

An Introduction to 'Un Pas de Deux, Un Pas de Dieu'

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ALTHOUGH THOMAS MERTON AND Anne Bradstreet were centuries apart and lived vastly different lives, similarities in their understanding of life and of God are striking. They were both seekers. They sought wholeness, integrity, through a constant questioning of life and of God which is manifested in their writing. They were both independent thinkers, quite unafraid to let their minds take them into unknown territories. Their art, their poetry, in its straightforward eloquence, shows that these authors were both pioneers; pioneers of the mind, pioneers of the spirit.

Anne Bradstreet was born in 1612, during the latter days of the Elizabethan era. Elizabeth I had ruled from the middle 1500s until the turn of the century and her influence was felt well into the 1600s. Bradstreet was well aware of the influence of the former queen. The Elizabethan women were appreciated for their intelligence, for their strength of character, more than women had been before in the history of England. Anne was raised in Tattershall Castle and at Sempringham Manor, where her father worked with the Earl of Lincoln. Her father's position was steward or manager for the vast estate. The Earl was a wealthy and learned individual, and there was a library with extensive holdings and, most likely, a great deal of stimulating and interesting conversation in the noble household. The growing influence of Calvinist ideas and the backlash from those who had followed the Catholic Queen Mary, the Restoration and the Reformation, were all brewing during this period. As the unrest grew, the people of England came to feel the heavy burden of taxes levied by the monarchy to quell rebellions.

The life that Anne Bradstreet found in America was very different from the one she had left in England. Her father was a leader of the colony, but her life, even though the family was of noble background

in England, was no longer one of gentility and leisure. All the settlers of the new colony suffered from want of everything during those first few years. Nobility of birth did not protect them from the harsh winters, the scarcity of food, the diseases, the wolves, the Indians. In *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich, Wendy Martin* writes:

Once in New England she uprooted her household several times to move to increasingly more distant, uncivilized, and dangerous outposts so that her father and husband could increase their property as well as their political power in the colony. (16)

Perhaps Martin's tone is somewhat harsh toward the men in this case. The possibility is that Bradstreet recognized the need for these moves even though there was hardship. Hardships, under the circumstances of pioneer life, were to be expected if not to be enjoyed. In addition, the Puritans believed that hardships were a blessing. God afflicted those he loved as a way to remind them of their purpose in life. Bradstreet interpreted her sufferings as God's punishment and God's lesson, in hopes of being one of the elect predestined to gain the reward of heaven.

Anne and her husband, Simon, had eight children, all of whom lived well into adulthood. He was away a great deal of the time, on business for the colony at first, and then, later, as its governor. Although she was a pioneer, Bradstreet strove to maintain the civility of her former life in England.

Born in 1915, Thomas Merton grew up living a rather sophisticated nomadic existence with his artist parents, in France and in the United States. His mother died when Thomas was five years old and his father raised him with little supervision. His father became ill when Thomas was fifteen, and they returned to the United States to his maternal grandparents home in New York. Orphaned by the time he was sixteen, he journeyed about Europe alone, leading the life his father had led before. Although he had a certain financial security from relatives, and from his father's estate, he had no guidance in his life. He attended school in England, where his godfather lived, and then went to Cambridge. While there, he became involved in drinking, carousing, and general dissipation. His godfather withdrew support, and Merton returned to New York and to Columbia University. His escapades continued for some time but he was able to complete his Bachelor of Arts and go on then to finish

a Master of Arts degree in English. He had begun writing novels while still in his youth and was an editor and writer as well as graphic artist for the Columbia University literary journal and the humour magazine, *The Jester*. He also edited the Yearbook.

Through the study of philosophy courses with Dan Walsh, a devout Catholic, and through self-searching, which he began while at Columbia, Merton's life took on a deeper character. He began to read philosophers of the Church, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. John of the Cross, and began to see a need in himself for order and for spiritual growth. He turned to Catholicism which took him from the life that hereafter he referred to as decadent, to one of peace and discipline and, ultimately, joy. After achieving his degrees, he taught in a small college in upstate New York and began his serious writing. Seeking more stability for his life and greater spiritual freedom, he entered a monastery in Kentucky where he continued his writing along with the rigorous schedule of prayer, physical labour, and study as a cloistered Trappist monk. His life at Gethsemani brought him peace, although his hermitage, ironically, became a meeting place for Merton and the world. He was visited by Civil Rights leaders, by artists, by poets, by religious leaders, all seeking his guidance, his warmth of friendship, his brilliance.

The solitude that Merton sought at Gethsemani was elusive. The days were busy with study, with farming, with prayer. His writing, which he had begun at Columbia, was not given high priority. He had chosen his life of asceticism. He chose it with the thought that he might never have the opportunity to write again, that the monastery would curtail his writing. This did not happen. He was encouraged to write, yet he was given little time in which to do it. Merton made time. Before he was given permission to live as a hermit on the monastery grounds, he would write after prayers, in the very early hours of the morning, filling many notebooks with poems, thoughts, and essays.

