Anne Bradstreet’s Romantic Precedence

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Abstract
The aim of this study is to highlight the Romantic dimension of Anne Bradstreet’s poetry, especially as epitomized in her little-known, but very significant, long poem “Contemplations.” It begins by tracing some of its strong “echoes” (i.e. textual echoes) of later major Romantic classics, such as Wordsworth’s “Intimations,” Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” and Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” and some of the affinities it bears to ideas of major American Romantic and Transcendentalist authors, such as Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. It then proceeds to discuss some of Bradstreet’s fundamental Romantic tenets in the context of the tenets of the Romantic movement. Since Bradstreet (ca.1612-1672) is primarily known as a Puritan poet, the objective of this study is three-fold: a) to reveal, through comparing her ideas with those of major pillars of the Romantic movement on both sides of the Atlantic, some of the depths and complexities of Bradstreet’s philosophic vision and thought, b) to stress her contribution to Romantic thought, by offering her not only as a romantic predecessor but also as a possible Romantic precursor in the Bloomian sense, and c) to underscore, ultimately, the importance of her overall poetic contribution, which many readers still view as either marginal or minor.

Keyword: Bradstreet, nature poetry, Romanticism, Puritanism, influence, analogy.

The American Puritan female poet Anne Bradstreet (ca.1612-1672) wrote a great deal of poetry and some prose. Though much of her thought is a reflection of her Puritanism, much of it is not. While other contemporary Puritan poets, say Edward Taylor or Michael Wigglesworth, devoted their entire writing careers to the expression of religious dogma, Anne Bradstreet dealt with a variety of subjects: personal, communal, philosophical, historical and, of course, theological. (Ruland and Bradbury, pp. 21-23).

Being a mother and a wife, she wrote substantially about the birth and death of her children and grandchildren, and about her love for and support of her husband. But she also wrote about a host of individual and universal concerns: the burning of her house, the celebrities she admired (such as Sir Philip Sidney, du Bartas, Queen Elizabeth, etc.), the woman question, England and America, the four elements, the four ages of man, ancient empires (The Assyrian, Persian, Grecian, etc.), the dialectics of the flesh and the spirit, and, last but not least, nature (Stanford, Ostriker, Dolle, Blackstock, Showalter, Kazin).
It is this latter theme, with which many readers are unfamiliar, that we wish to explore. We aim to show that Anne Bradstreet’s nature poetry, epitomized most significantly and effectively in her masterpiece “Contemplations,” is both rich enough and profound enough to rank among the best “Romantic” poetry ever produced on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. We argue in fact that her contribution at this very level entitles her to be considered an important “precursor” to the Romantic movement which flourished in the nineteenth century.

It is indeed remarkable that a little-known seventeenth-century woman poet like Anne Bradstreet, struggling for survival in the New England wilderness and against the gender prejudice so prevalent in her extremely conservative and patriarchal Puritan society (New, p. 100, Knight), raises many of the themes and grapples with many of the questions that major Romantic authors would raise a century and a half later. And she tackles such themes and questions with subtlety and sophistication.

With the purpose of highlighting her poetry’s Romantic dimension, and revealing its richness and depth, we shall in what follows begin by dwelling on some of Bradstreet’s affinities with and textual “echoes” of key ideas in major Romantic authors, both English and American, many of whose ideas she anticipates. After that, we will proceed to examine some of the fundamental tenets of her Romantic poetry in the context of the tenets of the Romantic movement as a whole. The ultimate objective is to emphasize a level of Anne Bradstreet’s achievement and contribution to the overall Romantic tradition which a number of scholars have mentioned only in passing (Abernethy, p. 52, MaCallum, p. 36, Hutchinson, pp. 1-33, Mores, pp. 24-28).

It should be noted, in this context, that we fully realize the differences among the various Romantic authors. However, when we speak about Bradstreet’s “Romantic” dimension, we have in mind the similarities between her language and ideas, on the one hand, and those which the English and American Romantics as a whole have in common, on the other – which is why critics such as Abrams (1971, 2012), Bloom (1970) and others speak of “the Romantics,” “Romanticism” or “the Romantic Age,” etc. Where specific affinities between Bradstreet and individual Romantic authors exist, we have, of course, also highlighted them.

