America
A Quintet of Poems

James Matthew Wilson

1776

I

There can, we know, be only one beginning:
One moment that was first with none before;
One moment from which every other follows,
Whose meanings we shall only hear of later,
As children listen on a mother's lap.
And it will be convulsive and abrupt,
That dense, dark center from which time unfolds.
But there come moments in a person's life,
Whether they're met with joy or disappointment,
That seem to echo of that first beginning
And bring with them a sense of something new,
A sense that something none has known before
Has made its first appearance in the world.

II

Imagine how it was for those aboard the ship,
The men and women cast upon the waters,
Who voyaged in their wretchedness and hunger
Beneath the wave-lashed decks. They waited there
In hopes the winds would carry them to land.
They fed on promises and fine descriptions
Of giant forests rising on the shore,
And held to them, while others fell to illness
And slipped with weighted shrouds into the sea.
How was it for them, eying the far horizon,
And catching, faintly, borne in on the breeze,
That first and unexpected scent of pine,
That sign, invisible, that land was near?

III

Imagine Reverend Edwards, in his town
Settled far inland from the port at Boston,
Its valley golden with the flames of autumn.
Imagine how he greeted the surprise,
As one by one the people set aside
Their worldly cares and gave themselves away
In bouts of penitence and hymns of praise.
Or think of that bald printer in his shop,
Bespeckled, setting out the blocks of type
In early morning darkness. Hidden there,
Within his head, lie plans for hospitals,
Societies, and colleges as yet
Unborn and yet already on their way.

IV

Or call to mind a rain-soaked Washington,
With level, compass, chain, descending down
A hillside into woodlands thick with vines.
He takes the measure of the unmapped land
As jewelers study gemstones with their loupe.
Or try, at last, to picture that pale lawyer,
Younger than most who crowded in the Statehouse,
And mute when others spoke at length and loud.
Beneath the lamp, he dips his pen in ink
To say to all the world what has till then
Been said too quietly: that we are called—
And not by man, but God—to live our lives
Within the liberty of nature's laws.

V

From one beginning come all those beginnings.
The place brand new to us is very old,
With paths and clearings marked beneath the trees,
And leaves that blaze to tongues of flame in autumn,
Obedient to a law we have not made.
We sense that first beginning in new life,
But also in the sudden change of heart.
We sense it in the never-resting mind
That ferrets out how good things can be made.
We sense it in the proud man short on prospects
Who will become a father to his country.
And so we see it in the one who brings,
With his few words, a nation to its birth.

George Washington at Philadelphia

In regal blue, with firm-set eye and mouth,
    The General departs to take command.
The day is clear and sunlight warms the land.
    Cobblestones ring with horse hooves. From the south,
March a parade of troops with fife and drum
    As if assured that victory will come.

Such is the pomp with which our war began.
    That mild day presaged many sadder ones,
When armies trudged through rain with heavy guns
    And learned how cold and hunger waste a man.
They'd hide, then fight, then vanish in retreat
    To slow what seemed inevitable defeat.

Between war's hope and its reality,
    How could such men endure, but from a sense
That, by their sacrifice, would soon commence
    An age of justice and of liberty,
Dependent not on power, rank, or king
    But on that order heaven alone could bring?

For we who follow, we too live between
    Those golden words and what such words may cost.
We know the just cause, sometimes, will be lost.
    And, to learn what true liberty might mean
We struggle still, we who have understood
    This is our country's trial and its good.

The First of Modern Nations

All of the world was once America.
Or so, at least, an old philosopher
Once wrote, and, in his writing, meant to say,
"The state of nature," raw and unpossessed;
A world where all lay still untouched by man;
Where lumber, iron, and coal and fertile soil
Awaited, raw materials to be shaped
And through such labor be made ours. Just so
It might have looked to those first weary travelers,
Their breaches dripping wet, their stomachs empty,
Their eyes in disbelief to see the towers
Of fir and cedar thrusting to the skies.

Even today, we sometimes think this country
Is young, the first of modern nations, and its roots
Are shallow, and its culture thin, its people
Still half unformed and severed from the past.
We think of Main Streets on the old frontier,
Their hasty, wooden buildings with false fronts,
Unpainted, crooked, and provisional,
The roads a filthy clabber of deep mud.
We think of modern suburbs and of strip malls,
Those places built for use but not to last,
Those places crowned with great electric signs,
Whose light bulbs chase a restless, racing circuit
To draw us for an hour off the highway.
They flash and fade away in desert darkness.

But this is not the truth of things, I think,
And not because the world was never empty;
And not because we found a mighty people
Already here, their ways long since established,
Their wisdom, skill, and cunning enviable.
Or, I should say, not only this. For when
Our ancestors first stood upon this land,
Full though it was of promise and abundance,
All that was missing were the laws of men
Such as they had been known for centuries.

