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THE AMERICAN STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NEWSPAPER VERSE

Ann Brunjes

Most scholars of American literature can offer little more than a blank look when asked to name a famous or important figure in American Literature from the years surrounding the American Revolution (approximately 1760 to 1820). If pressed, the scholar might call up Phillis Wheatley (1753?-84), the African slave-turned-poet who amazed her mistress and Boston intelligentsia with her religious and patriotic verse. Pushed harder still, the same scholar might recall Phillip Freneau, some of whose poems are said to prefigure the nature imagery of the transcendentalist and romantic writers of the nineteenth century. These two names aside, the years following the American Revolution until Emerson burst onto the literary scene in 1836 with his first book *Nature* have traditionally been seen as dark ones in American literary history.

Early in my graduate school career I certainly saw those years in the same light. In a course in early American Literature, which like most focused on the Puritans (their poetry, journals, and sermons), I undertook an assignment to conduct original research in any of the years between the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640) and Washington Irving's *Sketch-Book* (1819). Imagining myself as some kind of latter-day Thomas Johnson, the fortunate

For the CHRONICLE.

Mr. P R I N T E R,

I HAVE long perus'd your rural papers with pleasing satisfaction; and as you have been pleas'd to give us a curious account of the manners and customs of the inhabitants of *Wales*; as also a curious introduction to the *Whipper* of vices, and many other curious pieces; I also will, in my turn give you some account of myself; the customs and virtues of my friends and neighbours.

I live retired from the bustle of the world, in a little cottage, situated on the brow of a hill, and hear but little of the reigning vices of the age. Nor do I wish to concern myself with the failings and frailties of my fellow-creatures, but would rather overlook their follies, and view only their real virtues.

My little neighbourhood frequently associate, and alternately relate the virtues of their ancestors; but they wish not to remember, much less to unfold the failings of antiquity. One tells us, that his progenitors were meek and lowly, constant at public worship, devoid of deception, and of every kind of affectation and show. Another informs us, that his ancestors were humane, generous, actuated by the purest motives of justice and equity. That it was their constant practice to share the good things which Heaven had bestowed on them, with the poor, wretched, and miserable. A third acquaints us, that his father and grandfather were slain, fighting for their country's cause: that in them were combin'd the more noble qualities of the hero, with the real virtues of a friend, companion, and citizen.

Thus do we pass our leisure hours in festivity and mirth, and nought but unity and peace pervade our little band. "Envy may shoot her venom'd darts;" Malice may raise her hydra head; it's all in vain! still will we seek for virtue as our greatest good, and endeavour to ban even the appearance of vice, as the only destroyer of a rational creature.

Z E N O.

Berkshire Chronicle - July 24, 1788

scholar who lit upon the poems of Edward Taylor (1644-1729) stashed in a musty corner of the Yale library, I settled myself into the local history section of my hometown library and began scanning the collection. While no new Taylors leapt out at me, I found myself absorbed in microfilm copies of late eighteenth century issues of Pittsfield and Berkshire County (MA) newspapers.

In each issue I found a column devoted to poetry, the great majority of it attributed to local writers with elaborate pen-names like *The Berkshire Chronicle's* "Philo Independantic," my personal favorite. None of it was terribly good; even the more polished pieces were pale imitations of British neo-classical verse, and the unpolished were nearly incomprehensible, with allusions to local characters and events so obscure that only the most dogged contemporary reader could unearth their meaning. But these poems were clearly popular, and I could often trace the evolution in public opinion surrounding an event (like a proposed county lottery) more clearly through the *Berkshire Chronicle's* poetry than through its prose reportage. Readers felt strongly about these poems, arguing over their quality and content in verse and in letters to the editor. While my own Edward Taylor continued to elude me, I had found something that engendered passion in early Americans. I was particularly struck by the role poetry played in the lives of those long-ago Pittsfielders. Readers transformed any issue of note in the local scene into verse, which was subsequently commented upon by scores of readers. These poems forced me to reconsider those "dark" years, for there was a tremendous output of poetry and prose in local newspapers and magazines, much of it defining itself as "literary," and much of it quite unlike current conceptions of literature.

