

Rediscovering Edward Taylor Reading Poetry in Morning Devotions

When I took Survey of American Literature as a sophomore in college, the first unit we studied was the writings of the Puritans, which included journals, sermons, and poetry. Two of the poets who made an impact on me were Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), the first published American poet, and Edward Taylor (1642-1729), who captured my imagination with his striking imagery, as well as his passion for the Savior. I would like to tell you a little bit about Taylor's life and poetry, as well as how I came to make his poems part of my morning devotions.

Taylor's Life

Like Bradstreet, Taylor was born in England, (Leicester), the son of wealthy yeoman farmers with Puritan leanings. Both parents died when Taylor was in his teens. He was educated briefly, probably at Cambridge, thanks to a kind uncle with means, and he became a school teacher. After the death of Cromwell (1658) and the restoration of the monarchy (1660), Taylor ran into some trouble, as he could not, in good conscience, sign the Uniformity Act (1662) and join the Church of England. He was barred from teaching and decided to go to America. One of the first people he met in Boston was Increase Mather, who became a life-long friend. Years later, Taylor wrote an elegy for Mather.

Taylor took the entrance exam to Harvard and was accepted as an upperclassman. Upon graduation, he was offered the position of Scholar in Residence, but a few months later, he heard of a church in the frontier of Western Massachusetts in need of a pastor, and Taylor answered the call, setting off at once. He was a dedicated pastor, caring for the needs and souls of his parishioners, as well as for their bodies, since he did double-duty as a physician. But there are differing accounts of what his temperament was like. According to George McMichael (*Anthology of American Literature*, MacMillan, 1974), Taylor was known for his humility and his compassionate care. However, Donald Stanford (*The Poems of Edward Taylor*, 1960) paints a different picture: "Taylor, then, seems to have been endowed with those qualities usually associated with the word *puritan*. He was learned, grave, severe, stubborn, and stiff-necked." Leland Ryken writes, in his book about Puritans, *Worldly Saints*, that modern misconceptions of the Puritans come from Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction – which was written 200 years after the Puritan movement. Stanford seems prejudiced by a disposition to stereotype them in the manner of Hawthorne. It is interesting that two different scholars can read the same primary sources and come up with two opposite conclusions, and my own belief is that the poems can and should speak to this issue, and that they (the poems) tell us a lot about the poet. But more on that below.

Taylor was a skilled preacher, and nearly all his sermons are extant and available in print and on the internet. He married twice and had fourteen children, losing his first wife and five of his children to death. One of his most famous poems is "Upon Wedlock and the Death of Children." After his own death, a trunk full of Taylor's

poetry was discovered by his family. It seems that no one in his family or in his congregation knew that he had been writing poetry throughout his 58 years of ministry. According to family tradition, Taylor did not want his poetry published, but again, Stanford disagrees and says there is no document proving that wish. Regardless of the reason, the poems were not published--indeed they were lost and forgotten, until someone discovered them at Yale University in the 1930s. Taylor's grandson Ezra Stiles (1727-1795), who was only two years old when his grandfather died, became president of Yale College (1778-1795), and it is likely that that is how the poems ended up at Yale.

The Poetry

Many of the poems are meditations on preparing to take the Lord's Supper (the Sacrament of Holy Communion), and contain the imagery of wine, blood, bread, and flesh. Others are meditations on specific Bible verses and contain imagery from nature, spinning and weaving, and the church. The rest are on topics like family life, and even these are steeped in Calvinistic Protestant doctrine. All of it is inspiring; all of it is worthy of scholarly examination.

Scholars agree that Taylor was familiar with and influenced by George Herbert (1593-1633), who was writing a generation before Taylor. We can see the influence in the concrete poems which illustrate the parts of the church and objects of worship used within the church in Herbert's collection *The Temple*. McMichael writes, "Taylor had written in the tradition of such metaphysical poets as Donne and Herbert, expressing divine and elevated ideas..." Taylor's poems are concrete and visual, using extended metaphors, rich in imagery.

Without being able to ask Taylor, and without reference to them in his journals, we can see the influence of Shakespeare and Donne. With Shakespeare, it is in the structure of his poetry. The stanzas of many of the poems are like mini sonnets with an adapted rhyme scheme of ABABCC, as compared to Shakespearean sonnets, which rhyme ABABCDCDEFEGG. For the passion of truly loving the Savior, including the occasional use of erotic imagery, we can see Donne's influence (cf. "Batter My Heart").

