eulogized with more enthusiasm and fervor than any other poem that had ever been published in America."<sup>3</sup> Stimulated by this popular response, the poet returned to his study to write more poems that would, as Thompson put it, "speak from his heart to the hearts of the people; psalms of life and psalms of death." Several of the verses being already popular, when Voices of the Night appeared in 1839, 900 copies were sold in one month, and the book was printed four times within the year.

The popularity of Longfellow's poetic work increased steadily and dramatically throughout his lifetime. First printings of the longer poems were successively larger:<sup>4</sup>

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| 1847, <u>Evangeline</u>                      | 1,000 copies |
| 1851, <u>The Golden Legend</u>               | 3,500        |
| 1855, <u>Hiawatha</u>                        | 5,000        |
| 1858, <u>The Courtship of Miles Standish</u> | 10,000       |
| 1863, <u>The Tales of a Wayside Inn</u>      | 15,000       |

Collections of the poems, likewise, sold more widely each time they were published, 155,000 copies being distributed between 1839 and 1864. In 1840 Longfellow was paid fifteen dollars for the first printing of "The Village Blacksmith"; in 1874, the New York Ledger paid \$3000 for "The Hanging of the Crane."

The Song of Hiawatha proved to be the most popular of Longfellow's American narratives. Four-fifths of the first printing (5,000 copies) was sold before publication in 1855; a new printing



of 3,000 was immediately ordered; within a month, 11,000 copies had been published. Hiawatha made its way into the general culture: a series of Hiawatha pictures by Currier and Ives, popular songs about the love of Hiawatha and Minnehaha, dramatic stage readings of the poem, parodies everywhere, a New York musical extravaganza.<sup>5</sup> Freiligrath translated the poem into German, and it appeared in several other languages throughout the world; one American scholar even translated a portion of it into Latin for a schoolbook. By 1900, more than one million copies of Hiawatha had been sold,<sup>6</sup> and over a century after it was written Americans are still buying it, one Lansing bookstore currently selling over one hundred illustrated, hard-cover copies each Christmas.

Longfellow was famous among people of all classes. Samuel Longfellow related an incident in which one lady passing a jeweler's window heard a ragged, unshaven Irish laborer exclaiming to the crowd around him about a silver boat with a figure of an Indian standing in the prow, "Shure, and that's for Hiawatha." The man continued in Irish brogue, "That must be for a prisintation to the poet Longfellow; thim two lines cut on the side of the boat is from his poethry."<sup>7</sup> Parrington, commenting on the poet's tremendous reputation in the 1870's, noted "Young William Winter walking twenty miles to stand in the moonlight at the Craigie House gate and view reverently the silent walls within which the great Longfellow was sleeping."<sup>8</sup> The fame had spread across Europe as well. Bayard Taylor wrote from Gotha, Germany to Thomas Bailey Aldrich in 1872: "Tell Longfellow from me that the Weimar Princesses have read all his

works, and the Hoffsräulein, Baroness \_\_\_\_\_, a very charming person, begged me to say that her enthusiasm for him is so great that it led her to cut his name out of a traveler's register at Bruges."<sup>9</sup> In the European tour of 1868-69 Longfellow received degrees from Oxford and Cambridge and was granted a private audience by Queen Victoria. After his death he became the only American enshrined in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey. In Golden Multitudes, Mott estimates that more than one million copies of Longfellow's collected poems have been sold since 1839.<sup>10</sup>

While it has become a commonplace in twentieth-century criticism to note the shortcomings in the bulk of Longfellow's work, the poet was, in his own day, almost universally respected by literary men. With the exception of Poe, who charged him with plagiarism and hated his didacticism, Longfellow's contemporaries responded enthusiastically to his work. E. P. Whipple, granting that "A Psalm of Life" was based upon worn axioms, argued that the poem breathed new life into them. Quoting the "Footprints on the sands of time" passage, he wrote: "This is very different from saying, that, if we follow the example of the great and good, we shall live a noble life, and that the records of our deeds and struggles will strengthen the breasts of those who come after us to do and to suffer."<sup>11</sup> In 1842, a Knickerbocker reviewer praised Ballads and Other Poems (1841), which included "The Village Blacksmith" and "The Wreck of the Hesperus." The reviewer had earlier rejoiced that "the love of true poetry, the poetry of the heart and the affections, had taken so general and deep a root among us," as evidenced by the fifth edition of the Voices of the Night.<sup>12</sup>

Hawthorne wrote from the Salem custom-house in 1847:

I have read *Evangeline* with more pleasure than it would be decorous to express. It cannot fail, I think, to prove the most triumphant of all your successes. Everybody likes it.<sup>13</sup>

Along with Emerson, Parsons, Taylor, and others, Hawthorne sent letters of praise for *Hiawatha* in 1855. Hawthorne was to place Longfellow "at the head of our list of native poets."<sup>14</sup> Even Whitman came to respect Longfellow, calling him in *Specimen Days*, eminent in style and form, a poet of "melody, courtesy, and deference," the "universal poet of women and young people." Whitman found Longfellow lacking "in American feeling" but praised him as a great transitional figure, "reminiscent, polish'd, elegant, with the air of the finest conventional library."<sup>15</sup>

As the preeminently popular and almost universally respected nineteenth-century poet, Longfellow is most appropriate here at the culmination of a study of (1) the sources of appeal and the functions of popular poetry, and (2) changing attitudes about the levels of poetry.

