let my seed fall on the rocky ground. / I never laid my talents out to found / The many-mansioned condominium” (The Argot Merchant Disaster). His greatest fear as a poet is that he has built, as he has here, his “space-age pup tent on the sand.” While Starbuck scratches out “one verbal razzmataz / And heavy up my notebook with another,” he also grieves: “There’s nothing I would gladlier achieve / than poetry. I mean the serious thing.”

In fact, he means Wordsworthian poetry of “pure Organic Form, / . . . / Where not one word malingers from the norm.” Critics should be wary of the poet’s half-confessions in “Tuolomne.” Starbuck builds on sand, but that sand is “a standard / of Competition and comparison / in Counting up the offspring of the dutiful.” He is not often a poet “as bad as any of those silly gooses / Who put the right thing to the wrong thing’s uses.” As sand can also be fused with soda and potash to make glass, so poetry that shifts words brilliantly, undermining and reconfiguring form, makes the poet go “glass-eyed onto my knees.”

This “spectacle of devastations” in “Tuolomne” becomes the setting for Starbuck’s conversation with Wordsworth in the 1980s, as in “Magnificat in Transit from the Toledo Airport”: “Merciful Muchness, Principle of Redundance, / . . . / the world is too much for us, wait and see!” (The Argot Merchant Disaster). Knowing that “The world has a glass center,” Starbuck sees Wordsworth through the lens of poems that can “[p]olish [him] off. Take measurements. Melt in.” For Starbuck the Romantic way of looking at the world, along with every poetic form that we inherit (including songs and sonnets, ballades and sestinas), must go “into what they call a ‘solid solution.’” Doping the mix, they call it” in glassmaking. Starbuck’s poems half-disgustedly and half-delightedly explore what Wordsworth abhors in his sonnet: “The World Is Too Much with Us.” Starbuck’s work is fascinated, as dutiful speculum of late twentieth-century cultural and social devastation, with “late and soon, getting and spending” or what he calls “Power. Dough” in “Washington International” (Visible Ink).

Developing the innovations of Edward Lear’s fluid nonsense verse, in “Sunday Brunch in the Boston Restoration” Starbuck is consumed with the nonsense of shopping and eating in 1980s America, although this poem is also on the road to truth. He surveys a late capitalist world in which chocolate shrimps are chocolate shrimps but wrapped in aluminum foil and for sale: “Everybody a billboard! Certo! Chiapan or is it Belizean / . . . / comparison shopping the toveracks, the quarkbins, the vampeteropenerbarrelers.”

Such a tendency to verbal jiggery pokery is exploited by Starbuck in the humorous quatrains of double dactyls and double dactyls from the 1970s and in his many cryptograms and double acrostics. His technical wizardry also turns an ode into a “bad joke” in the first quatrain of his sonnet “The Commencement A (The Argot Merchant Disaster), and he compresses 17 lines of Shakespeare’s pentameters into fourteenables of rhymed paraphrase in the “Space-Saver Sonnets.” Starbuck is also quite capable of writing “with a Different Letter at the End of Each Line,” dedicated to the formalist critic Helen Vendler, with line beginning with the letter “O” and rhyming with the same sound—and of weaving “A Tapestry for Bay in dactylic monometer, with a 156-letter rhymed thread threaded through it. But Starbuck is not just a “the-Kid” as he puts in “The Universe Is Closed and REMs” (The Argot Merchant Disaster). “T]hough tongue / Dropt manna, and could make the appear / The better reason,” Starbuck is unlike Milton’s Belial in Book II of Paradise Lost or Bil Kid, because he does not “perplex and dash / Macounses.” During the 1960s Starbuck could focus his art on the futility of “demonstration” Dear Fellow Teacher” (The Argot Merchant Disaster) he produced in “Of Late” what Anthony Hecht described, in his Introduction to The Works, as the only one of any merit whatever.” For all technical pyrotechnics, Starbuck is intent on truth words, well disposed, burnish with an American