What one finds most striking on a first reading of “Contemplations” is the simplicity and straightforwardness of the poem’s language, which anticipates the diction and rhythm of later Romantic lyrics. At the same time, one is also paradoxically struck, on a more careful examination, with the language’s complexity and loftiness, which in a sense heralds the more sophisticated diction and rhythm

of the Romantic ode. Furthermore, the poem’s overall phraseology and thought mirror those of Romantic poetry at large to a remarkable degree. An astute reader of Romantic poetry cannot but recognize in “Contemplations” numerous textual “echoes” of principal moments in well-known Romantic classics, such as Wordsworth’s “Intimations,” Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” Bryant’s “Thanatopsis” and “The Prairies,” Emerson’s Nature, Thoreau’s Walden, and even Whitman’s Song of Myself. Some of the echoes are explicit, others implicit.

Here are some examples. Line 3 in stanza 1, “The trees all richly clad, yet void of pride,” reminds of Wordsworth’s complaint in “Intimations” about the absence of “glory” from the natural universe; line 7 in the same stanza, “rapt were our sense of this delectable view,” is an epitome of both Thoreau’s and Whitman’s sensuous mysticism. “Then higher on the glistening sun I gazed” (4, 1) and “lofty skies” (8, 3) recall Emerson’s tendency in Nature and in his other essays to focus on “higher elements” of physical nature (the sun, the stars, etc.). The song of the “grasshopper” and the “black-clad cricket” (9, 1-2) compels one to think of Keats’s “On Grasshopper and Cricket.” “…[E]ating, drinking, sleeping, vain delight” (17, 5) invokes, though antithetically, Whitman’s proud declaration in Song of Myself of being “Disorderly, fleshy and sensual … eating drinking and breeding” (2). Lines 5 and 6 in stanza 18, “If winter come and do fade,/ A spring returns, and they more youthful made,” echo strongly, though they may differ in implication and in the answer they give, the famous ambivalent ending of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” Bradstreet’s description of fish in stanza 24 resembles Thoreau’s in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Stanzas 26 through 30 are nearly a complete textual paraphrase of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” and stanza 31 is a précis of the argument of Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

Clearly, some of these echoes, and others to which we have not alluded, may not amount to much, being either purely coincidental and remotely relevant or at best half applicable. But many are potent, telling and elaborate. We shall briefly explore three of these interesting and somewhat revealing echoes, of which the first two are more explicit than the third.

Stanza 31 of “Contemplations” brings Samuel Taylor Coleridge to mind, portraying part of the eerie atmosphere in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and suggesting much of the theme and overall structure almost verbatim. It speaks of a “mariner” whose ship “on smooth waves doth glide”(1) and who “sings merrily and steers his bark with ease/As if he had command of wind and tide” (2-3); he is in fact, we are told, “great master of the seas” (4). Abruptly, however, his lot changes 180 degrees, for “suddenly a storm spoils all the sport” (5); we soon find him fighting “ ‘gainst all adverse winds” (7) and “long[ing] for a more quiet port” (6). Similarly in the opening lines of Coleridge’s “Rime,” the Ancient Mariner begins by telling the Wedding-Guest of the favorable conditions at the outset of his voyage, how “The ship was cheered” (21) and how “the harbor” was “cleared” (21) and how everyone sang “Merrily” (22). But as in the case of Bradstreet’s mariner, the voyage soon undergoes a sudden shift, for “now the storm-blast came” (49) and as “The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast” (50). The rest of the voyage is a

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2. Throughout, the first number refers to the stanza, the second to the line.
There is no doubt that Coleridge’s poem is far more intricate and elaborate than Bradstreet’s simple and sole stanza. Nevertheless, not only is the fundamental terminology employed in both almost the same but also the underlying theme itself. The sea voyage, in the poem and in the stanza, is essentially allegorical, depicting in vivid imagery and dramatized sentiments man’s perilous journey toward comfort and salvation in an ever fickle world, a world which is at times benign but often cruel. This particular instance is a concrete example of the great resemblance which often manifests itself, despite the undeniable inherent diametrical oppositions, between Romantic thought and Christian theology. In Bradstreet’s and Coleridge’s texts, the analogy is almost complete, not only semantically and aesthetically, as Abrams rightly argues in *Natural Supernaturalism*, but also lexically.

