

Sandra M. Gilbert

**“NOW IN A MOMENT I KNOW WHAT I AM FOR”:
RITUALS OF INITIATION IN WHITMAN AND DICKINSON**

Are poetic myths of origin gendered, and, if so, how are they en-gendered? If, as psychoanalysts from Freud to Lacan, from Horney to Chodorow, have argued, boys and girls become adult men and women through processes of acculturation and socialization that emphasize and enforce sexual difference, do male and female poets represent their own aesthetic *rites de passage* in ways that also stress difference? I want here to meditate on these questions by examining two crucial poems by the “father” and “mother” of modern American verse, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson: Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and Dickinson’s “My Life Had Stood a Loaded Gun.” Both are famous literary “cruxes,” both can be read in many different ways, but each, in some sense, records — even enacts — a ritual of aesthetic initiation.

Elsewhere I have argued that, although Whitman and Dickinson were alike in producing what their own age defined as — in Josiah Holland’s phrase about the “Myth of Amherst” — “not poetry,” their innovative modes differed significantly because of culturally produced gender differences. Specifically, I claimed that, although both writers, striking up for and in a New World, “appear to have suffered from extraordinarily intense feelings of anxiety about . . . the literally distant [English and continental] fathers of their literary art . . . for Whitman, despite all his disclaimers of dependence on tradition, [such] anxieties had to be resolved through a covert ‘positional’ identification” with the ceremonial verse genres that dominate verse tradition in English, while for Dickinson they did not.¹

In presenting this idea, I should note, I was relying on the accounts of asymmetrical male and female psychosexual development offered by Sigmund Freud and (more particularly) by Nancy Chodorow. For Chodorow (who draws upon Freud even while she revises him), western child-rearing arrangements mean that the father is a more distant figure than the mother, and therefore his image requires from a boy a “positional” identification which fosters “abstract or categorical

role learning rather than . . . personal identification.” Masculinity thus requires the boy to “repress those qualities he takes to be feminine inside himself,” and “masculine identification processes stress differentiation from others . . . and categorical universalistic components of the masculine role,” while for girls, enmeshed in ongoing relationships with familiarly present mothers, “femininity and the feminine role remain . . . all too real and concrete.”² Translated into literary terms, such a gender-inflected developmental model might mean, I suggested, that even Whitman, as the “New World’s representative man . . . had to certify his poetic identity through covert repetitions of the aesthetic maneuvers which characterize the old world’s tradition of poetic representation,” while Dickinson’s “poetic idiosyncrasies” could be seen as “stigmata of her inability — or her refusal — to deploy” some (though of course not all) of the major poetic genres that have dominated western literary history.³

In reiterating and expanding this argument now, I must add, I am explicitly disputing the claim of Calvin Bedient, who has asserted, drawing in his own way on Chodorow, that “Whitman defined himself as most women do: lacking the pillar-important, pillar-narrow, pillar-impermeable identity typical of males, he flowed, he became what he absorbed.”⁴ But where, in my earlier essay, I focused especially on “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Whitman’s quasi-pastoral elegy, and on several of Dickinson’s poems about death and dying, both dirges and mortuary verses, I want here to discuss what I have called rituals of initiation. For of course, in any consideration of gender issues, poems of poetic initiation should offer unusually relevant material for analysis, since such works not only reflect the artist’s self-definition but also offer an account of the ways in which he or she arrived at that self-image along with his or her concept of the literary tradition — indeed, the aesthetic community — into which every new poet must be inducted.

Different as are their narratives, “Out of the Cradle” and “My Life Had Stood” do seem to share most of these features. Both works, for instance, celebrate the speaker’s accession to a power that is virtually unique. Whitman boasts that the mockingbird “pour’d forth the meanings I of all men know,” and Dickinson brags of the singular “Vesuvian” pleasure she has achieved in her new life as a “loaded gun.”

