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THE POET AS HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHER: AMY CLAMPITT'S 'MARGARET FULLER, 1847'

Allen Flint

In this essay, I would like to examine Amy Clampitt's 'Margaret Fuller, 1847'¹, a poem brilliantly effective in using provocative diction to establish connections that combine with a series of contrasts to produce a valuable synthesis.

Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) was a shining star among New England intellectuals. Self-educated, friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, editor of the *Dial*, Horace Greeley's first foreign correspondent, she made a reputation holding classes in the form of conversations with women, and by out-talking some of America's brightest men. She settled in Italy in 1847, married a nobleman, had a child, and drowned with husband and child just off the American coast in 1850.²

One reads Clampitt's poem with only a single eye open until the sixth stanza, which contains 'succubus' and 'doppelgänger'. Two such strikingly provocative words, after quite ordinary diction through five stanzas, cause a second look, which leads to the connections mentioned above. In fact, that second look, echoing the poem's 'second spring', reveals the imaginative core of the poem. What is connected is religion (to at least a limited extent) with the Italian struggle for independence (leading eventually to unification), and some highly personal feelings which Margaret reveals (guardedly) in her letters. Clampitt's presentation centers on a contrast between actualities and various unrealities that leads to a final synthesizing statement, which, because the poem has stripped away the unrealities, can be (and is) effectively understated.

The most obvious unifying element in the beginning of the poem is the insistence on implanting the setting in Italy. Five of the eleven lines in Stanza One and the first line of Stanza Two (for an even half of the first twelve lines) end with Italian places or people: Italy, Rome, Corso (a street in Rome), Quirinal (the

¹ *New Yorker*, 8 September 1986, page 38.

² Clampitt's debt to Mason Wade, *Margaret Fuller, Whetstone of Genius* (New York, 1940) goes beyond use for background information; compare the poem with the book's pages 201–231.

Quirinal Palace, official papal residence until 1870, royal palace until 1948, presidential residence since then), Pio Nono (Pope Pius IX, 1846–1878), and Milan (preceded by Florence in the same line).

This early attention to Italy is not only essential to one of the central ideas in the poem (that for mid-nineteenth-century America, Italy's struggles evoked the memory of America's own revolutionary break with England seventy-five years earlier), but it also welds form and content, crucial to the success of the poem. The capitalization of 'New World' suggests one dimension of the centrality of contrast to the poem: Italy is being contrasted with America, but title and first line mean that Margaret Fuller is also involved in the equation of time and space, past and present, Italy and America, childhood and a second spring that defeats spinsterhood.

The second look at diction prompted by 'succubus' and 'doppelgänger' in Stanza Six proves immediately rewarding in reviewing the first stanza. 'Smoldering', 'queer geological contortion', 'New World crust', and 'upheaval' are richly suggestive, to say nothing of the aforementioned references to Italy, and metaphor. The four terms in quotation marks obviously fit together as neatly as Italy, Rome, and Corso, in their focus (from somewhat different perspectives) on the incipient revolutionary movement. The year 1847 in the title masks and simultaneously suggests 1848 as the central year in nineteenth-century Europe's revolutionary strife. An earthquake or the eruption of a volcano—some specific cataclysmically disruptive natural phenomenon—is required to convey the force of social and political revolution.

The church is introduced to form a possible third side of the triangle that includes Fuller and revolutionary Italy, by the Pope's seeming to give his blessing to the upheaval. If the religious element were more fully developed, Ossoli's family's close association with the Papacy might be worth considering. Angelo Ossoli's entanglement with an older foreigner, a Protestant at that, and one not at all in the mold of an obedient wife, could scarcely have pleased his older brother. Hence, if there were any way for Margaret to obtain the blessing of the Pope—if the blessing were for *her* upheaval—the reward would be worth the effort. That was not to be, however, and the religious dimension proves to be relatively unimportant. The 'votive banks of the faithful' in the last line of Stanza Three, and 'Mass' in the first line of Stanza Four, complete the overt expression of religion. But a reader more familiar than I with the history of the Church in the nineteenth century might be able to make more of Pope Pius IX's presence in the poem at all. He was controversial, politically, at the time; he was Pope for longer than anyone else; he re-defined the Papacy with the doctrine of Papal Infallibility in 1869, and it was during his Papacy that the Church profoundly altered the status of Mary and Anne by enunciating the doctrine of Immaculate Conception in 1854.

