

Breaking Free of Tradition

EARLY AMERICAN POETRY

Poetic tradition in America followed that in Britain for nearly 200 years. The Puritan poets like Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor likened their work to the British metaphysical poets, and followed in the footsteps of Milton, Spenser and Donne in their poems. Their poetry was highly didactic, mostly for use in teaching Puritan ethics. The first published American poet Bradstreet broke from it in some way, merely because she was female, and it was considered that she should devote herself to home and family. In *The Prologue* (1650), Bradstreet writes “I am obnoxious to each carping tongue/ Who says my hand a needle better fits,/ [than] A poet’s pen....” Bradstreet’s instincts were to love that world more than the promised world of Puritan theology. Thus, her poetry is energized by the struggle to overcome the love for the world of nature (Miller and Wendell para. 10). They also noted that the colonial poets mostly encircled their work with privacy, like poetic letters, so the writing was more private. Taylor’s work was very meditative. In *God’s Determinations Touching His Elect*, written in approximately 1680, one of Taylor’s most important works, he celebrated God’s power in the triumph of good over evil in the human soul (Miller and Wendell para. 11).

We must remember that the colonists were considered to be lower class for more than 200 years by the British and many critics, thought American literature was nonexistent. However, American poets, such as Ebenezer Cook and Richard Lewis, were known to poke back at the British snobbery, as in the poem *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1708). However, by the time of the American Revolution, the poetry got more serious and celebrated independence and the new American ideals in epic poetry, still following British forms. *The Rising Glory of America* by Phillip Freneau (1772) and Barlow’s *The Vision of Columbus* (1787) were examples of revolutionary poetry. Phyllis Wheatly was

one of the most prominent early black poets, who remained mostly unknown until the twentieth century. The poetess followed British poetics tradition, but the poetry also conveyed her disapproval of slavery. Her poems on various subjects, religious and moral, were published in England in 1773. Other poems by early black poets were not published until the nineteenth century.

NINETEENTH CENTURY INNOVATION

It really wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that an American tradition began to emerge with the new poetics of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickenson. *Leaves of Grass* (1855) broke tradition in both content and form. Whitman stepped out of Victorian modesty into bold American frank expression, and praised things unmentionably. In it he eulogized the body and the senses in the most immodest manner. Most of the volumes written by Dickenson were "self published" in manuscript books which she has mailed to correspondents during her life time. The rest of her works was not publicly published until after her death. She began writing in traditional styles, but as time passed, Dickenson played with form and content, altering meter and rhyme schemes, developing her own distinctive style. She also added visual elements to her printed copies of poetry, which contemporary readers were not able to see until they were published as written originally.

The Fireside Poets followed, and were called so because they often used fireside as a symbol of family unity and home. William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes and John Greenleaf Whittier were the most prominent poets. They created an American epic style which equaled the British poetry in forms and, more or less, put American poetry on its own multiple feet.

They were followed by the Abolitionist poets, both black and white, and some became a part of this tradition.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY OPENED NEW DOORS

By the last part of the nineteenth century, regional schools began to spring up, including black poets, like Dunbar, who was the most outstanding of the dialect poets. Other poets like Masters and Robinson represented their own regions. Robert Frost is considered to be New England poet. Frost seemed to try out all various forms in poetry during his career, but then developed his own blank verse using a conversational meter. He used mostly plain words of simple conversational English and made good use of simple themes and subjects, many of which dealt with nature. His works, most likely, were the largest break in the history of the American traditional poetry, they were a bridge to modern American poetry, in particular, for such poets as Pound, Eliot, Williams, Hughes and many more. These poets still used some parts of traditional form, but poetry suddenly blossomed off the standard columned page. They wrote in free verse without any forced rhyme in a conversational rhythm. Langston Hughes experimented with different voices and dialects, sometimes he used two or more within the same poem, as in *Weary Blues* (1926), adding oral tradition to standard English writing to create a conversation between two heritages. This set the stage for modernist poets, who experimented with form, sound and content.

The modernist poets explored visual and sound cues, with William Carlos Williams painting with words, and Pound and Eliot using sound to create musical poetic schemes similar to modern ballads with punctuated drums. Gertrude Stein delved deeply into language and its various aspects and meanings to self. Poets like Marianne

Moore began to experiment with forms until they explored all the different ways the poem could be created in – perfectly organized literary forms, often strict, and complete.

