

Introduction

From Perry Miller's monumental investigations of the New England mind, scholars learned decades ago never to underestimate the staying power of even the most parochial of Puritan notions. It was Miller who first suggested that between the thought of Edwards and Emerson are complex, if vexed, affinities more salient and enduring than Emerson's liberal apostasy could efface. Miller's description of the "Errand into the Wilderness" extended the tenure of that errand's accomplishment well beyond the decline of Congregationalism, while studies of the next generation by Lowance, Brumm, and especially Bercovitch adumbrated, even as they complicated, Miller's conviction as to the flexible tenacity of Calvinist ideas, especially their uncanny capacity to thrive outside the realm of the sacred. More recently still, scholars as methodologically and temperamentally various as Barbara Packer, Ann Douglas, Lawrence Buell, and most visibly, Harold Bloom, have probed the shaping power of religious ideas on the developing culture and its tradition of letters.

But this reciprocity between the literary and religious worlds has implications – in particular, implications for the poem – that scholarship has left largely unexplored. When Harold Bloom writes that Emersonianism, far from being just another literary strain, is rather "The American Religion," a "religion," as he puts it, that becomes so by being "first . . . canonized as American literature" (*Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 99), he imputes to this literary faith a vigor sufficient to absorb and subsume theology without loss of metaphysical discipline to religion or generic integrity to literature. Such an assertion, although offered in Bloom's characteristic idiom of fresh surmise, is not in itself controversial. It is, indeed, consonant with a long-standing critical view of American poetry as prophecy; that is, as prospective speech whose chief object is a recovery of the newness that the Fall occluded. Putting Emerson at the head of a tradition of poetic agonists pursuing an "American Sublime,"

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Elisa New

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 INTRODUCTION

Bloom re-energizes and freshens, but does not substantially alter, what has been for many years the broadly accepted version of American poetic inheritance.

Two magisterial works of the last generation, Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* and Hyatt Waggoner's *American Poets, from the Puritans to the Present*, both claimed that the pulse of the American poem is Emersonian. Pearce argued in 1961 that the very Americanness of the American poem inheres in its capacity to remake the Fall of Man to its own advantage; the modernism that Emerson codified, Pearce contended, is the American condition. Waggoner argues even more explicitly, and in terms anticipating Bloom's, that only insofar as the poem strikes for originality does it "[pass] Emerson's test for the true American poem" (83). In Waggoner's version of the American Sublime, "nothing is known, nothing given, everything is discovered or created" (xvii). To date, many of the most powerful accounts of Emerson's role share the notion that Emerson's substitution of poetic inspiration for religious conversion is the deciding influence not only on the retreat of sectarian piety before the advance of civic religion (as religious historians such as Clebsch, Ahlstrom, and Marty join Bloom in affirming), but also on the development of our major poetic tradition.

The most important challenge to this now classic view of American poetic inheritance came from Yvor Winters fifty years ago. Winters's insight, that American poetry is finally not about linguistic power but about "human isolation in a foreign universe," assumes the ongoing influence of an experiential Calvinism not so easily dislodged by Unitarian, Transcendentalist or Romantic forces. Few have disputed Winters's intuition that the key to Hart Crane and Emily Dickinson is not Emerson but rather the seventeenth-century devotional lyric, and his observations about such poets as Very and Tuckerman have also been widely accepted and confirmed. Recognizing Crane for the most American of American poets, and linking Crane's recondite style to a strandedness of style emphatically un-Emersonian, Winters pursued a compelling line of argument that has not been forgotten. If its force is still acknowledged, however, its authority has been drastically undercut by Winters's own imperial, frequently vituperative, critical ways. Winters made no bones about calling Emerson a "fraud." His characteristically pugilistic titles (for instance, the title of his omnibus collection of essays, *In Defense of Reason*) show an indifference bordering on contempt for the very idea of critical disinterest. Finally, Winters's sensibility prevented his maverick case from gaining the authority of a critical countertradition. Thus, while Gelpi and Delbanco, Buell and Ahlstrom have continued (in Miller's stead) to insist that certain Augustinian habits of mind, and so certain kinds of literary patterning, are present and endur-

INTRODUCTION

3

ing in classic American literature, the special sanctuary given this strain of thought by the American poem has not received sustained treatment since Winters.

