

Poetic Procreation in Edward Taylor's Meditations

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Edward Taylor's poetry is a special case: its most important part are meditations of a Puritan clergyman put into poetic form as a mental exercise in preparation of administering the Lord's Supper. In that personal function they were not meant for publication and as a consequence remained unknown for more than 200 years. Yet their discovery in the 1930s occurred at a fortunate time: the recent reevaluation of the English Metaphysical Poets had prepared literary critics for the appreciation of seventeenth-century religious poetry. Yet even here Taylor is special; his Meditations are not religious in the sense of a communication between a Christian poet and an audience of believers. They are theological in a highly professional and intellectual sense, meditations on dogmatic problems, the theological discourse between a biblical scholar and God, to whom he directs urgent appeals:

It grieves me, Lord, my Fancy's rusty: rub
And brighten't on an Angells Rubston sharp. (Med. II, 92, 1-2)

At the same time the biblical motto of these Meditations received a communicative pastorly function in the extended prose form of sermons preached by Taylor to his congregation before celebrating the Lord's Supper (A few of these sermons have been preserved).

The urge behind Taylor's meditative exercises is rooted in the Puritan conviction to take very serious the Protestant doctrine of justification according to which true belief, "saving faith" cannot be earned by human effort; it is a gift of God's Grace, which is provided by Christ's sacrifice and brings about conversion and regeneration in the elect. As sinful man

has lost the ability to do anything toward his salvation, evidences of this gift of "saving faith" which determines eternal life or eternal damnation are anxiously sought for. God's decision is irrevocable, yet election remains forever doubtful to the human being, and even if a pastor may consider himself a true believer, he feels bound to constantly renew his faith. Taylor's intensive meditating is an effort toward renewal; it is centered on the desire to approach an understanding of God's Grace by getting a full perception of the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice which "purchased" redemption for sinful man.

An immigrant after the restoration of Charles II to the English throne, Edward Taylor arrived in New England in 1668 at the age of 24 (or perhaps 26). On completing his studies at Harvard in 1671 he was called as minister to the small settlement of Westfield at the Western frontier of the Massachusetts Bay Colony where for about 45 years he served his congregation. Taylor was a learned man, also a Puritan of strong convictions; he practised the strict rule of admitting only those who could give evidence of conversion to full church membership and to participation in the Lord's Supper. His wide range of interest and knowledge is evidenced by his poetry and a remarkable library which besides major theological works contained books on history, medicine, metallurgy, and botany. He also brought the 6-volume Folio edition of the *Magdeburg Centuries* to the Western frontier. As a Puritan minister he was college-educated and read Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. At intervals of 4 to 6 weeks, he administered the Lord's Supper to his congregation. On these occasions from 1682 to 1725 he wrote 217 Meditations which he called "Preparatory Meditations before my Approach to the Lord's Supper. Chiefly upon the Doctrine preached upon the Day of administration" and collected them in two series. They were preserved in a manuscript which was discovered in the late 1930s in the Yale Library. Although difficult to modern readers in their dominant theological concern, they have elicited a considerable number of interpretations; they are now rightly considered a major opus of American poetry—which, however, could not influence or inspire American literature till our time. A complete edition of the Meditations appeared in 1960.¹

Taylor's Meditations average from 7-12 stanzas (sometimes less, often more); in accordance with the sacred meaning of numbers which plays a significant role in the Meditations, the stanzas invariably have six lines (perfect number 6) of ten syllables (the sum of the first 4 numbers, Pythagoras's sacred tetractys). As the composition of the Meditations is not only an exercise in theological comprehension but an effort in the renewal and revitalization of faith they most often start with a confession of incomprehension, confusion or "dullness," and proceed to an understanding of its reasons, the Fall, Original sin, and natural depravity; next, and most important, is the reactivated comprehension of Christ's redemptive sacrifice, which enables the meditator to understand and receive God's grace, and results in the ability to "sing," that is, to praise God's glory and grace of granting "saving faith." In that sense, each of the Meditations contains the implicit substructure of poetic creation: only when the meditator has come to fully comprehend the nature and conditions of God's grace, the essence of Godhead, is he able to produce the poem: in the state of regeneration he is finally capable to perform an act of aesthetic procreation.