The middle of the twentieth century saw a lot of changes as poets branched out into a new territory. Poetry exploded in many different direction and schools, until mid-century when innovative poets began to imitate themselves. Then suddenly the Confessional Poets appeared on the scene, bringing with them a more introspective, and frankly expressive of their reality, style which moved poetry into a new role. They were the first group of poets to be the basis of teaching poetry in America. Poetry was not some mystical art bestowed upon the minority and read by even fewer, but the language and concern of the majority of people. Poets like Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman and Theodore Roethke took poetry into the totally new territory, with realistic self, introspection of the reality of the self as it was and not as they wanted it to be. Some say that the Confessional Poets wrote to relieve themselves of their demons. It is confirmed by the APA that rereading one's work changes the cognitive processes and it may offer some insight into this kind of poetry. Anne Sexton famously said, "Poetry led me by the hand out of madness" (Marx 2).

JOHN BERRYMAN

John Berryman struck out in a new direction with his *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956), which was a conversation with Anne Bradstreet that went on from her trip across the Atlantic at the tender age of eighteen to her death. This long poem departed totally from any previous poetry in its form and content. Berryman created a conversation with Bradstreet's ghost and narrated their imagined life together, without getting rid of her husband as it was the poet, Berryman, who was the ghost in the poem, invisible for everyone but her. He did not consider her to be a great poet, but he implied that she

might have been under constraints of her Puritan feminine form. Berryman imagined trysts with Bradstreet mostly because the love for Ann was not mutual as her husband ignored her.

The poem starts with Berryman's note of admiration for Bradstreet. He shares a kinship with her as an outcast. "Both of our worlds unhande'd us" (Berryman verse 2 line 8). He imagines that he is with her on her trip to America. He speaks of himself all through the first part, even experiencing the difficult ocean voyage and the harsh times in the wilderness. Then he moves into introspection of his emotional well being as if these sufferings are connected. "I was happy once/ Something keeps on not happening; I shrink?" (Berryman 10-5). It is often difficult to tell which character is speaking, as Berryman moves easily into Bradstreet's in verse 15: "I am drawn, in pieties that seem/ the weary drizzle of an unremembered dream/ Women have gone mad/ at twenty-one" (Berryman 15). Berryman follows the life of Bradstreet through sexual encounters, childbirth and the deaths of her children until he reclaims the narrative in verse 25. Then he seems to move between the two personae almost like a real conversation, imagining things like love and nakedness, things shocking and wicked to her. Perhaps he is her devil and her lover. " – I have earned the right to be alone with you/ – What right can that be?" (Berryman 27-7). This conversation continues, punctuated by dashes (–), as the speakers change until verse 37 returns to Berryman's interior monologue and crosses at some points into undivided dialogue or separate monologues. He follows through the fire until it ends with her death and his mourning.

Zieger mentioned other imagined relationships in Berryman's poetry, so this can be considered uniquely his.

I contend that Berryman pursues this late-modernist reconstruction overtly in terms of his imagined relations with male poetic predecessors and

contemporaries; I also suggest, however, that this reconstruction is strongly over-determined by new relations in a field of poetic production imagined by Berryman as increasingly "invaded" or inhabited by talented women, live speakers rather than ventriloquized ghosts, and by the profound impact of at least one of those potentially displacing contemporaries, Sylvia Plath. (Zeiger 84)

This becomes interesting, considering Berryman's struggle for manic-depression, which is characterized by wide mood swings of a person with split personality but not separated as in schizophrenia. He remains the same person with hugely different perspectives, brought on by the extremes of the chemical imbalance (Maruish and Moses 158). Most manic depressives still went undiagnosed because diagnosis and treatment were quite primitive in Berryman's time. Many critics, including Zieger (1997), seem to ignore this idea. Perhaps, they are not aware of some aspects of Bipolar Disorder. It is my thought that his bipolar nature makes Berryman even more interesting.

