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978-0-521-41339-8 - The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of the American Poet

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Excerpt

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In 1820 Sydney Smith, cofounder of *The Edinburgh Review* and a critic renowned for the deadly accuracy of his wit, aimed all his hauteur at the pretensions of the new American nation in a single barrage entitled "America" that was meant to settle the matter once and for all:

In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue? What does the world yet owe to American physicians or surgeons? What new substances have their chemists discovered? or what old ones have they analyzed? What new constellations have been discovered by the telescopes of Americans? What have they done in mathematics? Who drinks out of American glasses? or eats from American plates? or wears American coats or gowns? or sleeps in American blankets?¹

If Smith's questions have boomeranged during the last hundred and fifty years, at the time he need not have worried about sounding silly. Smith's excuse for calling attention to the deficiencies of his inferiors was the outrageous provocation of the Americans' own loud boasts about their accomplishments. If they beat their own drum and breasts so noisily, why should he not puncture the drum and silence the upstarts? His superciliousness and their breast-beating were complementary indications of the Americans' defensiveness. In a previous article Smith had disposed of American literature in a succinct summary which condemned as much by the brevity of the list as by the paltriness of what was listed:

Literature the Americans have none—no native literature, we mean. It is all imported. They had a Franklin, indeed; and may afford to live for half a century on his fame. There is, or was a Mr. Dwight, who wrote some poems; and his baptismal name was Timothy. There is also a small account of Virginia by Jefferson, and an epic by Joel Barlow; and some pieces of pleasantry by Mr. Irving. But why should the Americans write books, when a six weeks' passage brings them, in their own tongue, our sense, science and genius, in bales and hogsheads? Prairies, steam-boats, grist-mills, are their natural objects for centuries to come.²

In 1820, however, Washington Irving published *The Sketch Book* and launched a career which would make him the lionized lamb of salons on both sides of the Atlantic. By 1820 William

The Tenth Muse

Cullen Bryant had written many of his best poems and would bring out a collected edition the next year. That same year, 1821, James Fenimore Cooper published the first of the romances which were to make him an acknowledged master of fiction in England and Europe as well as at home. And yet, though Sydney Smith's supercilious questions began to receive prompt reply, the taunt behind the questions—and all that it implied about the possibilities of art and civilization in America—continued to sting the American consciousness. "Who reads an American book?" Would the conditions of life on the North American continent permit Americans to write books worthy to be read, compose music worthy to be remembered, create paintings and statues worthy to be treasured? If America had no cultural past, would it, in fact could it have a cultural future?

As the most widely acclaimed poet of his day, William Cullen Bryant was invited in 1825 to lecture on poetry at the Athenaeum Society in New York. His four lectures reveal a great deal about the worried situation of the American poet in the early nineteenth century. The third lecture, "On Poetry in Its Relation to Our Age and Country," addressed itself specifically to the problem which disturbed every cultivated American. Bryant took full measure of the hardheaded doubts of men, even some Americans, who thought like Smith. Bryant was not speaking for himself but he was speaking for many when he drew up the case against the future of the arts in America:

Our citizens are held to possess, in a remarkable degree, the heedful, calculating, prosaic spirit of the age, while our country is decried as peculiarly barren of the materials of poetry. The scenery of our land these reasoners admit to be beautiful, but they urge that it is the beauty of a face without expression; that it wants the associations of tradition which are the soul and interest of scenery; that it wants the national superstitions which linger yet in every district in Europe, and the legends of distant and dark ages and of wild and unsettled times of which the old world reminds you at every step. Nor can our country, they say, ever be more fruitful of these materials than at present. For this is not an age to give birth to new superstitions, but to explode and root out old. . . . Is it likely, then, that a multitude of interesting traditions will spring up in our land to ally themselves with every mountain, every hill, every forest, every river, and every tributary

The American as Artist

brook. . . . The genius of our nation is quiet and commercial. Our people are too much in love with peace and gain, the state of society is too settled, and the laws too well enforced and respected, to allow of wild and strange adventures. There is no romance either in our character, our history, or our condition of society; and, therefore, it is neither likely to encourage poetry, nor capable of supplying it with those materials—materials drawn from domestic traditions and manners—which render it popular.³

The problem is perhaps not susceptible of a final answer, but it was and still is basic. Can art flourish in a land admittedly filled with natural marvels, but raw and wild, devoid of history and customs and tradition, diverse in its moral values and social criteria? We were “Nature’s nation,” a cliché that was fresher then and expressed a pious hope. The very fact that we were less civilized than Europe, closer to the teachings of Nature provided the peculiar moral imperative of our rugged individualism and would secure, if we were worthy, our exemption from the tragic course of history’s rise and fall. Our manifest destiny made us antihistorical and anticultural, or so one side of the national consciousness intuitively felt.