The successful completion of the meditative process is in the majority of Meditations expressed by the ability to "sing," or by playing or "tuning" a musical instrument like the bell, harp, trumpet, flute or virginal, quite often in reference to David and his psalms,² or by promises to praise, all of which is combined in the ending of Med. II, 42:

My Soule shall sing Thanksgiving unto thee
if thou wilt tune it to thy praise in mee.

Some Meditations begin with the poet's inability to respond to the overwhelming splendor of God's Glory, an inability successfully expressed in a stanza resplendent with playful self irony:

When thy Bright Beams, my Lord, do strike mine Eye,
Methinkes I then could truely Chide out right
My Hide bound Soule that stands so niggardly
That scarce a thought gets glorified by 't.
My Quaintest Metaphors are ragged Stuff,
Making the Sun seem like a Mullipuff. (I, 22, 1-6)

While "Hide bound" in his sinfulness, he can only confess: "All Dull, my Lord, my Spirits flat, and dead" (II, 7)—"Dull, Dull, my Lord, my fancy dull I finde" (II, 131; also II, 12 and 69). The reason is man's depraved nature, the consequence of original sin: "Unclean, Unclean, My Lord, Undone, all vile, Yea all Defild" (II, 26) immediately addresses this sinfulness, which Taylor describes with a great variety of images of dirt, dung, filth and corruption. In the Puritan ritual of conversion, self-deprecation, even self-loathing is a necessary precondition of faith and conversion. The initial dullness may also be understood as an inability to find the proper words for the praise of God which cannot but lead to poetic failure—but this very inability finds persuasive poetic expression:

My Lord, I fain would Praise thee Well but finde
 Impossibilities blocke up my pass.
 My tongue Wants Words to tell my thoughts, my Minde
 Wants thoughts to Comprehend thy Worth, alas!
 Thy Glory far Surmounts my thoughts, my thoughts
 Surmount my Words: Hence little Praise is brought.³ (I, 34, 1-6)

In his effort to reach the deepest meaning of God's revelation Taylor intensely searched for and boldly linked biblical quotations and images of different kind or provenience, an effort which sometimes resulted in awkward poetic tinkering when theological meaning was more important to him than poetic polish and beauty. He was aware of aesthetic failures when he complained in Med. II, 82 (1-2):

My tatter'd Fancy, and my ragged Rymes
 Teeme leaden Metaphors

Paradoxically, such admission of failure can produce wonderfully apt lines.

As all Meditations are meant to serve the preparation to the Lord's Supper, this sacrament in all the complexities of meaning controversially discussed by Protestant leaders is treated by Taylor in a variety of approaches. In the theological discourse of Med. II, 108 he rejects the conceptions of "Ubiquitarians," and of "Consubstantiation," and "Transubstantiation." In Med. II, 81 and 82 he is concerned with the

challenge the sacrament poses to reason: to accept the bread and wine of the Eucharist as body and blood of Christ: "What, feed on Human Flesh and Blood? Strange Mess!" Seen in a spatial sense, however, this becomes a metaphor: "This feeding signifies, that Faith in us / Feeds on this Fare . . ." But for all these scruples, the Lord's Supper is for Taylor the most intimate spiritual communion with Christ, the ultimate mystery of life, death and eternal life. Meditation II, 80, 81, and 82 are all based on John 6:53: "Except you eate the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, ye have no Life in you" (II, 80 leaving out "and drink his blood"). Surprisingly, this does not belong to the relation of the Last Supper, but to Jesus addressing the skeptical Jews after the feeding of the five thousand and defining himself as the "living bread that came down from heaven" (6:51). Med. II, 80, leading up to the climax of a newborn "babe of Life" which "shall sing" is the only one that ends on a note of triumph in which the Meditations' generative process is made explicit by sexual imagery.

80. Meditation. Joh. 6.53. Except you
 Eate the flesh of the Son of
 Man, etc. ye have no Life in you.
 6.1m [Mar.] 1707/08. Pub. ETG.

This Curious pearle, One Syllable, call'd LIFE,
 That all things struggle t'keep, and we so prize
 I'd with the Edge of sharpen'd sight (as knife)
 My understanding sheath'th anatomize
 But finde Life far too fine, I can not know't.
 My sight too Dull; my knife's too blunt to do't.

And if you say, What then is Life? I say
 I cannot tell you what it is, yet know
 That Various kinds of Life lodg in my clay.
 And ery kinde an Excellence doth show:
 And yet the lowest sort so secret lies
 I cannot finde it nor anatomize.

