

BEAUTY'S PURPLE FLAME: SOME MINOR AMERICAN GAY POETS, 1786—1936

by Stephen Wayne Foster

There have been many studies of the homosexual poetry of Walt Whitman and Hart Crane, but it is only recently that Robert Martin and Donald Mader have studied the other poets of America whose homosexuality is evident in their writings. Other poets await recognition. We might begin with Edward Taylor, the colonial poet whose love for Christ takes on homoerotic tones in its intensity and in Taylor's description of Christ's physical beauty, a Christian parallel to the Islamic mystic poetry which has long been recognized as covert homosexual love-poetry. After the Revolution, a group of New England writers, most with homosexual tendencies, founded the literature of American Romanticism. One of them, Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), wrote a poem based on the Biblical story of Daniel and three other boys who were raised from slavery to royal favoritism at the court of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia, but adding his own theme of the king being motivated by lust for the beauty of the four youths. This poem, "The Trial of Faith," has not been reprinted since 1793, and must therefore be quoted at length:

Four youths, companions, silent pass'd along,
By form distinguish'd from the vulgar throng.
Fair o'er them trembled Beauty's purple flame;
Their eyes, as angels', cast a sunny beam . . .
The monarch gaz'd.—His fierce and hardy mind
Then first with sweet and tender thoughts
refin'd;
He felt each nerve with strange emotion
thrill . . .
To Arioch then, his favor'd, faithful slave,
The turning prince his sovereign pleasure gave:
"Seest thou, my Arioch, those bright, youthful
forms;
What grace surrounds them, and what beauty
warms!
. . . Superior far to all in every grace,
Among the chosen youths appoint the place."

Ashpenaz, a eunuch, addresses the boys:

"All-lovely youths! Attir'd with every
grace . . ."

These excerpts are enough to give the idea.

A homosexual tradition was developed by Fitz-Greene Halleck and Bayard Taylor, with isolated poems being written by Thoreau, Emerson, John Howard Payne, and a few others. Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806-67) wrote a poem, "On Seeing a Beautiful Boy at Play," in which he describes the boy, whose:

. . . dark eye's clear brilliance, as it lay
Beneath his lashes, like a drop of dew
Hid in the moss, stole out as covertly
As starlight from the edging of a cloud.
I never saw a boy so beautiful.

He goes on to compare the boy to Ganymede, ending with:

I sigh to look upon thy face, young boy!

Walt Whitman came along with his outspoken "calamus" poems in *Leaves of Grass*, inspiring a whole school of homosexual poets who in England were known as Calamites, but who in America never received a label, although they may

be conveniently called "the American Calamites." In Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, one of the characters is modeled upon a friend named Thomas William Parsons (1819-92), a dentist, poet and pederast. In "To A Handsome Boy," Parsons asks a delivery-boy to run back from his errand to the poet's waiting hands;

If horses must be had—have horses then!
Horses with wings! and Mercurys for men!
Run, dear: I love thee! only do me this
Fleet little favor,—and thy fee? "A kiss."

What did Longfellow think of this?

Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833-1908) wrote a poem, "Alectryon," one of the first to introduce the theme of Greek mythological homosexuality to American poetry, telling of the love of the god Ares for the beautiful boy Alectryon.

George Lansing Raymond (1839-1929) was the author of numerous books of aesthetic philosophy and poetry. In one of his poems, "On Raphael's Angels" (known in a slightly different form as "A Phase of the Angelic") (we have pure pederasty:

I wonder not that artists' hands,
Inspired by themes of joy,
Presuming forms of angel-bands,
Are moved to paint the boy.

In *A Life in Song* (originally called *Life Below*), Raymond tells of his love for a girl, but then wishes that she were the sister of a boy whom he had once known and loved:

For I loved that boy, and the boy loved me
With a love far deeper and purer
Than ever a love I deem could be
If well'd from a source maturer.
We look'd in each other's eyes to see
Our dearer selves reveal'd;
And nothing within each orb saw we
Save too much love conceal'd.
We rested back in each other's arms,
And we heard each other's hearts,
With music far sweeter than ever the charms
That ever the world imparts.
For every throb in the blood of one
Would thrill through the other's veins,
And the joy of one dispel like a sun
The night of the other's pains.
Discordant never in smiles or sighs,
We wonder'd if it could be—
Oh God, to think we were then so wise!—
That others could love as we.