I think Berryman has to be read with manic-depression in mind, as his work makes much more sense than most critics will admit, when this is a part of the context. He changed his name from Smith and left his home in MacAlester, Oklahoma to live in the northeast. Many critics assume that his problems with alcohol derive from his inability to get over his father's suicide in his early childhood, leading to his own suicide in 1972, stemmed from these problems. However, bipolar disorder is hereditary and this explains both, his father's suicide, his alcoholism and the subsequent suicide. Manic depressives often use alcohol to relieve the deep wrenching and unexplainable depression. Bipolar disorder is chemical, so the mood swings have their origin in body chemistry and not in what is happening in the lives of the victims. That is the main

reason the theory is misunderstood, even by the sufferers who always try to find the cause in self. Berryman's struggles are easily seen in his work.

Henry, the alter-ego in the *77 Dream Songs* (Berryman 1969) seems like entirely another person. Since there is not enough space here to analyze the whole set of *77 Dream Songs*, I will simply mention a few hints to manic depression. In verse 1: "Huffy Henry hid the day/ unappeasable Henry sulked/ ... But he should have come out and talked" (Berryman 1). The sulking Henry is something which slows the magnanimousness of the manic persona. Song 29, which begins with: "There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart/ so heavy, if he had a hundred years/ & more, & weeping, sleepless in all them time/..." (29), is an expression of a depression which is so deep that it seems like a black hole and it is not getting better by the end of the poem. In Dream Song 40, "I'm scared of only one thing, which is me" (40), provides more evidence for his condition. It seems that Berryman was hospitalized once per year from 1959 until his death in 1972 (Athey 34). He was diagnosed with various problems from exhaustion to alcoholism, but was never actually diagnosed with bipolar disorder, though his poems and his life style provide plenty of evidence via V-Axis diagnostics for a diagnosis of bipolar disorder (First 55). In accordance with Gene Lyons's review of Paul Mariani's biography of Berryman's, the manic depression is seen in his early works, is an extraordinary sadness and loneliness that evolve out of artistic hopelessness alternating to undependable exultation. The poet's entire mature life sheds a light on the impacts that disease made on him.

Berryman's boozing, his alternating grandiose and persecutory delusions, his extreme irritability and outbursts of (mostly ineffectual) violence, his history of appallingly crude sexual behavior, even his suicide – as well as his father's,

since mood disorders can run in families – all point toward that diagnosis.

(Mariani 113)

In her review, Lyons sets some sort of task for Paul Mariani. The information in Berryman's biography is misconceiving when it concerns his disease. According to Mariani, dismissal of those deluded by their own self-complacency and supposed "sanity" is worse than "silly" (Mariani 135). In fact, manic depression is a treatable illness, and Paul Mariani, as Berryman's biographer should have known about it.

In spite of what had to be extreme suffering, or perhaps because of it, John Berryman created a whole new kind of poetry with variations which could provide analytic fodder for a very large book. One wonders how much more he might have produced had he been properly diagnosed and treated with at least some antidepressants. Lithium, according to some of my acquaintances is not as useful, and probably should be avoided if the victim can control behavior during the manic phases, but the depressive phases can often end in suicide.

SYLVIA PLATH

The son of the poets Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath has committed a suicide at 46 years after his mother had gassed herself while he was sleeping. If anyone has ever considered that clinical depression might be contagious, this family would certainly belong to the list of those. After Plath's death, her husband, Ted Hughes, took up residence and had a child with Assia Wevill, who subsequently killed herself and her daughter the same way as Plath did, because she was not able to get out from under Sylvia's shadow. Sylvia Plath also suffered from a mood disorder, clinical depression, for most of her short life. She had bouts with depression and endured shock therapy in her twenties while at college. Though many of her bouts with depression seem to have had

triggers, this is not a sign that the depression was psychological. It may be that the triggers simply weakened her defenses to fight off biologically based clinical depression.