In this book I treat the classic American poem as the religious center of an already religiocentric literature, aiming thereby to complicate, and in some measure simply to refute, the by now classic argument for Emerson's preeminence. Winters's passion, although often impolitic, hewed close to the texts, and thus to a central truth about them. The poetics that Emerson invents to replace orthodoxy serves neither to quell nor even to defer the old American preoccupation with the End and the subject who experiences that End. In the decades after "The Divinity School Address" those intractable assumptions that the theologian Jonathan Edwards shared with the poet Edward Taylor pass out of the care of seminarians and into the care of poets. Emerson notwithstanding, the conviction that there is, in Karl Barth's words, an "infinite difference between Time and eternity" – God's Word and the poets' – goes underground in the American poem.

The book's argument is this: Growing up beside the mainstream tradition we call Emersonian was another tradition, call it anti-Emersonian, that articulated itself in terms Emerson did not fit us to recognize. Theological in character – at times nearly scholastic; at others, self-consciously heretical, as opposed to merely antinomian – this tradition represents the virtual abandonment of Emerson's poetics by the very poets he saw as his culture's new priests. Not only do these poets find language itself structurally resistant to that "transcendence" recent revisions of Matthiessen have pronounced all but defunct, they also find Emerson's tenet of deferral – what he called "transition" – equally inconsistent with the realization of the poem. Rather, Beginnings and Ends claim their interest and respect; they cannot do without the Judgment Day; they cannot imagine a world without shame; they cannot forget the prohibition against idols. Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, Lowell, and Frost write poems fruitfully exercised by all those appurtenances of the Logos Emerson forswore: purity and the Incarnation, idolatry and God's unnameability; awe, dread, and the lure of the Nations; sin, Doom, and the Fortunate Fall. Even as these poets try out the Emersonian "power" in the poems we have long called major, they interrogate that power in poems we neglect. In so doing, they inaugurate and sustain a poetic countertradition, giving sanctuary to the very theological praxis to which the Emersonian religion gave no quarter. In this poetic tradition, liberal enlightenment driven back on itself finds: mystery.

The coming chapters study how, in the years between the Unitarian controversy of the early to mid nineteenth century and the rise of Neo-Orthodoxy a century later, the theology that Emerson pronounced

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Elisa New

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 INTRODUCTION

moribund finds new life and refuge in the unlikeliest of places: the American poem. Central to my argument is the claim that the American poetic tradition is not so unambiguously Emersonian as is assumed. Rather, Emerson's reinvention of religion as a species of poetry is tested and found wanting by the very poetic innovators to whom he addressed himself. What Emerson's own poetry bears out is a paradox: The substitution of a poetic theory for religion has the twinned effects of alienating religion from its life principle, theology, and disabling the poem as well. Much of this book is devoted to illustrating how such Calvinist ideas as fallenness, sin, idolatry, dread, the Atonement, the Chosen, and the Nations enter American poetry, and how that poetry, in turn, gives quarter and then direction to a whole new tradition of theological contemplation. Along the way the book also advances a theoretical argument, about the conditions under which poems thrive and those under which they do not. Describing Emerson's own failed accommodation of the poem to a "poetics," the book posits an essential antagonism between the lyric and indeterminacies of all kinds – Unitarian or poststructuralist – suggesting that whereas theory depends on what we currently call deferral, the American poem, sanctuary of an American theology, finds its purposes better served by Ends.

