

## Edward Taylor: What Was He Up To?

Edward Taylor's poems—I think the story is by now well known—were discovered in a bound manuscript book in Yale University Library in the middle of the 1930s by a scholar named Thomas Johnson. Taylor had died in the village of Westfield, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1729. His tombstone said he was eighty-seven years old. He had arrived in the Massachusetts colony sixty-one years before, in 1668, when the entire English settlement in the New England forests consisted of something between twenty and thirty thousand souls and the village of Westfield not much more than a hundred. Johnson published a few of Taylor's poems in an antiquarian journal in 1937. A first book of the poems, *The Poetical Works of Edward Taylor*, followed in 1939, after which poets and scholars began to read him and write about him. In 1960—just between the publications of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* and John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath*—Donald Stanford's *The Poems of Edward Taylor* put all of Taylor's major poems before American readers. It was a somewhat belated literary debut.

It was also an imposing, rather startling body of work. At the center of it was a sequence of 219 poems, written from 1682 to 1724, from the time Taylor was forty years old until he was eighty-two, entitled "Preparatory Meditations before my Approach to the Lords Supper. Chiefly upon the Doctrine preached upon the Day of administration." There was also an ambitious long poem on Calvinist doctrine, made out of thirty-six individual poems and several thousand lines, called *Gods Determination*; eight miscellaneous lyrics written, the scholarly guess is, sometime before 1689; a formal elegy on the death of his first wife from 1689; another on the death of one of Taylor's colleagues, the Hartford minister Thomas Hooker, in 1697; an undated poem in couplets, called "A Fig for Thee Oh! Death"; two other undated poems in couplets, "The Martyrdom of Deacon Lawrence" and "The Persian Persecution"; and a piece in what was his characteristic form, the rhymed six-line stanza of the "Preparatory Meditation," called "The Sparkling Shine of Gods Justice." There was more work, none of it adding much to our sense of Taylor's accomplishment, and it has been printed in the intervening years.

Almost everything about Edward Taylor and his poetry was unexpected. The unexpectedness of the poetry itself lay in the intersection of its quality, its quantity, its history, and its style, the peculiarities of its style. That a large body of poetry had turned up, written by a Puritan parson in the latter years of the seventeenth century in a village on the remotest western frontier of colonial New England, was not so surprising given the culture of literacy among the Puritan English colonists and the level of education required of Puritan ministers. The first surprise was that it was so good. Scholars in the 1940s were quite prepared to recognize its provenance, if not its value. Serious study of the intellectual and theological foundations of New England were flourishing; and, more crucially, it was the high tide, in English departments, of the study of the seventeenth-century poets, the metaphysicals from Donne through Traherne, to whom modernist practice and the essays of T. S. Eliot had given so much authority. Students of the poems saw immediately what tradition Taylor belonged to and how deeply he was rooted in it. Another surprise was that a poet so good—although the assessments

of how good he was were quite mixed—had lain unnoticed for so long.

The next surprise had to do with the ways in which he puzzled notions of Puritan austerity. He was very often a playful poet, on occasion an ecstatic poet, and his imagery was, well, more than metaphysical. By 1941 Austin Warren had published an essay titled "Edward Taylor's Poetry: Colonial Baroque."<sup>1</sup> Warren was trying to account for lines like these:

Shall Heaven, and Earth's Bright Glory all up lie  
Like Sun Beams Bundled in the sun, in thee?  
Dost thou sit Rose at Table Head, where I  
Do sit, and Carv'st no morsel sweet for mee?<sup>2</sup>

Even if you grant the pun on *rose* and the risen Christ, there is still a rose sitting at the head of a table carving meat, a rose that is also the sun, and a pun on *son*. This was not the aesthetic of George Herbert; it much more resembled the writing of Richard Crashaw, whose *Steps to the Temple* was published in 1646, and Crashaw was a Roman Catholic. So this was a Puritan minister in the 1680s on the remotest American frontier writing an often ecstatic poetry in a style strongly reminiscent of George Herbert but verging on a continental, Roman Catholic baroque, a minister who also, it should be added, was the author of a number of virulently anti-Papist works. The Puritans of Boston recognized the baroque style when they saw it. Michael Wigglesworth, the author of New England's most popular poem, *Day of Doom*, sternly rebuked a poetry made of "strained metaphors, far-fetch't allusions, audacious & lofty expressions . . . meer ostentation of learning & empty flashes of a flourishing wit," declaring that such writers "daub over their speech with rhetorical paintments" and "winding, crooked, periphrastical circumlocutions & dark Allegoric mysteries."<sup>3</sup> This tells us that there was something un-Protestant about this adamantly Calvinist cleric.