In spite of this tortured life, and in spite of burning a great deal of her work after discovering that her husband had been cheating on her, Sylvia Plath published a great deal of work, though most of the poems were issued after her death. What success she had won in the shadow of her outstanding husband, who also was a British Literature laureate, was well earned. Her poetry showed a displaced persona, caught in a hall of mirrors, not knowing what images were reflections and which one were real. Plath suffered from very low self esteem, so every rejection of her work struck her deeply on a very personal level. Perhaps, that is why she worked so hard to help her husband in achieving success. Thus, she did not have free time to be devoted to her creative activities. Plath's earliest work began a long fascination with mirrors. She wrote a thesis about two of Dostoyevsky's novels,

the appearance of the Double is an aspect of man's eternal desire to solve the enigma of his own identity. By seeking to read the riddle of his soul in its myriad manifestations, man is brought face to face with his own mysterious mirror image, an image which he confronts with mingled curiosity and fear. (Plath 97)

She saw this "other self" both, as good and talented, and evil. Mirrors figure in much of her poetry, as if she tries to examine the concept of mirrors from every angle.

The early poem, *Mirror*, describes what she fears, growing old alone and never seeing her true reflection. She is scared of being lost in her illusions. Perhaps, that is why she reacted so strongly to her husband's philandering. It was not that he wanted another woman, but he lied and deceived. He was a beautiful mirror framed in guilt but fatally flawed, unable to give a true reflection. In the end of the poem *Mirror* the persona of the mirror symbolizes her own poetry as if it has also been a mirror. "In me

she has drowned a young girl/ and in me an old woman/ Rises toward her day after day/ like a terrible fish” (Plath 35). That image of the rising fish in the mirror is one of the strongest ever used. It surprises and takes aback. Pamela Annas devoted an entire book to examining the mirrors of Sylvia Plath, so we shall not even attempt a cursory look here. Annas describes all the various uses of mirrors and mentions especially that the shattered or defective mirrors appear in *Thalidomide* (1962), *The Couriers* (1962), and *Words* (1963). In *Thalidomid*: “The glass cracks across/ The image/ Flees and aborts like dropped mercury” (Annas 24). Flawed mirrors, shattered mirrors, distorted and evil mirrors, Plath’s world is a hall of mirrors which she uses to look at and through her entire existence (Annas 178).

Her poetry is almost mystical, and sometimes quite dark. In *Aftermath* (1959) she describes mother Medea after the slaughter of her children, and the crowd which wants her blood, wants her tortured, but must be satisfied with only her tears. Plath turns a jaundiced eye on plain home surroundings and simple events. She describes a small boy biting a balloon in *Balloons* (1963) that they lived with and one, which the little boy bit. Little boys bite balloons to see what they are made of and how they will react. Innocent little boys break things.

Plath’s poetry is filled with symbols, some of which are not easy to understand. She personifies objects, and sometimes they even threaten her, like the letters in the wastebasket in *Burning the Letters* (1962). She mentions “a pack of men in red jackets” (Plath 13). These men will burn the letters that haunt her. Her poetic world is filled with odd talking and plotting things which should not be animated, like her own version of Alice’s strangely frightening wonderland through the looking glass. Perhaps, all of her poetry is looking through this glass, seeing from a different viewpoint. In *Black Rook in Rainy Weather* (1956) Plath reacts with wonder, so we know she was not always

depressed. She sees beauty but it is unreachable for her: “I only know that a rook/
Ordering its black feathers can so shine/ As to seize my senses, haul/ My eyelids up,
and grant/ A brief respite from fear Of total neutrality” (Plath 26). Perhaps, that is what
she feared most: mediocrity or not caring.

Sylvia Plath may have been the most important female poet of the twentieth century. She turned away from tradition and looked inwards at the outside world. The world within her mind judged the outside, but she never seemed to have been perfectly sure of the trueness of her vision. She may have been looking through her mirrors at times, through a microscope or isinglass at other times.

SHARON OLDS

Sharon Olds was another female poet breaking with tradition. She moved the pace with her interesting punctuation, explored subjects not feminine with a woman’s eye. She shared with Sexton a concrete imagination, one that in her case is often visceral. This was what she said of parents, haunting her adult room and life in her *Possessed* from *The Dead and the Living* volume (Olds 1987): “I dream the inner parts of your bodies/
the coils of your bowels like smoke, your hearts/ opening like jaws, drops from your
glands/ clinging to my walls” (Millier and Parini 664). She was definitely unfeminine in much of her work, though her perspective was distinctly feminine as she expressed anger over the helplessness of women in this world dominated by men.