The echo of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” which is more extended and complex, is quite remarkable and even amazing (Crowder, p. 387). There is almost a one-to-one correspondence between the two accounts of a nearly identical experience. Notice, in what follows, not only the affinities in terminology but also the parallels in the plot shifts and in the structure of the argument. Anne Bradstreet is sitting under a “stately elm” tree (21, 1) when she listens to the bird. Likewise, Keats, as Charles Armitage Brown in whose orchard Keats heard the nightingale narrates, is sitting under a “plum tree.” In “Contemplations,” the bird is chanting a “melodious strain” (26) “in summer season” (28,5); in the “Ode,” it is singing of “summer” in a “melodious plot” (10). Enjoying the ecstatic song, Bradstreet wishes to have “wings with her a while to take my flight (26, 7)” and “follow thee into a better region,/ Where winter is never felt by that sweet airy region” (28, 6-7); Keats wants to “leave the world unseen,/ And with thee fade away into the forest dim”(19-20). In both poems, the bird and the world of which it is a messenger stand in sharp contrast with the two poets and their worlds. Bradstreet, stressing the immortality of the nightingale, says it belongs to a “better region/ Where winter’s never felt.” It also, unlike human beings, “fears no snares,” “neither toils nor hoards up in thy barn,” “feels no sad thoughts nor cruciating cares,” its “clothes ne’er wear,” its “meat” is everywhere,” etc. Similarly in Keats, it has “never known,/ The weariness, the fever, and the fret,” it “was not born for death”; it is an “immortal bird”.

In “Contemplations” people are depicted as “frail and vain,/ In knowledge ignorant, in strength but weak”: “Subject to sorrows, losses, sickness, pain/ Each storm his state, his mind, his body break.” They “groan” and they suffer “losses, crosses, and vexation” (29, 1-3). In Keats, they also “sit and each other groan:/ Where palsy stakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,/where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies … / Where but to think is to be full of sorrow” (23-26). Most importantly, both personae respond positively to the song of the nightingale and are able to transcend momentarily, though inevitably they fall back into the world of suffering at the end. Bradstreet is “rapt with wonder and delight” and stays a while feeling and pondering with the bird; Keats, likewise, elevates and transcends, “Already with thee,” then descends: “… back from thee to my sole self” (72). Both lexically and structurally, the similarity is quite compelling.
The third echo is of Wordsworth, especially of the argument of “Intimations.” Though it is somewhat more implicit than the preceding two, it is ultimately more extended and significant as it consistently crops up at crucial moments in the poem. To be sure, “Contemplations” and “Intimations” are not identical in what they express or espouse. There are throughout many radical differences in their assumptions, assertions, and conclusions. At the same time, however, there are compelling echoes, parallels and similarities. We shall focus on two of them.

The two poems begin by introducing speakers who are both appreciative of the physical locale in which they find themselves and critical at the same time. They both certainly enjoy the natural scene and respond to it positively. Bradstreet celebrates the “green,” the “yellow,” and the “mixed hue” of the landscape around her, but she also complains that it does not seem to be satisfying enough. Something is missing; it is, she says in the first stanza, a landscape “void of pride” and, in the second, lacking “glory” even though “the glistening sun” has its own “glory.” Wordsworth has the same conception: in stanza 2, he finds “the rose” “lovely,” the “waters” on the “starry night” “beautiful and fair,” and the “sunshine” “glorious.” But such beauty and such “glory” fall extremely short of his expectations. He knows, he informs us, “That there hath passed away” a superior form of “glory from the earth.” Such celebrative - lamentative mood prevails throughout much of the two poems, with the two speakers oscillating between a rise here and a fall there, a momentary closeness or union with the surroundings and a momentary separation. Anne Bradstreet is “alone” in “pathless paths”; Wordsworth is also “alone” and divorced from the world around him.