The next set of surprises had to do with what must be called the quaintness and homeliness of his style. In his introduction to Donald Stanford's 1960 edition of Taylor's poems, Louis Martz enumerates what were seen to be the deficiencies of Taylor's verse: the clumsiness of his meters and his rhymes; his "strangely assorted diction," mixing low and learned terms with what seem to be coinages and dialect words; and the effects of "his use of the homeliest images to convey the most sacred and reverend themes."<sup>4</sup> To these charges might be added at least two others. Alongside the baroque in Taylor is a curious literalness and methodicalness of imagination: if the Lord is like wine, you are apt to get a solid stanza on every phase of the fermentation process. And finally for a Puritan, he is, rather surprisingly, inclined to load down the Lord with a profusion of descriptive terms that have the feel of a plain man's idea of high life: precious stones, the finest linen, the best wine, rare sugars, ointments, and perfumes. Perfumes, above all. One of the distinct characteristics of the divine in Taylor's world is that it smells wonderful. (This from a poet who, in 1696, twenty-five years after he arrived there, could still speak of Westfield's "foggy damps assaulting my lodgen in these remotest swamps." It's not so difficult to guess why the terms of his praise give the impression that God existed in a sort of eternal duty-free shop.) Martz is at pains to defend Taylor against the charge that he was a bumpkin, "a burlap Herbert," and

he does so by appealing to the deeply learned, passionately earnest man discernable beneath what he nevertheless regards as "the surface crudities" of his verse.

This issue, what to make of Taylor's style, is one of the subjects I want to take up, but there remains the last wonder in this inventory of Taylor's surprises to be dealt with. It is that all the evidence suggests that he created this body of work in private and in more or less total isolation. Over the course of his life he sent a few verses to friends and family members in letters, and he courted his first wife with a popular New England form, the anacrostic poem; but beyond this there is no evidence that he shared his poetry with anyone. There is no correspondence to suggest that he wrote to Cambridge or Hartford friends about it. Although the "Preparatory Meditations" seem to have been written on the same subjects as his sermons, there's no suggestion that he ever read his poems to his congregation. He made no effort to publish them, and although he copied out this large body of work very carefully and bound it in rough leather manuscript books, he explicitly forbade its publication upon his death. This doesn't mean that he didn't share his work. He may have had a literary correspondence that has been lost. He may have had a circle of friends among the Westfield farmers who took an interest in verse. He may have read his poems to one or both of his wives or to his children in his later years. We don't know. We know very little about his life. But there's nothing to indicate that he had a community of readers.

It is a set of facts—and gaps—one looks at with a mixture of disbelief and recognition. Emily Dickinson, after all, lived just north and east of him in Amherst, but she at least sent her poems to Thomas Higginson and Helen Hunt, and a few to magazines, and got to enjoy the reputation of a poet, recluse, and snob. Edward Taylor's privacy, like his culture, is a harder thing to read. He was an Englishman. He was born in Leicestershire, in the southern midlands, which made him an atypical colonist. The great majority of them came from East Anglia, the Home Counties, and the southwest of England.<sup>5</sup> Leicestershire was the birthplace of George Fox. It seems to have been more Quaker than Puritan in its leanings. It's hard to know how much this means. Michael Wigglesworth, with his dour view of verbal excess, came from Yorkshire. However eccentric Taylor was to the home culture of the other New England colonists, he had an English education and a profoundly Puritan theology.

So one ought to be a little skeptical of any impulse to claim him as an American, or proto-American, poet. In his early years in Westfield he went through King Philip's War, the last concerted attempt of the New England Indians to drive out the European invaders, and his poems make no mention of it. The imagery of the natural world in his poems is English, and his poems are full of English folk technologies and games and turns of speech, recently and wondrously transplanted, it is true, but that new rooting seems not to enter his imagination. He was among the founders of New England culture, certainly of the culture—somewhat different from Boston's—of the Connecticut River valley. Still, the only thing that seems American about him—presciently so—is this strange absence of a social context for his work. He seems—as Anne Bradstreet does in her private and unpublished poems—an early instance of the solitariness, self-

sufficiency, and peculiarity of the American imagination.

### The Issue of His Style

Which is why I want to return to the issue of his style. Here is one of his lines that has stuck in my head, a "volunteer," as they say of garden weeds: "Let Conscience bibble in it with her Bill." It's almost nonsense verse: the alliteration of *bibble* and *bill*; the string of assonances in the short *i* sound, *bibble in it with* and *bill*; and the odd word *bibble*. Here we come to the issue of Taylor's diction. He is a poet who sends you to dictionaries. His word of choice is not *dabble*, which, according to the *OED*, came into the language in the late sixteenth century, probably from the Dutch, and which Shakespeare used, in *Richard III*, to describe "A Shadow like an Angell, with bright hayre Dabble'd in blood," and Tennyson used, in *The Princess*, to describe someone "Dabbling a shameless hand" in the "holy secrets of this microcosm," and which seems to have been ascribed to the feeding behavior of ducks around 1661, so that Wordsworth could use it in 1789 in "The Evening Walk"—"Where the duck dabbles 'mid the rustling sedge"—and John Clare, gorgeously, in 1821—"The long wet pasture grass she dabbles through." It is not this word.