Bryant wanted to soothe these cultural anxieties with a positive assurance, but the very hesitancy of his affirmative formulation—the interrogative and conditional drift of the syntax—suggests his own anxiety:

Where the fountains of knowledge are by the roadside, and where the volumes from which poetic enthusiasms are caught and fed are in everybody’s hands, it would be singularly strange if, amid the multitude of pursuits which occupy our citizens, nobody should think of taking verse as a path to fame. Yet, if it shall be chosen and pursued with the characteristic ardor of our countrymen, what can prevent its being brought to the same degree of perfection here as in other countries? . . . I infer, then, that all the materials of poetry exist in our own country, with all the ordinary encouragements and opportunities for making a successful use of them. . . . If under these circumstances our poetry should finally fail of rivalling that of Europe, it will be because Genius sits idle in the midst of its treasures.⁴

Questions and ifs, leading to a speciously rational conclusion: “I infer, then . . .” However, Bryant’s response reveals itself as no

The Tenth Muse

rational deduction but a visionary hope. He assumed strategically that the terms of American life, bountiful with natural resources but bare of human heritage, do recognize and nourish and sustain the activity of the poet and artist. If his assumption were false, the opportunities of the New World would represent nothing but a bloated materialism, and our hard-won gains would be reduced to plunder. Surely some of our energy would go into making a great as well as a productive society. Still, dreams and ideals—no matter how frequently asserted nor how ardently invoked—can never assuage doubts for long. Consequently from the beginning of our written record until now, some form of Sydney Smith's questions has haunted our boldest artistic endeavors and often raised even before some of our most ambitious artists the dread specter of failure, half-expected and half-believed.

In the flush days of the late eighteenth century the poems of John Trumbull and Timothy Dwight projected democratic vistas stretching almost illimitably west from the thinly settled eastern shore. But even these poetic depictions gave empire precedence over art, as the poet's farsighted eyes explored America:

To glory, wealth and fame ascend,
 Her commerce wake, her realms extend;
 Where now the panther guards his den,
 Her desert forests swarm with men;
 Gay cities, tow'rs and columns rise,
 And dazzling temples meet the skies;
 Her pines, descending to the main,
 In triumph spread the wat'ry plain,
 Ride inland seas with fav'ring gails,
 And crowd her ports with whitening sails:
 Till to the skirts of western day,
 The peopled regions own her sway.⁵

The climactic vision of Joel Barlow's epic *Columbiad* disclosed "the progress of arts in America" but the steps of the progress laid out a sequence of development which placed art and poetry last: "Fur trade. Fisheries. Productions. Commerce. Education. Philosophical discoveries. Painting. Poetry."⁶

Then and now, many, including so flinty a critic of American culture as Ezra Pound, argued that the arts could grow only in a stable and healthy economy. Or did that order of things betray,

The American as Artist

however unwittingly, a hierarchy of values that damned us from the start as a venture in mindless and soulless capitalism? Our first worry was that our privileged status as “Nature’s nation” precluded cultural achievement; as we set about exploiting nature’s bounty, another question, not unrelated to the first, confronted Americans: can culture root itself in a society whose norms are economic, the profit motive fixing us on commercial expansion under a republican form of government? Were we, in fact, Mammon’s nation?

So rapidly was the continent spanned, so rapidly was it being peopled and urbanized and mechanized that many began to wonder if we had not abandoned the ideals that had kindled earlier generations and lost touch with our peculiar source of inspiration: the economy of nature itself. What happened to John Winthrop’s vision of a city set on a hill for all to see? Or to Thomas Jefferson’s idea of the balanced perfection of an agrarian society? Or to Fenimore Cooper’s sense of natural social classes and a natural aristocracy as the genius of American democracy? In a country of such extremes—unbridled commerce and untamed nature—what could be the sources of civilization? Or—to turn the question around—what would be the artist’s and the poet’s role in reconciling the American people and the American land in an American civilization?