The two poems also share a very close conception of the root causes of the self’s dilemma. Predictably, Bradstreet blames the self’s divorce, dislocation, and alienation in her Puritan world on the Fall of Adam and Eve. The loss of Eden is a great loss. In Eden, Adam is “glorious” and “lord of all” (11). Out of it, he is without “bliss” (12). There is no direct reference in “Intimations” to Eden, but there is a strong allusion to an Edenic state or stage. Man, Wordsworth affirms, has experienced “glory” in a “heaven” which “lies about us in our infancy” (67). He also speaks of “God, who is our home” (66). The two poets, who devote much space in the body of the two texts to the discussion of the human condition, see the problem as essentially a fall into materialism and into a chaotic society. In “The Flesh and the Spirit,” Bradstreet speaks of the self as “having her eye on worldly wealth and vanity” (6); in “Contemplations,” she condemns “this world of pleasure,” and she criticizes man “for feeding on sweets” and seeking “treasure” (32). She also emphasizes that since the hideous crime committed by Cain, man has been waging war against fellow man “filling earth with blood” (14). Such reminiscence brings to mind Wordsworth’s famous line in “Lines written in Early Spring,” “what man has made of man” (8) and of the French Revolution episodes in The Prelude. But in “Intimations,” Wordsworth also refers satirically to “dialogues of business … or strife” (100). The fall into materialism is a serious problem for, he tells us, “Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own,/ And even with something of a mother’s mind… /The homely nurse doth all she can/ To make her foster-child, her inmate man,/ Forget the glories he hath known” (79-86).
The exploration of these and other echoes is necessary not only because it sheds light on how similar or different Anne Bradstreet’s Romantic vision is from that of the major pillars of the Romantic movement and how profounder and richer her discourse looks when compared to theirs, but also because it encourages us to delve deeper into her Romanticism. Furthermore, what makes Bradstreet Romantic is not only the fact that she textually “echoes” other Romantics but also the fact that her thought, language, and view of the universe are often fundamentally Romantic, as the “echoes” illustrate.

II

Delving deeper into Bradstreet’s Romantic experience, one can distinguish between two clear levels of it. The first is what we call her “orthodox” Romantic view, and the second is the “unorthodox.” The two are at times intricately intertwined; most often, in fact, the latter is embodied or even disguised within the former. The Romantic strain in Bradstreet’s poetry, both orthodox and unorthodox, is inevitably a product of her overall relation to Puritan life and theology. Such relation, unlike in the case of many of her contemporaries, is both tense and double-faceted. Put simply, Bradstreet is at once a believer and a skeptic.

Bradstreet’s orthodox Romanticism stems, philosophically and temperamentally, from her orthodox Puritanism. What is her orthodox Puritanism? The Puritans are essentially dualists and idealists (Riley, pp. 30-40, Knight pp. 18-30). They both dichotomize the physical world and the spiritual, seeing them as almost completely incompatible, and radically inferiorize the former. The physical world, including physical nature, is both low and negative; the spiritual, on the other hand, is lofty and positive. Asserting such conception in “The Flesh and the Spirit,” Bradstreet tells us that Flesh “had her eye/ On worldly wealth and vanity,” whereas Spirit “did rear/ Her thoughts unto a higher sphere.” The former is to be resisted and fought, while the latter is to be sought after. As Perry Miller has pointed out, a good Puritan is expected to “wean” him/herself from the physical world and indulge in the spiritual.

But the Puritans did not deny the physical experience; as a matter of fact, they allowed a degree of both sensuality (eating, drinking, etc.) and sensuousness (appreciation of physical nature). Flesh, which Bradstreet permits to speak in the poem, draws Spirit’s attention to the importance of the sensory

Eternal substance I do see
With which enriched I would be.
Mine eye doth pierce the heavens and see
What is invisible to thee. (75-78)

The verbs “pierce” and “see” refer to an experience which is both meta-sensual and meta-sensuous.

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experience: Says she, “Come, come, I’lI show unto thy sense,/ ... True substance in variety?” (20-24). However, sensuality and sensuousness ought not to exceed the limits specified in the Puritan doctrine (Knight, pp. 13-20). Even though Flesh does express herself in Bradstreet’s poem, the space devoted to her speech is much smaller than that devoted to Spirit’s. Moreover, Spirit is given the final say, for Bradstreet is ultimately a good Puritan and spiritualist.

The point to stress here is that in Puritanism the senses do not aid the self in its pursuit of the spiritual experience except antithetically. That is, it is mainly through resisting and fighting sensuality and sensuousness, not through indulging in them, that the self creates the dialectical momentum which enables it to progress toward spiritual liberation and redemption. This is why, in “The Flesh and Spirit,” Bradstreet emphasizes the eternal conflict between the body and the soul: “And combat with thee will and must,/ Until I see thee laid in the dust” (41-42).