Sharon Olds survived an abusive childhood with an alcoholic father and a mother who was helplessly passive. She drew on the wellspring of beat poets and confessional ones of San Francisco in the sixties. Ozzie and Harriet filled the television screens and poets struck out into uncharted territory, writing about all that bad stuff, as a well known comedian George Carlin, who shocked the audience on TV. He had his *Seven Dirty*

Words comedy show and the sixties poets had their poems about sex, incest, violence and other family evils.

Sharon Olds writes stark striking poetry with very simple sharp images, like the dying father in *Beyond Harm* (1991). She describes the precarious role of caring for a father whom she loves and fears, but whom she does not trust. She has residual pain and rage to resolve, about the rejection and abuse she suffered at his hands and she depicts her mother as co-conspirator for not stopping him. She ends the poem with closure of a sort: "I suddenly thought, with amazement, he will always/ love me now, and I laughed—he was dead, dead!" (Olds 25).

Olds writes a great deal about her harsh Puritan upbringing and it figures in most of her poems. In *Mrs. Krikorian* from *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems of 1980-2002* she tells how she sinned, rushing the work to go spend time in the library, looking up sinful words. Olds refers to herself as a known criminal in sixth grade. Are all poets troublemakers in school? In her poems about her father she objectifies him, makes him an animate statue who commands her to look, to kiss and to be dutiful. She is surprised to discover that she loves him when he is about to die. This is not really surprising, since it is a common reaction of an abused child. The child cannot help but love the parent, no matter how abusive he or she is. This is all because of the respect and trust which were lost. Sharon Olds expresses fear, but not respect for her father in her poems, and even after his death, she does not confide in him. She only accepts the fact that he is dead, and so cannot stop loving him anymore.

Sharon Olds wrote about subjects that were often taboos for families, especially for their young members, such as sex, incest and miscarriages. These were not a standard topic for poets. She certainly did not write about beauty there, not about the flowers or stars to delight the senses. Instead, she focused on the stench of death and

dying. These were not the main subject of women poets. Olds stepped out far of her Puritan beginnings, not only in a truly rebellious manner, but simply distancing herself from narrow lanes with blinders on and stepping out of the shadows. She pointed out the ugly reality and still could find something she cared about.

In her poetry Sharon Olds expresses rage at the meanness in the world and the subjugation of women. She really rails at passive women who accept “their place”, as her mother did. She is neither religious nor anti-religious, but she sees the trappings of religion as mere excuses for control. Not only she ever accepted male dominance, but also refused to believe in male superiority. Moreover, Sharon saw men as objects. In fact, she objectifies everything in her poetry, standing aside to observe. Her objectivity exercises her freedom to look at everything and anywhere – and it separates her from the world, keeps her safe. In *The Quest* (1987) she states that it is her mission to find all the evil in the world: “...This is my quest, to know where it is/ the evil in the human heart/ As I walk home I look in face after face for it/ I see the dark beauty, the rage/ the grown-up children of the city she walks as a child, a raw target” (Olds 22).

The poetry of Sharon Olds is not about beauty or spirit, but rather about more practical things, like how to insure that a parent will not change his mind about loving the child. It is very important to catch that brief moment of love before he dies. We find in Olds’ poems elements of manipulation, just as she learned how to do it in order to survive, when she was a child. She manipulates her environment and shows us only what she wants us to see, from the special angle she selects, and creates the relationship of the object to herself and to the rest of the scene. The red balloon in *Balloons* (1963) is the first freely floating, living with her, then held up to the boy’s eye as he looks through it, and finally in his mouth leaving shreds in his tiny fist after it bursts.

Her early works steered her into more concrete directions, examining the physical. She has been panned by some critics and praised by others for her choice of subjects and plain language, sometimes referred to as vulgar. Some have said she was too shallow and centered upon self, but others commented that that allowed the audience to approach what might have been too daring. While Sharon Olds writes quite bluntly about the body and body functions, it is seldom her body from within that we read. It is an object observed, though it is her reaction, or more often merely observation, that we share. She has changed the body from a forbidden thing of sin into an ordinary part of life to be explored.

WHERE IS THIS GOING?