Nor *dibble*, which I first came across in Cowper's "Yardley Oak," where there is "a skipping deer, with pointed hoof dibbling the glebe." A *dibble* was an instrument for poking holes in the ground for planting. The noun shows up in manuscripts as early as 1450, the verb in 1583. Keats found a use for it in *Endymion* ("In sowing-time ne'er would I dibble take"), and it seems to have disappeared from all but horticultural uses by the end of the nineteenth century. It had an even briefer life as a variant on *dabble*. Michael Drayton's *Polyolbion* in 1622: "And near to them you see the lesser dib-

bling teale," and it is applied to the activities of fishermen by a Mr. Chetham in *The Angler's Vademecum*: "When you angle at ground in a clear Water, or dibble with natural Flies," in the 1680s.

So both *dibble* and *dabble* were, theoretically, available to Edward Taylor, but what came to his mind was *bibble*, which arrived in English from French or Norman French in both transitive and intransitive forms. In Stanyhurst's 1583 translation of the *Aeneid* there are "fierce steeds" that "Xanth stream gredilye babled" and its intransitive form—which the *OED* describes as obsolete—gets used by John Skelton in 1529: "Let me wyth you bybyll." The word is applied to ducks as early as 1552, and the last use of it cited in that dictionary occurs in 1861, in a work by M. B. Edwards called *Tale of the Woods*, in a section devoted to "The Eider Duck": "How pleasant it is to glide through the grass, / And bibble the dew-drops as I pass!" Whether Taylor's choice was dictated by the assonance or the alliteration, or by regional dialect, or by the sheer silliness of the word—it calls to mind a child blowing bubbles in milk—we have no way of knowing. What we do know is that it is not a duck exactly but a conscience behaving like a duck that is doing the bibbling. Which is enough to tell us that we are—the provenience of the word aside—in the seventeenth century.

Moreover, there is the matter of what this duck-like conscience is bibbling in. It's bibbling in rose water. Here is the stanza, from the fourth of Taylor's "Preparatory Meditations," in which the line appears:

God Chymist is, doth.Sharons Rose distill.  
Oh! Choice Rose Water! Swim my Soul herein.  
Let Conscience bibble in it with her Bill.  
Its Cordiall, ease doth Heart burns Caus'd by Sin.  
Oyle, Syrup, Sugar, and Rose Water such.  
Lord, give, give, give; I cannot have too much.

Taylor himself was, probably as a matter of necessity, something of a chemist. As a person of education he served as doctor as well as minister to the village of Westfield. His library included a five-hundred-page manuscript in his own hand, *Dispensatory*, extracted from sources like *The English Physician Enlarged* (1666) and *Pharmacopoeia Londensis* (1685), which described the medicinal properties of herbs, drugs, oils, and gums and the manner of their preparation.

This stanza condenses various ways of turning rose petals into medicine. But its proposition is to meditate on a verse from the *Song of Songs*: "I am the Rose of Sharon." The rose of Sharon is a species of hibiscus, not a rose, but let that be. It is a metaphor sung by a bride for herself in an ancient erotic Hebrew folk song; Christian typology—to get the full strangeness of it—had converted the bride into a figure for Christ. So the rose water and the rose oil, and the rose sugar and the rose syrup here are imagined applications of seventeenth-century technologies to the blood of Christ. God is the chemist who distilled a healing rose water from the blood of his son's crucifixion—an event of such joy that the seventeenth-century Calvinist conscience can bibble in it.

It is not surprising that the first twentieth-century commentators on Taylor found him exceedingly quaint and strange. They were also inclined to see him as a rather clumsy amateur, and a line like "Oyle, Syrup, Sugar and Rose Water such" might have served as an example. One supposes that he means to say that these items also have medicinal properties, and the commentators might have guessed that Taylor has forced the syntax in his effort to secure the rhyme. But what the word *bibble* should tell us is that we can't be sure about this. Given a mind so embedded in its own time, it seems quite possible that "Oyle, Syrup, Sugar and

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Rose Water such" was perfectly idiomatic Leicestershire English. We simply cannot know.

