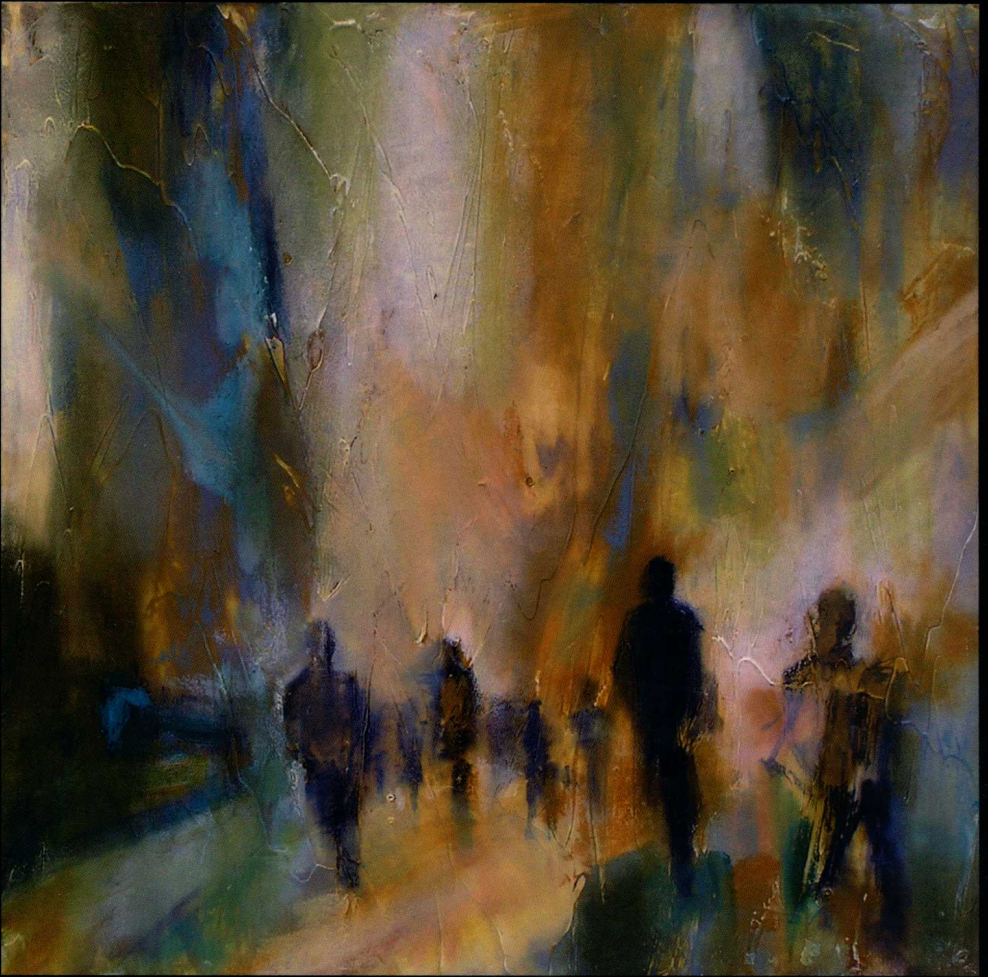


A BRIEF HISTORY OF
American
Literature



RICHARD GRAY

A Brief History of American Literature

Richard Gray



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Preface and Acknowledgments

In this history of American literature, I have tried to be responsive to the immense changes that have occurred over the past thirty years in the study of American literature. In particular, I have tried to register the plurality of American culture and American writing: the continued inventing of communities, and the sustained imagining of nations, that constitute the literary history of the United States. My aim here has been to provide the reader with a reasonably concise but also coherent narrative that concentrates on significant and symptomatic writers while also registering the range and variety of American writing. My focus has necessarily been on major authors and the particular texts that are generally considered to be their most important or representative work. I have also, however, looked at less central or canonical writers whose work demands the attention of anyone wanting to understand the full scope of American literature: work that illustrates important literary or cultural trends or helps to measure the multicultural character of American writing. In sum, my aim has been to offer as succinct an account as possible of the major achievements in American literature and of American difference: what it is that distinguishes the American literary tradition and also what it is that makes it extraordinarily, fruitfully diverse.