There are many key Romantic moments in “Contemplations” which derive their philosophic basis and thought structure from this particular theology-based mode of reasoning. One such moment occurs in the very opening of the poem:

Some time now past in the autumnal tide,
When Phoebus wanted but one hour to bed,
The trees all richly clad, yet void of pride,
Where gilded o’er by his rich golden head.
Their leaves and fruits seemed pointed, but was true,
Of green, of red, of yellow, mixed hue;
Rapt were my senses at this delectable view.
I wist not what to wish, yet sure thought I,
If so much excellence abide below,
How excellent is He that dwells on high
Whose power and beauty by his works we know? (1-11)

The first stanza highlights a sensory experience. The speaker, who is in physical nature, looks at the scenery around her and enjoys what she sees. Physical nature is beautiful: “The trees” are “richly clad” and the “leaves and fruits” seem “painted” with all kinds of lovely colors. The beauty of the landscape is in fact so tempting that the speaker indulges in it: “Rapt were my senses at this delectable view.”

Such rapture, however, does not last long. As if guilty for even a brief indulgence in sensuousness, the speaker immediately turns her thoughts to heaven. The second stanza, which comes to promptly and abruptly stop or undercut the speaker’s initial mood and experience, radically shifts her attention and feelings into an experience of a different type, a higher one. It introduces the idea of God’s excellence and beauty as the antithesis to the excellence and beauty of the physical world. It asserts that the heavenly realm is remarkably superior to physical nature. Upon this assertion, the speaker stops responding physically to the scene around her and starts to respond, think, and meditate about the realm which lies
above and beyond this realm. In other words, the speaker elevates and “contemplates” – hence the significance of the poem’s title – not physically sees, hears, or feels.

Two conclusions may be drawn here. First, the first stanza and the second are linked together more by contrast than by similarity or continuity. Of course, as apparent in line 4 in the second stanza in particular, the natural scene may function as a symbol signifying God’s beauty and excellence. Indeed it does. However, the signifier is generally subordinate to the signified; it is a sign which points not to itself but to something else (Maun and Myhill, pp. 5-21). The contrast is embodied not only in the idea which the stanza is explicitly affirming – i.e. God is more excellent than his work – but also in the crucial conjunction “yet” and in the word “thought.” The first stanza is a sensuous experience and a feeling; the second is an intellectual experience, a thought. Furthermore, the experience in the first stanza is inferior – made inferior, in fact – to the second.

Secondly, the two stanzas are not built on a causal relationship. Notice in this respect the force of the undercutting and the disruption which occur at the end of the first stanza and the beginning of the second. The former ends with an intense sensory moment of confusion: “I wist not what to wish.” The speaker, being a puritanic Romantic who knows that only a degree of sensuousness is allowed, weans herself immediately from the physical scene and focuses her attention instead on the spiritual. The disruption and undercutting make clear that transcendence occurs not through, but through a reaction against, the sensory experience. The romantic formula here is, as in Puritanism, at large: one looks at (a physical scene which is beautiful but inferior) for a few moments, then one looks away from it (to a spiritual scene which is superior) for most of the time – and not, one looks at the physical and through it one penetrates into the spiritual.

In this particular respect, Bradstreet’s resembles Emerson’s Romanticism. Like her, Emerson generally begins by describing a very appealing physical scene, then he immediately undercuts and transcends it. In the Divinity School “Address,” for example, he introduces in the very first paragraph a picturesque summer scene. It is a “refulgent summer,” he declares, in which “the grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of the flowers.” He adds: “The air is full of birds, sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm of Gilead, and the new hay.” A very physical landscape and a very sensuous experience indeed. In the second paragraph of the same essay, Emerson, like Bradstreet in the first two stanzas of “Contemplations,” shifts suddenly into a new mood: “But when the mind opens and reveals the laws which traverse the universe,” he informs us, “then shrinks the world at once into a mere illustration and fable of the mind.” As in Bradstreet, the initial sensory experience is spoken of not in order to be affirmed but in order to be deemphasized and even rejected. At best, the physical world, as in “Contemplations,” is a symbol of something other than itself: “a mere illustration” or “fable” of the “mind.” Emerson, like Bradstreet, dismisses the physical reality in order to introduce, as he does in paragraph 3, a “more secretly sweet, and overpowering” reality: the spiritual.