Despite its importance to *Berkshire Chronicle* subscribers of the late 1780s, none of this literature is read in college classrooms today. There is no section of *The Norton Anthology* devoted to eighteenth century periodical literature, and few scholars recognize this material as literary. There is a fairly straightforward reason for this neglect. While the poetry of the colonial period--most notably that of Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-72) and Taylor--is often difficult for the lay reader, suffused as it is by the religious piety of the Puritans, contemporary readers find in Taylor and Bradstreet an approach to poetry not terribly unlike our own. Both Bradstreet's and Taylor's poems express private pains, terrors, and fears. Though those concerns are largely focused on the

poets' relationships to God, their essential nature--an inner struggle made public in rhythmic, sometimes rhymed language--is not significantly different from the poems one might encounter in the most recent issue of *The New Yorker*.

In the years surrounding the Revolution, however, those Americans with a poetic turn of mind wrote distinctly political, public, didactic verse, poems which were designed to persuade one's fellow citizens to vote for a particular candidate or to embrace the figure of General George Washington as a hero of mythic proportions. This, to some modern readers, may be poetry in that it has meter (or more accurately aspires to meter), but today's readers have a very difficult time embracing these works as "literary" precisely because they do not transcend their own times--or perhaps more to the point, because they do not care to transcend their own times. But to Americans in 1785, a poem about the controversy surrounding the local Shaker community was as literary as Sylvia Plath's poetry is today. In the forty-odd years preceding Washington Irving's *Sketch-Book*, *The Federalist* was the talk of the taverns; Parson Weems' biography of George Washington was a best-seller; and the rapidly proliferating regional newspapers were jammed full of poems by local writers. All were considered literature; all were considered literary. Our current, still-fluctuating notions surrounding art and literature would have been quite foreign to eighteenth-century writers who saw all these texts as important contributions to the nation's fledgling literary canon.

Though the printing-press came to New England with the Puritans, twentieth-century print culture and its veneration of the bound volume was in its earliest stages in the late 1700s. Most information in post-Revolutionary America was still conveyed orally, but newspapers were one component in the growing influence of print culture in the former colonies. Popular and influential throughout New England especially, newspapers gained widespread acceptance during the Revolution, when they provided readers with one of the few sources of reliable information. Furthermore, without the con-

straint of copyright laws, it was fairly easy for printers (who were also frequently the editors, owners, and primary contributors) to fill three printed sheets by borrowing freely from other American, British or European newspapers. In the poems and essays published in Pittsfield's *Berkshire Chronicle* for the year 1788, we find, (in

PARNASSIAN PACKET.

From the NEW-HAVEN GAZETTE.
MR. PRINTER,
The distress, which the inhabitants of Guinea experience at the loss of their Children, which are stolen from them by the persons employ'd in that barbarous traffic, is, perhaps more thoroughly felt than described. But as it is a subject to which every person has not attended, the following attempt to represent the anguish of a mother, whose son and daughter were taken from her by a ship's crew belonging to a country where the GOD of Justice and Mercy is crown'd and worshipp'd.

HELP! oh help! thou God of Christians,
Save a Mother from despair—
Cruel White Men steal my Children—
God of Christians! hear my prayer.
From my arms by force they're rended,
Sailors drag them to the sea—
Yonder ship at anchor riding,
Swift will carry them away.
There my son lies pale and bleeding;
Fast with thongs his hands are bound;
See the tyrants how they scourge him,
See his sides a reeking wound.
See his little sister by him,
Quaking, trembling, how she lies!
Drops of blood her face besprinkle,
Tears of anguish fill her eyes.
Now they tear her brother from her,
Down below the deck he's thrown;
Stiff with beating—thro' fear silent,
Save a single death-like groan.
Hear the little Daughter begging,
Take me, White Men, for your own,
Spare, oh! spare my darling brother,
He's my mother's only son.
See upon the shore she's raving;
Down she falls upon the sands—
Now she tears her flesh with madness;
Now she prays with lifted hands.
I am young, and strong and hardy;
He's a sick and weekly boy—
Take me, whip me, chain me, starve me,
All my life I'll toil with joy.
Christians, who's t' a God you worship?
Is he cruel, fierce—or good?
Does he take delight in mercy,
Or in shedding human blood?
Ah! my poor distracted mother!
Hear her scream upon the shore!—
Down the savage Captain struck her,
Lifeless an the vessel's floor!
Up his sails he quickly hoisted,
To the ocean bent his way—
Headlong plung'd the raving mother
From a high rock in the sea.