This errand in the wilderness, this clearing
Beneath the trees—where pilgrims lit their fires,
Where brutal snow and cold would nearly starve them—
This soon would teach to them what we all know,

But eagerly have chosen to forget:
There is an older law than that of men.

And so it was, this awed and pious people,
They set about to build their earthly city
As best they could on just those lines that He
Who made all things first printed on the heart.
So Bradford, Gardner, Winthrop, and all those
Who sailed with them worked out a covenant
To bind themselves and, in those northern woods,
Set out to build a city on a hill.
And so, those generations on, when men
From up and down that rocky shelf of coast,
Convened in Philadelphia and declared
Their freedom to obey the laws of nature,
And pledged their sacred honor to that end.
And so it was, again, when Madison,
Found in a schoolroom cabinet a model
Of Sun and planets and the other stars;
He saw their ever-turning, stable order,
Concentric, balanced, grand yet peaceable,
A moving picture of eternity,
And took it for an image of our law.
We have invented nothing, they would say,
But only have appealed to that first frame
In shaping our more humble place to live,
As anyone with reason may discern.

If this was new, it was so in the sense
That truth is ever ancient, ever new.
And if, as one age passes to another,
These things seem far from us and passed away,
Or even lost beyond all recollection,
We need do nothing but remind ourselves
Of them and they'll be with us once again.
Our nation is the place where we have settled,
Its landscapes planted, plowed, and harvested,
But it is also covenant and spirit,
And so expresses in its way of life
What lies beyond all time and history.
In this, America, however old,
Is yet reborn with every generation:
The first of modern nations, we might say,
But founded on an everlasting law.

An Errand into the Wilderness

Amid white pines that rake the sky,
Crashes of waves on rocks that lie
Along our coasts, vales of red loam
And riverbeds, we made our home.
And so we live by mounts and spires,
Far in the West, and posts and wires
That plot the grasses of the plains,
And by thick clumps of rivercanes.

Our first forefathers saw this all.
They heard the breasted warblers' call,
And felt a note of joy and fear
As if God's providence drew near.
Here is a place of vast, good earth,
Where a new people comes to birth,
And work may find its dignity
In freedom and prosperity.

Freedom and work, and these in store,
But also failure, death, and war;
A sense that our unsettled state
Has lost its way, the hour grown late;
A sense words founder in the deed,
And noble speech masks petty greed,
Have cast their shadow on the land
And sent a tremor through our hand.

But steady it. Our nation still
Has genius and a noble will,
Reverences life and liberty,
And spreads their cause from sea to sea;
It reckons with each sin and flaw
By creed and custom, love, and law,
And teaches us to seek our good
In an enduring brotherhood.

Life, Liberty, and Happiness

Children are sent to school to learn,
    As every child will know;
But if they know so much already,
    Why should they have to go?
There are some things they won't discover
    Unless their teachers show.

And yet, they sense, when games are played,
    That cheating is not fair;
They see that bravery is good
    And that the kind will share;
They even know to fear the dark
    For what may linger there.

Most children guess their elders, once,
    Were just as wise as they;
Though heads grow bald and brows grow creased,
    Some wisdom still will stay,
No matter how they seem to explain,
    Explain it all away.

Perhaps it's to remind themselves,
    (Not you!) they tell those tales
Of cherry trees and honesty,
    Of Casey on the rails,
Or of those families who set out
    Beneath the Mayflower's sails.

What are those things we all must know
    As principles of right?
That life is not man's property
    Subject to whim or might,
But comes as our Creator's gift
    As the sun gives us light.

We know as well our acts are ours,
    Whether they're right or wrong.
For the abuse of liberty
    Is mankind's oldest song,
While there is glory in the soul
    That for truth suffers long.

We know, at last, that with our birth

Begins our destiny:
As acorns grow into the oak,
As rivers find the sea,
So we seek happiness when we
Become what we should be.

Life, liberty, and happiness
Are rights we've always known,
And yet of them the ages kept
As silent as a stone,
Except when their denial led
The human race to moan.

But, one July, they were declaimed
For all the world to hear,
And some have whispered them in cells
To bring the prisoner cheer,
And some to fatal battle go
In hope to bring them near.

America
A Quintet of Poems
Study Guide

1776

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, short poems in English were generally written in meter and in rhyming stanzas or in meter in verse paragraphs. Beginning with Lord Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears," poets, on occasion, began to compose poems in metrical lines grouped into "blank" or unrhymed stanzas. The American poet Wallace Stevens was especially known for composing in stanzas of this kind. "1776" is composed in the normal English iambic pentameter measure, but grouped into five unrhymed stanzas of thirteen lines each. Why might that be an appropriate number of lines per stanza?

The poem opens with a reflection on the "one beginning." How is it described? How does this description help us to reflect on those other "moments" that "echo" it?