I have accumulated many debts in the course of working on this book. In particular, I would like to thank friends at the British Academy, including Andrew Hook, Jon Stallworthy, and Wynn Thomas; colleagues and friends at other universities, among them Kasia Boddy, Susan Castillo, Henry Claridge, Richard Ellis, the late Kate Fullbrook, Mick Gidley, Sharon Monteith, Judie Newman, Helen Taylor, and Nahem Yousaf; and colleagues and friends in other parts of Europe and in Asia and the United States, especially Saki Bercovitch, Bob Brinkmeyer, the late George Dekker, Jan Nordby Gretlund, Lothar Honnighausen, Bob Lee, Marjorie Perloff, and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz. Among my colleagues in the Department of Literature, I owe a special debt of thanks to Herbie Butterfield and Owen Robinson; I also owe special thanks to my many doctoral students who, over the years, have been gainfully employed in trying to keep my brain functioning. Sincere thanks are also due to Emma Bennett, the very best of editors, at Blackwell for steering this book to completion, to Theo Savvas for helping so much and so efficiently with the research and preparation, to Nick Hartley for his informed and invaluable advice on illustrations, and to Jack Messenger for being such an excellent copyeditor. On a more personal note, I would like to thank my older daughter, Catharine, for her quick wit, warmth, intelligence, and understanding, and for providing me with the very best of son-in-laws, Ricky Baldwin, and two perfect grandsons, Izzy and Sam; my older son, Ben, for his thoughtfulness, courage,

commitment, and good company; my younger daughter, Jessica, for her lively intelligence, grace, and kindness, as well as her refusal to take anything I say on trust; and my younger son, Jack, who, being without language, constantly reminds me that there are other, deeper ways of communicating. Finally, as always, I owe the deepest debt of all to my wife, Sheona, for her patience, her good humor, her clarity and tenderness of spirit, and for her love and support, for always being there when I need her. Without her, this book would never have been completed: which is why, quite naturally, it is dedicated to her.

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1

The First Americans

American Literature During the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods

Imagining Eden

“America is a poem in our eyes: its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.” The words are those of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and they sum up that desire to turn the New World into words which has seized the imagination of so many Americans. But “America” was only one of the several names for a dream dreamed in the first instance by Europeans. “He invented America: a very great man,” one character observes of Christopher Columbus in a Henry James novel; and so, in a sense, he did. Columbus, however, was following a prototype devised long before him and surviving long after him, the idea of a new land outside and beyond history: “a Virgin Country,” to quote one early, English settler, “so preserved by Nature out of a desire to show mankind fallen into the Old Age of Creation, what a brow of fertility and beauty she was adorned with when the world was vigorous and youthfull.” For a while, this imaginary America obliterated the history of those who had lived American lives long before the Europeans came. And, as Emerson’s invocation of “America . . . a poem” discloses, it also erased much sense of American literature as anything other than the writing into existence of a New Eden.

Writing of the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods

Puritan narratives

There were, of course, those who dissented from this vision of a providential plan, stretching back to Eden and forward to its recovery in America. They included those Native Americans for whom the arrival of the white man was an announcement of the apocalypse. As one of them, an Iriquois chief called Handsome Lake, put it at the end of the eighteenth century, “white men came swarming into the country bringing with them cards, money, fiddles, whiskey, and blood corruption.” They included those countless, uncounted African Americans brought over to America against their will, starting with the importation aboard a Dutch vessel of “Twenty Negars” into

Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. They even included some European settlers, those for whom life in America was not the tale of useful toil rewarded that John Smith so enthusiastically told. And this was especially the case with settlers of very limited means, like those who went over as indentured servants, promising their labor in America as payment for their passage there. Dominant that vision was, though, and in its English forms, along with the writings of John Smith (1580–1631), it was given most powerful expression in the work of William Bradford (1590–1657) and John Winthrop (1588–1649). Bradford was one of the Puritan Separatists who set sail from Leyden in 1620 and disembarked at Plymouth. He became governor in 1621 and remained in that position until his death in 1657. In 1630 he wrote the first book of his history, *Of Plymouth Plantation*; working on it sporadically, he brought his account of the colony up to 1646, but he never managed to finish it. Nevertheless, it remains a monumental achievement. At the very beginning of *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Bradford announces that he will write in the Puritan “plain style, with singular regard to the simple truth in all things,” as far as his “slender judgement” will permit. This assures a tone of humility, and a narrative that cleaves to concrete images and facts. But it still allows Bradford to unravel the providential plan that he, like other Puritans, saw at work in history. The book is not just a plain, unvarnished chronicle of events in the colony year by year. It is an attempt to decipher the meaning of those events, God’s design for his “saints,” that exclusive, elect group of believers destined for eternal salvation. The “special work of God’s providence,” as Bradford calls it, is a subject of constant analysis and meditation in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Bradford’s account of the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers in the New World is notable, for instance, for the emphasis he puts on the perils of the “wilderness.” “For the season was winter,” he points out, “and they that know the winters of that country know them to be sharp and violent.” The survival of the Puritans during and after the long voyage to the New World is seen as part of the divine plan. For Bradford, America was no blessed garden originally, but the civilizing mission of himself and his colony was to make it one: to turn it into evidence of their election and God’s infinite power and benevolence.