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3 All citations from Emerson’s works are taken from Stephen E. Whicher, Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), 100-101.
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The more one controls, confines, and reduces the former, the more the latter emerges and dominates. This is the theme of Emerson’s *Nature* and Thoreau’s *Walden*: both make it obvious, in *Nature*’s two chapters on “Commodity” and “Physical Beauty” and in *Walden*’s chapter on “Economy,” that the more the physical experience, both sensual and sensuous, is resisted and economized, the more the spiritual is brought about and is made to prevail.

III

Like Emerson and Thoreau then, Bradstreet is a romantic dualist. But she is also, like many of the English Romantic writers, a romantic monist – and this is the second level of her Romanticism, which stands in opposition to the first. Such monism is primarily an outcome of her unorthodox Romantic vision which in turn is an outcome of her theological unorthodoxy, as we will explain.

Bradstreet never subscribes to the Puritan theology one hundred percent, unlike the Puritan poets Edward Taylor and Michael Wigglesworth (New p. 100). Even though she is the daughter of a Puritan governor and the wife of a governor as well and even though she knows her limitations as a female poet writing in a patriarchal, misogynistic society (Blackstock) – a society that punishes women, such as Anne Hutchinson, ruthlessly for simply speaking their minds – she does express many of her reservations and doubts (New, p. 100). For one thing, she is not a public figure. She is neither a governor, like Bradford and Winthrop, nor a church minister, like Taylor and Wigglesworth, and not even a historian, like William Bradford. Though an exceptional person she no doubt is, she enjoys the privilege of being an “ordinary” Puritan who can express what she feels with less inhibition than someone who holds public office. What she gives us is the opinion of the common Puritan, affirming things not always as they ought to be but as they are. Furthermore, and unlike the radical Anne Hutchinson (Knight, p. 6), Bradstreet airs her own views tactfully and cautiously, firmly but implicitly. She permits herself the liberty to vent her feelings – what she truly feels inside (New, p. 101) – but then ultimately goes back to reaffirming what is expected of her to say. This momentous margin of freedom is crucial, but so is the ultimate reassertion of faith.

In “The Prologue” and “Upon the Burning of Our House,” two poems the structure of whose argument manifests very well such tactful and cautious strategy, she begins by stating what she is expected to say, i.e. what one may call the “thesis.” She then goes on to affirm what she believes deep-down – the antithesis, which is a clear diversion from the initial assertion. Thirdly and finally, she goes back to restating what she has stated at the beginning with some qualification, a kind of synthesis.

In “Upon the Burning of Our House,” for example, and after the initial confusion she experiences upon learning that her house is being destroyed by fire, she immediately asserts what any good Puritan would when disaster strikes: God “gave and took”; the house “was His own, it was not mine,/ Far be it that I should repine” (17-18). The poem, however, does not end here. For after this initial assertion of faith in which she states that she ought not to complain or repine, Bradstreet starts in fact to do exactly the opposite of what she promises not to do: repine and complain. She tells us that when she passes by the “ruins” of the house, she cannot help but “cast aside” her “sorrowing eyes” (22). In an un-Puritanic way, she thinks of the good times she has spent in the house and the valuables she has lost: “here stood that
trunk, and there that chest,/ There lay that store I counted best” (25-26). She indulges in yearnings such as these for a number of stanzas, expressing her appreciation of material and worldly things. It is true that at the end of the poem she reaffirms: “The world no longer let me love,/ My hope and treasure lie above” (53-54). Nevertheless, in the large midsection of the poem, she vents her feelings towards her material possessions. What interests us here is precisely this suspension of belief, this doubt, this subversion, this diversion, or this rebellion, which, though momentary, is powerful and potent enough and which makes Bradstreet unorthodox and even anti-orthodox in part of her thought. As Blackstock persuasively asserts, “Faith does not come easily to Bradstreet” (p. 241).

Such un-orthodoxy, such significant margin of freedom, is also reflected in her experience of nature. In other words, during some moments of interaction with nature, the self weans itself from indulgence in sensuousness – as pointed out earlier. At other moments, however, it does indulge without betraying any feelings of regret or inhibition. Stanzas 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 20, 21, 22 and many others of “Contemplations” furnish excellent examples of this level of her Romanticism.