But here I finde, that all these kindes proove Stares
 Whereon I do ascende to heaven to,
 My Lord, thyselfe, and so do mock earths Snares
 Those snick snarls, and thus my Soul Steps goe

From Vegetate to Sensitive thence trace
To Rationall, and thence to th' Life of Grace.

What though I know not what it is? I know,
It is too good to bee full known by any
Poor Perblinde man, that squints on things, although
It's Life, its quickening Life to very many,
Yea t'all th' Elect. It is a slip up bred
Of Godlike life, in graces garden bed.

Grace is the Pearle, the Mother Pearle of Pearles
In which this Pearle of Life is kinnell choice.
Christ dropt it in the Soule, which up it ferles
A Lignum Vitae's chip of Paradise.
Its Heart and Soule of Saving Grace outspred,
And can't be had till Grace be brought to bed.

The Soule's the Womb. Christ is the Spermodote
And Saving Grace the seed cast thereinto,
This Life's the principall in Graces Coate,
Making vitality in all things flow,
In Heavenly verdure brisking holly
With sharp ey'de peartness of Vivacity.

Dead Looks, and Wanness, all things on them weare,
If this Life Quickens not, Things Spirituall Dead.
The Image too of God is grown thrid bare
If this Choice Life be n't with Christ's body fed.
All outer lives dance on, in hellish wayes
Eternally, unless this Life out blaze.

Thou art, my Lord, the Well-spring of this life.
Oh! let this Life send Rivelets in my heart.
That I may by lifes streames in Holy Strife
Conquour that death, at whose dead Looks I start.
When of this Life my soule with Child doth spring
The Babe of Life swath'de up in Grace shall sing.

In answer to the question "What Then is Life?" (l. 7) Taylor starts with a comparison:

This Curious pearle. One Syllable call'd LIFE,
That all things struggle t'keep, and we so prize (l. 1-2).

"This Pearle . . . we prize": it is, of course, eternal life, "The pearl of great price," according to Matt. 13:45-46: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchantman, seeking goodly pearls. Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it." Christ's parable is the basis for Taylor's discussion of the pearl as eternal life which, of course, stands in a long tradition of pearl imagery in Christian mysticism from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century and beyond.

But at the beginning of this Meditation, the poet's understanding is "dull"; his attempt "to anatomize" life miscarries: "My sight too Dull; my knife's too blunt to do't" (6). Actually, a special kind of knife is introduced for the task: "The Edge,"⁴ which is "a thin, sharp side of a blade" and also a pun on *adz*, a special knife to open a shell (much used on New England's shore); implicitly already here the oyster is introduced, in which the pearl is generated. However, before the image of the oyster is related to the womb the possibilities and forms of life are considered: The poet only knows that "various kinds of Life lodg in my clay,"⁵ but even in natural human life, "the lowest sort so secret lies / I cannot find it nor anatomize" (11, 12). But then different degrees of life in nature's course can be distinguished:

From Vegetate to Sensitive thence trace
To Rationall, and thence to th' Life of Grace (17-18)

and "all these kindes proove Stares" (stares of astonishment as well as stairs) "Whereupon I do ascende to heaven" like the angels on Jacob's ladder (14)—as it refers, of course, to eternal life:

It's Life, its quickening Life to very many,
Yea t'all th'Elect. It is a slip up bred
Of Godlike life, in graces garden bed . . . (22-24)⁶

The second part of the poem, starting with stanza 5 returns to the pearl as grace in order to explain its spiritual role and meaning for eternal life. This "Pearl, the Mother Pearle of Pearles" (mother-of-pearl and the mother-pearl) is the Pearl of eternal Life, brought into existence by a "kinnell" dropped into the soul by Christ "the spermodote," and this seed is "A

Lignum Vitae chip of Paradise," a chip of wood from the cross (wood of life), signifying Christ's crucifixion which provides grace for the elect. The soul which after impregnation "ferles up" like a shell which has been pierced by a grain of sand—is the womb or oyster in which the pearl comes to life.