The book is divided into two parts. In the three chapters comprising Part I, I excavate the implications of Emersonianism. The first chapter theorizes the language of Emerson's "original relation," the second chapter historicizes this language and demonstrates its repulse of poetic voicings, and the third explores the applied Emersonianism of the one American poet, Wallace Stevens, most engaged with Emerson's premises. The chapters of Part II, by contrast, treat Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, Frost, and Lowell as poets of fallen temperament writing in a densely theological grain.

Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the studies of separate poets to follow. Beginning with the modern figure Robert Lowell, it traces the tradition of theological inquiry back to the poems of Edward Taylor. This foundational chapter sets up a basic tension between the fallen poetry of Edward Taylor and the unfallen poetics of Emerson. The chapters that follow endeavor to demonstrate the ways in which the theologically "unoriginal," or fallen, will prove more consonant with the development of the poem than the "original." On the other hand, the deferred choice of an indeterminate poetics has in the end the same effect *on the poem* as the old ideal of transcendental originality.

Chapter 2 treats Emerson as both theorist and poet, setting him in his Unitarian context and suggesting the fundamental affinity between a Unitarian and poststructuralist poetics. After establishing the parallel function Emerson serves in his own literary culture and ours, I closely

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Elisa New

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

examine a selection of Emerson's best and worst poems. These readings link Emerson's failure as a writer of poems to the very poetics that so distinguish his theory. They prepare the ground for consideration of the poets addressed in subsequent chapters.

The third chapter, on Stevens, shows the results of the Emersonian poetics in the hands of a poet more gifted than Emerson. This chapter skips the standard anthology pieces to peer rather at Stevens's strange, even freakish, poems of the mid-century years. Here I underscore the ways in which Stevens brings the Emersonian notions of originality, or unfallenness, to their logical conclusion in poems whose "savagery" is their armor against the Divine. Renouncing, in Emerson's footsteps, the patrimony of Adam and the tribe of Israel, Stevens writes a poetry of the Nations – not genteel but ritually Gentile, totemic of faith, and unconverted to shame. Stevens's bizarre literalization of the Emersonian "original relation" dramatizes certain consequences earlier poets had detected from the outset.

Opening the second part of the book, the fourth – and longest – chapter advances the case that Whitman stands, from the very first, 1855, edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in a more complex relationship with the Emersonian mandate than "Song of Myself" would suggest. Granting the Emersonian thrust of that poem, the chapter performs an excavation of Whitman's scripturally saturated and radically experimental "The Sleepers" in order to advance a frankly revisionist view of the structure and intent of *Leaves of Grass* as a whole. As Hyatt Waggoner noted, "the source from which Emerson felt completely estranged is Biblical" (654). The in-depth, nearly exegetical attention I give to "The Sleepers" is authorized by my sense that Whitman's a-Scriptural, Emersonian poem, "Song of Myself," depends on the scripturalism, indeed the legalism, of "The Sleepers." Rather in the same way that, as David Damrosch has observed, the Pentateuch subsumes narrative within law – the inceptual myth of Genesis not the setting for but rather set *within* the legal codes – Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* delineates a cosmological and theological organization that "Song of Myself" benefits from, but cannot, for all its mesmerizing power, be said to found. This chapter shows how, in "The Sleepers," Whitman returns to the very Scriptural universe Emerson had abandoned, harrowing – and so, in Emerson's stead, saving Americans from – the Puritan Hell, but not before reopening the book on matters liberals had hoped to put to rest: priestly conduct, impurity, Adamic shame, and especially Christ's Atonement. Laying bare Whitman's profound engagement with Levitical prohibitions, with the Pauline taxonomies of saved and damned, and especially with the Puritan literature of unprepared sleep, I aim principally to propose that the liberty the speaker of "Song of Myself" enjoys is not originary, but regenerate,

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Elisa New

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 INTRODUCTION

wrested out of Whitman's engagement with an older law. Under the auspices of that law, "Song of Myself" can be born.