This inclination or need to see history in providential terms sets up interesting tensions and has powerful consequences, in Bradford’s book and similar Puritan narratives. *Of Plymouth Plantation* includes, as it must, many tales of human error and wickedness, and Bradford often has immense difficulty in explaining just how they form part of God’s design. He can, of course, and does fall back on the primal fact of original sin. He can see natural disasters issuing from “the mighty hand of the Lord” as a sign of His displeasure and a test for His people; it is notable that the Godly weather storms and sickness far better than the Godless do in this book, not least because, as Bradford tells it, the Godly have a sense of community and faith in the ultimate benevolence of things to sustain them. Nevertheless, Bradford is hard put to it to explain to himself and the reader why “sundry notorious sins” break out so often in the colony. Is it that “the Devil may carry a greater spite against the churches of Christ and the Gospel here . . . ?” Bradford wonders. Perhaps, he suggests, it is simply that “here . . . is not more evils in this kind” but just clearer perception of them; “they are here more discovered and seen and made public by due search, inquisition and due punishment.” Bradford admits himself perplexed. And the fact that he does so adds dramatic tension to the narrative. Like so many great American stories, *Of Plymouth Plantation* is a search

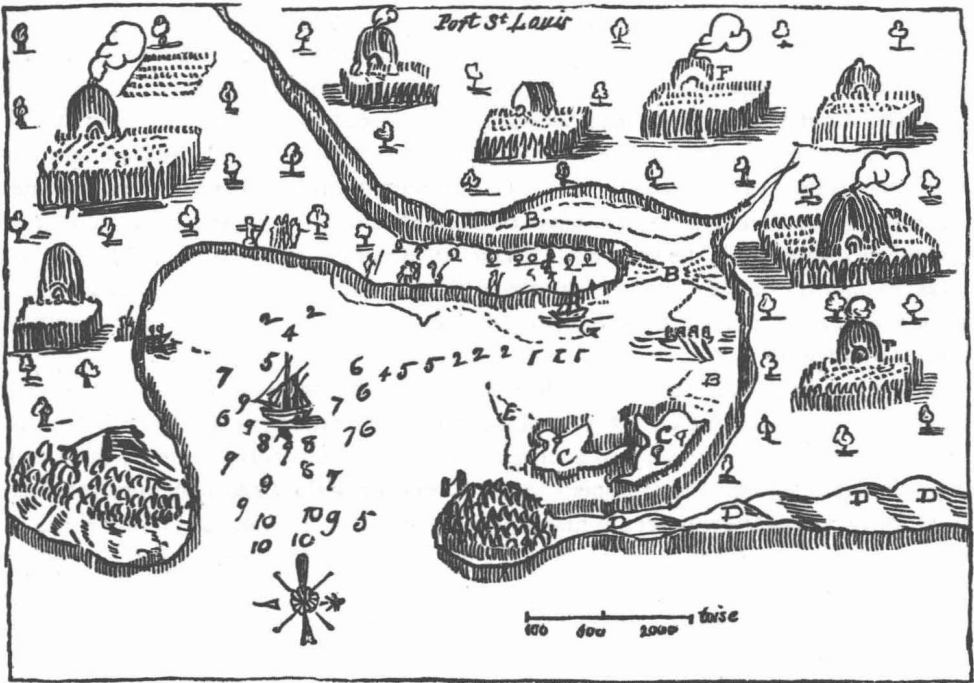


Figure 1.1 Samuel de Champlain's 1605 map of Plymouth Harbor where the Pilgrim Fathers landed. The Granger Collection/Topfoto.

for meaning. It has a narrator looking for what might lie behind the mask of the material event: groping, in the narrative present, for the possible significance of what happened in the past.