Similarly, both speakers associate the origins of their power with their possession by, and consciousness of, otherness: in Whitman's case, the otherness of both bird and sea; in Dickinson's that of an enigmatic "Owner." Again, both see death as, in Wallace Steven's phrase, somehow a "mother" of the "beauty" that they have been variously strengthened to create. Finally, for both, such beauty, such an "artifice of eternity" — to quote yet another modern poet — is paradoxically retrieved from, and in the context of, the flux, even the ferocity, of a natural world which the initiate must distance and conquer through language.

As I have already conceded, "Out of the Cradle" and "My Life Had Stood" offer very different narratives. But the most radical differences between the Whitman and Dickinson texts are inscribed, so my argument would go, not only in the discrepancies between their narratives (and the tone of those plotlines), not only in the strikingly different imagistic patterns that their dissonant narratives necessitate, but also, perhaps especially, in the different generic affinities the two works signal. As Leo Spitzer was perhaps the first and certainly the most distinguished critic to observe, "Out of the Cradle" is plainly "an *ode* . . . a solemn, lengthy, lyric-epic poem that celebrates an event significant for the community," and in "this very aristocratic genre" Whitman consecrates himself as "the democratic and priestly *vates Americanus*."⁵ But with its riddling (and therefore open-ended) conclusion, its almost surrealistic, elliptically phrased story, and its characteristic adherence to what John Crowe Ransom called "folk meter," "My Life Had Stood" seems more like a kind of fragmented Yankee ballad, a song of the self whose singers may have — in the transmission process — lost, forgotten, canceled, or repressed whole lines and stanzas.⁶ For this reason indeed, it is very possibly the case that generic distinctions — in this instance, the dissonance between ode and ballad — have, if not determined, at least qualified stylistic and narrative differences between the two works.

But such generic differences should not, in my view, be seen as trivial or accidental. On the contrary: they seem to me to be the consequences of deeply different psychosexual imperatives. Certainly, if we attempt a moderately close reading of "Out of the Cradle," we should be able to perceive rather quickly at least the outlines of the gender-inflected structures that this great ode dramatizes. From beginning to end, after

all, Whitman's poem emphasizes, not (as Bedient's argument would imply) the speaker's "merging" and "flowing" but his individuation — particularly his separation from "the feminine" — and the priestly (indeed, as George B. Hutchinson has recently observed, the shamanistic) authority that he has gained through such individuation as well as through what, as we shall see, is in essence a kind of "positional" identification with another male singer (the mockingbird) who totemically represents a brotherhood of magical, lovelorn *Meistersingers*.⁷

"Out of the Cradle"'s famously incantatory opening, for instance, with its long series of clauses in parallel structure, stresses not only the gift *from, up* and *out* of the seashore that the poet remembers receiving, but also his own separation from the elements of nature, his emergence *out, up* and *from* the mystically maternal forces emblemized by the endlessly rocking cradle of the deep. (Indeed, as several commentators have noted, the original version of this long shamanistic incantation followed "the musical shuttle" in line two with the specifically sexualized phrase "Out of the boy's mother's womb and from the nipples of her breast."⁸) In addition, as he recalls his empowerment by *and emergence from* the maternal chaos of the natural world, the poet strengthens himself and proclaims his already achieved authority through a frankly arrogant self-definition: "I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter, / Taking all hints to use them, but *swiftly leaping beyond them* . . ." This opening passage clearly constitutes, as Spitzer long ago pointed out, a "proem, composed in the epic style of [Virgil's great] *arma virumque cano*," and by prolonging his sentence, accumulating clause after clause, Whitman further reinforces his power. In Spitzer's words, "The longer the sentence, the longer the reader must wait for its subject, the more we sense the feeling of triumph once this subject is reached: the Ego of the poet that dominates the cosmos."⁹

