

Agnieszka Salska

"Whitman as Poet of His Time"

ABSTRACT

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.

BIO

Agnieszka Salska is the author of *Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson: Poetry of the Central Consciousness* (U of Pennsylvania Press, 1985). She wrote the chapter on Dickinson's letters for *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), published numerous articles, mostly on American poetry, and is one of the authors as well as editor-in-chief of a two volume history of twentieth century American literature for Polish readers (Kraków, Universitas 2003). Dr. Salska retired from the Department of American Literature and Culture at the Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź where she taught courses in American literature and served as Chair. She also served as President of Polish Association for American Studies from 1990 to 1996.