Which suggests another pivotal aspect of Bradford's book and so much Puritan narrative. According to the Puritan idea of providence at work in history, every material event does have meaning; and it is up to the recorder of that event to find out what it is. At times, that may be difficult. At others, it is easy. Bradford has no problem, for example, in explaining the slaughter of four hundred of the Pecquot tribe, and the burning of their village, by the English. The battle is seen as one in a long line waged by God's chosen people, part of the providential plan; and Bradford regards it as entirely appropriate that, once it is over, the victors should give "the praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them." Whether difficult or not, however, this habit of interpreting events with the help of a providential vocabulary was to have a profound impact on American writing – just as, for that matter, the moralizing tendency and the preference for fact rather than fiction, "God's truth" over "men's lies," also were.

Of Plymouth Plantation might emphasize the sometimes mysterious workings of providence. That, however, does not lead it to an optimistic, millennial vision of the future. On the contrary, as the narrative proceeds, it grows ever more elegiac. Bradford notes the passing of what he calls "the Common Course and Condition." As the material progress of the colony languishes, he records, "the Governor" – that is, Bradford himself – "gave way that they should set corn every man for his own particular"; every family is allowed "a parcel of land, according to the proportion of

their number.” The communal nature of the project is correspondingly diluted. The communitarian spirit of the first generation of immigrants, those like Bradford himself whom he calls “Pilgrims,” slowly vanishes. The next generation moves off in search of better land and further prosperity; “and thus,” Bradford laments, “was this poor church left, like an ancient mother grown old and forsaken of her children.” The passing of the first generation and the passage of the second generation to other places and greater wealth inspires Bradford to that sense of elegy that was to become characteristic of narratives dramatizing the pursuit of dreams in America. It also pushes *Of Plymouth Plantation* towards a revelation of the central paradox in the literature of immigration – to be revealed again and again in American books – that material success leads somehow to spiritual failure.

Ten years after Bradford and his fellow Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, John Winthrop left for New England with nearly four hundred other Congregationalist Puritans. The Massachusetts Bay Company had been granted the right by charter to settle there and, prior to sailing, Winthrop had been elected Governor of the Colony, a post he was to hold for twelve of the nineteen remaining years of his life. As early as 1622, Winthrop had called England “this sinfull land”; and, playing variations on the by now common themes of poverty and unemployment, declared that “this Land grows weary of her Inhabitants.” Now, in 1630, aboard the *Arbella* bound for the New World, Winthrop took the opportunity to preach a lay sermon, *A Modell of Christian Charity*, about the good society he and his fellow voyagers were about to build. As Winthrop saw it, they had an enormous responsibility. They had entered into a contract with God of the same kind He had once had with the Israelites, according to which He would protect them if they followed His word. Not only the eyes of God but “the eyes of all people are upon us,” Winthrop declared. They were a special few, chosen for an errand into the wilderness. That made their responsibility all the greater; the divine punishment was inevitably worse for the chosen people than for the unbelievers.

Written as a series of questions, answers, and objections that reflect Winthrop’s legal training, *A Modell of Christian Charity* is, in effect, a plea for a community in which “the care of the public must oversway all private respects.” It is fired with a sense of mission and visionary example. “Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when tenn of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies,” Winthrop explained; “wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill.” To achieve this divinely sanctioned utopia, he pointed out to all those aboard the *Arbella*, “wee must delight in each other, make others Conditions our owne . . . allwayes having before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body.” This utopia would represent a translation of the ideal into the real, a fulfillment of the prophecies of the past, “a story and a by-word through the world” in the present, and a beacon for the future. It would not exclude social difference and distinction. But it would be united as the various organs of the human body were.

Along with the sense of providence and special mission, Winthrop shared with Bradford the aim of decoding the divine purpose, searching for the spiritual meanings behind material facts. He was also capable of a similar humility. His spiritual autobiography, for instance, *John Winthrop’s Christian Experience* – which was written in 1637 and recounts his childhood and early manhood – makes no secret of his belief that he was inclined to “all kind of wickednesse” in his youth, then was allowed to come “to

some peace and comfort in God” through no merit of his own. But there was a greater argumentativeness in Winthrop, more of an inclination towards analysis and debate. This comes out in his journal, which he began aboard the *Arbella*, and in some of his public utterances. In both a journal entry for 1645, for instance, and a speech delivered in the same year, Winthrop developed his contention that true community did not exclude social difference and required authority. This he did by distinguishing between what he called natural and civil liberty. Natural liberty he defined in his journal as something “common to man with beasts and other creatures.” This liberty, he wrote, was “incompatible and inconsistent with authority and cannot endure the least restraint.” Civil liberty, however, was “maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority”; it was the liberty to do what was “good, just, and honest.” It was “the same kind of liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free,” Winthrop argued. “Such is the liberty of the church under the authority of Christ,” and also of the “true wife” under the authority of her husband.” Like the true church or true wife, the colonist should choose this liberty, even rejoice in it, and so find a perfect freedom in true service.

