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### *Cuts and Pastes*

OTHER THAN NOTING ONE SMALL ERROR in Clive Watkins's review (Pound's Canto XLV is complete, not an extract), I have few arguments with his scrupulous assessment of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, and I am especially grateful to him for calling readers' attention to the many typographical errors in the book, errors that one hopes future printings will correct. I am reminded of two howlers from past anthologies that persisted through several printings and, in one case, through a couple of editions. The first was a misprint, in Norton's *World Masterpieces*, of the last line of one of Petrarch's sonnets (tr. Edwin Morgan): "And ears are heard within the harp I touch." Imagining teachers struggling to explicate that curious bit of synesthesia has given me many a good chuckle over the years. Perhaps even better was the eighth line of Stevens's 'Sunday Morning' as it appeared in the first printing of the second edition of Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair's *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*: "As a clam darkens among water-lights"—possibly because the mollusc disapproved of a trespassing pair of Eliot's ragged claws. Neither of these, however, rivals the classic version of the sestet of Edwin Arlington Robinson's sonnet 'Reuben Bright' that appeared in the poet's second collection, *The Children of the Night*:

And after she was dead, and he had paid  
The singers and the sexton and the rest,  
He packed a lot of things that she had made  
Most mournfully away in an old chest  
Of hers, and put some chopped-up cedar boughs  
In with them, and tore down to the slaughter-house.

If an alert reader can spot nearly a hundred errors in the anthology's first half, then one supposes that Oxford will soon produce a companion volume, *The Oxford Book of American Poetry Errata*.

Because Watkins is more conversant with the American canon than most American readers, I will miss hearing how less-knowledgeable British readers respond to this book, especially to the latter half. Only a few decades ago, there seemed to be a good deal of trans-Atlantic back-and-forth when the Original Trans-Atlantic Man was enthroned at Faber and poets like Donald Hall (and Robert Pack and Louis Simpson) were assembling the two editions of *New Poets of England and America* and, in Hall's case, the little Penguin anthology of contemporary American poetry (which must have first been aimed at a British market) which Watkins mentions and which was the first collection of poetry I ever bought.

Things have changed; I have no idea which Americans are presently known in the U.K. I once heard that the poetry of that late bloomer Wallace Stevens was virtually unknown and unavailable in England at the time of his death and for some years afterwards. I suspect that few British readers of poetry could name more than a handful of American poets born since 1925, with the exception of Sylvia Plath (for obvious reasons) and Allen Ginsberg (for obvious reasons), a head-count that is probably about equal to the number that a typical American English major could identify. Lehman's selections from poets born between this date and his cut-off point of 1950 seem fairly reasonable, though it is worth noting that the 200-odd pages at the end of the book strike a strange contrast with its first 200, which include poets born between 1612 and 1869. If the book's table of contents were rendered in human scale, Mr. Oxbo Ampo would have a head the size of a pencil eraser, a fairly well-proportioned mid-section, and size 19EEE feet. Or, given the inflation of poetic egos, maybe the largest size should be at the top.

Still, assembling anthologies is a thankless and expensive task. When April Lindner and I completed whittling down our selections for *Contemporary American Poetry* to a modest 513 pages, we discovered that we had discarded as much as we were able to keep and still faced the prospect of paying off our half of a six-figure total of permissions fees. I had to put off buying shoes for my grandchildren, and Dr. Lindner began to urge her two sons into contact sports as a possible way of paying for their college educations. Thus, anyone who is discouraged from buying the Oxford anthology by Watkins's review should consider purchasing *ours*, which may be had for a much smaller sum and even includes three poems by former poet laureate Rita Dove (b. 1952), to whom Lehman can be imagined saying, "Sorry, kiddo. Born too late!" Otherwise, it would be indecorous for me, as a rival editor, to comment further on Lehman's contemporary selections other than to remind the reader of this title: *Contemporary American Poetry* (available now from amazon.com).