regions miles from the learned coastal cities and older settled villages), the work of creating an American literature in full swing.

The *Berkshire Chronicle* is typical in form and content of newspapers published in New England before the turn of the century. It is an accessible and entertaining paper, printing local gossip alongside national and international news. Its decidedly local flavor emerges from an "Amusement" column on science questions, a "Moral Observer" column, poetry ("The Parnassian Packet"), agriculture tips, social news, and, of course, advertisements. Most of the contributors use pen names; Alfred is the regular moral observer, as well as the "Amusement" column editor, while Justus, Whipper, and Zeno provide other less regular columns on morality and issues of popular interest. The *Chronicle's* motto, "Free as the savage roams his native wood -- or finny nations cleave the briny flood," is also typical in its oddness (I remain perplexed by the image of the United States as a "finny nation") and tone of grandiose self-importance. These papers took themselves quite seriously as the most influential and widely read venues for information, politics, and commerce, and as outlets for local literary and artistic productions.

While better-known early American writers (like Joel Barlow or Timothy Dwight) wrote epic and pastoral poems about American history and religion--subjects which conformed to prevailing literary standards--in the newspapers and magazines the reader finds a kind of free-for-all in the poetic contents. While Barlow's and Dwight's writings were published occasionally in the periodicals' poetry sections and so were familiar to the general reader, a great hash of writing appears in these publications as well--written by both anonymous writers and famous Englishmen. Readers never knew, in short, what they would find when they opened a magazine or a newspaper; there might be English Romantic poetry (Wordsworth appears in *The Berkshire Chronicle* with surprising regularity) or a rough satire on a local controversy, or a moralistic epigram, or a religious poem . . . all in the same forum, all under the head-

ing "poetry." There is a peculiar hopefulness to these newspapers--an optimistic expectation on the part of the editors that if they included everything permitted within a certain circumference of standards and tastes, with an emphasis on writing by Americans, something good was bound to show up.

Certainly religious poetry enjoyed tremendous popularity in these early newspapers, and the *Chronicle* carried a healthy share of poems expressing a variety of religious concerns. "The Contrast" (July 1789), a 120 line verse ramble in rhymed couplets attributed to the poet "Crispin," is typical in tone, subject, and style to most of the specifically religious poetry found in these early newspapers. "The Contrast" expresses a great deal of anger; the author clearly has an ax to grind, though his (or very possibly her) obscure references and tendency to contradiction make it difficult to discern precisely what s/he is upset about. Crispin opens with a mocking invocation to Minerva and the muses:

*GODDESS Minerva lend you aid,
While I in mysteries deep do wade;
And Muses nine, impart your skill,
And guide for once my wavering quill,
To sound aloud my leaden trumpet,
And wade in shallows to the armpit.*

Invoking Minerva, goddess of wisdom, suggests the poet's desire to distinguish his or her rationality from the religious fanaticism that will shortly be exposed. Crispin occasionally shows a flash of intended humor, as here when mocking his/her own solemn intonations with the anticlimactic, irreverent images of a leaden trumpet and armpits.