Challenges to the Puritan oligarchy

John Winthrop found good reason for his belief in authority, and further demands on his capacity for argument, when faced with the challenge of Anne Hutchinson (1591–1643). A woman whom Winthrop himself described in his journal as being “of ready wit and bold spirit,” Hutchinson insisted that good works were no sign of God’s blessing. Since the elect were guaranteed salvation, she argued, the mediating role of the church between God and man became obsolete. This represented a serious challenge to the power of the Puritan oligarchy, which of course had Winthrop at its head. It could hardly be countenanced by them and so, eventually, Hutchinson was banished. Along with banishment went argument: Winthrop clearly believed that he had to meet the challenge posed by Hutchinson in other ways, and his responses in his work were several. In his spiritual autobiography, for instance, he pointedly dwells on how, as he puts it, “it pleased the Lord in my family exercise to manifest unto mee the difference between the Covenant of Grace and the Covenant of workes.” This was because, as he saw it, Hutchinson’s heresy was based on a misinterpretation of the Covenant of Grace. He also dwells on his own personal experience of the importance of doing good. In a different vein, but for a similar purpose, in one entry in his journal for 1638, Winthrop reports a story that, while traveling to Providence after banishment, Hutchinson “was delivered of a monstrous birth” consisting of “twenty-seven several lumps of man’s seed, without any alteration or mixture of anything from the woman.” This, Winthrop notes, was interpreted at the time as a sign of possible “error.” Rumor and argument, personal experience and forensic expertise are all deployed in Winthrop’s writings to meet the challenges he saw to his ideal community of the “City upon a Hill.” The threat to the dominant theme of civilizing and Christianizing mission is, in effect, there, not only in Bradford’s elegies for a communitarian ideal abandoned, but also in Winthrop’s urgent attempts to meet and counter that threat by any rhetorical means necessary.

William Bradford also had to face challenges, threats to the purity and integrity of his colony; and Anne Hutchinson was not the only, or even perhaps the most serious,

challenge to the project announced on board the *Arbella*. The settlement Bradford headed for so long saw a threat in the shape of Thomas Morton (1579?–1642?); and the colony governed by Winthrop had to face what Winthrop himself described as the “divers new and dangerous opinions” of Roger Williams (1603?–1683). Both Morton and Williams wrote about the beliefs that brought them into conflict with the Puritan establishment; and, in doing so, they measured the sheer diversity of opinion and vision among English colonists, even in New England. Thomas Morton set himself up in 1626 as head of a trading post at Passonagessit which he renamed “Ma-re Mount.” There, he soon offended his Puritan neighbors at Plymouth by erecting a maypole, reveling with the Indians and, at least according to Bradford (who indicated his disapproval by calling the place where Morton lived “Merry-mount”), selling the “barbarous savages” guns. To stop what Bradford called Morton’s “riotous prodigality and excess,” the Puritans led by Miles Standish arrested him and sent him back to England in 1628. He was to return twice, the first time to be rearrested and returned to England again and the second to be imprisoned for slander. Before returning the second time, though, he wrote his only literary work, *New English Canaan*, a satirical attack on Puritanism and the Separatists in particular, which was published in 1637.

In *New English Canaan*, Morton provides a secular, alternative version of how he came to set up “Ma-re Mount,” how he was arrested and then banished. It offers a sharp contrast to the account of those same events given in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. As Bradford describes it, Morton became “Lord of Misrule” at “Merry-mount,” and “maintained (as it were) a School of Atheism.” Inviting “the Indian women for their consorts” and then dancing around the maypole, Morton and his companions cavorted “like so many fairies, or furies, rather.” Worse still, Bradford reports, “this wicked man” Morton sold “evil instruments” of war to the Indians: “O, the horribleness of this villainy!” Morton makes no mention of this charge. What he does do, however, is describe how he and his fellows set up a maypole “after the old English custom” and then, “with the help of Salvages, that came thether of purpose to see the manner of our Revels,” indulge in some “harmeles mirth.” A sense of shared values is clearly suggested between the Anglicanism of Morton and his colleagues and the natural religion of the Native Americans. There is a core of common humanity here, a respect for ordinary pleasures, for custom, traditional authority and, not least, for the laws of hospitality that, according to Morton, the Puritans lack. The Puritans are said to fear natural pleasure, they are treacherous and inhospitable: Morton describes them, for instance, killing their Indian guests, having invited them to a feast. Respecting neither their divinely appointed leader, the king, nor the authority of church tradition, they live only for what they claim is the “spirit” but Morton believes is material gain, the accumulation of power and property.

