Three American Poets

Walt Whitman,

Emily Dickinson,

and

Herman Melville

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I knew Barbara Hanrahan was out there, somewhere, waiting for this book. I just didn’t know her name, and so looked for her in all the wrong places. But now that I do know, I can thank her for bravely taking it on, without holding her at all blameable for anything in it.

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Whitman, Dickinson, Melville: three American poets of the same time and tongue, yet as poetically different from one another as each of them is from every other American who wrote verse in English before 1900. Their differing poetic signatures are plain enough to see and hear.

Outpouring Whitman:

Here rises the fluid and attaching character
The fluid and attaching character is the freshness and sweetness of man and woman,
(The herbs of morning sprout no fresher and sweeter every day out of the roots of themselves, than it sprouts fresh and sweet out of itself).

Impacted Dickinson:
We thirst at first—’tis Nature’s Act—
And later—when we die—
A little water supplicate—
Of fingers passing by—

Impersonating Melville:

I saw a ship of martial build
(Her standards set, her brave apparel on)
Directed as by madness mere
Against a stolid iceberg steer,
Nor budge it, though the infatuate ship went down.

For all these mutual unlikenesses, the three often appear together (if not arm in arm) in anthologies and literary histories under the sign of “American Poetry”—as if that denoted something more than “poetry written by Americans,” and even if it did, that three poets so distinct and atypical could begin to represent it.

What then justifies their being singled out, as here, and bundled together beneath the covers of a book? Are their poems especially “American”—more so than, say, “The Star Spangled Banner”? How so, exactly? Are Whitman, Dickinson, and Melville, as has often been said, the very best American poets of their era? In that case, what have their varied poetic excellences to do with their common citizenship? Does the latter somehow account for the former? Or are their nationality and poetic superiority merely coincidental? In that case, why aren’t they studied more often alongside esteemed poets of other nations? Are they good only in comparison to other Americans?

Short of answers to such questions, all we have, so far, in the way of a basis for treating the three together is their shared individuality. On this ground, a comparison of sorts is possible, beginning with an inventory of their differing ways of making unusual poems: the sorts of words each used, their uses of the words chosen, and their ways of putting words together. That, after all, is what any poem is: a certain selection, deployment, and arrangement of words.
As it happens, close inspection of their differing poetic manners and methods uncovers an actual similarity among the verses of Whitman, Dickinson, and Melville. However variously they wrote, all three wrote from the outset for the same reason: in reaction to ever-mounting assaults—scientific, philosophical, historical, political—on Christian understandings of the origins and purpose of human existence. Virtually every word written by the three can be traced, more or less directly, to threatened belief.

So common had such reactions to spreading doubt become by the 1850s, however, that those of Whitman, Dickinson, and Melville link them no more closely to one another than to countless other writers of their day—not just poets, be it said, and by no means just Americans. What sets them apart from all but a few of their contemporaries, and from every other American poet, is their coincidentally shared view of poetry as not just a passive medium for the expression of feelings regarding the problem of belief but a means (the only one they knew or trusted) of solving it—whether by recovering, somehow, the lost ground of assurance or by discovering an altogether new ground of knowledge and being.

If no proofs, there are reasons to suppose that the poetic eccentricities of Whitman, Dickinson, and Melville arise straight from their use of poetry as a vehicle of thought. Whereas expressions of widely entertained feeling—denial, dismay, anxiety, reassurance, despair—admit of poetic convention, writing poetry to arrive somewhere as yet unreached—perhaps unknown—calls for methods as yet untried, hence individually fashioned. To assert membership in an existing community of feeling, the poet employs a familiar form and style. To think for themselves, however, poets must devise languages of their own.

Verbally active, necessarily unconventional, and highly personal in this way, the idiosyncratic verse of Whitman, Dickinson, and Melville can be thought of as proto-modernist, far more typical of poetry written after, say, 1918 than that written by their contemporaries. This proleptic literary association goes a long way toward explaining the linking of three such unlike poets—entirely unknown to each other—and their posthumous rise together from disdain, obscurity,
and neglect to literary preeminence. What changed over time is not
themselves, of course, but the audience for printed verse, from a
large common readership eager for uplifting entertainment, to a far
more restricted, mainly academic audience for poems less immedi-
ately accessible and hence in need of instruction and conducive to
critical debate. With the general defection of common readers, after
1900, from printed verse to recorded song for helpings of sentiment
and humor, and the simultaneous ouster of Latin and Greek from
the undergraduate curriculum in favor of modern-language studies,
Whitman, Dickinson, and Melville replaced the likes of Longfellow,
Whittier, and Holmes as the most esteemed American poets before
Robert Frost.

If this change of poetic venue from the popular prints to the
academy brought Whitman, Dickinson, and Melville from nowhere
to center stage, it also separated printed verse as a whole from im-
mediate contact with its audience by interposing between poem
and reader a veil of pedagogical prose—introductory, explanatory,
interpretive, whatever. Instead of the pleasures peculiar to verse and
available only there, what the tutored audience gets—indeed, what
it usually wants—is other words, translations of poems into com-
mentary.

As today’s course catalogues and library shelves demonstrate,
Whitman, Dickinson, and Melville invite no end of such prosing.
They failed of popularity in their own day because, although by no
means indifferent to possible fame, they made few if any concessions
to the common reader at the expense of their personal quests for
knowledge by way of verse. It was difficulty, after all, that got them
into college.

However justifiable, even necessary, such prosing may be, the
chapters ahead try to avoid interpreting poems, translating them
into other words; and concentrate, instead, on describing them in
detail. Accordingly, much attention is paid to the constituent ele-
ments that all poems comprise: rhetorical situation (who is speak-
ing, to whom, what about, on what occasion, to what purpose), style
(the selection, usage, and arrangement of words), and versification
(meter, lining, the batching of lines, and forms of doubling).
To keep the reader’s eye as much as possible on the poems themselves, these descriptive chapters say nothing about the current critical conversation regarding these three poets. Once readers have become acquainted with the (very different) sorts of poems Whitman, Dickinson, and Melville wrote, their (comparable) reasons for writing as they did, and (some of) the literary consequences of their having done so, any reader so inclined can (with the help of the Afterword) drop in on that conversation, and do so not with hat in hand, looking for something to say or think about a poem, but on firm critical footing, prepared to weigh the pertinence, accuracy, and adequacy of whatever is heard there.

Parenthetical citations hereafter, unless otherwise specified, refer to the following collections (each fully described in the Works Cited): for Whitman, pages in the Library of America edition *Poetry and Prose*; for Dickinson, poem numbers in R.W. Franklin’s *Reading Edition*; for Melville, pages in Robert Faggen’s *Selected Poems*. Because these three chapters are better read through (either singly or together) than cherry-picked, I have chosen not to provide an index. Chapter titles and subtitles are a fair guide to their contents.