Chapter 5 explores Emily Dickinson's image of "circumference" as a theological limit, distinguishing such a limit from an Emersonian "transition" or the contemporary feminist "subversion." The negotiability of limits by power, or, an understanding of limits as emitting power – these are the axioms of Emersonian, but also of recent feminist, theory. I wish to complicate current feminist readings, which pronounce all limits in Dickinson as linguistically constructed (and so vulnerable to a poet's counterpressure), and simultaneously to complicate Emersonian readings which overemphasize Dickinson's faith in a poet's vision. In other words, whereas feminist and Emersonian readings of Dickinson's work emphasize her essential demolition of received forms, my interest is in Dickinson's much more chastened attraction to an unformed realm where she exercises little power to speak of. There, where "A Species stands Beyond," not only the forms of her culture, but the very forms of her poetic and female self-reliance are emptied of meaning. I thus describe the development in her poems of a religious attitude neither conventional nor antinomian, but rather intrepidly speculative and theological, meditative, and at times nearly mystical. Focusing on the tension between poetic seeing and that idolatry Reformed Christianity reviles, the chapter argues that the value Dickinson attaches to a blind and wandering language – as spiritual instrument – yields poems whose supernal difficulty has left them largely untreated in the critical literature. Finally, Dickinson's Emersonianism is of a drastically limited sort, more often curtailed and corrected than indulged.

Chapter 6, on Hart Crane, deepens the discussion of fallenness and limits pursued in Chapter 5. Detecting in Crane's recurring image of the "Hand of Fire" an overdetermined emblem of the fallen agony (it is, all at the same time, flaming sword of the angel guarding Eden, the Pauline sword that divides, and the outstretched hand of Edwards's fiery God), this chapter explores the religious psychology – of anxious dread, absurd humor, and fitful ecstasy – that structures poems from *White Buildings*, but especially *The Bridge*. I concentrate on doubt and ignorance as a condition of the fallen speaker, de-transcendentalizing Crane's work by employing, as I do in the Dickinson chapter, the same Kierkegaardian model of faith that will so engage Neo-Orthodox scholars in the 1940s. In Crane, the sinner whom Emerson had pardoned is ushered back into the canon, with dramatic effect on the poem as a form of the voice.

The book concludes with an epilogue that meditates on two poets, both of whom saw their careers crest as theology resurfaced in the work of the Niebuhrs and Tillich. Invoking in this epilogue Richard Niebuhr's *The Kingdom of God in America*, and noting especially Niebuhr's Kierke-

INTRODUCTION

7

guardian reading of Edwards as American theologian par excellence, these pages assert the continuity of thought Emersonianism may have interrupted, but which the poetic tradition has sustained. I thus call Niebuhr's conviction as to the instructive if irremediable gap between the subject and God an abiding preoccupation of the American poet who is more accurately heir to Edwards than Channing, to Taylor than Emerson. I conclude with readings of Robert Lowell, a poet solidly in Taylor's tradition, and Robert Frost, a severely chastened, or "experienced," Emersonian. The book loops back to its beginning with the claim that it is "regeneracy" rather than "originality" that is the American poet's *modus operandi* and native mandate.

The argument developed in the following chapters is cultural to the extent that I am interested in showing how a species of theological inquiry, once the exclusive purview of seminarians and the spiritually panicked, resituated itself in another cultural sphere. Chapter 2, for instance, combs the historical record to show how the highly literate Unitarianism that prepared Emerson's development as poetic theorist proved infertile ground for the poem's flourishing. Although making itself hospitable to poetry in theory and to poetry as theory, liberalism was nevertheless enormously indifferent to the requirements of the poem proper. The markedly theological character of these interwar poems – written between the Civil War and World War II – can be seen as part of a larger intellectual discontent with liberal religion that finally expressed itself in such watersheds as William James's critique of Emerson, Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, the rise of the Neo-Orthodoxy I take up in the last chapter, and, of course, the career and influence of Perry Miller. Historically speaking, the tradition this book treats is not in the least eclectic. If the years between the 1840s and the 1940s see theological concerns driven underground in the American poem, on either side of the poetic century I chronicle is orthodoxy – unsublimated, voluble, and fighting for a foothold: Hopkins and other heirs of Edwards battling for suasion over the American soul well into Emerson's lifetime, and the Niebuhrs well into the productive primes of Stevens, Lowell, and Frost.