So let us begin at the beginning, with our rather remarkable first four American poets, each of whom exhibits some characteristic quality that will be repeated in subsequent generations. First we have Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-1672) and Edward Taylor (c. 1642-1729), both born in England and coming to the Massachusetts Colony in their youth. It seems appropriate that our first poet should be a woman, and also one who apparently gave little thought to publication (her poems were first printed in England through the efforts of her brother-in-law), thus prefiguring the work of a later giant from Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson, who otherwise resembles Bradstreet (mother of eight) not in the least. While Bradstreet doubtless thought her devotional 'Contemplations' her best work, two of her most memorable poems, the proto-feminist 'The Prologue' and the witty 'The Author to Her Book,' are about poetry itself. Taylor, a Calvinist preacher, seems to have imbibed the English Metaphysicals as a young man, though he oddly sounds more like the Catholic Crashaw than those pious Protestants, Donne and Herbert.

Taylor's catalog of bizarre conceits about the Creator in 'The Preface' includes the remarkable rhetorical question "Who in this Bowling Alley bowld the Sun?"

As Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in 'The American Scholar' and 'The Poet,' American poets of the early years had "listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." Stylistically, the second pair of poets, Philip Freneau (1752-1832) and Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), practiced the mode neoclassical, with both poets (Wheatley almost exclusively) most at home in the closed heroic couplet. I am especially pleased that Lehman includes Freneau's lovely lyric 'The Wild Honey Suckle,' which establishes a truly original poetic sub-genre, the American nature lyric. American poets, following the leads of naturalists like Audubon and Bartram, found a glorious candy store teeming with new species, for which William Cullen Bryant, the model of the poet-as-naturalist, said, "the speech of England has no name." William Carlos Williams said, "The rose is obsolete," and American poets from Freneau to contemporaries like Richard Wilbur (befittingly well represented) and Linda Pastan (M.I.A. here, alas) have characteristically taken to the footpaths in search of flowers whom nature "bade . . . shun the vulgar eye." I wish that more of these poems were included; Emerson's 'The Rhodora' is present, but Bryant's 'To the Fringed Gentian' and 'The Yellow Violet' aren't. About the closest we come in more recent times is Williams's 'Queen Anne's Lace' and 'By the Road to the Contagious Hospital,' with its memorable personification of Spring ("Lifeless in appearance, sluggish, / dazed") as a housewife with a particularly nasty hangover. Freneau may have listened to a courtly muse for his style, but he is also American in another sense: he is our first political poet, "The Poet of the Revolution," as he was known in his day. Fiercely Jeffersonian and anti-British (he spent time during the Revolution confined on one of the infamous British prison ships), he was a great hater. His 'To Sir Toby' (not here) is more than a piece of anti-British agitprop; it is our first significant anti-slavery poem. Perhaps Lehman wished to spare his publisher the embarrassment of promoting a poet who once referred to the British army as a mob from whom "No age, no sex [was] from rape or murder free" (though Freneau may have been speaking only of those rotten hired-hands, the Hessians).

Wheatley, as our first African-American poet, is justly remembered in the names of dozens of public schools, but those who inhabit those hallways may find the opening of 'On Being Brought from Africa to America' a bit troubling:

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

A remarkable prodigy, Wheatley was tutored by her Boston owners and published her first poem at the age of fifteen. She has two poems here, neither of them her tribute to Washington, which earned her an audience with the General and which reads like something Pope might have written — had he been an African-American female, an advocate of revolution against the Anointed King, a devotee of poetic diction that would have shamed Tate and Cibber, and a poet who had more bad days than good. Well, not bloody likely. Still, what is remarkable about Wheatley's poetry is not that it is any good (it isn't) but that it was written at all. Wheatley died in poverty at thirty-three in the first year after the Treaty of Paris, a free woman who ironically fared better as a slave.

