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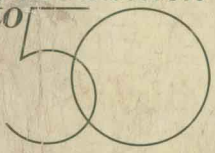

AMERICAN POETS

Peter Jones

An Introduction to Fifty American Poets

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An Introduction to Fifty American Poets

Peter Jones

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Foreword

The composer Lukas Foss in a BBC interview pointed out that it was irrelevant to say that he was born in Berlin. He was an *American* composer. He was thus stating his own deep conviction, and that of other American artists: namely, that he acknowledged and believed in an American tradition; that he was working within that tradition; and that the older traditions should acknowledge it and not condescend to it. He has, while living in America, developed from a 'conservative' composer into a powerful exponent and composer of the *avant-garde*. Yet he remains American in both his early and his later work. The American tradition is such that Foss – German by birth and upbringing – can be a part of it. His commitment highlights the difference between an artist who professes to be a 'nationalist', and one who works within a national tradition. The former profession can and often does lead to jingoism with little purpose beyond immediate excitement; while the latter bears witness to the past, accepting its lessons, and accepting, too, the possibility of full expression that can only come from working within a developed tradition, either by consolidating it or reacting against it. There is richness in the consolidation and purpose in the reaction.

A nation's artistic maturity is reached when such opposing movements evolve naturally from the cultural tradition, extending it. Although American poets had

not yet found a distinctive American voice at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they attained a voice and a maturity well before the century closed. I hope the chapters of this book describing the figures of that period provide the necessary evidence. The prime movers were Emerson and Poe, both in the principles they argued and in their attacks on one another – often contradictory but always pointing the paradoxes which others have explored.

Emerson clarified the American poet's choices, emphasizing the power of intuition and instinct as opposed to intellect, yet reminding us – in his essay on Shakespeare, for instance – that 'the greatest genius is the most indebted man'. And Poe, working precisely on the art of poetry, was able to clarify and define its functions. Both men stressed the high calling of the poetic art – a point frequently overlooked in the wide-spread contemporary misunderstanding of Emerson's praise of instinct and the misinterpretation of Poe's advocacy of originality. The literary pioneer work of Emerson and Poe meant that Whitman was able passionately to compose free verse in a crowded world, and Emily Dickinson in her seclusion could express herself with burning sincerity and develop in her concise poems a poetic power that was unprecedented in English. The American tradition contains them both.

There was a sense of literary pride in being American, and the 'leading-strings of our British Grandmamma', to use Poe's expression, were 'snapped asunder'. But the foundation of a national tradition was not without its hazards. A startling statement of Melville's indicates that facile nationalism was not far away. 'Let America, then,' he wrote in 'Hawthorne and his Mosses', 'prize and cherish her writers; yea let her glorify them ... let America first praise mediocrity even, in her children, before she praises (for everywhere merit demands acknowledgement from everyone) the best excellence in the

children of any other land.' Poe was sensitive to this danger. In his 'Exordium' of 1842 he underlined the folly of 'finding ourselves daily in the paradoxical dilemma of liking, or pretending to like, a stupid book the better because (sure enough) its stupidity was of our growth, and discussed our own affairs.'

The power of the greatest American poets – the pioneers and the consolidators – Emerson, Poe, Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, Crowe Ransom, Carlos Williams, Pound and Eliot – has kept that danger at bay. Movements and trends have developed naturally, multiplying the possibilities of the rich tradition. Imagists, Projectivists, Objectivists, the New Criticism, the Beat poets and others are all part of it. Only in recent years are the larger figures obscure. Time has yet to make its choice and one wonders, for example, how the work of Ginsberg – already recognized for its individual rhetoric and dubious influence – will be regarded in fifty years' time.

The social and political insecurity of recent decades has infected mature poets with an equivalent doubt that has, in some cases – as with the poets of the so-called 'Tragic Generation' – led to suicide (Plath, Jarrell and Berryman), to a form of literary withdrawal (Laura Riding), or an almost desperate search for adequate styles that has produced several incidences of stylistic *volte-face* in mid career (Merwin, Rich, Ashbery). Robert Lowell survived the period with conviction, though even he fumbled for a secure voice in *Notebook* and the subsequent collections that developed from it, except perhaps in his posthumous volume *Day by Day*, where a firmer control is evident. Current anthologies such as *The New American Poetry* edited by Donald M. Allen or *A Controversy of Poets* edited by Paris Leary and Robert Kelly help to emphasize the polarities and obscure the common ground. James Atlas's *Ten American Poets* reveals in a new generation of writers that the mis-named 'academic' poetry of

the school of Lowell, Bishop and Fitzgerald is thriving, and the anthology includes figures worth following.

Of the poets described in this book, none I feel could have been omitted if a clear picture of the diverse maturity of American poetry were to emerge. Those whom I have not included – particularly among recent writers – seem to me either to be working along lines similar to those of other poets, in a movement, and are mentioned in the context of another poet; or to have completed as yet an insufficient body of significant work to require an essay. I regret that I was unable to include Trumbull Stickney (1847–1904), mentioned in the essay on Conrad Aiken who acknowledged his debt to that 'forgotten figure'. Stickney, writing in a period of transition, was able to combine a metrical style and a robust, and at times highly poetic, tone, with a colloquial diction – a curious fusion that produced some memorable poems:

Leave him now, quiet by the way
To rest apart.
I know what draws him to the dust alway
And churns him in the builder's lime:
He has the fright of time.