Edward Cl

STEDMAN, EDMUND CLARENCE (1833–1908) Edmund Clarence Stedman’s influence on American poetry was greater as a critic and editor than as a poet. Nonetheless, his unusual vantage point as a broker thirty-one years on the New York Stock Exchau
enabled him to comment in verse on some of the most salient characteristics of urban life in the industrialized North. Despite his close association with the New York School of genteel poets (Bayard Taylor, Richard Henry Stoddard, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich), Stedman was less encumbered by the diffuse classicism and aesthetic idealism that now makes many productions of that school appear sentimental and forced. Much of his poetic output can be classified as “magazine verse,” short lyrics on occasional topics that were more notable for their evocations of mood than their philosophical critique. In his later years Stedman became one of the foremost architects of America’s literary heritage by editing influential anthologies, publishing essays and volumes of perceptive criticism on his more successful poetic contemporaries, and nurturing emergent poets by championing their works with other editors and publishers.

Edmund Clarence Stedman was born in Hartford, Connecticut, to Major Edmund Burke Stedman and Elizabeth Dodge Stedman. Major Stedman died two years later, and his widow and children were subsequently separated due to financial exigencies and Elizabeth’s remarriage. Robert J. Scholnick, Stedman’s only twentieth-century biographer apart from his wife, argues that these early trials caused Stedman to prioritize his Wall Street practice over his literary pursuits when later in life he had a family of his own to support. Stedman’s interest in poetry was nurtured by his mother, who for a time supported her family with her earnings as a writer.

After a brief tenure at Yale University, Stedman first entered the New York literary scene as a journalist. Some of his most successful comic and political pieces stem from this period. “How Old Brown Took Harper’s Ferry” (1859) and “The Diamond Wedding” (1859) illustrate Stedman’s gift for turning reportage into social commentary. Stedman’s lampooning of a wealthy Cuban suitor’s pursuit of a beautiful New York socialite in “The Diamond Wedding” earned him both a challenge from the aggrieved suitor and literary notoriety when the poem sold in great numbers as a newspaper pamphlet. Despite maintaining a light tone for most of the poem, Stedman closes his satire with the diamond-bedecked bride and groom standing in “naked equality” when after death they cross the Styx in company with plebeian New Yorkers “most used to a rag and bone.” This harsh egalitarian vision also energizes Stedman’s account of the 1869 Stock Market Crash in “Israel Freyer’s Bid for Gold.” The fanciful “Pan in Wall Street” (1867) depicts the fate of the transliterated Greek deity on the streets of New York. Stedman keenly observes the cultural conflict between the classical pretension of Wall Street’s architecture and its hardheaded commitment to getting and spending. In the short span between two quarter-chimes from “Trinity’s undaunted steeple,” Pan draws a crowd of truant “bulls and bears,” only to be driven off as a “vagrant demigod” by the “legal baton” of a policeman.

Although Stedman observed the Civil War at close quarters as a front line reporter for New York’s Evening World, his war poems lack a sense of immediacy and insight into the exigencies and motivations of the war. While the meter of poems such as “Sumter” and “Gettysburg” convey a martial sense of urgency, Stedman adopts a diction that associates the war with the chivalric conflicts of the Crusades. In “Gettysburg” Stedman refers frequently to Confederate forces as “grey-clad hosts” and “Southern hosts” in contrast to a reporter-like accounting of the heroic acts of individual Union soldiers and units. The war did inspire Stedman to write one of his longest narrative poems, “Alice of Monmouth” (1863). The eponymous heroine of the piece is a poor field worker chosen as a wife by the son of a landowning and class-conscious lawyer. The family breach that results is healed when Hugh, the son and husband, is mortally wounded in battle, and his repentant father embraces Alice as a true daughter. Despite the chivalric depiction of combat in the poem and other archaic Romanticisms, the poem’s theme is not as sentimental as it appears. Stedman displays keen historical and financial insight by compressing the significance of the War into that of a therapeutic balm for healing the class divisions of the North.