Christopher Pearse Cranch (1813-92), late in life, wrote a poem, "Iapis," about "a shepherd youth whom Phoebus loved," based on an episode in the *Aeneid*, Book XII, where the boy's name appears as "Iapix." Henry Augustin Beers (1847-1926) wrote "Narcissus," a poem about "Narcissus, Phoebus' darling."

Lloyd Mifflin (1847-1921) wrote in 1879 an elegy, "In Memoriam," about a youth who had died in Rome, "H. H. H. jr.," with whom he had apparently been in love:

His memory blooms a rose within the heart,
And sweetest odors are the last to die.

Francis Saltus (1849-89), in a far different tone, introduced "decadence" by writing a poetic drama about Sodom, *Lot's Wife*, with Swinburnean chants in favor of "vice."

James Berry Bensel (1856-86) lived a brief and incredibly tragic life, which explains the morbid tone of his poem, "Forgotten," about a dead boy whom he had loved, "wild with grief as any love-lorn girl," placing a flower and a curl from the boy's head in a little box to remember him by, but forgetting after all, forgotten:

... since that May
I kissed the contents for a dead boy's sake.

Only a few brief facts about Bensel's life can be gathered from articles in old, out-of-print literary biographical dictionaries.

George Edward Woodberry (1855-1930) was a professor of British literature, author of many books of criticism and poetry, one of the best-loved and most famous educators of his day, although since forgotten. Louis Ledoux said that there was "a whole row of young Sicilians" in Woodberry's poems, and Woodberry was the only American poet other than Whitman to be discussed in Xavier Mayne's *The Intersexes*. Mayne said:

Professor Woodberry, of Columbia University, is the authour (sic) of a long elegy, giving title to a volume, "The North-Shore Watch:" a retrospect and lament inspired by the death of a lad—a poem hellenically passionate, and of superior poetic quality.

Certainly Woodberry was the supreme American Calamite poet, both in outspokenness and in quality, as in such poems as "Comrades;":

Where is he now, the dárk boy slender
Who taught me bare-back, stirrup and reins?
I loved him; he loved me; my beautiful, tender
Tamer of horses on grass-grown plains.
Where is he now whose eyes swam brighter,
Softer than love, in his turbulent charms . . .
O love that passes the love of woman!
Who that hath felt it shall ever forget,
When the breath of life with a throb turns
human,
And a lad's heart is to a lad's heart set?
Ever, forever, lover and rover,
They shall cling, nor each from other shall part
Till the reign of the stars in the heavens be over,
And life is dust in each faithful heart!
They are dead, the American grasses under . . .
And my heart—all the night it is crying, crying
In the bosoms of dead lads darling-dear.

Here is one of the Sicilian youths, from "Flowers of Etna;":

Fond boy, art cannot limn thee,
Bud of the white dawn's hour;
And language doth but dim thee,
Youth's violet, Etna's flower;
But I will bear thy face with me
As far as shines eternity.

There were so many boys dying young and being lamented by their lovers in those days that one is tempted to think these deaths were imaginary, intended to satisfy the morbid sentimentality of the Victorians. Woodberry contributed his own lament, "The Dirge," whose loveliness overcomes the morbidity:

Violets, that were his eyes;
Roses that his kisses were;
Breath of jasmine be his sighs,
And his tears be myrrh!

James Benjamin Kenyon (1858-1924) wrote a poem on a theme dear to the Calamites, "Hylas and Hercules," which contains the line:

Never yet was boy so fair . . .

Walter Malone (1866-1915) was a judge in Mississippi who found time to ogle Greek waiters and write a lengthy epic poem, *Hernando De Soto* (1914), which includes an episode about two youths, Juan Ortiz and Pedro Miranda, who are attacked by Indians. Miranda has blue eyes, blonde hair, and "fair young limbs" as white as snow. When the Indians are about to put Miranda (who to Ortiz was "nearest and

dearest") to the torture, Ortiz says:

... Then around
My neck the last time did he throw his arms.
"Farewell!" he cried, and kissed me. But I wept
So wildly that I even could not sob
"Farewell!" in answer. . . .

One of Judge Malone's short poems is "Narcissus;":

... young Narcissus roamed in beauty nude;
His soft round limbs, fair as a lily's buds,
Were never hidden in a useless garb.
... His golden ringlets hung upon his breast,
Too short to hide his sweet, enchanting charms.