Philip Freneau aspired to be the first great American poet, and his career typifies in bold outlines the problem of the artist in America. Even before the Declaration of Independence he hailed “The Rising Glory of America,” as if the curve of our history were ever ascendant, freed of the wheel of fortune and the cyclic course of empire. “Bless’d by the genius of the rural reign,” “uncultured nature” would “tame the soil, and plant the arts.” In anticipation of the westward progress which T. S. Eliot would look back on in *The Dry Salvages*, Freneau saw the Mississippi, the “Great Sire of Floods,” submitting to the service of the settlers:

Nor longer shall your princely flood
From distant lakes be swelled in vain,
Nor longer through a darksome wood
Advance, unnoticed, to the main,
Far other ends, the heavens decree—
And commerce plans new freights for thee.⁸

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The Tenth Muse

In this "Millennium" our "Canaan" was "a new Jerusalem"; here "Paradise anew/ Shall flourish, by no second Adam lost." Moreover, Paradise regained not as a garden but as a city, belles lettres would spring up unforced, alongside trade, and we need never stoop to the study of dead languages or to "literary importation" from abroad.⁹

Did Freneau believe this ideal America, or did he, more than he was able to realize, merely believe in this ideal of America? In any case the ideal was soon challenged in Freneau's own experience. When he listed his literary models, he could cite only Englishmen: Shakespeare and Spenser and especially the neoclassicists, Dryden, "heav'nly Pope," and "godlike Addison."¹⁰ Moreover, so painfully was his society not the new Jerusalem that soon after the Revolution he began to project the American dream toward the frontier—the forest and prairies and mountains—as Natty Bumppo and Huck Finn were later to find themselves forced west before the advance of "civilization." Even Whitman would have to admit, after another war (and a fratricidal war at that) in the name of the national ideal, that the promise lay beyond the convulsive present along the road open west to the future. Freneau could blame corruption on the lingering taint of "civilized" Europe, but then the snake had entered the garden with the first settler. The new republic could seem to present a panorama of "the worst of men in worst of times."¹¹ The poet was the least of citizens; the merchant-baron throttled him and then went on to snivel that "these States, as yet, can boast no bard":

With such a bold, conceited air
When such assume the critic's chair,
Low in the dust is genius laid,
The muses with the man in trade.¹²

The poet had, then, two courses open to him: he could either turn east back to the society of the Old World:

Thrice happy Dryden, who could meet
Some rival bard in every street!
When all were bent on writing well
It was some credit to excel!—¹³

The American as Artist

or turn west to the far frontiers of the private dream:

O waft me far, ye muses of the west—
 Give me your green bowers and soft seats of rest—
 Thrice happy in those dear retreats to find
 A safe retirement from all human kind.
 Though dire misfortunes every step attend,
 The muse, still social, still remains a friend—¹⁴

Freneau's solitude proved more misfortune than safe retirement, and the muse kept no steady vigil against his mounting wretchedness. His old age, like Melville's and Twain's, was anticlimactic. Denounced as a political radical, neglected as a poet, poor, increasingly given to the "tavern and the flowing bowl," Freneau died from exposure after losing his way back home in a snowstorm. Carved on his tombstone is an epitaph so simple it seems portentous and symbolic: "Poet's Grave."

2

Nathaniel Hawthorne, looking back on his own literary career, put the problem with his usual honesty and rueful ambivalence: "No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land."¹⁵ Nevertheless, for all Hawthorne's modesty the supreme fact about his career is his achievement: shadowy, mysterious romances about America which made him an inspiration and example to others striving to cope with their situation as artists in the New World.

Herman Melville, primed by the literary nationalism of the "Young America" group in New York, found in Hawthorne's stories such strong validation of his own efforts that he could publicly scorn Irving's "imitation of a foreign model" and rank his new-found hero with Shakespeare. Since Hawthorne had demonstrated what could be accomplished with our own spirit and materials, "let us away with this leaven of literary flunkeyism toward England. If either must play the flunkey in this thing, let

7

The Tenth Muse

England do it, not us." In fact, the time had come to see the English tradition as in many respects "alien to us." At this point Melville felt brash enough to aim Sydney Smith's loaded question back across the Atlantic: "the day will come when you shall say, Who reads a book by an Englishman that is a modern?" But even with his head swimming, the realist in Melville had also to concede the futurity of America's laurels and the poverty of the immediate literary scene, which *Pierre* would gloomily satirize a year or so later. Indeed, so few "as yet have evinced that decided originality which merits great praise" that America should "first praise mediocrity even, in her children, before she praises . . . the best excellence" in foreigners. For "the truth is, that in one point of view this matter of a national literature has come to such a pass with us, that in some sense we must turn bullies, else the day is lost, or superiority so far beyond us, that we can hardly say it will ever be ours."¹⁶ The juxtaposition of the American artist as bully and weakling in this single short essay may have betrayed more uncertainty than Melville intended. In any case, while Walt Whitman emerged during the 1850s as the bard of modern America, Melville receded from the active contention of authorship.