The most notable section in Stedman’s collected works is titled “The Carib Sea,” and it contains poems written under the influence of trips to the Caribbean in 1875 and 1892. These fourteen poems depict the mingled violence and beauty of a region scarred by European and American imperialism, and Stedman uses the region’s ambiguous heritage to express his dark reflections on the emotional and physical costs that he has paid as an urban author and worker in the American economic system. The Darwinian tones of “Sargasso Weed” conclude by characterizing humankind as “parasites soon to be gone.” In “Castle Island Light” the sterile solitude of a lighthouse in the Bahamas leads two of the keeper’s three daughters to abandon him. The poem ends with the “gray old man / Digging a grave in the sand” for the third, an image that conveys the impermanence and desolation of European influence in the Caribbean. “Astra Caeli,” the final poem in the sequence, extends this melancholy tone even to the poet’s journey “Toward the one small part ourselves inherit / Of this lone darkling world—and call our home.”

Stedman’s literary criticism established him as the foremost proponent of an objective style of criticism that considered an author in the context of his society and the literary tradition in which he worked. Stedman’s essays on Whitman and Poe did much to refute the calumnies that had been laid on both men for their
SHEETLE, TIMOTHY REID (1948– )

Timothy Steele is a metrical poet whose use of traditional forms and precise, accessible language has repositioned formal prosody into the rich palette of contemporary poetry. Steele has published several collections of poetry, principally *Uncertainties and Rest* (1979), *Sapphics Against Anger and Other Poems* (1986), and *The Color Wheel* (1994). Known for addressing a rich variety of topics, Steele writes about his native Vermont and his adopted California home with elegance and wit. He is also a well-regarded literary critic who has written cogently about the development of modern poetry, among other topics.

Born on January 22, 1948, in Burlington, Vermont, Timothy Reid Steele was the eldest son of three children to Edward William Steele, a college professor, and Ruth Reid Steele, a nurse. He credits his mother's readings of Mother Goose, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses*, and Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Locksley Hall* for engendering his earliest appreciation for poetry. This interest deepened in grade school when Steele was introduced to the works of local poet Robert Frost. "He wrote with spellbinding accuracy about a world my friends and I saw around us every day," writes Steele in his 1992 essay "The Forms of Poetry." (29). Readings from his grandmother's home-based library with Keats, Shelley, and Longfellow as well as works from his father's political science library by George Orwell, John Steinbeck, Dos Passos, and James Baldwin further enriched his upbringing.

Steele attended Stanford University, whose English program was strongly influenced by Yvor Winters, and received his BA in 1970. At Brandeis University, he studied with J.V. Cunningham, a rigorous scholar and formalist poet, and received his MA in 1972. Steele was then awarded a Wallace Stegner Fellowship in Poetry at Stanford (1972–1973) and was later appointed a Jones Lecturer in Poetry at Stanford (1975–1977). During this productive time writing poetry and teaching, Steele also completed his dissertation on the history and conventions of detective fiction under Cunningham's direction. He received his Ph.D. in English from Brandeis in 1977. On January 14, 1979, Steele married Victoria Lee Erpelding, a rare books librarian, currently head of special collections at UCLA. Steele held visiting appointments at the University of California–Los Angeles from 1977 to 1983 and at the University of California–Santa Barbara in 1986. Since 1987 he has been a professor of English at California State University–Los Angeles.

