David Caplan

AMERICAN POETRY

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

American Poetry: A Very Short Introduction

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This book is dedicated in memory of my father, Edward Caplan זכרונו לברכה, and in loving admiration for the selfless care my mother, Diana Caplan, devoted to him.

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Chapter 1

American poetry's two characteristics

Two characteristics mark American poetry. On the one hand, several of its major figures promoted American poetry as essentially different from any other nation's. Although the reasons they offer vary, they typically claim that American experience demands a different kind of expression. Such poets advocate for novelty, for a break with what is perceived to be outmoded and foreign. As Walt Whitman wrote, "Old forms, old poems, majestic and proper in their own lands here in this land are exiles." According to this view, America's newness requires a correspondingly new literature. What is "majestic and proper" elsewhere appears unimpressive and inappropriate here. As a consequence, American authors bear the responsibility of developing a literature suitable to their unique country, by creating new forms and new kinds of poems. This emphasis on uniqueness even informs the work of American poets reluctant to commit to any national artistic endeavor. Inspired by it, they too feel the need to create new forms and new kinds of poems.

On the other hand, American poetry hardly isolates itself from international developments. Instead, it might be more rightly called profoundly transnational. Its gaze extends beyond national borders and its influences range widely. Just as individual authors move between different countries, American poetry often welcomes techniques, styles, and traditions originating from outside America. “The American,” observed T. S. Eliot, criticizing this characteristic, “shows his too quick susceptibility to foreign influence.”

To understand American poetry, we must recognize both characteristics and their intimate, dynamic relationship. While, to a certain extent, all national literatures look both inward and outward, a particularly intense combination of the two characteristics inflects American poetry, influenced by its late historical emergence and rapid development. The two characteristics do not exist separately from each other. Rather, they work in a productive dialectic, inspiring both individual accomplishment and the broader field. Of the two, the first characteristic (American poetry’s emphasis on its uniqueness) is often the easiest to overvalue and the second (its transnationalism) is the easiest to neglect. Especially when American poetry turns boisterous and assertive, the temptation arises to isolate it from other countries and their literary traditions. According to this line of reasoning, the more “American” a poem is, the better it is. At its worst, this standard translates cultural jingoism into literary terms. It reduces American poetry by enforcing a crude standard on a complex body of literature, overlooking the forces that energize it.

Instead, the two characteristics stimulate American poetry with overlapping, competing, and sustaining interests. Both drive the poetry. They animate the poet’s choice of forms, meters, and language and the emphasis placed on originality, mastery of convention, or a combination of both. They add a certain intensity to the poetry and the debates it inspires.

These characteristics predate the establishment of the United States of America. Consider Anne Bradstreet, the first poet living in America to publish an original collection of their own work (though, tellingly, her collection, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America…, by a Gentlewoman in Those Parts*, was published in London). Bradstreet was born Anne Dudley in Northampton, England, to a prominent Puritan family. Both her father and her husband served as governors of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Tutored at home, Bradstreet learned Greek, Latin, French, and Hebrew. She also read the work of many canonical Anglo-European authors. At eighteen, she sailed to America with her husband and father. In 1650, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America…, by a Gentlewoman in Those Parts* was published after her brother-in-law brought it to a publishing house, without, Bradstreet claimed, her knowledge.

True to its title, the book locates the "tenth muse lately sprung up" in New England, reporting back from "those parts." The term *tenth muse* both connects Bradstreet to poets writing in England and distinguishes her from them. Like her English contemporaries, Bradstreet draws inspiration from ancient Greek and Latin sources, the muses of the Anglo-European literary tradition. She also represents a recent development: the "tenth muse" added to the classical nine. The nine muses date back to antiquity. Arising in a foreign landscape, the tenth is new.

THE TENTH MUSE

Lately sprung up in AMERICA.

OR

Severall Poems, compiled with great variety of VVit and Learning, full of delight.

Wherein especially is contained a compleat discourse and description of

The Four { *Elements*, *Constitutions*, *Ages of Man*, *Seasons of the Year*.

Together with an Exact Epitomie of the Four Monarchies, *viz.*

The { *Assyrian*, *Persian*, *Grecian*, *Roman*.

Also a Dialogue between Old *England* and New, concerning the late troubles.

With divers other pleasant and serious Poems.

By a Gentlewoman in those parts.

Printed at *London* for *Stephen Bowtell* at the signe of the Bible in Popes Head-Alley. 1650.

1. In 1650, Anne Bradstreet published the first collection of poems written by a poet in America, presenting "the tenth muse" that had "lately sprung up in America."

In "A Dialogue between Old England and New; Concerning Their Present Troubles, Anno, 1642," Bradstreet seeks to define the contribution that a voice from the periphery might contribute. In the poem, America addresses England as England faces the imminent threat of a civil war. Noticing Old England's downtrodden state, New England solicitously asks, **"**What means this wailing tone, this mournful guise? / Ah, tell thy Daughter; she may sympathize." During the exchanges that follow, Old England admits the guilt she feels over her debased religious state, "my sins—the breach of sacred Laws." However, she never sufficiently answers her daughter's question, until New England presses her, "Pray, in plain terms, what is your present grief?" The almost blunt inquiry jolts Old England, inspiring one of the poem's most conversational moments:

> Well, to the matter, then. There's grown of late
>
> 'Twixt King and Peers a question of state:
>
> Which is the chief, the law, or else the King?
>
> One saith, it's he; the other, no such thing.

“A Dialogue between Old England and New” employs many of the stylistic and rhetorical conventions of its day, placing the still-novel perspective of “New England” within the English literary tradition. When she personifies England as the mother and America as the daughter, she returns her readers to a familiar poetic technique, personification, and comparison. For instance, twelve years before, when sailing to America, seven Puritan leaders signed a document that faithfully called “the Church of England” “our dear Mother” from whom “we have received” “salvation” “in her bosom and sucked it from her breasts.” The signers included Bradstreet’s father. Recasting the personification, Bradstreet also employs a well-established verse form. The poem is composed in heroic couplets, the era’s dominant verse form.

The poetic strategies Bradstreet employs cannot be separated from her theological and political concerns. They carry a particular charge. Most obviously, the poem exhibits the Puritan preference for “*a plain style*” distinguished (as William Bradford advocated) “*with singular regard* unto the simple truth in all things.” When New England urges Old England to speak in “plain terms,” she admonishes Old England to follow her own example and act in true Christian fashion.

This eloquence of this plain style should not be confused with an unlearned or artless expression. It need not lack passion (as also demonstrated by Bradstreet’s most famous poem, “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” a tender celebration of married love). In “A Dialogue between Old England and New,” New England zealously urges Old England to wage a vengeful holy war against those whom she denounces as the church’s enemies, both home and abroad. The poem gleefully details the violence that Old England should inflict on “the Church’s foes”; “We hate *Rome’s* Whore, with all her trumpery,” she charges, urging, “Let Gaols be fill’d with th’ remnant of that pack, / And sturdy *Tyburn* loaded till it crack.” After sacking Rome “and all her vassals rout,” England must not cease her bloody labors but “lay her