The discovery of Taylor's poems in the 1930s challenged, even obliterated, misconceptions of the Puritans, especially Puritan ministers, who were assumed to be sober, and even grim, as Sanford wrote. Taylor's poetry is imaginative, creative, and full of passion. Poems like Taylor's do not spring from a cold, grim, sober mind. Taylor wrote, as McMichael explains, in the tradition of the metaphysical poets (Donne and Herbert among them) expressing "divine and elevated ideas," and not in the style of the grim Puritans, Michael Wigglesworth and his disturbing "Day of Doom," with its unbaptized babies sentenced to Hell, among *them*.

Poetry as Devotional Material

I have known of Edward Taylor since college and have taught two of his poems ("Huswifery" and "Upon a Spider Catching a Fly") throughout my entire career. Although I have owned his anthology, I had never cracked it open and delved into the

other poems, but in May of this year, I felt them calling to me. I decided to read the first one during my time of morning devotions. It was entitled simply, "Meditation."
(Warning: the original spelling is archaic, since the poetry was composed before English spelling was standardized. Hint: Read it out loud!) Here it is:

What Love is this of thine, that Cannot bee
In thine Infinity, O Lord, Confinde,
Unless it in thy very Person see,
Infinity, and Finity Conjoyn'd?
What hath thy Godhead, as not satisfide
Marri'de our Manhood, making it its Bride?

Oh, Matchless Love! filling Heaven to the brim!
O're running it: all running o're beside
This World! Nay Overflowing Hell; wherein
For thine Elect, there rose a mighty Tide!
That there our Veins might through thy Person bleed,
To quench those flames, that else would on us feed.

Oh! that thy Love might overflow my Heart!
To fire the same with Love: for Love I would.
But oh! my streight'ned Breast! my Lifeless Sparke!
My Fireless Flame! What Chilly Love, and Cold?
In measure small! In Manner Chilly! See.
Lord blow the Coal: Thy Love Enflame in mee.

Here Taylor sees Jesus, meditates on who he is and what he has done by shedding his blood to redeem mankind – and he cannot contain his passion ("Oh matchless love! Filling Heaven to the brim!"). But that is not good enough. Compared to what it could be and should be, his heart is empty ("Oh! That thy love might overflow my heart!") and cold. He ends the poem metaphorically, asking God to fan the flames of ardor by blowing on his cold coal of a heart ("Lord, blow the coal"). Structurally, the poem is in three stanza sestets, with the rhyme scheme ABABCC. Some are "near rhyme rhymes" – or his pronunciation was slightly different than ours, which is very likely. Overall, it is a very tidy, uniform little poem. I wrote a summary in the margin of each stanza: "Love cannot be confined" in verse one, "The blood of Christ puts out the flames of Hell" beside stanza two, and "Instead of Hell's flames, set a fire of love for you in my heart" beside the third stanza. It helps me to summarize the main idea contained in each stanza, to force me to interact with the poem.

"Meditation" was inspirational to me. I used the poem as a prayer that morning and decided to read the next poem the following day. There was a Bible verse at the top of the second poem: Canticles (Song of Solomon) 1:3: "Thy name is an ointment poured

out." The poem is five stanzas long, but has the same verse length and rhyme scheme. There is a biblical allusion to the woman who broke the alabaster jar and poured precious anointment on Jesus's head and feet (Matthew 26:7; Mark 14:3; Luke 7:37). Taylor asks the Lord to break his heart so that the precious ointment of praise can pour forth. Some of the imagery also alludes to two of George Herbert's poems, "To All Angels and Saints" and "Odour." The imagery is rich with precious stones--pearls and rubies--and even a multicolored gemstone of Taylor's imagination:

Blushes of burnisht Glory Sparling Slide
From every square in various Colour'd glee
Nay Life itselfe in Sparkling Spangles Choice.
A Precious Pearle thou art above all price.

Just as on the previous day, I was inspired by Taylor's meditation on a single Bible verse.

The next day I read another poem, another meditation on Canticles 1:3, and the next day, another – with the theme of our relationship to Christ being marriage to God. There were six poems in all related to Song of Solomon and our matrimonial love for Christ. But after these, Taylor branches out. Still early in my readings were meditations on Psalm 45:2, John 6:51, and Isaiah 25:6. Many of Taylor's poems, as I said, are meditations on taking the Lord's supper, which he did each week in preparation for taking the sacrament. Each one has served me in two ways: they have thrilled me as a reader of poetry with the delight of the imagery and poetic devices--and filled me spiritually, as Taylor's meditations on scripture became mine. Robert Frost once said that a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom. Edward Taylor's poetry does this.

