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Whitman as Poet of His Time

We are used to interpreting the poetry of both Whitman and Dickinson as strikingly exceptional if viewed against the background of poetry written in their times. Not so long ago, in the same series of lectures at OSA, Cristanne Miller showed how much Dickinson's poetry shared with the work of poets, especially women poets popular in her age. Taking cue from Professor Miller I want to look at Whitman's work under a similar aspect. To what extent Whitman remains a poet of his time? What does his art share with the art of his contemporaries?

To answer the question I will read selected poems from the 1856 edition, 1860 edition, the Civil War poems and the late poems of the 1870ties against selected, early and late, poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. My reason for focusing on Longfellow as the point of reference is, of course, this poet's extraordinary and long popularity among the so called "general reader". Longfellow was truly and unquestionably the poet of his age and, for all his learning, became almost *the* folk poet of the nineteenth and early twentieth century United States.

Reading Whitman alongside Longfellow one discovers both striking thematic affinities and striking divergencies, formal and stylistic of course, but perhaps first of all - ideological. Such a comparative reading permits clearer understanding of Whitman's commitment to American democracy as the foundation and core of his poetic oeuvre. Everything else in his poetry seems to follow from that commitment.