

Humility in Anne Bradstreet's Poetry

by

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In contrast to such private poems as elegies, Anne Bradstreet's public poems include apologies about her failure as a poet. According to Eileen Margerum, critics have regarded Bradstreet's apologies and the apologetic languages of her public poems as "examples of a creative woman's reaction to life in a male-dominated society that allowed her little room for confident self-expression" and as "evidence of her insecurity in the traditionally male role of public poet."¹

In opposition to these critics, Margerum asserts, placing Bradstreet in the history of traditional poetry, that in her apologies Bradstreet just "followed the conventions appropriate to the works";² accordingly, in a true sense, the poet's apologies are not excuses but should be taken as apologia. Citing a number of lines from Bradstreet's poems, Margerum claims that what lies behind the poet's apologies is her "self-assurance rather than self-doubt."³ This critic also says that Bradstreet's apologies may well be judged in terms of "creative applications of conventional and obligatory poetic formulae, and not as expressions of self-doubt or deprecations of her poetic abilities."⁴ Margerum suggests that Bradstreet had trust in her poetic abilities and composed poetry with confidence, and regards her poetry as the perfected form of her poetic creation.

However, stressing that Bradstreet's apologies are mere pretensions and just patterns of the conventions of traditional poetry, Margerum seems to have neglected to probe incisively into the poet's humility itself. In other words, Margerum almost thinks that Bradstreet's humility is of little avail except for producing some formal apologies in her public poems. Here, one need make a clear distinction between the humility which Margerum regards as superficial pretensions and the one which strongly concerns Bradstreet's relationship with God. Bradstreet's poetry is mostly religious, sometimes transcendental; and her poems treating such subjects as death, love, nature, human vanity, and heavenly glory show some conflicts between her puritanical consciousness of God and her genuine emotions, between doubt and piety. How does she resolve these conflicts? This essay will try to answer the question, focusing on her humility as a clue, and examine the mechanism of her poetic imagination.

Bradstreet's religious poetry is particularly interesting. She firmly believes in God as if she wishes to merge into Him, yet sometimes she feels anguish because the will of God is questionable. She oscillates between belief and doubt. In "On My Dear Grandchild Simon Bradstreet, Who Died on 16 November, 1669, Being but a Month, and One Day Old," she gives voice to a deep cry of her heart:

No sooner came, but gone, and fall'n asleep,
Acquaintance short, yet parting caused us weep;
Three flowers, two scarcely blown, the last i' th' bud,
Cropt by th' Almighty's hand; yet is He good.
With dreadful awe before Him let's be mute,
Such was His will, but why, let's not dispute,
With humble hearts and mouths put in the dust,
Let's say He's merciful as well as just.
He will return and make up all our losses,
And smile again after our bitter crosses
Go pretty babe, go rest with sisters twain;
Among the blest in endless joys remain.⁵

She does not understand why she suffers the loss of her dear grandchild,

and she cannot help feeling doubt and anger toward God. She knows that she should not feel that way and tries to subordinate her emotion to reason, and her poetry shows her relentless conflicts between reason and emotion. Her difficulty in believing the will of God creates such a half-minded line, "such was His will, but why, let's not dispute." However failing her faith appears and despite her almost blasphemous language, she concludes her poem with the reassurance of her faith toward God in a more or less conventional way.

Her almost sacrilegious expression makes her poetry particularly interesting when one sees that her time was the age of the Puritans who firmly believed in the absolute Grace of God. In her poetry Bradstreet frankly expressed human emotions and feelings not molded into the religious conventions of the tradition of Puritanism.

When she turns to a religious theme, she realizes that she is still attached to earthly vanity. Her realization is a crucial point where humility comes in. She thinks that she is a worldly creature, too little to understand the deep meaning of God's deeds. She acknowledges that she is only thinking of her earthly interests rather than the glory of God, and feels ashamed of her impudence to have doubt toward God. This balance of doubt and humility gives rise to the dynamism of Bradstreet's poetry, and the charm of her poetry is in her free and honest rendering of wavering yet true human emotions. Her humility is not mere pretensions as seen in the apologies in her public poems; it is a creative force of her poetical imagination.

Bradstreet's poetry divides largely into some groups, and what follows will examine each group with respect to her sense of humility in her relationship with God. First, as seen above, she has a group of poems whose thematic pattern is the conflict between reason and emotion; she tries to subject emotion to reason and eventually affirms the will of God: examples are some elegies and "Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House."

The second group shows the poet's effort for her complete absorption in God; she seeks her life in God, ecstatic and sublime: an example is "Meditation." The third group deals with the revelation of the divine works in nature; for instance, "Contemplation." The

fourth group concerns the historical and geographical meanings of America as a Canaan, the sempiternal process of seasons, and elements constituting the universe of man and God: for example, "The Elements," "Of the Four Ages," "The Four Seasons," "The Four Monarchies," "The Four Humors," and "A Dialogue between Old England and New."

In the first group, first of all, her poetry portrays herself as a humble and pious woman before God. In the first elegy of 1665 dedicated to a dead grandchild, she seems to be tolerant of the child's death and accept it without much regret; she writes, "Farewell dear babe, my heart's too much content."⁶ She tries to view the child's death as God's will: ". . . Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done":⁷

Blest babe, why should I once bewail thy fate,
Or sigh thy days so soon were terminate,
Sith thou art settled in an everlasting state. (p. 235)

She reassuringly affirms the child's death as blessed in heaven, for she has complete trust in God:

But plants new set to be eradicate,
And buds new blown to have so short a date,
Is by His hand alone that guides nature and fate. (p. 235)

Bradstreet is willing to believe that everything on earth is created and decided by God; otherwise, she is unable to accept the child's death. Like many Puritans in a new Canaan, a sense of God's design seems to have had a strong influence on Bradstreet.