I have been using Taylor's poetry as part of my morning devotions for many months now, and I am only about a third of the way through them. Taylor wrote more than 200 poems, and his elegies and sermons are also in print to be explored. The poems have enriched my walk with Christ and fed my intellect. I will be sad when I am finished – who knows, I may begin again! Most of the poems are online, with his original spelling. The collection *The Poems of Edward Taylor*, edited by Donald E. Stanford, is available on amazon.com, but it is pricy, \$44 when last I checked. The spellings in this edition are also Taylor's original spellings, but please don't let that intimidate you: read them out loud, and you will find their sense. I will leave you now with the two poems that I have used in my American Literature curriculum: please enjoy.

Upon a Spider Catching a Fly

Thou sorrow, venom Elfe:
Is this thy play,
To spin a web out of thyselfe
To Catch a Fly?
For Why?

I saw a pettish wasp
Fall foule therein:
Whom yet thy Whorle pins did not clasp
Lest he should fling
His sting.

But as affraid, remote
Didst stand hereat,
And with thy little fingers stroke
And gently tap
His back.

Thus gently him didst treat
Lest he should pet,
And in a froppish, aspish heate
Should greatly fret
Thy net.

Whereas the silly Fly,
Caught by its leg
Thou by the throate tookst hastily
And 'hinde the head
Bite Dead.

This goes to pot, that not
Nature doth call.
Strive not above what strength hath got,
Lest in the brawle
Thou fall.

This Frey seems thus to us.
Hells Spider gets
His intrails spun to whip Cords thus
And wove to nets
And sets

To tangle Adams race
In's stratigems
To their Destructions, spoil'd, made base
By venom things,
Damn'd Sins.

But mighty, Gracious Lord

Communicate
Thy Grace to breake the Cord, afford
Us Glorys Gate
And State.

We'l Nightingaile sing like
When perchd on high
In Glories Cage, thy glory, bright,
And thankfully,
For joy.

What I appreciate about this poem is the conceit of Satan as spider catching humans in his web. He catches the wasp by luring him and stroking him, but the stupid fly is easily entangled. Just as David does in his lament Psalms, Taylor turns a corner at the end and says that Grace will break the Satanic chords, and we will not be imprisoned by evil, but instead of dumb, dead flies, we will be Nightingales, singing freely and joyfully perched in Glory's cage.

Huswifery

Make me, O Lord, thy Spinning Wheele compleat;
Thy Holy Worde my Distaff make for mee.
Make mine Affections thy Swift Flyers neate,
And make my Soule thy holy Spoole to bee.
My Conversation make to be thy Reelee,
And reele the yarn thereon spun of thy Wheele.

Make me thy Looome then, knit therein this Twine:
And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:
Then weave the Web thyselpe. The yarn is fine.
Thine Ordinances make my Fulling Mills.
Then dy the same in Heavenly Colours Choice,
All pinkt with Varnish't Flowers of Paradise.

Then cloath therewith mine Understanding, Will,
Affections, Judgment, Conscience, Memory;
My Words and Actions, that their shine may fill
My wayes with glory and thee glorify.
Then mine apparell shall display before yee

That I am Cloathd in Holy robes for glory.

When I taught this poem, I always included a picture of a spinning wheel with the handout, labeled, of course, since most high school juniors are unfamiliar with the parts and function of a 17th century spinning wheel. Taylor asks God to make him into a spinning wheel and names the parts of the wheel with their metaphoric counterparts: God's word is the distaff, his affections are the flyers. His soul is the spool, and his conversation is the reel. In the second stanza, Taylor gets more specific. He wants to be the loom, he wants the Holy Spirit to be the quill (spindle) and he wants the hand of God himself to weave the cloth, perhaps the fruit of Taylor's life and ministry. He wishes the fabric to be dyed with Heavenly colors and painted with flowers. In the third stanza Taylor imagines heavenly clothing being fashioned with the cloth made on the wheel and loom. It is a complex, beautiful poem revealing a genuine desire to praise God and glorify Him with his life.

There are many more poems where these come from. Have fun exploring them!

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