Unlike Merton, who chose solitude, for Bradstreet, the isolation of the colony with its loneliness, its difficulties, was not a choice. This arduous existence was thrust upon her. That she used it, that she did not revel in misery in her poems, is to her credit. The poems quoted in my play show her humor, her wonder, her delight in life. The thought of a room of her own in which to work was repeated in

her prose and poetry often. She would rise from bed while her household slept, to compose her verse.

Adrienne Rich gives an interesting view of Bradstreet's work saying it was

...an act of great self-assertion and vitality. To have written poems, the first good poems in America, while rearing eight children, lying frequently sick, keeping house at the edge of wilderness, was to have managed a poet's range and extension within confines as severe as any American poet has confronted. If the severity of these confines left its mark on the poetry of Anne Bradstreet, it also forced into concentration and permanence a gifted energy that might, in another context, have spent itself in other, less enduring directions. (xx)

Perhaps the isolation spurred her to the thoughtful verse, the personal lines which are so universal in feeling. In a most eloquent simplicity she shares her responses to the life around her, to her own artistic life within her. It is these poems, written during such difficulty, which have made Bradstreet retain readers over the centuries.

Adrienne Rich's comments about Anne Bradstreet are echoed in an article written by Victor Kramer regarding Merton. This article appeared in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*:

The years Merton spent from 1941 to 1968 as a cloistered monk are best characterized as a continual and systematic investigation of ways to combine contemplation and writing...

Ultimately the activities of the contemplative and the writer reinforced each other, for while he entered a monastery, he would never forget that he was by temperament an artist. (220)

And so, although Merton's isolation and ascetic life were by design, whereas Bradstreet's were not, there were choices that the poets made within their lives which are similar. Victor Kramer makes further comments about Merton's life of solitude, "although a hermit, Merton severed many connections with the world while in artistic ways he was extending connections." (225) Merton published very little before he entered the monastery and afterward his publications list grew to such an extent that he stated his concern in an article quoted in *Contemporary Authors*:

In the first place I think I have written too much and published too much. Some early work resulted in my being classified as a spiritual writer, or, worse still, an 'inspirational writer,' a category to which I

seriously object, but which I have perhaps not worked hard enough to avoid. However, it is certainly true that my work, both poetry and prose, represents a monastic view of life and implies a rather strong criticism of prevailing trends toward global war, totalism, racism, spiritual inertia, and crass materialism. This criticism is not something I want to repudiate, though I regret an occasional note of acerbity. (777)

It is true that Merton sought publication for his works before he became a monk and, although he did not actively seek it afterward, he was pleased to have his works appreciated and in print.

It is paradoxical that Bradstreet may not have intended for her work to be published at all. Her volume printed during her lifetime was done so through the actions of her brother-in-law and sister, who took the manuscript with them to England, possibly without the author knowing about it. In her poem, "The Author To Her Book," she refers to her 'illform'd offspring that was taken and exposed to publick view.' After this publication, her corrections and additions were added to the work when it was published after her death. In essence, however, both Bradstreet and Merton wrote for themselves, for their souls, and for those they loved.

For her children, Anne Bradstreet wrote poetry and prose as a means of sharing with them her hard-won understanding of life and of God. These are conversational in tone and are touching in that she even shares her doubts about the existence of God, knowing that all intelligent young people have doubts, some of which, like hers, are never clearly resolved. There are beautiful poems written to her husband, Simon, who was a man dedicated to his family and to the colony which he helped govern. In "To My Dear And Loving Husband," the author proclaims,

If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee;
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me ye women if you can.

She was a loving mother, a loving wife, a loving author, sharing her words, her thoughts, to make life under the tenets of Puritanism happier for her children, her family. Many of her lines were written for their edification and for their comfort after her death.

Although he did not have a family of his own to write for, Merton found one in the world of his readers. The correspondents he had, the novices he taught, all were like his family, his children. His

writing is personal. In his autobiographical works he talks of his doubts about God, of his concerns with religion, with faith. He shares the pains of his life with candour and talks of his early life of extreme liberality in his famed work *The Seven Storey Mountain*. All his books are personal, directly and simply written for all their beautiful prose and poetry. They can be seen as compassionate lessons to the reader, Merton's only family. Bradstreet's family was her relatives, her children, her husband, and now the world of her readers. Merton's family was his friends, his fellow monks, and the world that he cared so much about.

Though plagued by occasional physical illnesses, both of these authors were basically quite strong, which helped them through their difficult daily lives and gave them the stamina to write when others would have rested. Although Bradstreet wrote several poems while she lay ill in bed, I think that her sicknesses were a surprise to her and that the time spent resting gave her the opportunity to write and to reflect on God's purpose in afflicting her. She had borne eight healthy children and lived to be over sixty years of age, criteria, I believe, for being considered remarkably healthy some 350 years ago in the harshness of early New England.