In addition to Frost and Cunningham, Steele draws inspiration from a wide range of poets, for example, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Sir Philip Sidney, Keats, Emily Dickinson, Thomas Hardy, E.A. Robinson, W.H. Auden, Richard Wilbur, Philip Larkin, X.J. Kennedy, Louise Bogan, Anthony Hecht, Thom Gunn, Janet Lewis, and Edgar Bowers. Steele’s honors include a Guggenheim fellowship (1984–1985), Academy of American Poets Award (1986), Commonwealth Club of California Medal for Poetry (1986), and a Los Angeles PEN Center, Literary Award for Poetry (1987). Though *pastoral* by subject, poems such as “Family Reunion” (Uncertainties) speak to frailties that go beyond landscape: to vistas of blue hills, / Or the silence of a still and dripping field.” In “Summer” (Sapphics) he recounts the season’s rich beauty: “Lakes windless with profound sun-shafted water; / Dense orchards in which high-grassed heat grows thick.” In “December in Los Angeles” (The Color Wheel) Steele keeps his gaze toward Vermont, which brings a certain bemusement, if not poignancy to his verse: “The tulip bulbs rest darkly in the fridge / To get the winter they can’t get outside.” In “Near Olympic” he describes a diverse Los Angeles culture: “The neighborhood, part Japanese and part / Chicano, wears poverty like art / Exotic in its motley oddities.” Steele’s love poems are particularly striking. In “Eros,” for example, he blends nature and intimacy: “Yet the soul loves the braided rope of hair, / The sense of heat and light, the cheek’s faint flush.” Donald E. Stanford’s review of The Color Wheel echoes similar critiques when he praises the collection for its “fresh, perceptive look at ordinary (frequently domestic) events with a tone sometimes ironic, sometimes whimsical, sometimes merely sympathetic. The excellence of the poems is in their language” (385). Indeed, Steele’s precision in image and word lends his verse a quiet, definitive strength.

Steele is also an important literary critic, whose seminal study *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter* (1990) lucidly traces the developments that led modernist poets T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams to abandon traditional forms in pursuit of new styles. X.J. Kennedy elaborates, “With lightly wielded knowledge, Steele revises accepted histo-
juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous images. His often bizarre narratives and oneiric imagery reveal a world where the unconscious mind seems to collide with day-to-day life.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1943, Tate first gained literary notoriety when, at the age of twenty-three, his first collection, The Lost Pilot (1967), was selected by Dudley Fitts for the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition. At the time, he was still a student in the University of Iowa's graduate writing program. The title poem from this book, "The Lost Pilot," offers a brief glimpse into Tate's early biography, since it was dedicated to his father, who was killed while flying a combat mission over Germany when Tate was a baby. However, most of Tate's work resists autobiography and subverts the confessional style that was popular in American poetics at the time his writing career began. Therefore, little about his biography has been made public except for his many awards and literary accomplishments. Tate attended the University of Missouri (1963–1964) and received a BA from Kansas State College (1965). He then attended the University of Iowa and, after receiving his MFA in poetry (1967), taught at the University of California–Berkeley (1967–1968) and at Columbia University (1969–1971). Since 1971, he has been a professor at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst.

Following the success and acclaim of his first collection came the publication of The Oblivion Ha-Ha (1970) and Hints to Pilgrims (1971). In these texts, the poet moves further away from autobiographical impulse and toward comic surrealism, creating a narrative spectacle full of both humor and horror, an often zany but unsettling jaunt through what seems to be someone's private and bewildering dreamscape. In the poem, "Dear Reader," from The Oblivion Ha-Ha, he writes: "I am trying to pry open your casket / with this burning snowflake" (87). Such psychically revealing imagery is similar to that of the early surrealists, but Tate's work is more preoccupied than theirs with humor and kitsch. The poems submerge the reader in a universe strewn with day-to-day events cominling with grotesque or wickedly funny and impossible occurrences.

Tate's next book, Hottentot Ossuary (1974), which is sometimes considered prose poetry or short fiction, involves a similar exploration of dream logic. In the poem "Leaping Woman," he writes: "The leaping woman arrives in an ambulance of starlight" with "her foaming team of white Cadillacs" (13). These lines demonstrate Tate's oneiric impulse his macabre sense of metaphor, and his interest in the capacity of language to challenge our perceptions of reality.