It is important to note that, supporting the theory of the levels of poetry, Longfellow's work does contain poems of a variety of degrees of aesthetic excellence, and that several twentieth-century critics, in isolating certain fine poems from the Longfellow canon, have explained distinctions between high and low levels of poetry. While some critics have supported the narratives--Kreymborg favored *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, finding the characters "delightfully differentiated" and the ballads and legends "informed with dramatic

fire" and the "color and movement of their periods";<sup>16</sup> and George Arms praised the "polished social tone" in The Courtship of Miles Standish, for example, with its "frolicsome humor" and "quizzical treatment of the fathers of New England"<sup>17</sup>--the elitist defense of Longfellow has usually centered on short poems, particularly the sonnets. Paul Elmer More wrote that only in the sonnets did Longfellow write slowly enough; his powers increased as the intricacy of the rhymes forced him to reflect the "deeper, more obstinate emotions of the breast."<sup>18</sup> More recommended that the sixty-three sonnets be published alone.<sup>19</sup>

Norman Holmes Pearson, in a significant article (1950) entitled "Both Longfellows," distinguished between two parts of the poet's career which Pearson found to be in conflict: Longfellow wanted to write "for the castle and the court" and also for "the middle classes and the populace."<sup>20</sup> The chief distinction between elitist and popular poetry, as analyzed by Pearson, is the handling of metaphor and simile: in elitist poetry, the situation is presented in and for itself, any metaphorical meanings being implied rather than stated; in poetry for the people, a simile or analogy, and sometimes explicit statement after that, is added to make the implications of the original situation perfectly clear. According to Pearson, Longfellow failed in many poems to maintain the distinction between these two audiences: what would have been suited to the court was often cut down by simile or analogy to fit the middle class and the people.

George Arms, building upon Pearson's idea, analyzed three stages in Longfellow poems: (1) the scene, (2) the analogy, and (3) the statement.<sup>21</sup> The more explicit and forthrightly didactic the poem, the lower Arms rated it in poetic value. In "The Rainy Day," for example, statement becomes exhortation and spoils the poem. The "worst" poems were those skipping the analogy and moving directly from the scene to the statement. In "The Village Blacksmith" the poet moved too quickly from scene to exhortation, and the link between details of the blacksmith's life and the lesson taught is so tenuous that any poetic effect is destroyed. Some first-third stage poems, like "A Psalm of Life" and "Excelsior," are openly didactic from the beginning, the scene serving as merely stage property for the all-important moral lesson.

The "best" poems were those which avoided explicit moralizing. Longfellow was most frequently successful here by developing only the scene and the analogy, thereby avoiding the danger always implicit in the third, statement stage. Observing that one reason the sonnets are held in good repute is that Longfellow was automatically limited in them to a two-stage movement, Arms offers "Nature" as an example of an aesthetically satisfying poem.

As a fond mother, when the day is o'er,  
 Leads by the hand her little child to bed,  
 Half willing, half reluctant to be led,  
 And leave his broken playthings on the floor,  
 Still gazing at them through the open door,  
 Nor wholly reassured and comforted,  
 By promises of others in their stead,  
 Which, though more splendid, may not please him more;  
 So Nature deals with us, and takes away  
 Our playthings one by one, and by the hand  
 Leads us to rest so gently, that we go

Scarce knowing if we wish to go or stay,  
 Being too full of sleep to understand  
 How far the unknown transcends the what we know.

I would offer another two-stage sonnet to exemplify aesthetic excellence--"The Cross of Snow," in which Longfellow alludes to the death of his wife Frances Appleton by fire in 1861.

In the long, sleepless watches of the night,  
 A gentle face--the face of one long dead--  
 Looks at me from the wall, where round its head  
 The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light.  
 Here in this room she died; and soul more white  
 Never through martyrdom of fire was led  
 To its repose; nor can in books be read  
 The legend of a life more benedight.  
 There is a mountain in the distant West  
 That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines  
 Displays a cross of snow upon its side.  
 Such is the cross I wear upon my breast  
 These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes  
 And seasons, changeless since the day she died.

The impact of the poem derives from the striking metaphor and from the poet's allowing us to receive its implications without his explaining them: the grief is intense (deeply cut into the breast of the speaker in the shape of a cross, and cold like snow); the grief has not lessened by a single degree in spite of eighteen years of shifting scenes and moods in the speaker's life (as the cross of snow deep in the mountain ravine does not yield to the sun by melting). The poem does not become a sentimental display of self-pity; the control of feeling, on the other hand, by the sharply chiseled image of the cross of snow leads us to regard the immutability of the speaker's grief, not as evidence of self-pity, but as testimony to his deep and eternal love for the one who died eighteen years earlier.

Arms points to some one-stage poems that are highly successful. In "Aftermath" and "The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls," for example, analogy and statement are both omitted, and the poems succeed through "meticulously controlled symbolic" implications of the scene itself.