Hugh McCulloch (1869-1902) wrote "The Quest of Heracles," which included a section titled "Antinous;":

... Antinous returned
His love so greatly that he scarcely yearned
For love of women. . . .
... And for this
He had been born on earth; had known the bliss
Of love surpassing woman's love; had known
The joy of straining arms about him thrown . . .

John Erskine (1879-1951) was the author of *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, a parody of the *Iliad* in the form of a novel. He was one of Woodberry's students at Columbia, and told many anecdotes about Woodberry in his two volumes of autobiography. Perhaps they were lovers. Erskine wrote a poem, "A Song of Friends;":

Such friendship Hylas knew:
Hylas the young, whom once Alcides loved . . .
"Hylas, O Hylas!" For they two were bound,
The knightly roamer and the tender boy,
In perfect league, as when the climbing vine
Ranges the aged oak with beauty round . . .
So Hylas round Alcides grew,
Himself unstalwart, round the son of Jove . . .
O thou who first the love of man
On men bestowed, once more inspire,
As when all brotherhood began,
The yearning quest, the far desire . . .

William Frederick Allen (1880-19 ?) and James Latimer McLane jr. (1898-19 ?) both wrote poems titled "Hyacinthus," issued by the same publisher within a year of each other! Allen says:

Phoebus' kiss may not awake
Nor thy beauty's silence
Poor boyfair, no!

McLane describes:

... Hyacinthus, slender, sunburned lad
With wide brown eyes and tawny, wind-sweet hair;
Naked he plunged among the waves . . .

Wallace Gould (1882 or 1883-19 ?) was yet another writer of poems on Greek homoerotic themes, as in his "Discobolus," which deals with a statue of a young athlete:

... Was he a slave—
A wild young prize from Scyros, or a Samian
youth of the choicer flesh?
Or a penniless young Athenian rake who would
readily strip for an obol? Or
As likely, just a boy about the palaestra, one with
uncommon contour
But common mind perchance below the average?

George Sylvester Viereck (1884-1962) was a German-American who claimed to be the Kaiser's bastard son, and who wrote several novels. He also wrote a poem, "Mr. W. H." about Shakespeare's boyfriend. Another poet, but an anti-German one, who also wrote a poem on this subject, was Alan Seeger (1888-1916), who died in the First World War. He wrote

"With a Copy of Shakespeare's Sonnets on Leaving College," addressed to his own boyfriend, who was advised in later years to:

... turn here, dear boy, and reading see
Some part of what thy friend once felt for thee.

Seeger also says that in their relationship he had read "the sense of David's line," no doubt a reference to Jonathan's love "passing the love of women." Seeger also wrote "The Deserted Garden," which contains a passage on Antinous, here in the form of a statue:

Close by upon a beryl column, clad
In the fresh flower of adolescent grace,
They set the dear Bithynian shepherd lad,
The nude Antinous. That gentle face,
Forever beautiful, forever sad . . .

Seeger was once famous as the author of "I Have a Rendezvous With Death," a war poem rendered poignant by the death of the author.

Another soldier of the First World War was Hervey Allen (1889-1949), who had a nervous breakdown and went to teach at a boys' school in Charleston, South Carolina, whence he was forced to flee to avoid arrest on pederastic charges in 1923. He wrote two prose masterpieces, *Israfel* and *Anthony Adverse*, but he also wrote poetry, including poems about Hylas and Antinous. There is a pederastic episode in *Anthony Adverse*. He married a woman with "the mystique of a boy."

Fenwick Lindsay Holmes (1883-19 ?) wrote another of those dead-boy elegies already mentioned, "My Boy Beyond: to a friend":

You may not come to me, but I can go:
I fear not the wide stretch of plain,
I know that He who met you on your way
Will meet me too, beyond the blue
And guide me to my boy again.

The first line of this poem is an echo of David's lament over the death of his infant son by Bathsheba (II Samuel 12:23), but the sub-title "to a friend" appears to prove that it was not the poet's own son to whom this elegy was addressed. One must always be careful in dealing with minor poets to avoid mistaking parental love for the love of somebody else's child.

Carlyle Ferren MacIntyre (1890-1967) wrote a poem, "Narcissus," one of the last of a long tradition of poems on Greek themes, describing the boy's smooth-skinned, "hermaphroditic beauty." Lucius Morris Beebe (1902-66), who wrote numerous prose works, also wrote "After Horace," an imitation of the *Odes*, Book IV, 10, about a Roman who consoles himself for the disdain of Ligurinus in the arms of other beautiful youths.