New English Canaan, as its title implies, is a promotional tract as well as a satire. It sets out to show that New England is indeed a Canaan or Promised Land, a naturally abundant world inhabited by friendly and even noble savages. Deserving British colonization, all that hampers its proper development, Morton argues, is the religious fanaticism of the Separatists and other Puritans. Morton divides his book in three. A celebration of what he calls “the happy life of the Salvages,” and their natural wisdom, occupies the first section, while the second is devoted to the natural wealth of the region. The satire is concentrated in the third section of what is not so much a history as

a series of loosely related anecdotes. Here, Morton describes the general inhumanity of the Puritans and then uses the mock-heroic mode to dramatize his own personal conflicts with the Separatists. Morton himself is ironically referred to as “the Great Monster” and Miles Standish, his principal opponent and captor, “Captain Shrimp.” And, true to the conventions of mock-heroic, the mock-hero Shrimp emerges as the real villain, while the mock-villain becomes the actual hero, a defender of traditional Native American and English customs as well as a victim of Puritan zeal and bigotry. But that humor can scarcely conceal Morton’s bitterness. Confined on an island, just before his removal to England, Morton reveals, he was brought “bottles of strong liquor” and other comforts by “Salvages”; by such gifts, they showed just how much they were willing to “unite themselves in a league of brotherhood with him.” “So full of humanity are these infidels before those Christians,” he remarks acidly. At such moments, Morton appears to sense just how far removed his vision of English settlement is from the dominant one. Between him and the Native Americans, as he sees it, runs a current of empathy; while between him and most of his fellow colonists there is only enmity – and, on the Puritan side at least, fear and envy.

That William Bradford feared and hated Morton is pretty evident. It is also clear that he had some grudging respect for Roger Williams, describing him as “godly and zealous” but “very unsettled in judgement” and holding “strange opinions.” The strange opinions Williams held led to him being sentenced to deportation back to England in 1635. To avoid this, he fled into the wilderness to a Native American settlement. Purchasing land from the Nassagansetts, he founded Providence, Rhode Island, as a haven of dissent to which Anne Hutchinson came with many other runaways, religious exiles, and dissenters. Williams believed, and argued for his belief, that the Puritans should become Separatists. This clearly threatened the charter under which the Massachusetts Bay colonists had come over in 1630, including Williams himself, since it denied the royal prerogative. He also insisted that the Massachusetts Bay Company charter itself was invalid because a Christian king had no right over heathen lands. That he had no right, according to Williams, sprang from Williams’s seminal belief, and the one that got him into most trouble: the separation of church and state and, more generally, of spiritual from material matters. Christianity had to be free from secular interests, Williams declared, and from the “foul embrace” of civil authority. The elect had to be free from civil constraints in their search for divine truth; and the civil magistrates had no power to adjudicate over matters of belief and conscience. All this Williams argued in his most famous work, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, published in 1644. Here, in a dialogue between Truth and Peace, he pled for liberty of conscience as a natural right. He also contended that, since government is given power by the people, most of whom are unregenerate, it could not intervene in religious matters because the unregenerate had no authority to do so. But religious freedom did not mean civil anarchy. On the contrary, as he wrote in his letter “To the Town of Providence” in 1655, liberty of conscience and civil obedience should go hand in hand. Williams used the analogy of the ocean voyage. “There goes many a Ship to Sea, with many a Hundred Souls in One Ship,” he observed. They could include all kinds of faiths. “Notwithstanding this liberty,” Williams pointed out, “the Commander of this Ship ought to command the Ship’s Course. This was “a true Picture of a Commonwealth, or an human Combination, or Society.”

