JAY SATTERFIELD: Welcome back to *Hindsight is 20/19*, the podcast where we look at 250 years of Dartmouth’s history through 25 objects from the Library’s archival collections, one per decade. I’m Jay Satterfield. I’ll be you host for this episode.

On June 26, 1872, a bearded, robust poet of moderate fame appeared before the graduating class and faculty of Dartmouth College to deliver the Commencement poem. I’ve got an old ledger book here in my hands. It is the account book for a student group, the United Fraternity Executive Committee for commencement expenses that year. One line simply states “Poet $17.50.” That is right next to another entry for the band that played that day—that ran a hefty $50.00. The poet was pretty cheap or rather expensive depending on your taste in modern poetry.

The poem he read was a new one, written especially for the day: “As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free.” Most of the faculty were not pleased—they were of a generation when Dartmouth churned out ministers and educators—and this poet was considered risqué in most literary circles. He had his supporters—Ralph Waldo Emerson perhaps chief among them—and he could command substantial payment for his poems by well-established literary magazines such as the *Atlantic*. But to middle-class American readers, and to the faculty of most New England colleges, his expansive free verse was far too sensual and unorthodox for their liking.

The Class of 1872 was about to cast off from Dartmouth, many of them about to enter the field of law, and they were feeling some freedom in their youth. In fact, it was reported that the poet was invited by the United Literary Societies in an effort to offend the conservative faculty’s genteel tastes. It was a statement on graduation that they no longer needed to adhere to the stern morality of their professors. They were on their own and they would invite any poet they wanted.

Eyewitness accounts of the recitation vary: one claimed a disheveled poet mumbled his way through an incomprehensible poem while another stated that he gave a fine, clear reading. The poet himself provided the New York media with a press release that apparently was never used, though both the *New York Times* and the *Boston Daily Advertiser* had reporters on the scene to cover the Commencement exercises.

The poet wrote an account of his stay at Dartmouth that provides a telling portrait of Hanover in 1872. In a letter (which we don’t own) to his longtime companion Peter Doyle, he reported:

It is a curious scene here, as I write, a beautiful old New England village, 150 years old, large houses and gardens, great elms, plenty of hills—every thing comfortable, but very Yankee—not an African to be seen all day—not a grain of dust—not a car to be seen or heard—green grass everywhere—no smell of coal tar.—As I write a party are playing base ball on a large green in front of the house—the weather suits me first rate—cloudy but no rain.  Your loving WALT.

Peter Doyle? Walt? Hold on, this is Walt Whitman! The Good Grey Poet himself. There is a picture of him on the New York Public Library Digital Collections page from 1872. He looked the part—grey beard and hair sticking out in all directions and a face wrinkled by time—a stark contrast to the vibrant young poet rakishly depicted in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman engaged in his usual self-promotion to puff the poem, and its association with Dartmouth when he published it later that year:

The leading piece in this volume, and giving name to it, is the Annual Commencement Poem, delivered on invitation of the Public Literary Societies of Dartmouth College, NH, June 26th, 872. It is an expression and celebration of the coming mentality and literature of the United States—not only the great scientists “already visible,” but the great artists, poets, litterateurs, yet unknown.

Leave it to Whitman to determine what American arts were and what they would become. The poem opens:

As a strong bird on pinion free,

Joyous, the amplest spaces heavenward cleaving,

Such be the thought I’d think to-day of thee America,

Such be the recitative I’d bring to-day for thee.

The poem fits the mood of commencement: it implores America to move forward and discover her true art and science, building on the past, but uniquely American in its future:

Thee in thy future;

Thee in thy only permanent life, career—thy own unloosen’d mind—thy soaring future.

Thee as another equally needed sun, America—radiant, swift-moving, fructifying all.

All of that expansive hope and progressive freedom! Whitman’s words would have been such a departure from what had been pounded into the students’ heads the previous four years. When they entered Dartmouth in 1868, they were faced with a set curriculum with no electives. Freshmen year, they studied Latin, Greek, Mathematics, History; as sophomores, those were joined by a class in modern languages focused on French grammar, Civil Engineering, Rhetoric, and Natural History; Junior year introduced Philosophy and Physics; while seniors enjoyed a class in Anatomy and Physiology and a class in German. America itself is ignored, and God forbid any modern literature would be included from any country.

The only real choice they had was to opt for a kind of concentration in Science (selected by 52 students) or agriculture (just 10 students). It was not the kind of heady intellectual environment you now associate with higher education, where ideas are held up for challenge rather than just to be accepted. And it was a place where anything too contemporary was only for leisure time, but never for serious study. “Radiant, swift-moving, frucitying all” it was not!

But here was Whitman, extoling graduates and the nation to move forward and boldy embrace the new.

The Present holds thee not—for such vast growth as thine—for such unparallel’d flight as thine,

The Future only holds thee, and can hold thee.

I love that line… “The Future only holds the, and can hold thee.” Those must have been frightening words for that philosophy teacher, more so for the president, the Reverend Asa Dodge Smith, a conservative deeply religious man hired to guide the college after Nathan Lord’s tumultuous tenure.

This wasn’t the first time the Literary Societies had pushed the limits of acceptability by inviting a radical thinker to campus. In 1838, 35-year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson came to speak just ten days after delivering his scathing Harvard Divinity School Address that damned American higher education and Harvard specifically for its failure to teach anything of value. That speech got Emerson banned from Harvard for 30 years, but apparently secured the desire of Dartmouth students to hear him speak.

It is hard to imagine today that Emerson and Whitman would have been seen as so controversial. They are on the syllabus today--not banished from campus or distained by the faculty—but held up among the great thinkers of the 19th century. But in their day, they were not to be trusted.

Through history, Dartmouth students have had their moments when they are just the coolest people. They invited the radical Walt Whitman to recite a poem at class day. What a bold statement of independence and a clear assertion of modernity on a campus that shied away from both concepts. And what a vision of where higher education could go—a place where challenging new thought could intermingle with the past to build something altogether new. In this instance, it was the student body pulling the College forward, showing it what it could become, just as Whitman prophesied!

*Hindsight is 20/19* is a production of the Dartmouth College Library, and is produced as part of the celebration of Dartmouth’s 250th anniversary highlighting selected objects from Rauner Special Collections Library. This episode was written and directed by Jay Satterfield, and produced by Peter Carini, our sound engineer was Laura Barrett. Thank you for listening and we hope you will continue to enjoy *Hindsight is 20/19*.