Here where I teach, our advanced course in the American literature of the first half of the nineteenth century is called "The American Renaissance." One stumbles over the "re" in the same way that one wonders about it in the phrase "Harlem Renaissance." What, exactly, were these writers being reborn *from*? There were no ashes, to be sure, only a barely lit bed of kindling that could have used a good dose of kerosene. The usual suspects are all here, in proportions that represent the current canonical view: Bryant is cut down to three poems — that perpetual classroom punishment 'Thanatopsis,' the pretty good yet clearly of-the-period 'To a Waterfowl,' and 'Sonnet — To an American Painter Departing to Europe,' a piece I don't recall having seen in an anthology before. Missing, as I have noted, are the flower poems and 'The Prairies,' which rates historical interest, perhaps, as giving insight into what a liberal of the period (Bryant was a founder of the Republican Party, which in 1856 was a radical departure) made of "Manifest Destiny," the historical and sociological justification for the destruction of Native American tribes. (Interestingly, Lehman includes no Native American poets, nor any Hispanics.)

Among the "Schoolroom Poets" — i.e., those who were felt respectable enough for classroom recitation — we find a foreshortened Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, represented by no excerpts from his famous epic poems or any of several flawless sonnets, and lacking even 'The Arsenal at Springfield' or 'The Rope-Walk' as examples of his sustained lyrics. Longfellow has been championed by Dana Gioia and others as the most significant poet in the American canon before Walt Whitman, but he seems destined to be short-changed in the future, despite his being the first American poet to be honored in Westminster Abbey. If any sentient being can read 'The Cross of Snow' without admitting that it is that rarity, a great Italian sonnet that is also a great poem, then I suspect that that being has grown from a pod. On the other hand (lacking a first hand), we do have a respectable sample of Emerson, whose poetry is most evident in his prose and whose most powerful poem, 'Threnody,' a heart-rending lament over the death of his first-born son, is too long to be included in most anthologies but is worth several reprintings of such turgid bits as 'A Snow-Storm' or 'Bacchus.' I've always been a great fan of 'Each and All,' a tight summation of his Transcendentalist ethos which begins, sadly, with what might be the two worst opening lines ever written: "Little

thinks, in the field, yon red-cloaked clown / Of thee from the hill-top looking down,” lines which a senior professor once earnestly told me were a description of a *cow*. John Greenleaf Whittier, who defined himself as the great abolitionist poet in such stirring occasional poems as ‘Ichabod’ and ‘Laus Deo,’ is represented by poems on other subjects, and his great maritime ballad ‘Skipper Ireson’s Ride’ is slighted in favor of the patriotic groaner ‘Barbara Frietchie.’ Thankfully, the editor did not include ‘Maud Muller,’ a sentimental favorite of days of yore that was justly ridiculed by Bret Harte in his side-splitting parody ‘Mrs. Judge Jenkins.’ Other poets of the period, like the sometimes-poetizing Henry David Thoreau (read the prose for the poetry), the peripatetic Oliver Wendell Holmes, and the ephemeral James Russell Lowell, are treated with an appropriate lack of space.

And then there is the problem of Our Cousin Edgar, the perpetual joker in the American deck. Lehman’s selections are good, if unsurprising, and I’m especially pleased to see ‘The Haunted Palace,’ a clever allegory of madness that too often is lost in its placement in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’ where it appears as a spontaneous improvisation by the loony, guitar-plucking Roderick. I do miss ‘Sonnet — To Science’ and ‘Israfel,’ both poems that explore what Richard Wilbur has called the “facultative basis” of Poe’s aesthetic, which is so different from that of Emerson and the Transcendentalists that it seems to have descended from the orbit of Al-Aaraaf, the wandering star that provides Poe with his chief symbol of the origins of imaginative energy. We do get ‘The Raven’ and ‘Ulalume’ in all of their splendor, the latter held dear in my memories of James Mason, as Humbert Humbert, declaiming it to a gum-cracking Lo in Stanley Kubrick’s classic film.