Tate frequently submerges ideas about the self and personal identity into a dizzying array of wordplay or bizarre comedic narratives. However, the work retains a sense of urgency that is both sympathetic and horrifying, disturbing and hopeful. In Viper Jazz (1976), the poet writes that "dreamy cars graze on the dewy boulevard. / Darkness is more of a feeling inside the drivers." He then observes that "the city is welded together / out of hope and despair" (62). As this example demonstrates, Tate can fluctuate from comic absurdity to profound statements to straightforward candor. Drawing as it does on images of pop culture and contemporary life, the language seems natural and unpretentious.

Tate does not attempt to use symbolism elicit the same reaction in every reader, as did the French surrealists, but he does attempt to excite the irrational element of human experience, thereby disrupting dominant assumptions about reality. This is especially true of his recent collections such as The Shroud of the Gnome (1997) and Memoir of the Hawk (2001), in which plain, conversational language describes peculiar and freakish events. In the prose poem "Somehow Not Aware That She Was Heaven-Born," he writes about the second coming of a one-eyed beast: "I was just sitting in my chair growing a beard, my brain lit up like a pinball machine and I prayed for order" (69).

Tate's other books of poetry include Return to the City of White Donkeys (2004); Worshipful Company of Fletchers (1994), which won the National Book Award; Selected Poems (1991), which won the Pulitzer Prize and the William Carlos Williams Award; Distance from Loved Ones (1990); Reckoner (1986); Constant Defender (1983); Riven Doggeries (1979); and Absences (1972). He has also published a novel, Lucky Darryl (1977), and a collection of short stories, Dreams of a Robot Dancing Bee (2001). His Selected Poems includes work from The Lost Pilot (1967) to The Reckoner (1986) and is considered to include his most significant work through that period.

Further Reading. Selected Primary Sources: Tate, James, Hottentot Ossuary (Cambridge, MA: Temple Bar Press, 1974); The Oblivion Ha-Ha (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1967); Selected Poems [Hanover, MA: Wesleyan University Press, 1991]; Viper Jazz (Hanover, MA: Wesleyan University Press, 1979); Worshipful Company of Fletchers (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1994). Selected Secondary Sources: Gioia, Dana, "James Tate and American Surrealism" (Denver Quarterly 33.3 [Fall 1998]: 70–80); Harms, James, "Clarity Instead of Order: The Practice of Postmodernism in the Poetry of James Tate" (Denver Quarterly 33.3 [Fall 1998]: 81–88); "James Tate" (Poetry Exhibits, Academy of American Poets [13 June 2001], www.poets.org).

Mark Tursi

TAYLOR, BAYARD (1825–1878)

Primarily known as a journalist and world traveler by his contemporaries, Bayard Taylor professed poetry to be his highest occupation as a writer. His rise from farmer's son to cosmopolitan litterateur, his knowledge
of numerous cultures and peoples from both firsthand experience and scholarly study, and his varied social and professional relationships provided him with a range of subject matter for his poetry matched in the nineteenth century only by Whitman and Melville.

Taylor's poems range from brief lyrical descriptions of the sights encountered during his many journeys abroad to metaphysical speculations cast in dramatic verse plays. Poe judged Taylor to be the finest prosodic craftsman in American literature in his time. His verse is notable for the diversity and fluidity of its metrical patterns and rhyme schemes. Although Taylor was honored as the nation's poet laureate at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, his book-length verse narratives and plays published in the 1870s were not popular. Taylor's reputation went through a sharp decline soon after his death, but interest in his writing has revived as readers have recognized Taylor's engagement with male-male sexuality and with global influences on American political and religious cultures.

Ambition and financial need motivated Bayard Taylor to be a prolific writer. His oeuvre includes seventeen volumes of occasional and narrative verse, four novels, eight critical works and translations of German classics, nineteen travel books, and innumerable magazine essays, short stories, and reviews. His success on the public lecture circuit and the popularity of his travel writing made him one of the best-known men of his day. Taylor's diplomatic career enhanced his reputation and influence as a literary interlocutor of foreign places and peoples to an American audience, and included service as a writer for the Perry Expedition to Japan, chargé d'affaires to Russia during the Civil War, and ambassador to Germany in 1878.