One further poem illustrating that Longfellow could produce the finest poetry is "Snow-Flakes," praised by both Pearson and Arms.

Out of the bosom of the Air,  
 Out of the cloud-folds of her garments shaken,  
 Over the woodlands brown and bare,  
 Over the harvest-fields forsaken,  
 Silent, and soft, and slow  
 Descends the snow.

Even as our cloudy fancies take  
 Suddenly shape in some divine expression,  
 Even as the troubled heart doth make  
 In the white countenance confession,  
 The troubled sky reveals  
 The grief it feels.

This is the poem of the air,  
 Slowly in silent syllables recorded;  
 This is the secret of despair,  
 Long in its cloudy bosom hoarded,  
 Now whispered and revealed  
 To wood and field.

In a several-layered metaphor the poem first sharpens our vision of a snowfall, with a personification of the Air who wears garments of clouds and who shakes the snow out of the folds of the dress covering her bosom. The softness, slowness, and silence of falling snow is accentuated by the repetition of the sibilant in these words and throughout the poem. Repetition of this soft sound, along with connotations of the words bosom, and the fact that the snow is sent down to cover (warm, comfort) bare woodlands and forsaken fields, all suggest that the personified Air is compassionate.

Then the focus shifts, and the snowfall is no longer tenor, but vehicle in the comparison. First, falling snowflakes are used to sharpen our awareness of how a poem is made: from vague and cloudy perceptions suddenly will emerge a succession of clearly articulated thoughts and concrete images ("cloudy fancies take/ Suddenly shape in some divine expression"--the flakes are concrete and lovely in their intricate shapes). Then, falling snow and creating a poem are both used as vehicles to accentuate what happens when grief, that has long been suppressed in a human heart, is released. The articulation of grief, like making a poem, is arduous and difficult and it is done slowly and quietly ("Slowly in silent syllables recorded . . . now whispered"). The expression of grief, like falling snow, is attended by a "white countenance," and as the personified Air evidences compassion in the act of sending a snow blanket to cover "wood and field," the expression of long-hidden "despair" is accompanied by a deepening of tenderness and compassion in the "troubled heart." The poem works in yet another way, in which making a poem and revealing a secret human grief become the vehicles for emphasizing that there is something supernatural which, like man, feels grief and expresses compassion ("The troubled sky reveals/ The grief it feels."). Pearson praised the poem for its "congeries of metaphor" in which "man, physical nature, atmosphere, God become inextricably woven."

Notwithstanding the fact that a booklet of excellent poetry could be gleaned from Longfellow's volumes--and more than one critic has suggested doing this, Arms and Pearson included<sup>22</sup>--it must be



admitted that the bulk of Longfellow's most popular poems will be found at the middle and lower levels on a scale of poetic excellence. Most twentieth-century critics dealing with Longfellow have chosen to isolate a few high-level poems for critical attention. As Arms wrote, "One believed it a duty to undermine the uncritical [nineteenth-century] regard for the poet by analyzing his defects and then to find merits which more plebeian tastes had perhaps not discovered."<sup>23</sup> Our purpose here is not to repudiate the lower-level work, but to assert the significance of its tremendous popularity and to clarify its functions.

One important purpose of this study has been to show that appreciation of lower-level, popular poetry in the nineteenth century was not exclusively plebeian. In his own day Longfellow was admired by critics as well as by the people. Part of the change in critical attitude between the two centuries has resulted from a change in poetic taste. Parrington wrote that in Longfellow's work "the romantic, the sentimental, and the moralistic, blended in such just proportions, and expressed themselves with such homely simplicity as to hit exactly the current taste and establish a reputation that later generations have difficulty in understanding."<sup>24</sup> Part of the change in critical estimation of Longfellow has resulted, likewise, from a change in attitude about the levels of poetry. Arms discounts nineteenth-century critical admiration of Longfellow by stating that during his lifetime "critics frequently grouped Longfellow with literary immortals on the basis of approval."<sup>25</sup> But that is exactly the point. In the nineteenth century, critics, while not blind to

the levels of aesthetic excellence, did harbor a respect for popular work. While usually not of the highest aesthetic quality, it had other merits; it functioned to meet the needs of the people in ways that the critics respected. Part I of this study reveals both the changes in poetic taste between the two centuries, and the changes in attitude toward the levels of poetry. Longfellow's most popular poetry exemplifies, almost to the letter, the nineteenth-century critical principles outlined in Part I.

In producing the poetry for the people hoped for by American critics in the early 1800's, Longfellow played a central role in that paradoxical phenomenon in which, as Spiller put it, "American culture at mid-century was shaped by a natural or self-appointed aristocracy which idealized and lectured to, but did not mingle with the common man."<sup>26</sup> The spirit of the day was democratic and learned. The people were thirsty for knowledge and they expected their poet to know something; they ignored a commoner who spurned book-learning, in favor of a professor poet who knew more than ten languages and could translate the literatures of Italy, Germany, France, Sweden, Portugal for them.