In Stanza 3, she describes a “stately oak”:
Then on a stately oak I cast mine eye,
Whose ruffling top the clouds seemed to aspire;
How long since thou wast in thine infancy?
Thy strength, and stature, more thy years admire,
Hath hundred winters past since thou wast born?
Or thousand since thou brakest thy shell of horn?
If so, all these as nought, eternity doth scorn. (15-21)

The oak tree is appreciated for its own sake (“thy strength” and “stature”; “thy shell”) as a physical entity and not as a symbol. Bradstreet enjoys looking at it, and not through it or beyond it. She admires its very shape, form, and physical grandeur: the tree is “stately” and its “ruffling top” rivals the clouds in loftiness. In the following four stanzas, she heaps praise on “the glistening Sun”: “Then higher on the glistening Sun I gazed,/Whose beams was shaded by the leavie tree” (15-16). The word “gazed” is significant here; it shows that Bradstreet’s sensuous experience with the sun, and physical nature as whole, is neither casual nor peripheral but intense and deep – “gaze” as an act is longer, deeper and profounder than “look” or “see.” As in the case of the oak tree, the sun is also admired for itself and not for its being a symbol.

The joys that she derives from physical nature and the comfortable relation she has with it are evident in stanza 21:
Under the cooling shadow of a stately elm
Close sat I by a goodly river’s side,
Where gliding streams the rocks did overwhelm,
A lonely place, with pleasures dignified.
I once that loved the shady woods so well,
Now thought the rivers did the trees excel,
And if the sun would ever shine, there would I dwell. (141-147)

The word “pleasures” is explicitly illustrative of the type of sensuous experience Bradstreet derives from elements of physical nature. But her experience with physical nature is embodied in other less explicit terms. The adjectives “cooling” in the first line, “goodly” in the second, “gliding” in the third, “lonely” in the fourth, and “shady” in the fifth, all convey the effect of the landscape on the speaker’s felicitous state of mind. The felicity, serenity, and tranquil mood which the speaker experiences are owed to the physical setting in which she finds herself. The speaker’s experience of nature is also conveyed in verbs like “overwhelm,” “loved,” “excel,” and “dwell.” The word “sat” in the second line is crucial, for Bradstreet is not looking at nature from a distance; she is physically in it.

In this level of her engagement with physical nature, Bradstreet is similar to Wordsworth, Keats, Thoreau, even Whitman, and others. The physical landscape in the Romanticism of these authors is valued for the sensuous experience that it enables the self to enjoy. The speaker’s heart in Wordsworth “leaps up” when he “behold[s]” / “A rainbow in the sky.” The Wordsworthian hero, as the case is in Bradstreet, appreciates the physical landscape itself. The sensuous experience that results from the self’s encounter with such landscape is greatly valued. In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth, expressing his value of the physical scene and its healing effect on the self, says:

Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In Nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. (102-111) 

IV

The similarities, affinities, and textual echoes – at the lexical and conceptual levels – that we find in many of the texts of later major Romantics, on the one hand, and of Bradstreet’s, on the other, are obvious by now. The question we wish to pose briefly at this point is whether Anne Bradstreet can be considered an influence on the later Romantic generation or not – whether, to use Harold Bloom’s

4. Rosamond Rosenmier, in *Anne Bradstreet Revisited* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), stresses the importance of sight and hearing in Bradstreet: “The speaker’s first vision of nature was one to the eyes; that vision will now be replaced by a vision in sound, one that, as faith is said to, speaks to the heart through the ear” (150).
terminology, she is a Romantic “precursor,” though “remote” she certainly is in many ways from them, in distance, time, and temperament.5

At a glimpse, the matter of influence may not seem serious enough to deserve investigation. How can a “marginal” poet like Anne Bradstreet, some may skeptically and dismissively ask, influence major pillars like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman? For one thing, there is the matter of immediacy and affinity. Bradstreet lived in a “remote” part of the world – the American Wilderness – almost a century and a half before Wordsworth and Coleridge published The Lyrical Ballads (1798), the collection of poems which triggered the Romantic movement. Additionally, she is temperamentally different from many of the authors we are comparing her with, being female, American, and Puritan. Furthermore, there is the matter of status. Bradstreet has not generally, for all kinds of reasons, not least among which is the fact that she is female, Puritan and American, been recognized as a major influential author. In the Anglo-American canon, and up until recently, she has been treated as a “minor,” marginal author (Rosenfeld). Moreover, there are no explicit references to her or her works in those of the major Romantic authors referred to in this paper. All of this is granted.