Taylor established himself as a writer of note without any of the traditional benefits of college education, inherited family wealth, or government sinecure. Born on January 11, 1825, to Joseph and Rebecca Way Taylor, Taylor entered a world that was remarkable for its stability in the midst of widespread social change. He grew up in Kennett Square, a small village thirty-five miles northwest of Philadelphia, surrounded by neighbors belonging to the Society of Friends. Although marrying a German non-Quaker had caused his paternal grandfather to be read out of the local Quaker meeting house, and none of the family ever rejoined the sect, the habits of the Taylor family were strongly influenced by the surrounding Quaker community. Living in the midst of a conformist community with which he and his family were not entirely in sympathy affected Taylor's sense of himself as one set apart from the common lot of a farmer's sons. Taylor's wanderlust mirrored the social mobility that characterized American life in the Jacksonian era. If Taylor's sense of separation drove him out of Kennett Square into the world, it just as inexorably drew him back. When he finally earned enough money to build Cedarcroft, his long-dreamed-of family estate, he chose to build it in Kennett Square. Several of Taylor's most powerful poems, such as "The Quaker Widow" and "The Old Pennsylvania Farmer," drew on his familiarity with Quaker community life and used it as a microcosm to express the poet's alternating sense of bewilderment, resignation, and serenity in the face of rapid social change.

Taylor escaped farm life at age seventeen when he apprenticed himself to the printer of the West Chester Register. Although his restless spirit led him to buy out his contract after only two years, Taylor gained important knowledge of the publishing trade and popular tastes during this time. The money to buy out his apprenticeship came from the proceeds of his first book of poetry, Ximena: or The Battle of the Sierra Morena (1844). "Ximena," the title poem of the collection, is set in southern Spain during the Crusades, and its dependence on chivalric ideals and foreign settings made it an ideal vehicle for Taylor's introduction into the mid-nineteenth-century literary world. Taylor parlayed the modest success of this volume (sold by subscription) and the literary connections he had developed with Rufus Griswold, editor of Graham's Magazine, into a long-cherished dream of traveling to Europe. With one hundred dollars in advances from two different periodicals and a vague promise from Horace Greeley to purchase additional letters, Taylor embarked in 1844 on a two-year tour that made his career as a writer. Often penniless and reduced to scraps and the kindness of strangers, Taylor paid his way primarily by the labor of his pen, submitting regular travel letters to the New York Tribune, the Saturday Evening Post, and the United States Gazette. The book that resulted from this journey, Views Afoot, or Europe Seen With Knapsack and Staff (1846), catapulted Taylor into minor literary fame at the age of twenty-one. The book went through nine editions in the first year of its publication, and it established Taylor as the center of a New York literary circle that included poets such as R.H. Stoddard, George Boker, and E.C. Stedman.

Poems of the Orient (1854), the most celebrated and bestselling of Taylor's seventeen volumes of poetry, was published close on the heels of his well-received triptych of foreign travel narratives set in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Poems such as "The Temptation of Hassan Ben Khaled" treat readers to exotic depictions of Islamic society while simultaneously identifying the poet with the physical and spiritual yearnings experienced by his Muslim characters. In "L'Envoi," Taylor claims that his Eastern experiences enabled him to find "the cipher of my nature—the release / Of baffled powers, which else had never won / That free fulfillment, whose reward is peace." This "release" was both the physical restoration that resulted from the journey and the aesthetic license it
afforded him for a passionate expression of sensuality in his verse.