The people were on the rise and yearned for culture, but they were, for the most part, inexperienced in art. Longfellow was able to gratify their taste in a period of "national and cultural adolescence," as Thompson phrased it.<sup>27</sup> The people responded to the picturesque and romantic transmitted from the foreign literatures into American poems like "The Skeleton in Armor," Evangeline, and Hiawatha. This audience wanted art, but was not ready for the

challenge of great art. As Spiller wrote, Longfellow "was the bard of American people not because he spoke the truth about life in his own or any other time as did Whitman, but because he made articulate and memorable the simple dreams of average humanity."<sup>28</sup>

In offering a similar reason for Whitman's lack of success with the public at large, George Santayana suggests the basic appeal of poets like Longfellow.

. . . the people . . . are natural believers in perfection. They have no doubts about the absolute desirability of wealth and learning and power, none about the worth of pure goodness and pure love. Their chosen poets . . . will be always those who have known how to point these ideals in lively even if in gaudy colors. . . . They instinctively look toward a more exalted life, which they imagine to be full of distinction and pleasure, and the idea of that brighter existence fills them with hope or with envy or with humble admiration. . . .

. . . A poet who loves the picturesque aspects of labor and vagrancy will hardly be the poet of the poor. He may have described their figure and occupation, in neither of which they are much interested; he will not have read their souls. They will prefer to him any sentimental story-teller . . . any moralizing poet; for they are hero-worshippers by temperament. . . .<sup>29</sup>

The people needed a folklore, a set of signs of greatness in their native land, and Longfellow created for them a group of inspiring figures from America's own past: Paul Revere, Miles Standish, Priscilla, Evangeline, Hiawatha.<sup>30</sup> Pearson identifies this as the significant achievement in Longfellow's poetry for the populace: his one great power was the "mythopoeic."<sup>31</sup> Whereas, Whitman had created a "mystique" of the body in a poetry dependent on "emotional thrust," Longfellow's work was more appealing to the people because it presented them colorful, concrete figures in "firm outlines": Paul Revere, John Alden, Priscilla, the village blacksmith. The

mythopoeic accomplishment of "Paul Revere," for example, was "to create a figure from the past whose virtues of immediate decision and action will coincide with and catch up the virtues of what had been America's chief moral action as a nation."

Critics who disparage Longfellow for falling short of elitist standards overlook the significance of his popular appeal: he did more than all our other poets to enlarge the audience for poetry;<sup>32</sup> as Stedman wrote, "Our true rise of Poetry may be dated from Longfellow's method of exciting an interest in it."<sup>33</sup> It is true that much of the work was not elitist, but as Stedman stressed, Longfellow often taught by choice not the "upper form" but the "primary class."<sup>34</sup>

The foremost elitist criticism of Longfellow has always been against the didacticism. But the taste of the age accepted forthright didacticism; in fact, as shown in Part I, expected it. In a significant essay in 1959, William Charvat stressed that in working consciously to write for the people, Longfellow had to convince them that poets could be effective teachers and preachers.<sup>35</sup> While poetry was a genre held in high esteem by the critics, the public attitudes were ambivalent: people tended to venerate old masters like Homer and Milton, but to have contempt for young and unsuccessful "beggarly poets." Charvat demonstrated that for twenty-five years (1824-1849) Longfellow propagandized his readers until he was satisfied that they accepted him and his poetry. A large majority of the poems contain favorable references to art, scholarship, literature, poetry: bards are sublime, immortal; art is wondrous; books are household treasures. John Alden, the scholar, wins out over Miles

Standish, the man of action. We might add to Charvat's list the praise of the musician Chibiabos in Hiawatha:

All the hearts of men were softened  
By the pathos of his music;  
For he sang of peace and freedom,  
Sang of beauty, love, and longing;  
Sang of death, and life undying  
In the Islands of the Blessed.

In Outre-Mer in 1835, Longfellow included his review of Sidney's Defense of Poetry; aware of the public view of poetry as "effeminate nonsense" Longfellow argued that poets have been active and useful men, he was himself a useful citizen, a teacher; poetry was useful in instructing men, in the culture of other nations, for example. In 1839 Hyperion was a thinly disguised attempt to make the poet publicly respectable by associating him with magnificent scenes and historic names. Longfellow's method was effective, Charvat emphasized, because each defense of poetry was accompanied by an appeasement of public hostility toward elitists--scholars erred in secluding themselves from the world of men; poets were wrong in disdainning common sense and in remaining aloof from their fellow men.