Nevertheless, there are, in addition to the striking textual echoes, affinities, and similarities examined above, a number of psycho-biographic/historic facts which compel us to think about Bradstreet as a potential precursor and to take the matter of influence more seriously than we may at first be tempted to think.6 The first among these is the fact that her anthology of poetry, The Tenth Muse, was published in England in 1650.7 Several editions of the same anthology appeared consistently afterwards, including the 1758 edition, which is prior to but not far from 1798, the date of the publication of the Lyrical Ballads.

Secondly, not only was her anthology published in London, and it was thus not that “remote” or inaccessible to anyone interested in reading poetry, but it was well-known to many intellectuals. Bradstreet’s contribution was praised by Edward Philips, nephew of John Milton, in his “Women among the Moderns Eminent for Poetry” in 1675. We are also told that eight years after its publication, The Tenth Muse was listed in the bookseller London’s catalogue along with Fletcher, Milton, Du Barta, Walton, Browne, and Shakespeare.

Thirdly, even though Bradstreet’s influence was not explicitly acknowledged by major nineteenth-century authors, it was explicitly acknowledged by a number of most important and most influential twentieth-century poets. John Berryman’s famous poem “Homage to Mistress Bradstreet” and many of

5. For more on the idea of the precursor, see Harold Bloom, Anxiety of Influence (London: London University Press, 1973).

6. Josephine K. Piercy, in Anne Bradstreet (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1965), believes that Bradstreet “in many ways . . . anticipated the Romantic poets” (99). Elizabeth Wade White, in Anne Bradstreet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), confirms Piercy’s point. Piercy has an interesting comment about the matter of Bradstreet’s influence: “If the chronology had been reversed, critics might have written studies on the influence of the Romantic poets on Anne Bradstreet! Did they read her? Certainly in “Contemplations” one is constantly reminded of some evanescent thought or phrase of the Romanticists” (101).

Adrienne Rich’s poems, among many others, reveal their indebtedness to Anne Bradstreet. If major twentieth-century poets, in other words, speak with no hesitation or inhibition about Bradstreet’s influence on them, why should we be hesitant and inhibited to look into her potential influence on the Romantic writers of the nineteenth century? Ruland and Bradbury see Anne Bradstreet as a “crucial antecedent” to modern poets (pp. 21-23).

It has become clear, we believe, that there is a very serious Romantic dimension to Bradstreet’s poetic imagination and literary achievement. She is a prolific author who has written about diverse and complex subjects, including the self’s relation to and experience of nature, a major concern to Romantics in general. Her romantic poetry compares with the best romantic poetry ever written. Such comparison, we believe, enriches Bradstreet’s poetry: through comparing her lexicon, ideas, and structure of thought to those of the major Romantics, readers will be able to find deeper meanings than if they look at her poetry in isolation. But the comparison may function also, we hope, to encourage some readers to pursue the matter of influence further than we have suggested in this study.
الأبعاد الرومانسية في شعر آن برادستريت

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المتخصّص

ينصب التركيز في هذا البحث على الأبعاد الرومانسية في شعر الأديبة الأمريكية آن برادستريت وبخاصة في قصيدتها الطويلة "تأملات". بدأ البحث بالإشارة إلى الأصدقاء النصيّة التي تتضمن في لغتها وفي طياتها أوجه شبه مهمة بين قصيدته أثر برادستريت المذكورة من ناحية وقصائد الرومانسية الرئيسيّة لشعراء كبار، مثل ويردزورث وكورلريج وكيتس كولريدج، إضافة إلى بعض أعمال إمرسون وثورن ووولف ورمان النثرية من ناحية ثانية.

تنتقل الدراسة بعد ذلك للخوض بعمق من التفاصيل في السمات الرئيسيّة لفلسفة برادستريت الرومانسية، مقارنة بالسمات الرئيسيّة لفلاسفة الحركة الرومانسية عمومًا. والهدف من وراء ذلك هو تبيان جانب من تلك الفلسفة قد لا يبدو ظاهراً للعين، إضافة إلى لفت الانتباه إلى أثر برادستريت الذي لم يتبث إليه القراء بعد في إدراج الفكر الرومانسي قبل مولد الحركة الرومانسية.
Anne Bradstreet’s Romantic Precedence

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