Before undertaking the main theme, a general parody of several Protestant sects, the poem offers 45 lines on the invasion of spurious religions and itinerant preachers from "Sister States." The propagators of these religions are described in the harshest terms as "Homer's frogs engaging mice, / or numerous swarms of bodylice"; as "herd of swine in field of corn," "mountabanks" (sic), and "jockeys trading off blind horses." The particular objects of Crispin's scorn are the Universalists and Shakers, though Calvinists and

atheists also endure attacks. Though Pittsfield had no Unitarian Church until 1890, the Shakers were founding a new community in nearby Hancock, and Crispin's anxieties may have been sparked by their apparent success.

The author sees him/herself as the great leveler; endorsing no creed, Crispin condemns as ridiculous the believer and atheist, all equally foolish in believing themselves saved. In closing s/he writes:

*Thus all whirl round with equal scorn,
As Planets on their axis turn.
And so keep up endless contention
Yet half their craft I may not mention.*

Stylistically undistinguished, Crispin's poem remains interesting to us for a number of reasons. Clearly, the citizens of Pittsfield felt free to entertain a variety of religious opinions and publish their verses for the community's consideration. And the fact that Crispin chooses to express her or himself in verse, rather than in prose, holds its own fascination. Crispin, like many late-eighteenth century writers, believes that weighty subjects merit the weightiness of verse. Our contemporary understanding of poetry (however false) as an outlet for heavy emotion or navel-gazing is a stunning reversal of earlier Americans' standards and expectations.

Politics and politicians were also considered fit subjects for poetry, though readers often lamented the harsh tone taken by the poems. Magazine readers in particular expressed the frequent hope that they might be spared the crudeness and viciousness of local political debate. One writer to the March 11, 1809 issue of the *Richmond, Virginia Visitor* made clear his disdain of ad hominem political writing: *Every well disposed man who reads the newspapers, cannot but regret what we call the liberty of the Press, when he observes how invariably it happens, that political controversies terminate in personal abuse. . .*

This reader may have had in mind exactly the sort of writing that caused a considerable stir among the readers of the July 1788 *Chronicle*. In addition to igniting a series of personal attacks, one badly writ-

ten poem, signed by "Philo Independantic" and entitled "On the Celebration of the 4th of July, being a day of DEPENDANCE" (July 31 1788), sparked a lively debate among the *Chronicle's* readership concerning literary standards and the freedom of the press with respect to literature. Certainly the poem is rough: it has no consistent meter; an apologist might call its rhymes "creative;" and to a contemporary reader it is practically nonsensical, concerned as it is with the drunken antics of a group of historically insignificant Revolutionary War veterans on the Fourth of July. Laced with local political satire, "The Celebration" is similar in content to (though perhaps rather rougher in execution than) most political poetry published in the *Chronicle*.

A few stanzas from the poem, reprinted below, should provide the reader with the flavor of Philo Independantic's verse style:

*Palmer rose and told the concourse,
In his opinion 'twas no wrong course
To give them an oration,
On the present antifederal occasion.*

*When Palmer had done his expressions
so strong,
To Strong's tavern repaired
Each deacon and saint, old and young
simmer,
And at Strong's request, paid six shillings
for dinner.*

*Dinner seated over all
Cannons roar to teach their fall.
Horse and men Danforth calls forth,
To shew their valour and some mirth;*

*Not with a view to fight or kill,
Nor shew their bravery or their skill*

*Independence all pass'd free,
He got home who steady be.*

Philo Independantic's politics, as expressed in the poem, seem to have been on the anti-federalist side (i.e., opposed to the ratification of the new Federal Constitution), since he refers to the Fourth as a day of "Dependance"--in other words, Philo may have seen the Constitution's

ratification as a betrayal of the county's prevailing antifederalist beliefs and a betrayal of the spirit of the Revolution commemorated on the Fourth. Philo reinforces the impression that this is a gathering of anti-federalists by naming the celebration "the present anti-federal occasion." The characters named in these lines and elsewhere in the poem--Danforth, Strong, and Palmer, for example--were all Revolutionary war veterans and in some cases bona fide heroes. Whether Philo is lampooning the old veterans for their antics and beliefs or celebrating their politics and exuberance is unclear, but certainly the poem reflects the county's current political climate and issues of national importance.