On the surface, the poignant tale of the mockingbirds — the "two feather'd guests from Alabama" — that constitutes the central episode of "Out of the Cradle" and gives rise to the operatic song of loss which dominates that episode would seem in its pathos too domestic, even too sentimental, to follow the heroic Virgilian opening Spitzer describes. Yet as D.H. Lawrence, always one of Whitman's strongest readers, argued many years before Spitzer wrote his essay, this

apparently domestic anecdote is really, in the deepest sense, about male bonding. For the disappearance of the “she-bird crouched on her nest” — lost, “May-be kill’d, unknown to her mate” — is essential to the boy’s getting of wisdom. As Lawrence put it, “creative life must come near to death, to link up the mystic circuit. The pure warriors must stand on the brink of death. So must the men of a pure creative nation . . . And so it is . . . where the male bird sings the lost female: *not that she is lost, but lost to him who has had to go beyond her, to sing on the edge of the great sea, in the night.*”¹⁰

“Him who has had to go beyond her”: Lawrence’s phrase significantly conflates bird and poet, as does Whitman’s own rhetoric both in the poem itself and in his 1859 self-review of the work. As George Hutchinson observes, “The boy’s substitution for the she-bird” — which is made explicit in the lines “Demon or bird! . . . / Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?” — is “a transformation whose end is spiritual union and resulting equivalence of the spirit ‘brother,’ mate, or demon and the initiate . . .”¹¹ And Whitman himself vaunted this “equivalence” when he insisted that the poem signaled his own aesthetic resurrection: “We feel authorized to announce, for certain,” he wrote in the *Saturday Review*, “that the Mocking-Bird, having come to his throat again, his cantabile, is not going to give cause to his admirers for complaining that he idles, mute any more, up and down the world. His songs, in one and another direction, will, he promises us, after this date, profusely appear.”¹²

To be sure, the very nature of the mockingbird — according to the *American Heritage Dictionary* “a gray and white bird of the southern United States . . . noted for [its] ability to mimic other birds” — might suggest that, by substituting this American ventriloquist for the nightingales and larks who traditionally function as “spirit guides” in classical verse, Whitman was dramatizing what Bedient sees as a female tendency to “flow” and to become “what he absorbed.” If you can be everyone, this argument might go, perhaps then you are really no one, at least not a someone with a “pillar-important” and “impermeable” masculine identity. On the contrary, however, I would propose that, precisely because he can become everyone, Whitman as both mockingbird and acolyte of the mockingbird is Someone: the “democratic and priestly *vates Americanus*” who is always “afoot

with” his vision and always the spokesman/hero of his community because he contains “multitudes.”

Fittingly, therefore, the conclusion of “Out of the Cradle” celebrates this multilingual hero’s accession to language. As the “savage old mother” becomes increasingly sinister (a point that many commentators have noted), the boy confronts the task of deciphering, with his bird-familiar’s aid, the “drown’d secret hissing” that is her *Ur-sprache* — a primordial language-below-language, a “key” word that he must conquer if he is to become the “solitary singer” who paradoxically embodies the New World even as he “strikes up” for that utopia of comrades. Significantly, his understanding of the word follows, first, upon his recognition of his own mission — “Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake” — and, second, on his intuition of his mystical affinity with the bird, his awareness that, as if in response to a Shelleyan “Be thou me, impetuous one,” the bird is “projecting *me*.” At this sacred moment, the sea speaks “the low and delicious word death,” the savage mother’s explanation of her boychild’s destiny.

As such an explanation, the infamous “word” is of course richly ambiguous. Is the key word “death” because, as Whitman declared elsewhere, “to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier”? Is it “death” because life and death are merely aspects of each other in the endlessly rocking cradle of nature? Is it “death” because the solitary singer must transcend death in order to become powerful and priestly? Is it “death” because in many *rites de passage* the initiate must undergo a symbolic death and burial in order to be reborn into his new, mature self? Is it “death” because it would be death to merge with the mother, the feminine, the chaos of the deep? Is it “death” because, more specifically, that mother has (in the penultimate line of the poem) been characterized as a “crone,” a name for “witchlike old woman” that has the same etymological roots as the word “carrion”?