Early in 1840 Longfellow announced his intention to try to reach the masses with poetry:

I am going to have ["The Wreck of the Hesperus"] printed on a sheet, and sold like Varses, with a coarse picture on it. I desire a new sensation with a new set of critics.<sup>36</sup>

The poem was not printed as a broadside, but did appear in the New World, one of the new crudely printed newspapers. Charvat noted that at Harvard in 1840 two ancient, diverse traditions of verse-making

combined incredibly in Longfellow: (1) the balladmonger and broadside verse writer, and (2) the scholarly gentleman and poet of the coterie.<sup>37</sup>

In his later poetry the didactic tendency was less obtrusive, but in the early work Longfellow worked to produce an art that common people would understand and respect. Cognizant of public doubt of the "masculinity" and usefulness of poetry and knowing that New England liked sermons, Longfellow compromised in the obvious way--with moralizing verse.<sup>38</sup>

Nothing useless is, or low;  
 Each thing in its place is best;  
 And what seems but idle show  
 Strengthens and supports the rest.  
 ("The Builders")

Lives of great men all remind us  
 We can make our lives sublime,  
 And, departing, leave behind us  
 Footprints on the sands of time.  
 ("A Psalm of Life")

Toiling,--rejoicing,--sorrowing,  
 Onward through life he goes;  
 Each morning sees some task begin,  
 Each evening sees it close;  
 Something attempted, something done,  
 Has earned a night's repose.  
 ("The Village Blacksmith")

The moral lessons were not disturbing or exciting. No critic has credited Longfellow with great ideas or penetrating insight. He was not a reformer, but, typically for popular poets, a reinforcer of commonly held convictions. His message was "a cheerful acceptance of the lessons of life," and this simple Stoicism "commended him to all the virtuous, home-keeping folk," as Stedman wrote.<sup>39</sup>

There are three other qualities (all respected by nineteenth-century critics as shown in Part I) that were important in making Longfellow's poetry appealing to thousands of readers: they were entertaining stories; they were full of feeling; they worked to cheer and soothe the reader.

Longfellow has been universally recognized as an excellent raconteur, "a true-story-teller for the multitude."<sup>40</sup> Sensational sales of the ballads and narratives testify to the appeal of these stories in the 1800's, and this writer is at least one modern who has recently enjoyed--and found welcome respite from heavier studies in--several of these poems: The passionate elopement of the "Viking old" who sped across the sea with the daughter of "old Hildebrand," only to take the ultimate escape by falling upon his spear when his beloved wife died later in their land of exile. The agonized fear of the skipper's daughter as, lashed to the mast, she rode out the storm to her death in "The Wreck of the Hesperus." The excruciating dilemma of John Alden--how will he find a way to marry Priscilla without betraying his friendship to Miles Standish? The ennobling pathos of Evangeline's life-long search for Gabriel, a tale of "affection that hopes, and endures, and is patient." The thoroughly lovely description of Hiawatha's fasting, and subduing of Mondamin, the youth in garments green and yellow, who was buried by Hiawatha and rose again, with Hiawatha's careful cultivation, in the form of "the maize in all its beauty,/ With its shining robes about it,/ And its long, soft, yellow tresses." The biting irony when Ser Federigo, having been all his life enamored of Monna Giovanna who wed his rival but

is now a wealthy widow, sacrificed, without hesitation, his beautiful and beloved pet falcon for refreshment when the woman paid him a visit; he discovered too late that Monna Giovanna's young son was critically ill and that she had come to beg him to give her the falcon which was the only thing her son wanted, and her only hope for his recovery ("The Falcon of Ser Federigo").

Many of the poems invoked strong feeling in the reader, warming the heart as nineteenth-century poems were expected to. Before his death Hawthorne was said to have asked his son to read aloud the final scene of Evangeline where the sadness of death was forgotten in the glory of this reunion.<sup>41</sup> "The Bridge," according to one British critic, conveyed the most profound sympathy of any poem in the English language.

I stood on the bridge at midnight,  
As the clocks were striking the hour,  
And the moon rose o'er the city,  
Behind the dark church-tower.

I saw her bright reflection  
In the waters under me,  
Like a golden goblet falling  
And sinking into the sea.

. . . . .  
How often, oh how often,  
I had wished that the ebbing tide  
Would bear me away on its bosom  
O'er the ocean wild and wide!

For my heart was hot and restless,  
And my life was full of care,  
And the burden laid upon me,  
Seemed greater than I could bear.

. . . . .  
And I think how many thousands  
Of care-encumbered men,  
Each bearing his burden of sorrow,  
Have crossed the bridge since then.



One poem that "stirred the multitude to its depths," as Horace Scudder noted in his edition of the collected poems, was "The Building of the Ship" in which an analogy of a bride/ newly-built ship, entering the arms of the bridegroom/ sea, precedes an impassioned apostrophe to the Ship of State, carefully built like the first ship, and encountering great risk during its maneuvers over the sea, like both the ship and the bride on the "sea of life."

How beautiful she is! How fair  
 She lies within those arms, that press  
 Her form with many a soft caress  
 . . . . .  
 Sail forth into the sea of life,  
 O gentle, loving, trusting wife,  
 . . . . .  
 Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!  
 Sail on, O union, strong and great!  
 Humanity with all its fears,  
 With all the hopes of future years,  
 Is hanging breathless on thy fate!  
 We know what Master laid thy keel,  
 What workmen wrought thy ribs of steel,  
 . . . . .  
 Fear not each sudden sound and shock,  
 'Tis of the wave and not the rock;  
 'Tis but the flapping of the sail,  
 And not a rent made by the gale!  
 In spite of rock and tempest's roar,  
 In spite of false lights on the shore,  
 Sail on, nor fear to breast the sea!  
 Our hearts, our hopes, are all with thee,  
 Our hearts, our hopes, our prayers, our tears,  
 Our faith triumphant o'er our fears,  
 Are all with thee,--are all with thee!