Stickney died at the age of thirty. He was, however, one of the first American 'moderns'.

It is not my intention here to distinguish and assess the Englishness of English verse or the American-ness of American. The reader will be able to do that by supplementing the brief quotations given in the text and referring to the bibliography for further reading. He may sympathize with Matthew Arnold, who, on seeing an advertisement for a *Primer of American Literature*, declared that 'we are all contributors to one great literature – English Literature'. But he is more likely to agree with W. H. Auden in his introduction to the *Faber Book of Modern American Verse*, that 'from Bryant on there is scarcely one American poet whose work, if unsigned,

could be mistaken for that of an Englishman.'

I hope the majority of the poets in this volume may remind us that the poetic vocation is not one of narrow self-esteem but that, in Emerson's words, the poet 'stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth but of the commonwealth'.

Manchester 1975, 1979

Anne Bradstreet 1612?–1672

Eternal substance do I see.
With which inriched I would be;
Mine eye doth pierce the heavens, and see
What is invisible to thee.

– 'The Flesh and the Spirit'

It is difficult to understand what made Anne Bradstreet write verse – particularly the verse of charm and wit for which she is still read, traditional and derivative yet identifiably her own. She was a teenager when she arrived in America, a wife in a wilderness surrounded by natural and human hostility – forest, untillable soil and fractious Indians. She was called upon to build and plant and bury. She bore eight children and suffered chronic illness for much of her life. Yet she was the first American poet, at a time when it was thought unbecoming – even a sign of madness – for a woman to write.

As a girl she read books in the library of the Earl of Lincoln at the Castle of Sempringham, and she never forgot her favourite authors: Edmund Spenser, Joshua Sylvester's translation of du Bartas, and most of all Francis Quarles, Sir Philip Sidney, Michael Drayton and Sir Thomas Browne. Her reading included Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*, Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and of course the Bible. Her

own poems, written in the new world, were in part a nostalgic exercise, and she composed elegies on Queen Elizabeth and Sidney. But there was a deeper motive: a struggle to establish continuities, to maintain a sense of home and family in an absolutely different milieu.

One of her most engaging qualities is her strength of spirit. She expressed annoyance at being condescended to as a woman:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits,
A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
For such despite they cast on Female wits:
If that I do prove well, it won't advance,
They'l say it's stoln, or else it was by chance.

– 'Prologue'

The tone is characteristic. Her strength of will is hardly surprising. Born in England, near Northampton around 1612, she emigrated with her parents and her young husband, Simon, a graduate of Cambridge, when she was eighteen. They sailed on the *Arbella* with eleven other families. On landing, they met the original colony of pilgrims who had arrived ten years earlier. According to Anne's father, they were, 'in a sad and unexpected condition, above eight of them being dead the Winter before; and many of those alive, weak and sick ...' During their own first winter, he reports he had 'no table, nor other room to write in than by the fireside upon my knee'.

The family settled first in Ipswich and later in North Andover, Massachusetts. During the deprivations and trials, Anne Bradstreet's faith was tested and clarified. Single-mindedly she pursued the common Puritan goals: to lead a Christian life strictly by the light of the Scriptures in the harsh, depriving interpretation placed on them by the Puritan fathers; to help found the Kingdom of God. Her occasional doubts and final acceptance

resulted in some of her best poetry, in particular the *Contemplations*.

By 1646 she had written a number of long works, including *The Foure Elements*, a conventional debate on the relative virtues of one element over another. It is a tedious and characterless work, imitating Sylvester's pentameter couplets. Other imitations of Sylvester's translation of du Bartas were based on the same principle of 'fours': *Of the Foure Humours in Man's Constitution, The Foure Ages of Man, The Foure Seasons of the Yeare,* and – based on Raleigh's *History – The Four Monarchies*. 'Youth' in *The Foure Ages of Man* is not without its power:

Whole nights with Ruffins, Roarers, Fidlers spend.
To all obscenity mine ears I lend:
All counsell hate, which tends to make me wise,
And dearest friends count for mine enemies.

But this is dull stuff to come from a life rich in incident and beset by *new* trials and sufferings. She confesses ingenuously at the end of *The Foure Seasons*, 'My subjects bare, my brains are bad,/Or better lines you should have had.'

Her friends thought otherwise. A brother-in-law, the Reverend John Woodbridge, returned to England in 1647 and, unbeknown to the author, took with him a manuscript of her poems. It was published in England in 1650 as *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up In America*. Anne Bradstreet, when the news reached her, worried and delighted, immediately set about revising the book, adding new poems and a proem called 'The Author to her Book':

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain
Till snatcht from thence by friends less wise than true
Who thee abroad expos'd to publick view