Heat and water, two of the four ancient elements, are prominent in the poem, with water ultimately quenching the flames. There are 'smoldering' and 'torchlit' in Stanza One; 'furnace,' 'burned,' 'torches,' 'glowed,' and 'lit' in Stanza Three; and 'lamplit' in Stanza Six. It is Italy that is smoldering, with the torchlit proces-

sion suggesting revolution. Terms evoking heat in Stanza Three unite Margaret's inflamed passion for Ossoli with the fires of revolution, and (in a line noted earlier) with the heat of religious fervor in 'glowed in the votive banks of the faithful.' Does one read 'faithful' as religiously faithful, with a second look suggesting fidelity to the revolution, or the reverse, with the overt meaning the political revolution and the covert hint towards religion? I suppose the answer depends on the importance attached to the next line, which has Margaret and Ossoli attending Mass. In its own stanza, the line seems to me to invite minimization; one line of the stanza is about Mass, but the remainder of the stanza deals with excursions into nature, and with Margaret's romantic ecstasy, even though she had little food—in other words a blissfully if foolishly romantic idyll. In context, religion is of little importance. In fact, priggishly considered (and why not consider the priggish when examining the heretofore blue-stockinged Miss Sarah Margaret Fuller?) and from a religiously biased morality, line one of Stanza Four nods in the direction of religion, but it is quite likely that Margaret and Angelo are conceiving their child at that time, almost certainly before marrying.

The 'long excursions into the countryside' did indeed, pruriently considered, make her 'bedroom sweet'. She is, she tells us through the letter (to her mother, in Stanza Four), and Clampitt through skillful use of the letter, happier and healthier than she has ever been.

But that heat, the passion, is a fire that inevitably must be put out. As Pio Nono retreated into the Vatican from the fires of revolution, so the rains came (Stanza Five) driving Margaret inside. The childish well-being of Stanza Four becomes terror-ridden childhood nightmares in Stanza Five. From dreams of her mother, dead, to dreams of a 'drowned' friend, to 'tides', to 'succubus of mud' to the migraines of morning sickness ('nausea' in Stanza Six), and to that final word of the poem, 'drowned', the poem not only reveals the terror of childhood, but places Margaret in her pregnant-but-partly-abandoned present, and points to her own death in less than three years. The swing from evocation of happy childhood to the terror of childhood nightmares to the migraines of second self (redefining, perhaps undercutting, the second self of second spring) is the fall from the heat of a passionate affair to the coldness of drowning.

Of less central importance than heat and water, but still useful, are the words expressing organic life: 'chrysalis', 'kernel', 'grapes', 'violets', 'roses', and 'fruit', all in the first four stanzas. Perhaps they function to place Fuller's situation, and Italy's, in a natural context, as the two notable words about smell — 'reek' in Stanza Four and 'stank' in Stanza Six — suggest first a romantic and then a realistic world. The affair moves inevitably from the romantic moments among the beautiful flowers to the sordid and painful reality of a lonely pregnancy. Of these words, the only one to command the attention of 'succubus' and 'doppelgänger' is 'chrysalis'. Margaret, in the year of the revolution in Italy, has herself moved out of the husk, the shell, of her former life, and is about to spread her wings and fly. 'Chrysalis' assumes its full force when it reverberates through 'bloodstream', 'scandalous', and 'adventure', as describing the change that takes place in Margaret at the time.