Hart Crane, the famous homosexual poet, was the associate editor of *Pagan*, a literary magazine, and it is to be supposed that Crane attracted several homosexual poets to contribute, although nothing is known about the lives (including the birth/death dates) of such poets as Archie Austin Coates and Le Baron Cooke. Cooke's "Nocturne" begins:

Moonlight, and the sparkle of nude boys
Dancing like slender fauns across the sandbar,
Enchant the night.

Coates' poem, "Rivals," is outspoken and realistic:

Along the Avenue of an afternoon,
Lithe, slim youths
Sauntering.
Sleek of hair, and trim, and narrow of hip,
Beneath faces artfully made just a bit too beautiful
And not quite manly.
They stroll slowly,

Shooting side-glances into passing faces,
Meaningly.
At the corner
A painted woman
Shambles into a doorway.
Her lips are of dry flame,
And in her eyes are flames of hatred,
Hatred and scorn, bitter and inexpressible,
For these slim youths,
Her rivals.

The most elaborate of the homosexual poems of this period was *Hyacinthus*, a lengthy prose-poem by Phillip Steffens, of whom nothing is known. This slim book was privately printed, aimed at "the scholar of mythology and the connoisseur," in 510 copies deluxe, with illustrations by Joan Winsor Orbison, and dedicated to "all those pagan souls whose innate love for Beauty transcends beyond Evil." There follows some one hundred pages of heavy breathing and lurid passions, unlike the chaste Greek poems of the previous poets of this tradition. This was the only book under discussion published in California, and thus the only one free from the puritanical restrictions of the East Coast. Here is a sample:

I loved you madly, insanely, and yet I know little
of love.
Fear: yes, I had not loved you adequately, I was
not adept
at caresses, and you, you had found me
wanting, you, a God.
Tears came; my throat convulsed with sobs.
Ah me! I would not see you again. Nevermore
your hand
running through the blackness of my hair, nor
feel
the tremor of your lips brushing my mouth,
nor the ecstasy of your arms about me.
And suddenly I felt you close, your hand on my
shoulder.
"Hyacinthus, my love, Hyacinthus!", you
whisper.
O the fire of me then and the love and the
madness
as I beheld you tense and erect standing
before me in your Godly nakedness.
I arose to my knees and embraced your body
fiercely, my mouth daring unbelievable
feats.
You bent to kiss my hair and dug your fingers in
my shoulders and appeased the pangs of
my hunger.
Three nights and three days, my Lover, did we
lie on my couch, soul-drunk with love.
Your fingers flowed along my thighs, awakening
unfathomable music within me, and you
marvelled at the warmth of me.
Your lips met mine in soul-lingering caress. I was
pregnant with your immortality stirring
within
me, fusing with my mortality.
Time there was none, no Life, nor Death!
Only Love . . .

It was not long after this that the Second World War paved the way for modern homosexual literature, beginning with the poetry of Louis Ferdinand Valentine in the 1940s, and continuing with the poets of our own time. I have avoided discussing the poets treated by Martin and Mader, as well as a few other poets such as Henry V. Stevenson, who issued two volumes of verse with his photograph giving the reader an ogle (in the 1920s); and have avoided going into a psychological analysis of the various themes and mental attitudes toward same-sex love

displayed by this wide variety of poets. Certainly, there is a gulf between the lurid loves of Hyacinthus and Apollo in Steffens' poem on the one hand, and on the other hand, the "passion cold and shy" felt by Ralph Waldo Emerson for "fair boys bestriding steeds" in the poem, "The Harp," in the *Age of Innocence*.

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- Donald Mader (editor), *Men and Boys* (New York: Coltsfoot, 1978), with an introduction (reprinted main text originally issued 1924) Francis Saltus' *Lot's Wife* (1890) is not in the Library of Congress or the British Museum, nor am I aware of the location of any copies. Excerpts from this and other works by Saltus are reprinted in: Thomas Robert Smith (editor), *Poetica Erotica: a Collection of Rare and Curious Amatory Verse* (New York: Crown Pubs., 1949), pp. 587-93. The "Song of the Youth" (p. 591) from *Lot's Wife* is blatantly homoerotic. Francis Saltus is not to be confused with Edgar Saltus. Smith's anthology was originally issued in a large and unexpurgated edition in 1921, which I have not seen.