Like Thomas Morton, Williams was also drawn to the Native Americans: those whom writers like Bradford and Winthrop tended to dismiss as “savage barbarians.” His first work, *A Key into the Language of America*, published in 1643, actually focuses attention on them. “I present you with a *key*,” Williams tells his readers in the preface; “this *key*, respects the *Native Language* of it, and happily may unlocke some Rarities concerning the *Natives* themselves, not yet discovered.” Each chapter of Williams’s *Key* begins with an “Implicit Dialogue,” a list of words associated with a particular topic, the Nassagansett words on the left and their English equivalents on the right. This is followed by an “Observation” on the topic; and the topics in these chapters range from food, clothing, marriage, trade, and war to beliefs about nature, dreams, and religion. A “generall Observation” is then drawn, with cultural inferences and moral lessons being offered through meditation and analogy. Finally, there is a conclusion in the form of a poem that contrasts Indian and “English-man.” These poems, in particular, show Williams torn between his admiration for the natural virtues of Native Americans, and their harmony with nature, and his belief that the “*Natives*” are, after all, pagans and so consigned to damnation. Implicit here, in fact, and elsewhere in the *Key* is an irony at work in a great deal of writing about the “noble savage.” His natural nobility is conceded, even celebrated; but the need for him to be civilized and converted has to be acknowledged too. Civilized, however, he would invariably lose those native virtues that make him an object of admiration in the first place. And he could not then be used as Williams frequently uses him here, as a handy tool for attacking the degenerate habits of society. Williams’s *Key* is an immense and imaginative project, founded on a recognition many later writers were to follow that the right tool for unlocking the secrets of America is a language actually forged there. But it remains divided between the natural and the civilized, the native and the colonist, the “false” and the “true.” Which is not at all to its disadvantage: quite the opposite, that is the source of its interest – the measure of its dramatic tension and the mark of its authenticity.

Some colonial poetry

While Puritans were willing to concede the usefulness of history of the kind Bradford wrote or of sermons and rhetorical stratagems of the sort Winthrop favored, they were often less enthusiastic about poetry. “Be not so set upon poetry, as to be always poring on the passionate and measure pages,” the New England cleric Cotton Mather warned; “beware of a boundless and sickly appetite for the reading of . . . poems . . . and let not the Circean cup intoxicate you.” Of the verse that survives from this period, however, most of the finest and most popular among contemporaries inclines to the theological. The most popular is represented by *The Day of Doom*, a resounding epic about Judgment Day written by Michael Wigglesworth (1631–1705), *The Bay Psalm Book* (1640), and *The New England Primer* (1683?). *The Day of Doom* was the biggest selling poem in colonial America. In 224 stanzas in ballad meter, Wigglesworth presents the principal Puritan beliefs, mostly through a debate between sinners and Christ. A simple diction, driving rhythms, and constant marginal references to biblical sources are all part of Wigglesworth’s didactic purpose. This is poetry intended to drive home its message, to convert some and to restore the religious enthusiasm of others. Many Puritan readers committed portions of the poem to memory; still more read it aloud to

their families. The sheer simplicity and fervor of its message made it an ideal instrument for communicating and confirming faith. So it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that Cotton Mather could put aside his distrust of poetry when it came to a work like *The Day of Doom*. At Wigglesworth's death, in fact, Mather confessed his admiration for the poet: who, Mather said, had written for "the Edification of such Readers, as are for Truth's dressed up in *Plaine Meeter*."

Even more popular than *The Day of Doom*, however, were *The Bay Psalm Book* and *The New England Primer*. Only the Bible was more widely owned in colonial New England. *The Bay Psalm Book* was the first publishing project of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and offered the psalms of David translated into idiomatic English and adapted to the basic hymn stanza form of four lines with eight beats in each line and regular rhymes. The work was a collaborative one, produced by twelve New England divines. And one of them, John Cotton, explained in the preface that what they had in mind was "Conscience rather than Elegance, fidelity rather than poetry." "We have . . . done our endeavour to make a plain and familiar translation," Cotton wrote. "If therefore the verses are not always so smoothe and elegant as some may desire . . . , let them consider that God's Altar need not our polishings." What was needed, Cotton insisted, was "a plain translation." And, if the constraints imposed by the hymn stanza form led sometimes to a tortured syntax, then neither the translators nor the audience appear to have minded. The psalms were intended to be sung both in church and at home, and they were. *The Bay Psalm Book* was meant to popularize and promote faith, and it did. Printed in England and Scotland as well as the colonies, it went through more than fifty editions over the century following its first appearance. It perfectly illustrated the Puritan belief in an indelible, divinely ordained connection between the mundane and the miraculous, the language and habits of everyday and the apprehension of eternity. And it enabled vast numbers of people, as Cotton put it, to "sing the Lord's songs . . . in our English tongue."