The other terms allied to something of this movement are ‘upheaval’ in Stanzas One and Seven and ‘heave’ in Stanza Six. The first upheaval refers clearly to the political unrest in Italy at the time. However, it assumes a deeper meaning when set against the ‘unending heave of human trouble’ in Stanza Seven. Here, Margaret is personally and intimately involved, as she is giving birth in a manner that must necessarily scandalize an America epitomized by Greeley, Hawthorne, Concord, and New England. Of course, what draws these terms together most significantly is the ‘heaving succubus of mud’ of Stanza Six. At the center of what Margaret most stands for, most IS, is the terror of childhood nightmares mingled with the scandal of her conduct in Italy and leading to the tragic drowning at the end. Certainly there must have been some people in easily scandalized New England who would have been relieved, and seen the hand of a just God, at Margaret’s not being able to return to America with the burden of her shame.³

This, I think, is the sub-text in the adjectives – ‘straitlaced’ and ‘fastidious’ – which Clappitt uses to posit Greeley and Hawthorne, admirable choices, as arbitrators in their separate realms. Greeley was as public as Hawthorne was private, but was the editor any less uncomfortable with Margaret than the novelist?

One sign of the poem’s apparent quick shift from Italian revolution to Margaret Fuller (perhaps one indication that the poem is most about Fuller from the start, perhaps a measure of the poem’s success in fusing Fuller and Italy) is the movement from smoldering Italy in Stanza One to ‘mutilated Italy’ in Stanza Three. Italy is setting, but more than mere setting, whereas what happened in Italy is most importantly reflected in Fuller.

A surprising number of verbs in the poem begin with the letter ‘d’. Two-thirds of them are in situations in which Margaret is the actor. They are:

Stanza One: she’d disappeared
 Two: once despaired
 Four: dissembled
 Five: dreamed
 Eight: do
 Eight: drowned.

In the others, Margaret is not actor: he’d drawn in Stanza Two; it drowned in Six; and venders disappeared in Six. The repetition of verb sounds certainly is a unifying factor in the poem in a general, formal sense, with the added benefit of seeming to support the concept (or character, perhaps) of Margaret conveyed by the poem. In fact, she is in a way characterized by the movement from her being a discerning person, to her having once (but no more) despaired of finding love, to her needing to dissemble, once pregnant. There is the same progression

³ Three heroines in nineteenth-century American literature commit suicide by drowning, all three, in a way, following sexual transgressions: Zenobia in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, and the title character in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*.

from her dreaming to her drowning, with the principal sub-liminal value of the 'd's' being that they do lead, via sight and sound, to that all-important last word of the poem.

Closely allied with the force of those words is the manner of referring to Margaret, as the first words in six of the nine entries in the list indicate. Margaret is named in the title of the poem, but not named again. Instead, Clappitt uses a form of 'she' fifteen times. Those instances are concentrated in the first five stanzas of the poem, with only two of the fifteen in the last three stanzas. Six are contractions, two of the 'she would' and four of the 'she had' form. In the first five stanzas, Margaret is principal and is actor. With her pregnancy, and foreshadowing her doom, she becomes more acted upon than actor, towards the end of the poem. Migraine returns, life takes over, until at the end of the poem one use of 'she' suffices for a recital of the major events of her life.

One key to the shift is the disappearance of Ossoli from the poem, once Margaret is pregnant. He is introduced in Stanza Two, is presented in Stanzas Three and Four as Margaret's companion and as the reason for her interest in the revolution (a bit unfairly, as she had met Mazzini in London), goes to Mass with Margaret in the first line of Stanza Four, and is heard of no more. This reflects the fact of the matter — that he sent Margaret out of Rome for her safety during her pregnancy, but also to conceal from his family the depth of his involvement with her — but also his relative unimportance, from an American point of view. The birth of the child is mentioned in Stanza Seven and again in Eight, but it is as if Ossoli ceased to exist when Margaret becomes pregnant.