The poem had an especially great public impact during the war when the union was at stake. One writer described the reaction of President Lincoln to the final stanzas of this poem. "As he listened to the last lines, his eyes filled with tears, and his cheeks were wet.

He did not speak for some minutes, but finally said with simplicity:  
 'It is a wonderful gift to be able to stir men like that.'" <sup>42</sup>

Besides instructing, entertaining, and stirring his feelings, the poems were successful, finally and importantly, because they soothed the reader. Longfellow, as critics have universally agreed, was a metrical genius. The regular rhyme and rhythm, the clarity of the figures and thoughts, the normal prose order in the lines made for easy reception by readers. "He used his culture," Stedman wrote, "not to veil the word, but to make it clear. He drew upon it in a manner which they could relish and comprehend." <sup>43</sup> Likewise, the ideas were not challenging or disturbing. As More wrote, Longfellow "doesn't require any violent readjustment of our ordinary moods." He bestows instead an "unvexed faith," and that is the "true mission of the poet." <sup>44</sup> Critics have charged Longfellow with ignoring real social and political problems of his day, but in doing so he satisfied a need of his readers to be simply charmed, cheered, and soothed. A craftsman rather than a seer, he brought his readers not prophetic insight, but "perceptive everyday understanding of diverse materials." <sup>45</sup> James Russell Lowell wrote to Longfellow about a shoe salesman in 1847 who told him that in a state of "deep personal depression . . . such as [he] had never experienced before or since," his daughter sat by his bedside and read Evangeline. It comforted him and sent "light into [his] soul," and he had a feeling of personal obligation to the poet. <sup>46</sup>

Besides the didactic charge, the other most common and serious criticism of Longfellow has been that the verse is shallow:

Stedman wrote that "superlative joy and woe alike were foreign to [his] verse,"<sup>47</sup> and Odell Shepard found him "self-indulgently romantic, using imagination rather for escape from reality than for penetration of it."<sup>48</sup> Admittedly the verse does not contain the strong passion and piercing insight of high-level poetry; the burden of the poems is not, for example, "the pathetic or terrible sense of transiency that runs through the heart of the world" as More pointed out, or the dramatization of turbulence expected in modern poetry.<sup>49</sup> This is no evidence for the fact that Longfellow did not experience anxiety and turbulence; Thompson has shown that poetry was one method for bringing the storm and stress of his life under control. His poems served this same purpose for many readers. A sonnet by "E. N. J." of Providence, Rhode Island, appearing in the U.S. Democratic Review (October 1848) is typical of his readers' gratitude for the soothing, comforting quality of Longfellow's poetry.

America's own Minstrel, hail to thee!  
 For thou hast been a blessing to thy race--  
 Yes, glorious Bard, the music of thy song  
 Hath power to soothe all restlessness and care,  
 For those who long have striven with despair.

The writer asked Longfellow to continue striking the chords of his lyre for those "Whose sun is set because their loved are gone!"

Holiest of minstrels, I've no power to tell  
 All that I owe thee--thanks--farewell, farewell.

Reaction to "A Psalm of Life" brings into relief two kinds of literary experience. An elitist reader is disappointed because

the poem is not intellectually stimulating or emotionally disturbing. He feels unchanged and finds the poem shallow. Another reader is grateful for the optimistic affirmation of faith--in "immortality, progress, individual integrity, and each man's power to triumph over adversity."<sup>50</sup> This reader is heartened by the exhortation to action at the end of the poem. The contrast here suggests a difference between the higher and lower levels of poetry. The practiced reader begins in repose, and comes to the poetry to be disturbed. He wants a fully aesthetic experience with disturbance and then resolution. Lower-level poetry, however, functions differently. The reader begins in agitation--with life's real problems--and he comes to the poem seeking relief--encouragement, reassurance, a means toward repose. Charles Sumner wrote that Longfellow's poetry "affords succor and strength to bear the ills of life."<sup>51</sup> In "The Day is Done" Longfellow had described this kind of quiet, soothing poetry that so many nineteenth-century readers appreciated.

Such songs have power to quiet  
 The restless pulse of care,  
 And come like the benediction  
 That follows after prayer.

. . . . .  
 And the night shall be filled with music,  
 And the cares that infest the day,  
 Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,  
 And as silently steal away.

NOTES--CHAPTER XIV

<sup>1</sup>Lawrance Thompson, Young Longfellow (1807-1843) (1938; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1969), pp. 229-87.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 287.

<sup>4</sup>Hart, The Popular Book, p. 127.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 129-30.

<sup>6</sup>Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in the introductory note, H. W. Longfellow, The Song of Hiawatha (1855; rpt. New York: Bounty Books, 1968), p. x.

<sup>8</sup>Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, III, 53.

<sup>9</sup>Taylor and Scudder, Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor, II, 599.

<sup>10</sup>Bode, The Anatomy of American Popular Culture 1840-1861, p. 200.

<sup>11</sup>E. P. Whipple, Review of Griswold's Poets and Poetry of America, North American Review, 58 (1844), 25.