Merton had been ill as a child, as had Bradstreet, and he was bothered with minor aches and colds throughout his life. His teeth were not good and caused him much pain as well as keeping him from serving in the military during World War II. He was, however, physically strong enough to overcome the several years of abuse to his body from his raucous life in college, both at Cambridge and at Columbia. He also was able to manage the rigours of life as a farmer/monk at Gethsemani.

In the play I have chosen to depict Anne in her middle years. It is the time after the publication of her book, *The Tenth Muse*. It is also the time during which her inner questioning and her work began to join more and more. Her work from this time on is like a window into her mind and her soul. Her later works still question God although, as in all her writing, she seems resigned to the power of an authority greater than hers.

Thomas is shown in his early fifties, at the peak of both his career and his inner life. Actually, this is the age he was at his death. He had been touring India and was then in Thailand speaking on

'Contemplative Thought in Eastern Philosophy and in Christianity.' His list of writings and his schedule during the last years of his life are phenomenal. His trip to Asia had brought him to an even deeper awareness of spirituality, self, and man's responsibilities to himself, God, and others. His death was due to electrocution caused when he touched the exposed wires of an electric fan on that very hot afternoon in Bangkok.

Merton had come full circle. He had gone over the mountain and the mountain had vanished. He was in tune with the person he had been before he became a monk. The monastery and its discipline had refined him and ultimately it gave him the freedom to be what he was meant to be. His concerns that grew later in his life, about the world, the cruelty, the love, the heroism, the meanness, were there in the poetic, dream-like writing of *My Argument with the Gestapo* written before he went to Gethsemani. In it are autobiographical vignettes and sequences in which he projects himself into war-torn Europe, in which his personality and his concerns are shown vividly. Merton wrote the novel while he was teaching at St. Bonaventure College in upstate New York. He was in his early twenties. It wasn't published then, although he sent it to several publishers. He cared enough about the book, what it said to the world about war, and what it said about him, to have kept it after destroying most other works he had done before entering the monastery. It is as though he were protecting this book which showed his young self, his tender, yet strong self, still vulnerable, still naive. The manuscript remained with him until the last year of his life when preparations had begun for the work to be published. Naomi Burton Stone, the editor of many of Merton's books, writes:

Far from changing his youthful ideals... [he] now felt more than ever obliged to speak out against the unmorality and callousness of nuclear warfare, to urge, whenever and wherever he could make himself heard, the urgent necessity of world peace, of a true understanding of the inherent dignity of man, all men, everywhere... I admit to having some qualms. Early works are often better left in the attic... As I read the book, I was delighted with it. I had forgotten how many scenes from his boyhood were in it, and doubt if I had even noticed originally the signs of his growing interest in the monastic life.

Merton looked forward to the publication of his work. He fretted over the typing of a few minor corrections and was thrilled at the prospect of it finally being printed.

This full circle, from before his turning from the world to his entering the monastery to do the bidding of the church, to the re-emergence of the person he had been in his earlier years, shows the man as striving for wholeness and integrity. He had found a peace in the monastery, an understanding of God, of simplicity. The strength of that peace allowed him to question the deepest aspects of life throughout his years and to give to his writing this contemplative spirit. This was his way to God.

It was also Bradstreet's way; however, her questioning was not as free as Merton's. Hers was certainly striking for the mentally closed time in which she lived and for the fear that must have been always with her about overstepping the boundaries of outspokenness in a rigid Puritan society. The story about her father's banishment of Sarah, Anne Bradstreet's sister, which is an important point in the play, is true. It is discussed in a biography of the poet, by Elizabeth Wade White. Although Anne never wrote about the situation, it must naturally have struck her deeply, and so I chose to make it a part of 'Un Pas de Deux, Un Pas de Dieu.' I believe that she would have and likely did respond in the way represented in the play. The private grief, the guilt for having a contented household while her sister was ostracized, and the guilt for feeling anger toward her father and the Puritan way, must have been unbearable. It would seem that she must have felt fear and constraint and that her strong and intelligent personality, at this point, turned inward more and more to seek the answers to the cruelty present in the situation. I also feel that, unlike Merton, she may never have completely become free of this guilt, this confusion of her father, authority, and God, and the harshness of the Puritan society. Her writing certainly became more personal after this terrible incident which was also the time in which the family moved to Andover, a settlement even more removed from the other towns. This was to be her monastery, so to speak, her room of her own, her chance to let her mind explore and her pen to heal through her poetry.

Anne Bradstreet lived some 300 years before Thomas Merton. She was a Puritan. He was a Catholic monk. Their artistry, their brilliant

minds, their need for solitude, their seeking of wholeness, integrity, brought them together in my mind and in my writing. Seeing them come alive again, in the performance of my play, is a thrilling experience for me.

Christine Hogan's play was performed by the author
and Michael Woodward on the first evening
of the Oakham Conference.

Notes and References

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