

TRIBUTES

What do Emily Dickinson, Federico García Lorca, Luis Palés Matos and Sappho have in common? Each is the subject of a tribute program at the 2001 People's Poetry Gathering, and each has been deeply influenced by the oral traditions of their culture. In each case, these literary masters played with popular oral traditions to create a new synthesis and a new literary sound. For example, Emily Dickinson's radical consciousness played against the rhythms of the hymnal; García Lorca embraced the ballads of Gypsies; Palés Matos made a new Puerto Rican poetry, distinct from the literature of Spain. Also offered this weekend are a pair of tributes to the late great Allen Ginsberg, one paying homage to the Asian influences on his work (Asian American Writers Workshop), the other celebrating his influence as a gay poet (St. Marks Church).

Luis Palés Matos and *Verso Negro*

Luis Palés Matos (1898 – 1959) was born in Guayama, Puerto Rico, and is one of the island's most celebrated poets and one of the first major proponents of *verso negro* in the Caribbean and one of the first to emphasize the Afro-Antillean identity of the culture of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands as distinct from that of Spain.

The *verso negro* poetry of Palés Matos reflects the African roots of Puerto Rico's culture. Though set to paper, the poetry itself was performance-oriented. It integrated African words and a rhythmic structure evoking a drumbeat, and it commented on daily life in the Black community. While some critics believe his poetry objectified Black culture, it was radical for a time when the African roots of the island's culture were ignored. It wasn't until the 1950s that even the music of the Black communities, like *plena* and *bomba*, were played on the radio.

La guitarra

Empieza el llanto
de la guitarra.
Se rompen las copas
de la madrugada.
Empieza el llanto
de la guitarra.
Es inútil
callarla.
Es imposible
callarla.
Llora monótona
como llora el agua,
como llora el viento
sobre la nevada.
Es imposible
callarla.
Llora por cosas
lejanas.

The Guitar

The weeping of the guitar
begins.
The goblets of dawn
are smashed.
The weeping of the guitar
begins.
Useless
to silence it.
Impossible
to silence it.
It weeps monotonously
as water weeps
as the wind weeps
over snowfields.
Impossible
to silence it.
It weeps for distant
things.

— Federico García Lorca, translated by Cola Franzen

Federico García Lorca and the Gypsies

The great García Lorca (1898 – 1936) was born in Fuente Vaqueros, west of Granada in Andalusia. He wrote many books of poetry including *Poet in New York*, but he is often associated with the music and people of southern Spain. In the early 1920s he and his friend, the composer Manuel de Falla, organized Spain's first amateur festival of *cante jondo* (literally "deep song," the lyrics and music of flamenco), because they thought it needed to be saved from commercialization. He was a champion of the Gypsies and their traditions and became great friends with musicians and *toreros* (bull fighters). To García Lorca, the Gypsies embodied the soul of Andalusia.

Equal to the gods
is the man who sits
in front of you leaning closely
and hears you sweetly speaking
and the lust-licking laughter
of your mouth, oh it makes my
heart beat in flutters!

When I look at you
Brochea, not a part of my
voice comes out,
but my tongue breaks,
and right away
a delicate fire runs just beneath
my skin,

I see a dizzy nothing,
my ears ring with noise,
the sweat runs down
upon me, and a trembling
that I cannot stop
seizes me limb and loin,
I am greener than grass, and
death seems so near....

— Sappho, translated by Edward Sanders

W i l d
Nights — Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile — the Winds —
To a Heart in port —
Done with the Compass —
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden —
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor — Tonight —
In Thee!

— Emily Dickinson

A Tribute to Sappho

— Edward Sanders

Sappho was born on the island Lesbos, near Asia Minor, around 650 BC. Most of her surviving works are contained in small pieces of papyrus and very little that is reliable exists about her life. Still, enough has come down to us to judge her a great poet.

What is certain is that she gathered around her a group of women for instruction in music and poetry and that she felt great tenderness and love for her women friends. She was a fundamentalist Aphroditian. She wrote nine books of odes, epithalamia, elegies and hymns. She created her own mode, the Mixo-Lydia, and realized her genius in a variety of meters, including the beautiful one that is known as the Sapphic stanza.

One of only two poems that have survived more or less in their entirety, thanks to literary critic Longinus, has been translated by Catullus (into Latin), by Byron, by William Carlos Williams, and by many other poets, including myself (see inset).

Emily Dickinson

— Susan Howe

The following remarks were transcribed from a program at Poets House, on May 24, 1990, Passwords: Susan Howe on Emily Dickinson.

In the precinct of poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark, silence or sound, volatilizes an inner law of form, moves on a rigorous line. Simple reflection should cast doubt on the historicist image of an artist isolated from historical consciousness — killing time for no reason but arbitrary convenience — as she composes, transcribes, and arranges into notebooks over a thousand visionary works. The name Emily Dickinson attaches to these texts.

During her lifetime their creator refused to collaborate with the institutions of publishing. When she created herself author, editor, and publisher, she situated the work in a field of free, transgressive pre-discovery. "How lonesome to be an article, I mean to have no soul..."