<sup>12</sup>Review of Longfellow's Ballads and Other Poems, Knickerbocker, 19 (1842), 181.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted by Manning Hawthorne and H. W. L. Dana in Origin and Development of Longfellow's Evangeline (Portland, Maine: Anthoensen Press, 1947), p. 40.

<sup>14</sup>Brown, "The Aesthetics of Romanticism," in The Achievement of American Criticism, p. 164.

<sup>15</sup>Brown, p. 181.

<sup>16</sup>Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength, p. 108.

<sup>17</sup>Arms, The Fields are Green, p. 215.

<sup>18</sup>Paul Elmer More, "The Centenary of Longfellow," (1908), Shelburne Essays on American Literature, ed. Daniel Aaron (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), pp. 145-47.

<sup>19</sup>The sonnets were published separately at about the time of Elmer's essay by Ferris Greenslet, ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1907).

<sup>20</sup>Norman Holmes Pearson, "Both Longfellows," University of Kansas City Review, 16 (Summer 1950), 245-53. Pearson found this distinction in Longfellow's Outre-Mer (1833-34): "The same remark is true of the Middle Ages as of our own and of every age. If the state of society is shadowed forth in its literature, then this literature must necessarily represent two distinct and strongly marked characters: one, of the castle and the court; another, of the middle classes and the populace; the former, elegant, harmonious, and delicate; the latter, rude, grotesque, and vulgar. Each of these classes has its own peculiar merits; but our manuscripts, by pre-sending them to us united, . . . have led us insensibly into the habit of confounding the manners of the court with those of the city."

<sup>21</sup>Arms, pp. 205-22.

<sup>22</sup>Arms suggests excisions in some of the best poems for more condensation, to satisfy modern taste that only the barest essentials be presented (pp. 220-22). For example, in "Seaweed" he would use only stanzas 1, 2, 3, and 8; in "Snowflakes" he would drop the second stanza and begin with the third so that the poem would end on the word snow. In "Killed at the Ford" he would use only twelve of the thirty-seven lines.

Pearson suggests that we "pare Longfellow down to a core" or rather "two cores which can be regarded without undue condescension" (p. 253).

<sup>23</sup>Arms, p. 205.

- <sup>24</sup>Parrington, Main Currents, II, 439.
- <sup>25</sup>Arms, p. 205.
- <sup>26</sup>Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 98.
- <sup>27</sup>Thompson, p. xiii.
- <sup>28</sup>Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature, p. 100.
- <sup>29</sup>George Santayana, "The Poetry of Barbarism," Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (1900; rpt. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), pp. 185-86.
- <sup>30</sup>Hart, The Popular Book, pp. 128-29.
- <sup>31</sup>Pearson, pp. 246-47.
- <sup>32</sup>Odell Shepard, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, American Writers Series (New York: American Book Co., 1934), p. liii.
- <sup>33</sup>Stedman, Poets of America, p. 181.
- <sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 190.
- <sup>35</sup>William Charvat, "Literary Genres and Artifacts," Ch. 3 in Literary Publishing in America 1790-1850 (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pa., 1959).
- <sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 71.
- <sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup>John Paul Pritchard, Return to the Fountains (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), p. 87.
- <sup>39</sup>Stedman, Poets of America, p. 190.
- <sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 209.
- <sup>41</sup>Mrs. Hawthorne's letter to Longfellow, quoted in Manning Hawthorne, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup>Noah Brooks, "Lincoln's Imagination," Scribner's Monthly (August 1879). Noted by Horace Scudder, ed., The Complete Poetical Works of Longfellow (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Riverside Press, 1886; abridged edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), p. 98.

<sup>43</sup>Stedman, Poets of America, p. 220.

<sup>44</sup>More, p. 140.

<sup>45</sup>Arms, p. 217.

<sup>46</sup>Quoted in Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse, p. 100.

<sup>47</sup>Stedman, Poets of America, p. 221.

<sup>48</sup>Shepard, p. xxvii.

<sup>49</sup>Arms, p. 219.

<sup>50</sup>Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse, p. 103.

<sup>51</sup>Quoted in Thompson, pp. 340-41 from a letter written to Francis Lieber in 1843.



## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to demonstrate that there are levels of artistic achievement and aesthetic experience in poetry, and to explore the implications of this fact.

Specifically the study has had five purposes:

- (1) To isolate differences between higher and lower levels of poetry.

There has been no attempt to suggest that popular poetry "is just as good as" elitist poetry. On the contrary, levels of aesthetic excellence have been specifically illustrated. Higher-level poems exhibit a greater correspondence between form and content, succeed in amalgamating a greater number and diversity of elements into a unified poem, force the reader's careful attention to words and phrases in the poem, demand the reader's active participation in working out the meanings of the poem, and offer the reader insights of greater significance, thereby challenging, and at the same time, nourishing his mind and soul.

Lower-level poems, on the other hand, are more inclined to utilize predictable schemes of rhyme and rhythm than to adapt form to content. These poems tend to be simple and clear, employing only a few elements in a "star system" and avoiding the complexity of a

densely textured poem, using words and phrases the meanings of which are grasped immediately, explaining the meanings outright. Lower-level poems usually reaffirm old convictions rather than challenging the reader to discover new ideas or perspectives.