Its Heart and Soule of Saving Grace outspred
and can't be had till Grace be brought to bed. (29,30)

That this Grace has been "brought to bed" completes the sexual context. According to the interpretation of Canticles, Christ is bridegroom to his bride, the Church, which comprises the community of saints: on the marriage bed he is the sperm-giver to the oyster/womb/soul; he performs a spiritualized sexual act to generate the conversion of the elect which is accomplished in stanza 6:

The Soule's the Womb, Christ is the Spermodote
And Saving Grace the seed cast thereinto
This Life's the principall in Graces Coate,
Making vitality in all things flow. (31-33)

If this sounds daring, even shocking in a puritan meditation, we should remember that the comparison of pearl and human embryo is ancient lore. The equation of oyster-shell and womb, the grain of sand which penetrates the shell to produce the pearl and the sperm which creates the embryo is archetypal; it is recognized in many ancient cultures and establishes the meaning of the pearl as a life-creating and life-renewing force. As such it is also basic to the biblical role of the pearl as the kingdom of heaven.⁷ Seed has a double meaning, the botanical and the human seed, the descendants; from God's covenant with "Abraham and his seed" the Puritans derived essential aspects of their covenant concept, admitting only the "seed," the children of church members, to baptism. "Grace's Coat" returns to the mother-of-pearl quality of the "Pearle," the shining coating of both pearl and shell, which makes it so precious. Yet "grace's coat" is also the piece of clothing which distinguishes the true believer, according to Christ's Parable Matt. 22:1-14. It is the "wedding garment" required

for the marriage feast and the kingdom of heaven.⁸ It is basic to Taylor's conviction that the Lord's Supper can only be taken by converted, true believers, a conviction which he defended in an exchange of letters and treaties with a liberal colleague. At the same time, a "wedding garment" is the proper cloth for the birth and marriage images of this poem.

For all the Meditations' biblical foundations, there was also the lived life of Taylor's personal experience. The Records of Westfield Church, faithfully kept by Taylor and registering births, reveal that Taylor's wife at the date of Med. II, 80 was eight months pregnant,⁹ so that Taylor was deeply concerned with the marvel of human procreation of life which results in the birth of a babe.¹⁰ It should be added that stanza 6 stands out not only as the central section of the poem presenting its central theme and meaning but also as a singularly short stanza of only 39 words, when the average is from 49 to 52 words.

In contrast to the "vitality in all things," and "sharp ey'de peartness of Vivacity" which "Saving Grace" has brought about, stanza 7 lists the negative consequences of its absence. It is perhaps the least interesting stanza of the Meditation, and one may wonder whether Taylor added it for numerical reasons. For in this, as in most other Meditations a numerical system can be discovered which Taylor seems to have considered necessary to make his praise worthy of the Godhead, which is also defined in numbers. Key concepts are invariably presented in significant or holy numbers: in Med. II, 80 "Life" occurs 16 times (2 times 8, multiple of 4, sum of digits 7); the Meditation has 8 stanzas; "grace" occurs 8 times, soul 3 times. Counting the words in individual stanzas we get 49 (multiple of 7) in the first three stanzas as well as in the seventh, which refers back to them. The sum of words for the whole poem is 396 (3 for trinity, 9 its multiple, 6 a perfect number) it is the sum of 6 times 66.¹¹

Finally, stanza 8 sums up the understanding reached and proclaims it as a confession of faith: "Thou art, my Lord, the Well-spring of this life" (in reference to John 4:14 "a well of water springing up into everlasting life"), adding the petition "Oh! let this Life send Rivulets in my heart," which raises the hope that hereby death is conquered. All of this—faith, petition and hope—amounts to the conviction:

When of this Life my soule with Child doth spring
The Babe of Life swath'd up in Grace shall sing.

The supreme spiritual stage is reached when the soul, impregnated by Christ, has given birth to a Babe which, wrapped up in Grace, is able to sing.

All of Taylor's Meditations are exercises in creative writing, in the "procreation" of meditative poetry, and, as we have seen in Med. II, 80 this may result in erotic, even sexual imagery. If this seems surprising in a Puritan poet and pastor we should remind ourselves that erotic thought and sensibility is an element in all religious feeling and worship. The Westminster Confession (New England Faith) speaks of "the seed of God" in the saint, the converted believer. Eroticism is part of the catholic tradition, of protestant pietism, and also of puritan faith.¹² In his late Meditations Taylor shows a preference for verses from Canticles (sometimes giving the Hebrew original for a word), displaying a marvelous ingenuity in spiritualizing their erotic images: the "two breasts" of the "Beautious Spouse," (II, 150); their "nibbles" and "spiritual milke" for Christ's "Spirituell Babe" are the two testaments which nourish the believer.