One week after publishing "The Celebration," the printer of the *Chronicle* received an unprecedented outpouring of letters and columns from regular contributors and new ones--none of them, significantly, commenting on the content of the poem but rather on its form. One respondent in the August 7 issue, calling himself "Criticus" and overwhelmed by aesthetic pique, entitled his response to "Celebration" "Remarks on Scribbling." Following prefatory remarks on the negative aspects of freedom of the press, "Criticus" directly addresses the offending Philo Independantic, and writes: *But that any man, however destitute of learning, or even of common abilities, should be prevailed upon to expose to public view such an heterogenous, metamorphosed, borrowed, unconnected piece of composition, as that which appeared in the last week's paper, under the signature of Philo Independantic; or otherwise called Pedantic Ignoramus, is a phenomena. Surely, if the man has any sense of propriety; if he can distinguish prose from poetry -- two feet from six; or if he can perceive any difference in the rhyme of "so strong" and "repaired;" he certainly never would have exposed such imbecility. -- But as the candor of the public is requisite in all public performances, it is hoped and expected that Philo may partake of that benefit, upon the sole condition that he never more will attempt to wield the pen. (Chronicle, August 7, 1988).*

In response to Criticus's commentary, a regular columnist, "Pedro," questions Criticus's literary authority: *Now, Mr. Printer, I wish to be informed by what means Criticus & Co. became clothed with authority to kill and make alive at their nod?--If they have not been vested with such powers, they must have as much impudence to assume it, as Philo had in exposing his performance to the public eye. . . I should therefore advise Mr. Criticus & Co. to dissolve their copartnership as dictators, and pursue some business within the compass of their authority. (Chronicle, August 14, 1788)*

Pedro seems less disturbed by the prospect of bad literary publications than by the thought that someone such as the anonymous Criticus might believe himself capable of censoring the press before the public had had a chance to make up their own minds about the worthiness of the poem in question. Whipper, another regular columnist, seconds that belief when he writes of Criticus & Co.: "I know no right they have, except by assumption, to recondemn works which the better judgment of the PUBLIC had previously but partially condemned." If the Printer is to hand over inspection of submissions to the paper to Criticus, to "censure and silence, or applaud and permit any or every writer or writers whom they please, without first having the sanction of the public eye--then farewell to the liberty of the press--....farewell to the idea of a reformation in the people--and farewell to the WHIPPER" (Chronicle, August 14, 1788).

Reader opinion seems to have preferred publishing unsavory pieces like "The Celebration" to the alternative of censorship. Whipper, in true Jeffersonian spirit, believes that exposure to a variety of even poor writing is the only way to develop a literary sensibility and "a reformation in the people." These writers all continued to comment, favorably, unfavorably, and with personal venom, on one another's writing, and the *Chronicle* continued to print rough homemade verses like "The Celebration" from time to time. For Pedro and Whipper, literature was not exempt from the democratic process.

The *Chronicle* published a great variety of political poems, more standard in

form, content, and meter than Philo Independantic's "Celebration." These poems proclaimed the rising glory of America, exhorted Americans to be industrious, virtuous, and patriotic, and sang praise to Washington and Franklin. There were romantic love poems and pastoral elegies, poems condemning the popularity of state and local lotteries and gambling, complaints about the court system--in short, any subject of popular concern found its way into the *Chronicle* in verse form. The two poems I have discussed here present only an extremely limited sampling of what the *Chronicle* or any other late eighteenth-century provincial American newspaper has to offer. Though unlikely to revolutionize popular (or scholarly) opinion about the "dark years" in American literature before Emerson, these poets and their poems provide contemporary readers with a glimpse into our earliest literary tastes and standards. In places like the *Chronicle*, we find a people defining themselves through poetry--and defining poetry itself--with the vigor and passion of those engrossed in the construction of a new national identity. ❧



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