Poets, it is true, do not write in vacuums. Nevertheless, such historical framing as I here essay should not be understood as a prelude to an exercise in New Historicism or in that strain of cultural studies energized by the work of Foucault. There can be little doubt that the theoretical, cultural, and historicist turn of literary studies in the last twenty years has had salutary effects on our understanding of numerous American writers, nowhere proving its efficacy more than in the rediscovery of Emerson, as essayist, if not as poet. The example of Emerson merits for just this reason close and particular scrutiny precisely because his current

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Elisa New

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 INTRODUCTION

rehabilitation as essayist has not helped him much as poet. One has to wonder why Emerson's poetic theory does not find its natural illustration in his poetic work. What, we may ask, does theory do that poems can't? Or, what do poems do that theory can't account for? To put it another way, how might the aims of a theoretical and of a poetic language be so different that a "poetics" as sophisticated as Emerson's could not help him write a better poem?

With such questions before us, one aim of this book is to ask where a poetics can go and where the poem, perhaps, can't; to explore in particular the limitations of the contemporary premium on openness and open form.

It is beginning to be noticed, for instance, how much of our theory is narrative theory. Reacting against New Critical hierarchies that took the poem as archgenre – Logos even – of the body of literature, contemporary theory is, not surprisingly, punctilious in withholding protection from the relics of a retrograde literary establishment. Further suspicion of the lyric as the luxury object of a patrician class has had the effect of cooling interest in ideas about poems proper, instead rendering to various theories now going under the name of "poetics" the attention poems once claimed.

This shift of attention from, in effect, *parole to langue* has proven undeniably fruitful as we have gone about describing the larger systemic forces that influence literary output and especially the shaping of American narratives. Many of the most notable critical works of the past decade have been those concerned to demonstrate how a skeptically based "poetics" can expedite understanding of, say, the discontent of American narratives with the freedom America actually offered. American novels that disbelieve themselves can join in a project of query that suspends all social givens, all political inequities: To understand a narrative as governed by "poetics" credits the way it problematizes the social order, holding in abeyance any precipitous claims to achievement of a perfect union.

But poems that disbelieve themselves can renounce the one power they have: call it voice. I would contend that even in the extreme case of a poet like Ashbery, it is the scattering of voice that gives the poem its ironic power, the odd wonder of a ventriloquized performance no one speaker owns that gives Ashbery his place in a tradition of lyric voicings. Whether the voice that utters the poem in fact owns itself, is individual, has some coherence outside the exigencies of the various systems that press on it – these are not easy questions to answer. Still, one can say with assurance that poems are written *as if* such coherence might obtain, as if the choice of a word, of *parole*, makes virtual the chooser; as if the record of a voice print not at all arbitrary but willed and designed gave the self, or the soul, some foothold not otherwise there. Poems cannot

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Elisa New

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

9

prove the existence of the integral self, but the lyric does not exist save where the existence of the speaking self is seriously entertained – as an article of faith, if not a foregone conclusion.

To contemplate certain American poems in particular, is to be thrust out of the theoretical universe we've come to know. Assumptions about, for example, the equation of literariness and an intrinsic skepticism of language are thrown into question when we acknowledge the fundamentally affirmative quality of these poems, as opposed to the negative – by which I mean antithetical rather than dolorous – and deterministic quality of our theoretical climate. Unconsoled by social truths, repelling skepticism, and resisting even the disenchantments of irony, the poems treated here are, to put it as simply as possible, religious. They are invested in structures which only a critic sure of her freedom from prejudice should venture to “deconstruct.” Though enormously powerful, these poems are driven not so much by the Nietzschean will to power on which current theories rely as by what William James called “the will to believe.” To read them in good faith does not require piety, but it does exact a certain suspension of disbelief, at least for the space of the poem.