I suspect that all these possibilities are equally valid, if only because each depends upon a consciousness predicated on the knowledge of separateness—on, that is, an epistemology made possible by a division from what Lionel Trilling, citing Freud in a famous analysis of another great ritual of initiation, Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode,” spoke of as the “oceanic bliss” of infantile bonding with the mother. To know that

death is “different” and “luckier” from what others suppose, for instance, and to know that life and death are rocked in the same cradle, means precisely to have been so distanced from the unconsciousness of nature that inchoate knowledge can be linguistically formulated. Such knowledge, moreover, implies transcendence of the deathliness of the material, rebirth *from* and *out* of the matter and mater-iality of the maternal crone: rebirth into the grievous but powerful solitude, the “unknown want” and “sweet hell” of the dedicated poet-priest, whose songs will “after this date, profusely appear.”

Whitman’s ritual ode of initiation has, as he himself appears to have intuited, a number of features in common with the initiatory *rites de passage* most influentially defined and discussed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner.¹⁴ For one thing, as I have already noted, the boy is forced to confront the “drown’d secret hissing” of death in order to be reborn as man and poet. In this regard, the poem’s final line is as wonderfully ambiguous as the multivalent “key” word “death,” for it implies that not only did the sea whisper its message *to* the “me” or ego but also that, as the actual phrasing has it, “The sea whisper’d *me*”—whispered or articulated the poet’s triumphantly achieved identity. But even more important, a characteristic of the work that Whitman might well have joined Turner in noticing is just the “liminal”—“betwixt and between”—seaside setting that energizes both its narrative and its symbolism. “Even as a boy,” the poet later confessed in a reflective prose piece called “Sea-shore Fancies,”

I had the fancy, the wish, to write a piece, perhaps a poem, about the seashore—that suggesting, dividing line, contact, junction, the solid marrying the liquid—that curious lurking something . . . which means far more than its mere first sight . . . Hours, days, in my Long Island youth . . . I haunted the shore . . . “I have found the law of my own poems,” was the unspoken but more and more decided feeling that came to me as I pass’d, hour after hour, amid all this grim yet joyous elemental abandon.¹⁵

The law of my own poems: both generically and psychosexually that law, to which the “outsetting bard” had to learn to pledge allegiance, was what we would now call a “Law of the Father,” a principle of male poetic identity retrieved from and through a resistance to the deadly

lure of the mother. Moreover, that this law must now, quite properly, be transmitted to the community at large, as the initiate, no longer a novice, assumes the role of certified leader and spokesman, is made clear even by the ironic braggadocio of the self-review, which functions almost as a kind of coda to the ritual of initiation: “the Mocking-Bird, having come to his throat again . . . is not going to give cause to his admirers for complaining.”

Speaking of codas, given temporal constraints my analysis of “My Life Had Stood” must now be little more than a brief coda to my discussion of “Out of the Cradle.” In concluding, therefore, I will try briefly to list a few of the ways in which, although it too is a ritual of initiation, Dickinson’s poem departs from the hegemonic ceremonial pattern to which Whitman’s ode adheres. First, and most obviously, “My Life Had Stood” is not explicitly about art, even though it *is* about an accession to language (“every time I speak for Him”). In fact, readers can decide—and have argued—that the mysterious “Owner” who claims and “identifies” the narrator is as much a lover or a Christ figure as he is a muse. Furthermore, the indeterminacy of this figure is echoed by the indeterminacy of much of the poem’s language—not only the famous last-stanza riddle but also, for instance, the first line, which may mean (to use one of Cristanne Miller’s techniques) “[All] My Life [I] had stood— a Loaded Gun—” or, rather differently, “My Life [itself] had stood—a Loaded Gun—.”

But what kind of victory, in the traditional sense of the word, can be won from such indeterminacy? Not, certainly, the kind of triumph Whitman achieves. For if the speaker of “Out of the Cradle” empowers himself by translating the word up from the waves, the speaker of “My Life Had Stood” becomes *that which has to be translated*, an opaque and enigmatic text which empowers itself through its very opacity. Anesthetized, instrumental, sepulchrally lacking the grief which paradoxically makes Whitman’s (or Wordsworth’s) “outsetting bard” *into* a prophet and priest, this speaker is born, moreover, into a community which is not a society of life, of comrades who are setting themselves against death, but a commonality of death, of killing. As opposed to Whitman’s poet, indeed, who is energized by an influx of consciousness, Dickinson’s “Gun”/artist knows what she does but knows not why she does it or why her Master wants her to do it.