Lord put these nibbles then my mouth into
And suckle me therewith I humbly pray,
Then with this milk thy Spirituell Babe I'st grow . . . (13-15)

Here is another babe to sing praise!—As the ability to sing is reached at the very end of the meditative effort, the progression toward it which the Meditation describes can only then be composed in a state of renewed faith. The text of the Meditation should therefore be considered a reviewing, a retelling after the fact. Taylor's demonstration of the "procreation" of poetry is circular: the end is also the beginning. Yet in a sense this is true for all aesthetic creation; a successful poem is the end-result of a mental effort; by congratulating himself on the ability to sing, Taylor celebrated God and also the success of his meditative labor.

Although characteristic in their theological significance, Taylor's poems in their own way fulfill an archetypal scheme of poetic procreation in that

they proceed from a theme or "memory" to scrutiny and examination, leading to a comprehension which achieves aesthetic form. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper celebrating the mysterious communion with the Son of God in his sacrificial death—concerned with the mystery of life, death, and granting the participant eternal life—for Taylor provided the ultimate challenge, a test for his faith as well as his creative power as a poet. Focused on the all-important achievement of regeneration, the Meditations also re-enact the archetypal rite of initiation which compels frail humanity to descend to the depth of a flawed self, so that after relentless purges he may attain purification and redemption.

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NOTES

¹*The Poems of Edward Taylor*, ed. Donald E. Stanford (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960).

²Taylor wrote metrical paraphrases for the singing of Psalms, cf. Thomas M. Davis and Virginia L. Davis, "Edward Taylor's Metrical Paraphrases of the Psalms," *AL* 48 (1976/77): 455-70.

³The beginning "I fain would praise thee" with slight variations is used also as a beginning in I, 43; II, 6; II, 74 and II, 106.

⁴The Edge's/ adz's "sharpen'd Sight" (l. 3) receives a negative contrast in "Poor Perblinde man, that squints on things" (l. 21).

⁵Taylor uses "kinds" and "kindes" three times in this Meditation on "Life"; also in the related Med. II, 89: "All kinds of things did from its belly leap." One may suspect that he knew the German *Kind* and uses his *kinde* for a pun.

⁶There are two biblical and meaningful references in these lines: 1 Cor. 15:45 "The first Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit." Also in line 38: "If the Life quickens not . . ."; "bred" = bread refers to John 6:51 (Christ calls himself "the living bread") but also puns on breed, bred as well as braid = arch woven into strands, plait.

⁷Cf. "Perle" in Manfred Lurker, *Wörterbuch biblischer Bilder und Symbole* (München: Kösel, 1987) and "Pearl" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987): "In many archaic cultures, the marine shell, because of its appearance, is associated with the female genitalia, and the pearl is believed to be both the sacred product and the emblem of the female generative power. The pearl thus symbolizes both the life that is created and the mysterious power that begets life. . . . It is through

this connection with feminine generative power that the pearl becomes a symbol of regeneration and rebirth as well."

⁸In this parable Christ defines the Kingdom of Heaven as "a certain king, which made a marriage for his son." His servants are several times sent out without finding anybody willing to come. Finally on the highways they find "both good and bad." When the king at the feast sees a man "which had not on a wedding garment," He scolds the man and tells his servants "Bind him hand and foot and take him away and cast him unto outer darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen."

⁹Thomas M. Davis, *A Reading of Edward Taylor* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1992) 176.

¹⁰H, 89, written after the birth of a son, begins with "Birth" in the first line followed by "womb," "cradle," "Midwife Song," "Travail," "bare (bear)," "big-bellied," "Infant born," as well as "All Kinds of things did from its belly leape."

¹¹Karen Gordon Grube, "The 'Secret Sweet Mystery' of Numbers in Edward Taylor's Meditation 80, Second Series," *EAL* 13 (1978/79): 231-37, and Ursula Brumm, "Tuning' the Song of Praise: Observations on the Use of Numbers in Edward Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations*," *EAL* 17 (1982): 103-18. Taylor's quotation of the "secret sweet mystery" of the "elected number seven" occurs suitably in Med. II, 21 (3 times 7).

¹²Karl Keller discusses eroticism in Taylor's work and Calvin's writing in "The Rev. Mr. Edward Taylor's Bawdry," *NEQ* 43 (1970): 398-99.