These three and many other poets, such as Ginsberg and Sexton changed poetry of the twentieth century. Some people can say it became prose-like, or even lost its charm. But poetry has never been charming, not to poets at least. It is about our feelings that we observe from environment by seeing, hearing, smelling or touching the objects. This is our subliminal connection with the physical world and it is a way of communicating the deepest feelings and ineffable truths. It may have started out aimed at beauty, as in love poems, or praise, as in the metaphysical or the Puritan poetry, but it evolved. The reason poetry exists is because it can convey so much more than simple description. The poets try to touch the audience on a deeper level and elicit a reaction which leads to a brief moment of sublime understanding.

Poetry in America began to separate itself from that of Britain in the late nineteenth century, and continued well into the twentieth. However, the development of the connection between bars and poetry began in the sixties and continued to grow. Many bars host poetry open mikes to attract new talents. This has helped to develop

performance poetry and created a whole new genre called SLAM poetry. It is tied up with ordinary life and ordinary people. It is not the high snobbish culture any more. Rap and Hip Hop use ordinary poetry for their creations. It is simply a matter of availability.

These three poets, and others who inspired, followed or were contemporary with them, laid the groundwork for the future of poetry. It will not disappear, but has, instead, become very popular, even in small towns. These poets broke with tradition and created new forms and explored new areas. Sadly, many of our brightest and best are plagued with problems, and Plath, Olds and Berryman were no exception. Olds was, possibly, the odd, since she used a more objective perspective. She also is the healthiest of the three, as evidenced by her longevity. She has managed if not to slay the tigers, but to keep them in abeyance.

It is a sad thing that treatment for bipolar disorder and clinical depression was not better while Berryman and Plath were alive. They might have produced many volumes of work for us. The biological imbalances from which they suffered still cannot be cured, but the bottom of the depression can be raised a bit with few side effects, generally allowing many of such sufferers to live rather normal lives. Some of the current drugs do not dull the senses as lithium (often prescribed for the manic phase of bipolar disorder) did and ritalin (a treatment often prescribed for ADHD) is said to do. We also seldom, if at all, use electric shock therapy for depression, as it is primitive and painful. Modern pharmacology can help many sufferers of mood disorders to live normally with much less pain.

In any case, during their short lives, Plath and Berryman helped to change the entire landscape of American poetry and made it accessible to the masses, for which it has been usually written. Poets may do some writing for themselves, but they write more to connect with others and touch them, possibly in very profound ways. Literature

is always meant to be shared. Sharon Olds carries this even further, in exploring taboo areas and writing very plainly with extremely graphic imagery. The American poetry of the nineteenth century was still built upon British tradition with yet soft edges, somewhat flowery language, as seen in some of the earliest work of Robert Frost. Then he, like other poets began to experiment with style, form and content.

What followed these changes was an early experiment of poets like Ginsberg, Eliot and Pound. The Black Mountain Poets followed the Modernist poets, like those mentioned above; creating the very visual performance poetry of the mid-twentieth century that was seen in coffee houses and bars. The Confessional poets I have discussed appeared on the scene at that point, moving from poetry as art to poetry as expression. American poetry of the twentieth century became free of the previous trappings and American poets ceased to be led by a tradition which was not theirs. They have created their own tradition, led by their own poets, of whom the three discussed here are quite outstanding and important. These were the pioneers of today's poetry. Tomorrow's pioneers are already on the scene.

There is really no way to predict where the art is going, except that it will become more and more popular. Poetry has gone in many directions from the published book to organized SLAMs. While many critics do not consider rap and hip hop music as either music or poetry, there is no denying that much of this work is indeed poetic. Poetry, or verse, has long been used to feed lyrics to music. In fact, the earliest poetry might have actually been sung in order to facilitate memory. Then the audience was invited to join in, and poetry became a dynamically shared experience. With the advent of the printing press, printed poetry could be distributed, reaching a larger audience in books and newspapers.

Now, with electronic distribution, television and radio, poetry is out of the closet and is no longer trapped in the mansions of the highly educated. Poetry can be shared freely over the Internet and published in many forms. I can only hope that this development continues and future poets come from all walks and regions to share their work with all kinds of audiences. There may develop many different kinds of poetry to suit the taste of a nation of agreeable differences.

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