The best-known poems in this collection include “Bedouin Song,” “Hassan to His Mare,” and “To a Persian Boy.” These poems contain elements of sublimated passion and male-male sexuality, extending themes Taylor first explored in his magazine verse. One such poem, “Hylas” (1850), has been identified by Robert K. Martin as an important contribution to the tradition of gay poetry in the United States. In 154 lines of iambic pentameter, Taylor relates the death by drowning of Heracles’s squire and lover, Hylas. Taylor dedicates fully half of the poem to a detailed and nearly lascivious description of Hylas’s body: “Naked, save one light robe that from his shoulder / Hung to his knee, the youthful flush revealing / Of warm, white limbs, half-nerved with coming manhood, / Yet fair and smooth with tenderness of beauty.” The presence of intense sensuality and intimations of homoerotic love, albeit in a poem with obvious Tennysonian influences and a traditional form, remind one of those elements in Whitman’s verse that elicited charges of crudity from some readers. Taylor’s relative freedom to explore human sexuality within accepted poetic forms distinguishes him among mid-nineteenth-century American poets publishing in mainstream magazines like Grahams and the Atlantic Monthly.

In 1855 Taylor collected his published works into Poems of Home and Travel. The earlier poems included in the collection were mostly landscape descriptions written while “afoot” in Europe. Other poems, such as his extremely successful California ballads, were fictional creations that he had published before an 1849 journey to California, despite Taylor’s claim in print that the poems were authentic descriptions of California life. “The Fight of Paso Del Mar” is typical of these poems in its use of Spanish names and words as the principal means of establishing its California setting. In the poem, “Stout Pablo de San Diego” encounters “Bernal, the herdman of Chino,” who is going the opposite direction on a narrow cliff-side path. Both men prove to be so hotheaded and violent that, grappling desperately on the slippery path, they fall off the cliff together.

A cry of the wildest death-anguish
Rang faint through the mist afar,
And the riderless mule went homeward
From the fight of the Paso del Mar.

In addition to its romantic depiction of passionate conflict, the poem contributes to a convenient fantasy of the “Vanishing Californian,” in the same vein as much American writing about Native Americans at that time.

By 1865, having published nearly twenty books of poetry, travel, and fiction, Taylor felt ready to attempt projects of greater seriousness and sustained thought, including book-length narrative poems, verse dramas, and masques. His first longer work, The Poet’s Journal (1865), is a pastiche of lyric snapshots woven by means of lengthy verse passages into an autobiographical narrative of the poet’s journey from grieving widower to husband in a second marriage. The Picture of St. John (1866), a poem of 2,840 lines written in ottava rima, concerns the wisdom gained by an artist through the difficult circumstances of his life. Taylor used the poem to explore the ways that tragedy and beauty could contribute to an artist’s aesthetic development. In Lars: A Pastoral of Norway (1873), Taylor drew on his familiarity with Quaker beliefs and customs to craft a quaint love story that hinges on the doctrine of pacifism.

Taylor’s greatest scholarly achievement was the translation of Goethe’s Faust in its original meters (Part 1 in 1870; Part 2 in 1871). Translating Faust was an ideal task for a poet with Taylor’s formidable technical skills, and it served as the standard American translation for nearly eighty years. The three major poetic works that Taylor produced after his immersion in Goethe—The Masque of the Gods (1872), The Prophet (1874), and Prince Deukalion (1878)—represent his attempt to extend the force of Goethe’s Romantic genius to an American context. All three books are verse dramas, none of which were intended for the stage.

David Starr, the protagonist of The Prophet, is loosely modeled on Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, but the force of Taylor’s theological and sociological critique of Starr’s sect was directed at the conservative Christian groups that opposed the metaphysical vision espoused in the other two dramas. In The Masque of the Gods, a pantheon of ancient gods from diverse cultures bewail their abandonment and question the validity of their individual claims to divine supremacy. The poem integrates Taylor’s experiences as a traveler and observer of non-Western cultures and religions with a critique of the spiritual aridity he observed in the urbanized and industrialized cities of the United States. It ends with a chorus of spirits that celebrates the triumph of men over their anthropomorphic gods: “They have conquered the phantoms themselves created; / They have torn the masks from the gods aforetime, / To find the mock of the face of Man.” (See also Religon and Poetry.)