Such insistence on 'she' clearly orients the poem's focus on Margaret Fuller, whatever tangential significance revolution and religion might have. Obviously, the other frequently used personal pronoun, 'her', supports this focus, and in fact deepens its meaning. There are fifteen instances of 'her' or 'herself' in the poem, and there is nothing more personal. For the most part (twelve of the fifteen) they express possession, with four specifically about Margaret's person, and a surprising three about her mother. Well, not so surprising, after all, when one considers the strength of Margaret's feelings for her mother, and the anguished letter in which she finally tells her mother of the marriage and her son, and when one suspects that letter to be most nearly central to Clappitt's concept in creating the poem.

The form of the poem is intriguing. It is blank verse—certainly unrhymed and essentially iambic pentameter, with the overwhelming majority of the lines in the first seven stanzas having nine, ten, or eleven feet, and enough of them iambs to give the poem meter (or the effect of meter), never to my ear with so persistent a regularity as to call attention to itself. I would suggest, further, that the poem is a variation of the *ballade* form, with seven eleven-line stanzas and a concluding six-line envoy, a variation on the pattern of ten-line stanzas with a five-line envoy. The metrical pattern in the first seven stanzas is abandoned with striking effect in the increasingly staccato-like short lines in the envoy, ending in a final iamb with 'And drowned' (as so many strands of the poem lead to the last word,

interestingly the same last word as in T. S. Eliot's 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock').

The centrality of Stanza Six in the poem, alluded to in several ways already, is reinforced in Clampitt's use of metaphor. The metaphor in Stanza One, the last word in the poem's first sentence (a sentence with an element of periodicity: 'Italy' at the end of the first line and 'ceased/to be a metaphor' three and four lines later), is quite simple and obvious. Italy, for Margaret in 1847, by her thirty-seventh year, has ceased to be an attractive but virtually unattainable symbol of culture, but is now real. The Italy of the imagination would be stable, unchangeable—the epitome of the ancient world. However, Fuller knew in advance of going to Italy that the country was in turmoil. In that sense, Italy had ceased to be figurative; it became literal. In addition, using the word 'metaphor', instead of presenting the idea metaphorically, alters the metaphor. It loses something of its effect; if metaphors operate most meaningfully when they are subtle, below the surface, that effect is lost, or eroded, if overt. On the other hand, the point can hardly be missed when metaphor is specified.

The metaphor in Stanza Six operates in much the same way. 'Child', quoted from Margaret's letter to her mother, is used in Stanzas Four and Five, initially in a positive context—the happiness and well-being of childhood. However, with the aforementioned shift from good weather to bad (sunshine to rain), fall to winter, and sexual passion to pregnancy that marks Stanzas Four and Five, childhood becomes a time of terror. The positive image of Motherhood is reversed with the terror of nightmare and of mother's death, which shifts immediately to the death of a best friend, and then towards metaphor in the waves' reclaiming the body. It is as if Margaret's pregnancy—which is gradually being revealed in Stanzas Five and Six—prompts consideration of life and death, mothers and daughters and babies, leading to 'waves' and 'tides' and the metaphor of the ongoingness of life in the figure of death.

The terror of death is mitigated in the recognition that death is a natural part of life. There is no such solace at this point in the poem, however, as (in the depths of her depression) Margaret sees the tides as sucking her down into the murky subterranean world—down into pain and death, into the world of nightmare.

The dictionary gives only a literal definition of 'succubus', as a 'female demon thought in medieval times to have sexual intercourse with sleeping men'. While it is tempting to see Margaret's relationship with Ossoli in something like those terms (she as medieval demon, drawing the sleeping Ossoli—he is usually referred to as unlearned, or uneducated—down into sexual intercourse, and then death by drowning), to do so would be to repeat the nineteenth century's mocking prurience (which Clampitt's poem rather pointedly ignores), without adding much to understanding of the poem. One needs to look at the figurative definition of 'incubus' (which at the literal level is sibling to 'succubus': 'a spirit or demon thought in medieval times to lie on sleeping persons, esp. women for the purpose of sexual intercourse'). Figuratively, an incubus is a nightmare, or 'anything oppressive; burden'. Here are meanings that accord with the narrow context of