Although she speaks for “Him,” and although she assures her readers that “To foe of His—I’m deadly foe—,” her ballad—in what I have called its “transmission”—represses all reasons for action or enmity.

Finally, then, where Whitman dramatizes an initiation into the power made possible by the separation from and consequent knowledge of death, Dickinson dramatizes an initiation that is deadly because “I have but the power to kill, / Without—the power to die—.” In its cryptic frankness, therefore, her *rite de passage* also marks an entrance into both *bewilderment* and *subversion*. Elliptical as it is, “My Life Had Stood” needs to be supplemented by other Dickinson verses to be more nearly understood. Its *bewilderment*, which is to say its ease with indeterminacy and mystery, is reinforced by the affirmation of enigma that characterizes such a Dickinson text as “I have a King who does not speak,” where it is the nature of the god or muse to be silent, withheld. And its *subversion*, its acquiescence in a liminality that is ongoing rather than temporary, is signaled even in Dickinson’s far more exuberant tribute to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “I think I was enchanted,” a poem about the female literary tradition in which the speaker identifies her aesthetic community not with the mocking bird’s centrality but with just the witchcraft that Whitman repudiates when he distances himself from the “crone” who has facilitated his transition into adulthood. For Dickinson, in other words, even the narrative of the crucial *rite de passage* need not be—or cannot be—couched in the form of (to recall Spitzer) “a solemn, lengthy, lyric-epic poem that celebrates an event significant for the community” in general.

But must the difference between Whitman’s and Dickinson’s rituals of initiation that I have provisionally outlined here necessarily imply hierarchy? Is Whitman a “better” poet because he is quasi-Virgilian and because Victor Turner would recognize the tale he tells? Or is Dickinson a “better” poet because she is more “original,” more willing to cast off the burden of the past and its archaic ceremonies? For the gender theorist, it seems to me, these are unfair and unanswerable questions. Each of these major artists, after all, has condensed into language a significant account of the moment when “I know what I am for,” and in doing so — as I would eventually like more extensively to argue — each has discovered “the law of my own poems.”

Notes

¹ See Sandra M. Gilbert, “The American Sexual Poetics of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson,” in *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 144.

² Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 177, 181, 176-77.

³ “American Sexual Poetics,” pp. 147-48.

⁴ Bedient, “Walt Whitman: Overruled,” *Salmagundi*, 58-59 (Fall 1983-Winter 1983): 331.

⁵ Spitzer, “*Explication de Texte* Applied to Walt Whitman’s Poem ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,’” *ELH* 16 (1949): 248-49.

⁶ Ransom remarks on Dickinson’s use of “folk meter” in “Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored,” in Richard B. Sewall, ed. *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 88-100.

⁷ Hutchinson makes a persuasive case for Whitman’s “shamanistic” impulses throughout his *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of the Union* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986).

⁸ See, for example, Barbara Schapiro, “Shelley’s *Alastor* and Whitman’s *Out of the Cradle: The Ambivalent Mother*,” *American Imago: A Psychoanalytic Journal for Culture, Science and the Arts*, 36, 3 (Fall 1979): 252.

⁹ Spitzer, “*Explication*”: 236.

¹⁰ Lawrence, “Whitman,” reprinted in *Leaves of Grass: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 848-49.

¹¹ Hutchinson, p. 127.

¹² “All About a Mocking-bird” (1859), quoted in Hutchinson, p. 123.

¹³ Trilling, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” in *Prefaces to the Experience of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), pp. 254-60.

¹⁴ On *rites de passage*, see Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, tr. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960); and Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

¹⁵ “Sea-shore Fancies,” *Prose Works 1892*, reprinted in Bradley and Blodgett, p. 767.

¹⁶ See Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 28-29.