One practical effect of this acknowledgment of belief rather than disbelief as operative and vital in the constitution of the poem is that the theological terms deployed here will often be the same ones our theory has disposed of with alacrity. It may seem obvious to some, for example, that what I will call God's unnameability resembles what Derrida calls the hegemony of the Logos, the absolute presence that Western, and specifically Christian, culture sanctifies at the expense of writing. This accounted for, such readers might parse, say, Edward Taylor's shame at writing as epigraph to Derrida's theory of graphemic denigration, and deem all this book a footnote to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Moreover, in days which have recently seen the Law of the Father routed by theorists concerned to expose dualism as a strategy of power, this book may seem to take an antiquarian, if not retrograde, interest in “binaries.” Revising the work of Lacan and Foucault, feminist critics here and abroad have of late devoted themselves to showing that imbalances of power are as much fixed by the old Cartesian coordinates – of me and not-me, thought and being, signifier and signified – as by the explicitly guilty antinomies of male and female, reason and emotion, mind and body. Such theorists would, and do, claim that what a traditionally misogynist Christianity calls the Fall is no more than the loss of the Mother, transposed as myth. Following out this train of thought, the dividedness of human experience that Western metaphysics naturalizes as dualism is little more than a reaction formation, or patriarchal habit, which compulsively repeats, in order to master, the separation from this mother. After assigning Dickinson her due place of honor, such a criticism might enjoy

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Elisa New

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 INTRODUCTION

noting that when Emerson seeks to overthrow the language of his Puritan fathers, he finds his best strategy in the polymorphous language Kristeva has called “semiotic,” and that what Whitman in fact discovers in his revisionist reading of Leviticus is precisely the maternal figure the Mosaic and later the Christian cultures are established to repress. Finally, one might ask what historical ruptures conditioned this poetic interest in the Fall? Theorists who follow Foucault in seeing history as the force that names in order to institutionalize what it is already nostalgic for would not find it inexplicable that a modern, secular anomie should seek comfort in the Fall as metaphor.

The methodologies I have sketched above are different from each other in manifold ways, complex in their own right and not reduced without violence to analogues of one another. They may, nevertheless, be said to share one thing: a certain confidence that faith, or religious experience, is best described in terms alien to itself. Why? Because of faith’s habit of concentrating power in a God who, as metaphor, shores up the power of other, material structures (the Patriarchy, the Law, the Truth) by lending these the prestige of the immaterial.

When a contingent structure is made divine there is surely warrant for deconstruction. This does not imply, however, that such warrant should hold reciprocally, that structures of divinity or faith require reduction to material designs. But one result of the poststructural reaction against illegitimate immaterializing of the contingent and material has been just this: a reactive materializing of the immaterial. To wit: God in the text is equated with the textual or actual orders he is suffered to prop; piety with love of dominance or domination; contemplation of Time to a denial of history. We run out of ways to credit poetries of faith with intrinsic sense or interest.

Thus, around the very issues of faith this book treats materialist analyses of various kinds can overstep the limits of their discipline, totalizing where other total explanations hold the field. I do not suggest that religious history is not as susceptible as any to the play of contending powers, but rather that around matters of the immaterial a single-minded search for material causes risks not merely tactlessness but also an odd parochialism. My primary interest in the coming pages is in the workings of poems, and particularly the ways in which an American poetic language is first infiltrated and ultimately transformed by the specific lexicon of American Calvinism. Its uses are manifold, but theory is characteristically unkind to poetic texture, absorbing that texture, as a matter of course, into its own cultural or heuristic matrices.

Nor, let me be clear, does the critical method that the recent theories have unseated serve poems much better. The New Criticism sealed the poem in the inertia of its rarity. Poetic stresses and tensions, caught in the