Stanzas II-IV offer a series of five vignettes or tableaux, scenes of particular moments of "beginning." What is described in II? Who are the figures introduced in III and IV (some named, some not)? And what do each of these scenes of beginning tell us about America?

In stanza V, a refrain or coda occurs that draws together the different moments the poem has presented. What seems to be the role of trees—seen or scented on the air—in the poem? What do they teach us about these moments of beginning? Do the refrains here help you understand more clearly the significance of the five vignettes? What is the relationship of a nation's birth to the first birth of the "one beginning"?

George Washington at Philadelphia

In 1986, the American poet Richard Wilbur premiered a poem and cantata (with music composed by William Schuman), "On Freedom's Ground," in celebration of the centennial of the Statue of Liberty. One of Wilbur's greatest poems, "For C.," is one of several he wrote in what is called sesta rima with envelope rhyme. This poem offers a quiet tribute to Wilbur's great patriotic verse by replicating the beautiful sesta rima stanza. It is worth noting that the second great American poet, Edward Taylor, chose a version of this stanza as the form for more than two hundred of his poems.

The setting of the first stanza is 1775. What is described and how? See if you can learn more historical details about this important moment of an army marching "From the south."

What contrast does the second stanza create? Though it might apply to many moments during the American Revolution, there is one historical moment, where the trudging with "heavy guns" through the cold proved decisive. Can you discover when that was? What are other moments of "cold and hunger" that Americans experienced during the War? Finally, in this second stanza, we hear a little bit of Washington's strategy during the war. What was it?

The third stanza reflects on the previous two moments and tries to draw out their significance. What is it that the American revolutionaries hoped for? Why were they willing to risk their lives?

In the fourth stanza, the poem turns to us? Where do we stand in relation to the "golden words" of "justice" and "liberty"?

The First of Modern Nations

In the same decades when the first American colonies were establishing themselves, the English poet John Milton staged a revolution of sorts. He wrote an epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, about the rebellion of Satan and the other "fallen angels" against the authority of God, and he wrote that epic in blank verse paragraphs. Shakespeare and the great dramatists of his age wrote their plays in blank verse, but until Milton, blank verse (iambic pentameter verse that is "blank" because it lacks rhyme), very few poets had used the medium for non-dramatic poems. Milton's "heroic measures" as he called them would eventually become a standard medium for longer narrative and philosophical poems in English. One of America's greatest poets, Robert Frost, wrote most of his poems in blank verse paragraphs, following Milton's example. This poem follows Milton and Frost in offering an extended meditation on the significance of America in blank verse paragraphs.

What does the unnamed "old philosopher" mean, when he says all the world was once America? Do you know who that philosopher was and his possible influence on the American founding?

How did America look to the first pilgrims to our land? What is a common way of thinking about the American landscape "Even today"? What do you think of when you see "great electric signs" off the highway?

The poem rejects the notion of America as "young" for a few reasons. What are they?

The poem continues to present us three vignettes of different people discovering that this supposedly young country has in fact "invented nothing." This phrase, similar to a famous observation from one of Thomas Jefferson's final letters, has a particular meaning. The remainder of the poem tries to unpack or describe that meaning. What does it mean for America to be at once ancient and new?

An Errand into the Wilderness

One of the great poems about nationhood is W.B. Yeats's "To Ireland in the Coming Times." This poem adopts Yeats's rhymed tetrameter couplets to offer a reflection on America past and present.

What places that we have "made our home" appear in the first stanza?

One of the great insights historians offer us about America is that our ideals and character were inspired directly by the landscapes they discovered. What is the connection between the concrete details of particular places such abstract terms as "dignity" and "freedom and prosperity"?

In the third stanza, we learn of some of the doubts that have beset the American experiment from the beginning. What are they? How does the final stanza response to those doubts? Do you hear echoes of other American poems in these final lines?

Life, Liberty, and Happiness

Poems for children are written in many kinds of rhyming stanzas, but among the most common is a modified ballad stanza, featuring six lines and three rhymes. That is the form of this poem.

The poem begins about the ways in which children learn or come to know things. What is the difference between school-learning and what we find in the second stanza? How do we come to know some things but not others?

It's a traditional bit of satire to say that adults grow less wise than children with the years. Both Jesus and Mark Twain, among others, have made memorable remarks on the subject. What does this poem assert on the subject?

How do we remind ourselves of important lessons? What are the important lessons, the "principles of right" that Americans should know?

What does it mean for life to be a "gift"?

What is "mankind's oldest song" and what does it teach us about the nature of liberty?

What does it mean to "seek happiness" according to the poem? Why might the word "happiness" cause confusion or debate among people?

In the last two stanzas, the poem tells us about the historical knowledge of these "principles of right." What do we learn about them?