Stanza Six and the broader context of one layer of connections in the poem. The previous stanza has ‘terror in the night’, ‘dreamed her mother dead’, and ‘re-dreamed her best friend’s body’. Further, succubus in Stanza Six is preceded by metaphor, inviting—indeed, perhaps requiring—that the word be examined rather than taken for the first literal meaning that comes to mind. Also in this instance (perhaps more strikingly than elsewhere in the poem) past and present are brought together in Margaret’s seeing the terrors of her nightmare-haunted childhood resurrected in the misery of her present situation in Italy. The daylight is shut out of her world, bringing to mind the nightmares of her youth, and the malodorous building she lives in brings on migraines, another manifestation of her troubled childhood.

Clampitt’s stunning choice of *doppelgänger* to characterize the migraines embodies a sense of second self that connects with the second person being nurtured in Margaret’s womb, and with the second spring of Stanza Two, itself associated with the re-birth of hope in Italy’s struggle for independence and perhaps with a regeneration of spiritual values (but, as I argue, one wants to hesitate a bit before assigning too much religious significance to the Pope’s presence). The migraine as *doppelgänger* is joined by morning sickness’s nausea (the nearest Clampitt has the poem come to making explicit the pregnancy Margaret was reluctant to admit), and by a consciousness of her body that extends the passion in the bloodstream and triumphs over the chasteness in the perfection of the second spring. The un-named fetus, a life of its own, takes over for its own ‘inexorable purpose’.

Continuing to find perfect foils, Clampitt has Carlyle being very wrong in seeing Margaret as a ‘strange liting lean old maid’, and presents Greeley and Hawthorne (Margaret worked for one and aroused in the other some most embarrassingly contradictory feelings) as particular epitomes of all that first Concord and then New England would feel in response to Margaret’s pregnancy’s possibly antedating her marriage. Clampitt then returns to the nightmare/actuality motif, with Margaret, for all the troubles she had earlier in life, now—facing child-birth in a strange land, in her late thirties, unable to appear in public, banished to the hovel of an insensitive peasant, away from Rome and husband, rejected by inlaws who don’t yet know of her marriage—now facing an actuality more challenging, more frightening, than any of the nightmares she had ever had before. Now she is in a world that is as totally absorbing as Italy’s struggles had been during the previous fall’s torrid season of love and revolution. In fact, now she is in the throes of an experience that makes religion seem insignificant. Human troubles lead to the poem’s brilliant summation, with Margaret’s life told by Clampitt in four lines:

Injustice. Ridicule. What did she *do*,
 it would be asked (as though that mattered).
 Gave birth. Lived through a revolution.
 Nursed its wounded. Saw it run aground.
 Published a book or two.
 And drowned.

Thus, primarily through diction Amy Clampitt presents a view of Margaret Fuller that is highly charged with feelings based on glimpses of Fuller's personal life; yet the poem reaches beyond the merely personal—indeed enriches the personal—by relating her life to the birth of the modern Italian nation. Margaret Fuller's out-of-wedlock procreation is as surprising as Italy's birth. The success of the poem is in its subtle synthesis of biography and history.

BÁSNÍRKA JAKO DĚJEPISNÁ ŽIVOTOPISKA: AMY CLAMPITTOVÁ A JEJÍ BÁSEŇ *MARGARET FULLER, 1947*

Článek podává podrobnou textovou analýzu básně *Margaret Fuller, 1947*, napsanou mladou americkou básnířkou Amy Clampittovou a v nedávné době uveřejněnou v časopise *New Yorker*. Autor nejdříve seznamuje čtenáře s těmi fakty ze života Margarety Fullerové, význačné osobnosti z amerického transcendentálního hnutí v devatenáctém století, která jsou relevantní pro dokonalé pochopení básně. Nato zkoumá básnické prostředky, kterých Clampittová používá k tomu, aby uvedla život Fullerové ve vztah ke zrodu italského národa, a ukazuje, jak se báseň přenáší z oblasti veřejné do oblasti osobní a dospívá k úspěšné a jemně vypracované syntéze biograficko-historické.