1855 is, of course, the great watershed year for American poetry, for it marked the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Lehman uses this edition’s version of ‘Song of Myself,’ instead of the 1892 “death-bed” edition favored by other anthologists, a decision which Watkins finds defensible. Nevertheless, Lehman sees fit to insert 52 section numbers that do not appear in the poem’s original version and were added by Whitman later to emphasize the cyclical nature of the poem. I wish that the editor had included a few of Whitman’s graphic Civil War poems, which reach a level of realism that the Trench Poets of World War I rose to a full half-century later. ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ is a notably good choice, for it is one of the rare poems written before our century that deals with the concept of a future, not the apocalyptic future of the saints or the visionary gleam of Tennyson in ‘Locksley Hall,’ but the real, everyday future that connects the poet on the ferry with the commuter crossing the Brooklyn Bridge on 9/11 to enter a Manhattan forever changed yet forever the same.

Whitman was born in 1819 and the next significant male poet, Edwin Arlington Robinson, fifty years later. Were it not for the presence of Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), that half-century would be skipped over in ten pages, three of which are devoted to Ernest Lawrence Thayer’s ‘Casey at the Bat.’ Dickinson has

undergone so many transformations, at least in the scholarly mind, over the years that it's difficult to keep track of which myth is *au courant*. A few years ago I sat through a paper titled 'Emily Dickinson, Survivor of Child Abuse' at an academic conference and listened to a serious debate over whether or not her 'Alone and in a Circumstance' is set in an outdoor privy. I deeply regret having missed the MLA convention that featured that notorious "muse of masturbation" paper, but I can console myself with the poet's placement, along with such strange bedfellows as Thoreau and Melville, in *Gay and Lesbian Poetry of Our Time* (1988), the contents of which the estate of Elizabeth Bishop and the good sense of John Ashbery declined to enter. If it is possible anymore — and it probably isn't — to read Dickinson's poems purely for pleasure as opposed to deconstructing them as cryptograms (can Dan Brown's *The Dickinson Code* be far off?), then there is a fine selection here. One of my favorites is 'I taste a liquor never brewed', a poem that I have lately decided, if you will allow me one of my own far-fetched musings, is spoken by a drunken hummingbird!

I could go on forever about personal favorites that aren't in *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, but Gerry Cambridge has to save some space in *The Dark Horse* for poems. I should probably conclude with some remarks about twentieth-century American poets and Lehman's editorial decisions, some of which strike me as curious. The editor says he includes two blues lyrics "because of the argument, based on the work of Langston Hughes and others, that the blues is a literary form." True enough, but why then does he not include any examples of this literary form? Hughes's wonderful 'The Weary Blues' has only six lines from a twelve-bar blues lyric (Hughes modified the stanza from three to six lines when he discovered that poets were paid by the line!), and the poet wrote a number of full poems in the blues form. And no matter how hard I try, I can't conceive of W. H. Auden as an American poet, despite his change of citizenship. If one is going to include Anne Carson on the basis of her U. S. teaching and influence on younger poets, then why not add Joseph Brodsky, Derek Walcott, and Czesław Miłosz or, for that matter, Seamus Heaney — all Nobel prizewinners? Does Carl Sandburg really merit only thirty-two lines, or does Carl Sandburg merit as many as thirty-two lines? Is Elizabeth Bishop coming to dinner without 'The Fish'? Who invited Frederick Seidel? Is Kenneth Koch, judging by page count, four times more important than Gwendolyn Brooks? Didn't James Wright write some fine formal verse? Is Rodney Jones the only southern poet born since 1925? Daddy, is it true that there was once a poet named James Dickey?

If we love poetry, we each carry a dream anthology around upstairs, and the only real solution to having it on our bookshelves is to don the cat-burglar suit and steal into the library at midnight with a scrapbook, pair of scissors, and jar of paste. In this regard, I recall an old Robert Klein comedy routine parodying those late-night TV sales pitches. He would offer, for three payments of \$99.99, "Every record ever

made! A truck will come to your door!” Since I now have the complete run of *The New Yorker* on six CDs, wouldn’t it be possible to offer “Every poem ever written!” on a similar set and let everyone pick and choose? Come to think of it, virtually every poem ever written and a few that have not yet been written are available free on the internet, including the works of Britney Spears, and a hefty tome like *The Oxford Book of American Verse* may in fact represent an idea whose time has come and gone.