The New England Primer had a similar purpose and success. Here, the aim was to give every child "and apprentice" the chance to read the catechism and digest improving moral precepts. With the help of an illustrated alphabet, poems, moral statements, and a formal catechism, the young reader was to learn how to read and how to live according to the tenets of Puritan faith. So, for instance, the alphabet was introduced through a series of rhymes designed to offer moral and religious instruction. The letter "A," for example, was introduced through the rhyme, "In *Adams* Fall/We sinned all." Clearly, the *Primer* sprang from a belief in the value of widespread literacy as a means of achieving public order and personal salvation. Equally clearly, as time passed and the *Primer* went through numerous revisions, the revised versions reflected altering priorities. The 1758 revision, for instance, declares a preference for "more grand noble Words" rather than "diminutive Terms"; a 1770 version describes literacy as more a means of advancement than a route to salvation; and an 1800 edition opts for milder versified illustrations of the alphabet ("A was an apple pie"). But this tendency to change in response to changing times was a reason for the durability and immense popularity of the *Primer*: between 1683 and 1830, in fact, it sold over five million copies. And, at its inception at least, it was further testament to the Puritan belief that man's word, even in verse, could be used as a vehicle for God's truth.

That belief was not contested by the two finest poets of the colonial period, Anne Bradstreet (1612?–1672) and Edward Taylor (1642?–1729). It was, however, set in tension with other impulses and needs that helped make their poetry exceptionally vivid and dramatic. With Bradstreet, many of the impulses, and the tensions they generated, sprang from the simple fact that she was a woman. Bradstreet came with her husband to Massachusetts in 1630, in the group led by John Winthrop. Many years later, she wrote to her children that at first her “heart rose” when she “came into this country” and “found a new world and new manners.” “But,” she added, “after I was convinced it was the way of God, I submitted to it and joined the church in Boston.” What she had to submit to was the orthodoxies of faith and behavior prescribed by the Puritan fathers. Along with this submission to patriarchal authority, both civil and religious, went acknowledgment of – or, at least, lip service to – the notion that, as a woman, her

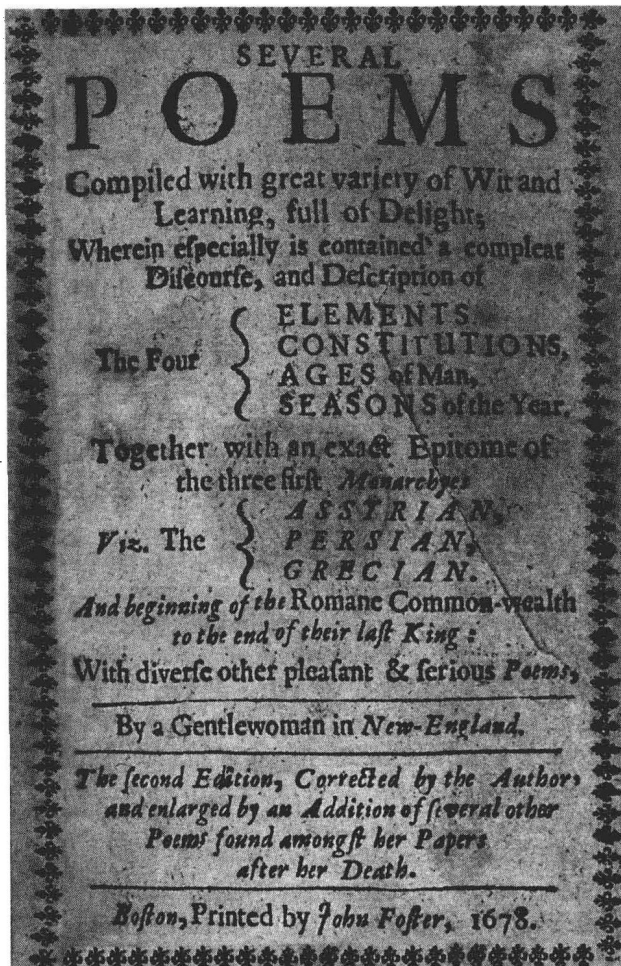


Figure 1.2 Title page of *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* by Anne Bradstreet, Boston, 1678. © The British Library Board. C.39.b.48(1).