

Jan-1987

Poetry

Anne duCille
Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation

duCille, Anne (1987). Poetry. *Bridgewater Review*, 4(3), 32.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol4/iss3/14

more arrived at by objective standards than any other kind of reputation. Instead, it is most definitely what I would call a POLITICAL matter. The people who write, read, judge, and teach literature are no more or less capable of objective evaluation than anyone else. They form interest groups as inevitably as any other aggregate of human beings whose interests are served or harmed by the decisions they make.

There have always been established elites in literature -- groups of people in power who have a significant measure of control over what gets published (and thus read), praised (and thus taught), and eventually canonized as a masterwork. It seems to me that there have been three such elites controlling the American literary canon since publishing became big business in the 1830s. Through the late nineteenth century, the publishers were in control. By the turn of the century, the great age of magazines, journalists and reviewers had taken over. And in our time, the literary establishment has become the academy -- college and university professors.

The "test of time" thesis argues that a book remains popular over a long period of time, during which short-sighted cavils and contemporary prejudices drop away to leave -- lo and behold -- a masterwork. Now this certainly doesn't describe the emergence of *Moby Dick*. On the contrary, after 70 years of total neglect, Melville suddenly began to be read again -- thanks to two influential critics from the literary establishment: his biographer Raymond Weaver and F. O. Matthiessen. Actually, this kind of shot-in-the-dark rediscovery is at least as common in literary study as the steady progression of the test of time. What happens is that a particular cultural generation, because of its preoccupations and predilections, becomes receptive to new and different works. Certain cracks appear in the armor of accepted dogma preached by whatever elite is currently established as keepers of the kingdom of culture. Thus, Weaver and Matthiessen broke through the hegemony of late-nine-

teenth-century "Gilded Age" critics, who believed that literature ought to provide ideal examples and moral uplift, in order to praise Melville's fierce grappling with deeper, more disturbing issues.

For a variety of reasons, ranging from accepted ideas of role distribution to sheer prejudice, the nineteenth century was not a good time for women or minorities to get properly published, read, and reviewed in America. But there were dozens of women who wrote novels then that are worth considering in our time. Most such books were dismissed previously as "women's fiction." In a now famous phrase, Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of Matthiessen's heroes, called their authors "a damned mob of scribbling women." A similar intolerance governed the literary scene for ethnic and racial minorities. Thoreau declared in *Walden*, for example, that "the culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe." A slander of such generality is of particular interest to me, because I am currently writing a book that traces the literature produced by Irish Americans from the eighteenth century to the present. And, in fact, my research has turned up an impressive number of fascinating, forgotten writers who also deserve to be considered freshly.

Reclamation projects for women and black writers have been under way for some years now, and these have already yielded important discoveries. Some that come to mind are Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*, and the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. The work in other immigrant and ethnic groups is less far along, but may be no less fruitful, if the Irish are any indication. My point is this. What governs the formulation and revision of the canon of accepted masterworks is not the test of time, but different times. We need to keep our minds -- and our course syllabi -- open so that this work can continue.

Charles Fanning is a professor of English at Bridgewater State College.

Pride

You wait for him
by the side of the road,
the old, red Peugeot swinging down on you
like a chariot.

You strain to see if he is anxious
getting out; if his thighs too are jelly.
But the strength in his footsteps
obscures your vision.

*He does not struggle.
His eyes are silent, blood unscreaming.*

Straightening,
you fix your face into the same cool gray
as his jacket.

Security

You lean with him
against the car door,
the three hundred mile good-bye
breathing down your crotch
and his hand light on your hip.

In his fingertips
you recognize your own reluctance;
his fear freezes on your tongue.
Somewhere in your toes
you want to say
you're not a spider.

Blossoming

I wake
with expectation of you
rising in my blood
a bubble
streaming toward the surface
I am bursting with you

In the telephone
your voice is an anxious stutter
thick with Jamaica
I did not think that I would call so soon
you say
but it's been centuries
and I am bursting

Outside
magnolia buds
swelled with early morning drizzle
break into blossom

This I believe
will be the last beginning

Ann duCille

Ann duCille is a member of the English Department faculty at Bridgewater State College, where she teaches courses in poetry, Afro-American literature, and creative writing. An alumna of BSC, Class of 1971, she holds a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University. Her poetry and short stories have appeared in several magazines and anthologies, including *The Iowa Review*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Panache*, *New Letters*, and *Presence Africain*.