However, as her children die one after another, she cannot help feeling anger and doubt toward God. In the elegies of 1669, she reveals her honest frustration being unable to comprehend the will of God.⁸ Knowing that she should not adhere to earthly vanity, she cannot help showing love, sorrow, and anguish. She produces such lines as follows:

With troubled heart and trembling hand I write,
The heavens have changed to sorrow my delight.
How oft with disappointment have I met,
When I on fading things my hopes have set.⁹

The best part of her poetry is her honest description of her mind in conflict. But, rebellious as she seems sometimes, she ultimately controls her emotion with a conventional sense of Christian humility:

Mean time my throbbing heart's cheered up with this:
Though with thy Saviour art endless bliss.¹⁰

Or she satisfies herself with the hope of future compensation:

He will return and make up all our losses,
And smile again after our bitter crosses
Go pretty babe, go rest with sisters twain;
Among the blest in endless joys remain.¹¹

Her ultimate reliance on God as the absolute saviour also appears in "Upon the Burning of Our House." This poem expresses her cathartic feeling, a spiritual uplift from earthly attachment to heavenly aspiration. Acknowledging the difference between bodily and spiritual existence, she tries to discard her earthly vanity:

Adieu, Adieu, all's vanity.
Then straight I 'gin my heart to chide,
And did thy wealth on earth abide?
The arm of flesh didst make thy trust? ¹²

She hopes to preserve spiritual wealth in heaven so that God may reward her:

Yet by His gift is made thine own;
There's wealth enough, I need no more,
Farewell, my pelf, farewell my store.
The world no longer let me love,

My hope and treasure lies above.¹³

Describing her sublime feeling and her belief in the certainty of heaven, this poem is a masterpiece. Her wish for God's grace ultimately resolves her earthly conflict and creates a fine poetic resolution.

The second group of her poetry reveals her desire to be one with God, and this oneness is much more intensified, compared with the first group. In "Meditation" she dare say that "Christ is my brother, I ascend unto my Father . . . I am a member of His body, He my head. . . . Let me be no more afraid of death, but even desire to be dissolved and be with Thee, which is best of all."¹⁴ She shows herself as a humble creature wishing to be saved and embraced by God. Her God is not wrathful but benevolent, abounding with grace: "Thou art my Creator, I Thy creature, Thou my master, I Thy servant. But hence arises not my comfort, Thou art my Father, I Thy child."¹⁵

The third group focuses on God's manifestation in nature and her attempt to commune with God. In "Contemplation" her imagination almost reaches a mystical realm and shares a sort of divine knowledge. Yet even in a rapturous state she still suffers from her unworthy existence when she sees the glory of God in nature; with a humble heart she sings her inability to express the supreme beauty of God's creation:

My humble eyes to lofty skies I reared
To sing some song, my mazed Muse thought meet.
My great Creator I would magnify,
That nature had thus decked liberally;
But Ah, and Ah, again, my imbecility!¹⁶

Even when she hears insects singing, she broods over her inability:

Shall creatures abject thus their voices raise
And in their kind resound their Maker's praise,
Whilst I, as mute, can warble forth no higher lays?¹⁷

Her humbleness is itself a poetic subject, leading directly to stressing

the praise of God. As she perceives God's design in the magnificence of nature, she is struck with awe; and with humility she aspires toward heaven.

The fourth group deals with the fundamental elements of the universe: time, eternity, place, four elements (water, air, fire, earth), humors (phlegm, blood, black bile, yellow bile), seasons. But most poems in this group are by and large dull and unimaginative, showing hardly any trace of the poet's inner conflicts nor her great poetic culmination. Her relationship with God here is perfunctory, and no poem shows her deep, close feelings toward Him. It is hard to find her humility in this circumstance.

To conclude, Bradstreet's expression of humility plays a unique role in the imaginative construction of her poetry. On one hand, her humbleness appears as apologia for being a hack poet in her public poems; on the other hand, her humility, deeply concerned with her personal relationship with God, creates a poetic resolution to her inner conflicts often caused by her wonder at the mysterious will of God and the absolute differences between earth and heaven. Her humility solves these conflicts, tying her heart to God.

As the will of God is hard to understand and sometimes seems oppressing to her, God may have appeared to Bradstreet as having a number of faces. He abounds in grace, yet He takes away her children; in a typological sense she sees that America is a promised land, yet her life there is not very easy; God is Father to her, yet He gives her suffering. She did not have direct languages to express the attributes of God. This is different from Emily Dickinson, born about a century later, who wrote of God, "Burglar! Banker! Father!" Bradstreet is a poet in a puritanical society, and her speech is naturally restricted; yet one must not forget that her poetic vision is relatively free and has created genuine human expressions.

Notes

¹ Eileen Margerum, "Anne Bradstreet's Public Poetry and the Tradition of Humility," *Early American Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1982, p. 152.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵ *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. by Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 237.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁷ *The Bible of the King James Version*, Luke 22: 42.

⁸ *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, pp. 236-37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 292.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

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