Prince Deukalion presents a more affirmative vision of humanity’s relationship with the Divine. The four acts of the play follow Deukalion and Pandora on a Faustian quest through four stages of human history: the ancient world, medieval Europe, industrialized Europe, and an unknown future. Deukalion and Pandora serve as the personifications of humanity’s romantic and spiritual longings. Their quest for divinity is consummated in an agnostic vision of immortality that is “proven by its need”:
By fates so large no fortune can fulfil;
By wrong no earthly justice can atone;
By promises of love that keep love pure;
And all rich instincts, powerless of aim,
Save chance, and time, and aspiration wed
To freer forces, follow!

In few other passages of Taylor's work can the relationship between genteel idealism and industrial abjection be seen this clearly. The powerlessness and alienation experienced by those who lack "fortune" and "justice" demands, in Taylor's mind, a religious consolation.


Liam Corley

TAYLOR, EDWARD (CA. 1642-1729)

Edward Taylor is the most accomplished poet of the American colonial period. Unpublished until the 1930s, his poetry interests readers less for its expression of expected Calvinist beliefs than for its unexpected Renaissance sensibility combined with a Reformed religious point of view.

Probably born in the farming community of Sketchley, Leicestershire, England, Taylor was educated as a religious nonconformist. His earliest verse, including a dialogue on maypoles and a defense of Protestants accused of setting the London fire of 1666, indicate his fervid rejection of both Anglican and Roman Catholic beliefs. It is likely, however, that during the early years of the Restoration of King Charles II, Taylor attended Cambridge University, where he encountered rich cultural material that would later contribute to his poetic meditations. In response to a loss of employment as a result of measures designed by the King to persecute nonconformist believers, Taylor became an émigré who settled in Massachusetts Bay in 1668.

He graduated with a BA from Harvard College in 1671, the same year he accepted an invitation to serve as the Congregational minister and physician in Westfield, Massachusetts. While serving this frontier settlement in the western part of the state, he raised a family with Elizabeth Fitch of Norwich, whom he had courted in verse and then married in 1674. Three years after the death of his wife in 1689, he married Ruth Wyllys of Hartford.

Early in his Westfield ministry Taylor felt discontented because of the distance from the cultural milieu of Boston, especially Harvard. But he came to accept his frontier calling as divine will and also managed to participate in the intellectual issues of his day by maintaining correspondence with such East Coast figures as Increase Mather and Samuel Sewall. He read books given or loaned to him by such friends, copied extensive passages from borrowed books, and by the end of his life possessed a library consisting of at least two hundred works. In what might be described as "sermon wars," he participated in heated religious controversies, particularly concerning the liberal interpretation of the church sacraments advanced by Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729). During the last four years of his life, Taylor was very ill and benefited from the ministerial assistance of Nehemiah Bull. He died and was buried in Westfield in 1729.

Ranging from the four elegies written as a Harvard student to "Verses on Pope Joan" written late in life, Taylor's writings remained in manuscript during his lifetime. Although his sermons appear to have been prepared for the press and his poetic meditations were carefully revised and hand-bound, only stanzas five and seven of his "Upon Wedlock and Death of Children," which Cotton Mather included in Right Thoughts in Sad Hours (1689), ever appeared in print during his lifetime. Had Taylor stayed in Boston, his many writings, possibly even his potentially controversial meditations, doubtless would have been published. His corpus includes eight sermons written about 1694 in reply to Solomon Stoddard (published in 1965 as Edward Taylor's Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper), thirty-six sermons written between 1693 and 1706 on typology (published in 1989 as Edward Taylor's Upon the Types of the Old Testament), fourteen sermons written between 1701 and 1703 on the nature of Christ (published in 1982 as Edward Taylor's Harmony of the Gospels), and various other writings spanning his lifetime (collected in 1981 as The Unpublished Writings of Edward Taylor and in 1982 in Edward Taylor's Harmony of the Gospels). These sermons, conforming to the Ramist formula of discourse Taylor learned at Harvard, frequently identify the specific occasions for select poetic meditations, and comprise a
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