The quality of didacticism is not entirely useful in distinguishing between the levels of poetry, because the history of criticism reveals that poetry of all levels is expected, by most critics, to effect moral and intellectual "improvement" in the reader immediately or eventually. A more accurate distinction centers on method. Lower-level poems speak the lesson outright; higher-level poems work to stimulate the reader so that the improvement will come from within himself.

(2) To assess kinds of value in popular poetry.

Most popular poetry ranks at the lower-levels on the artistic scale, but there is a great variety in aesthetic value in popular poems. Evangeline and Hiawatha are rich in imagery, musical cadence, and symbolical representation of human characteristics, and would rank higher on the aesthetic scale than one of Wilcox's poems of passion. Yet, even in Mrs. Wilcox's "Delilah" there is some poetic value: the lilt of the line, the striking dramatization delineating sexual passion in a memorable way. Every popular poem has some aesthetic value, and every poem that has been widely popular has functioned to meet definite needs of the audience. Modern critics respect poetry only when the function is primarily aesthetic, but nineteenth-century critics respected other functions--of instruction, entertainment, and psychology.

- (3) To determine the sources of appeal and functions of popular poetry.

The appeal of popular poetry has been closely related to the popularity of the poet with his audience. Readers have been interested in the personal lives of their poets, whom they have admired, idolized, and tried to emulate.

Sources of appeal in nineteenth-century popular poetry itself include:

(a) Forthright didacticism--by which the poets reaffirmed the middle-class values of home, work, God, country, and brotherhood, and met their readers' expectations to be instructed.

(b) Musicality, exciting narrative, warm feeling--which made the poems pleasing to ordinary readers.

(c) Romantic and exotic fantasy (Taylor's Oriental poems and Longfellow's ballads and narratives)--affording entertainment.

(d) Historic subjects (Sigourney and Longfellow)--giving people pride in their American past.

(e) Realistic reflection of life (the contentions and warm humor of family life on the farm in Carleton, the quietness of the Quakers in Taylor, the vicissitudes of love in Wilcox, the omnipresent fact of death in Sigourney)--by which the people saw a poetic mirror of themselves.

While usually not offering a fully aesthetic experience, popular poetry of the nineteenth century had other valid functions. It was a medium for instruction, when the people were just beginning to yearn for knowledge and culture, and for entertainment, in an age before radio, film, and television. It had also important

psychological functions of soothing grief and hardship (consolation in Sigourney, sympathy in Longfellow) and of bolstering the morale by reassuring readers of individual worth and capability (Wilcox and Longfellow).

(4) To suggest that modern elitist criticism, in admitting within the pale of poetry only work of the highest level, concentrates on the art of a very few and ignores the variety and vitality of the literary experience of the great mass of people.

(5) To emphasize the significance of the difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century attitudes about the levels of poetry.

In the early nineteenth century, American criticism urged the creation of a national literature. Part of this movement developed into a call for a poetry for the people that would help amalgamate the nation by recording the history, the daily experience, and the aspirations of the people, and that would elevate the people by improving them morally and culturally. If poetry were to improve the people, it had to be written so that they would read it.

While not denying the superior value of great poems, the critics also respected lower-level, functional poetry, that dealt with affairs of everyday life and was explicitly didactic, easily intelligible, concrete, interesting, optimistic, and soothing. Whitman wanted to become the national bard but failed to reach the people primarily because his poetry was too difficult for them.

Longfellow succeeded in writing the lower-level, but functional poetry that the people enjoyed.

Twentieth-century critics have not been sympathetic to any but the highest poetry. The elitist bias has three bases:

(a) Snobbism--"I have more in my bag than you do," as one professor put it.

(b) Fear--that extensive consumption of popular arts corrupts public taste and robs the producers of superior culture of the discriminating appreciation they need.

(c) The fact that great art is aesthetically superior and that a person who cultivates his taste so as to appreciate truly high-level poetry will not usually find lower-level poems interesting or satisfying. The arguments of twentieth-century critics for elitist poetry are convincing: it approximates the complexity of life, while lower-level poetry sacrifices truth; it controls feeling rather than exploiting it; it leads a reader to face and transcend reality rather than to escape it.

In juxtaposing these two sets of attitudes toward the levels of poetry, this study has attempted to undermine empty snobbism by exposing it; to alleviate fear by revealing response to popular art not as causing corruption of taste but as signifying budding interest in culture and a step toward experience of greater art; and to suggest (for the use of critics and teachers) a reconciliation between the attitudes of the two centuries, both of which are based upon valid principles. The suggestion is, first, to recognize with nineteenth-century critics that lower-level poetry may be legitimately

enjoyed for its simpler values by persons who are not trained in great art or by persons who want or need relaxation and simple enjoyment; and, second, in view of modern convincing arguments for the superiority of great poems, to work whenever the opportunity arises for the improvement of aesthetic taste through education. Rather than using their energy in snobbish and scathing condemnation of popular art, critics and teachers ought to learn how it functions so as to be more proficient in leading their readers and students toward improvement of taste in the arts.

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