Hawthorne cut a quainter and clumsier figure in the eyes of Henry James almost thirty years after Melville's comments, but Hawthorne's writings, for all their limitations, called forth James's most extended critical piece, and the first full-length critical work on an American author. Writing for an English audience, James had to accommodate Hawthorne before he could find his own posture as an American-British novelist. He appreciated Hawthorne's "great courage" in daring to write at all. If "the profession in the United States is still very young, and of diminutive stature . . . in the year 1830 its head could hardly have been above ground." In fact, James, unlike Melville, wondered solicitously whether we did not render Hawthorne "a poor service in contrasting his proportions with those of a great civilization." On the other hand, since our best writers had been more or less "of trans-Atlantic growth," the heartening sign to James was the fact that the more recent American writers seemed "now almost inevitably more cultivated," "more cosmopolitan," "more Europeanized in advance."

The American as Artist

However, even Henry James could not but be somewhat of two minds on this point. The crux of the problem was whether the American artist found himself by looking at home or abroad, by seeking the fuller context of the established tradition or rooting himself in his intrinsic possibilities for whatever they yielded. James would make his own determination; but the paradox which "poor Hawthorne" presented to him in 1879 was the odd fact that although he was a "provincial" and "solitary worker" he was also a profound and original genius, and, further, that his eccentric genius proceeded in many ways out of and not despite his circumstances. The British themselves recognized this fact in asking James to write the book for the English Men of Letters series; Hawthorne was the only American author honored by inclusion in the series.¹⁷

For the next generation Pound, in his strong-voiced expatriation, denounced the literary nationalism of his friend William Carlos Williams. How could Williams live in New Jersey and write such fine verse? Because, Pound had to conclude, Williams' mixed ancestry held him off as an "observant foreigner" who had to absorb America "as something put there for him to look at."¹⁸ So by Pound's curious twist of thought Williams could be a poet in America because he was not really American, while he, Pound, had to remain a poet in exile because as a thorough American he was too deeply involved in the outrageous actuality of home to live there. Williams retorted flatly that Pound was "aching to make me something that I ain't"¹⁹ and remained opposed to the seductions of the Old World. Almost twenty-five years later he wrote to young Robert Lowell abroad, attacking T. S. Eliot for declining "to remain here and put his weight behind" the making of an American poetic speech and warning Lowell against losing himself to the "European Circe":

... it is another Odyssey from which, not like some earlier American writers, I hope to see you return to your Penelope (American) much enriched in your mind and ready to join your fellows here in pushing forward the craft. You can bring great riches to us or you can ignore us; it's your choice. . . . come back; do not allow yourself to be coaxed away from us. I say this not for myself, after all, but for you.²⁰

The Tenth Muse

3

The course of American poetry can be measured by the poets' persistent crises of identity which involved in some way a crisis of place and role. The accommodations of other or older American poets, even when successful for them, were generally powerless to allay the restlessness of the next generation. Each poet had to confront his own situation and attempt to identify himself within it. Since the nineteenth century, poets everywhere have felt more and more displaced from their increasingly urbanized and technocratic societies, but the situation here is an extreme testing of the ability of the human spirit to adjust to the modern reality. Consequently, seldom—perhaps never before—have a nation's poets been as consistently concerned with and self-conscious about their purpose and role as American poets have been—indeed have had to be—from the start. As a result they have asked, perhaps more urgently than other poets in other times and places, the fundamental questions about their calling and their craft: what is poetry? what are its deepest sources and richest materials? what are its ends? how is the poem made? what is the relation of the poet to the poem, of the poem to the public? is the poet foreign to his native environment, or can he draw from it and help shape it?

Thrown back on himself more than his counterpart in England or on the continent, the American is forced to name his identity on his own ground and root his speech in that self-defined ground. Without the security of an accepted role or range of roles in society, without the assurance of a literary class or a literary audience, however small, without the expectations and norms given and acknowledged—all these prerogatives of the poet in a more traditional society—he has had to justify and comprehend the poetic act before he can speak to others. Emerson had optimistically placed the poet in the new society as the "representative man," but many poets and artists found themselves among Melville's "isolatos," their self-reliant individualism turned darkly and sourly inward. In both ways the artists have been profoundly representative; in Whitman's words "by its popular poets the calibres of an age, the weak spots of its embankments, its sub-currents, (often more significant than the biggest surface ones,) are unerringly indicated."²¹