And we might have the same trouble with a line that seems a perfect example of what scholars took to be Taylor's naivete: "Its Cordiall, ease doth Heart burns Caus'd by Sin." It looks as if the poet, having wandered into his pharmaceutical metaphor, has—if not inadvertently, certainly ludicrously—turned sin into a form of indigestion. But there is no doubt that he's making a joke about sin and indigestion—it's, in fact, an instance of the metaphysical "wit" that attracted the attention of midcentury scholars to him in the first place. This does seem to be an aspect of his sense of humor and also of his theology: given the saving blood of Christ, sin is a mere indisposition. It is also possible that other meanings of *heartburn* had more force in Taylor's English. The word is first cited by the *OED* with reference to digestion in 1597. It shows up around the same time as a joke in *Much Ado about Nothing*: "How tartly that Gentleman lookes, I never can see him, but I am heartburn'd an howre after." It also, however, was used to describe feelings of passionate enmity—"heart-burning Hate," Spenser writes in *The Faery Queen*. How much sting of this second meaning there is inside the joke I think it's impossible to gauge. In either case, although Donne might have assayed such a metaphor, George Herbert, to whom Taylor is so often compared, would probably not. It is a little too low and a little too risible. And it is for me one of the things that's wonderful about him. He is a poet full of verbal wonders.

And this is one of the pleasures and strangenesses of reading him. His contemporaries, like Marvell, and his great antecedents, like Donne and Herbert and Milton and Vaughan and Crashaw, have become the seedbed of educated English. Their diction defined its possibilities, and their

lines are the echo chamber in which English verse came to have resonance. Taylor, who was not absorbed in this way, both because he was not naturalized by generations of poets and schoolmasters and because he was always in some sense an outsider—not university educated, not a Londoner, not even an East Anglian like most Puritan ministers—presents us with a fresher and more radical version of one of the main experiences that poetry has to offer: the intimate confrontation with another mind, embodied in the verbal habits of another time.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this effect will change over the years as poets and schoolchildren come to know his lines, but now, some sixty years after the recovery of his verse, it still seems newly decanted, as if—I don't know whether this metaphor should refer to rose water or to wine—it had been salvaged from the sea and the bottles opened and the odor were as sharp and unfamiliar as the day it was bottled.

#### The Organization of His Poems

The poem in which these lines occur, "Meditation 4. Cant. 2.1. I Am the Rose of Sharon," was written in April of 1683. It is, as the title indicates, a meditation on an image from the bride's song in *Song of Solomon*. It is a place to continue an interrogation of Taylor's style and to look at the related issue of the organization of his poems. The poem is organized, like all of the "Preparatory Meditations," as a sort of prayer. Its purpose is not so much union with God, at which the practice of meditation aimed, but preparation for the union that occurred, for Taylor, in the Lord's Supper. Each of the meditations begins by laying out a theme suggested by a scriptural text; the middle part of the poem develops the theme, and the poem ends with a supplication, which is both a way of praising God and an expression of the desire for union with Him.

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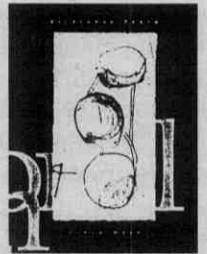
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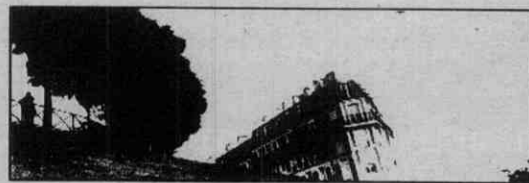
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"Lord blow the Coal: Thy Love Enflame in mee," the first meditation ends. "Yet may I Purse, and thou my Mony bee," ends the second. And the third, more ecstatically, "Lord, breake thy Box of Ointment on my Head." A bed of coals, cash and a purse, a box of ointment: the range and heterogeneity of his imagery is a bit dizzying, as if the entire world existed to be a compendium of likenesses to this relationship.

It is striking, and moving to me, that the very last of the meditations, written more than forty years after these early poems, takes as its theme another line from the *Song of Solomon*, "I am sick of Love." It also ends with a supplication—it is his final supplication—that the gift of his poetry might be accepted. This is a theme throughout the second series of meditations, and it is accompanied often by a sense of the inadequacy of his art. The tone is profoundly subdued:

Had I but better thou shouldst better have.  
I nought withhold from thee through  
nigerdliness,  
But better than my best I cannot save  
From any one, but bring my best to thee.  
If thou acceptst my sick Loves gift I bring  
Thy it accepting makes my sick Love sing.

One of the interesting things that this anguish in the later poems tells us about the intention of Taylor's art, and therefore about the formal organization of the meditations, is that they were intended as an offering, and although Taylor believed that no human action could bring a person to God, he seems to have hoped that his gift would be accepted. This tells us in turn something about the middle part of his poems, in which he is concerned to develop, or at least elaborate, his theme: it is his way of making a gift of his imagination to his God. This explains something to me about the joy, the gid-

diness and strangeness of the early meditations, as well as the feeling of gravity and exhaustion in many of the late ones. This is a subject I will return to shortly, but for now it is enough that we understand what is at stake for Taylor—beside doctrine—in the development of the poems.

Let's look now at Meditation 4. The first two stanzas deploy the theme by making a little allegory:

My Silver Chest a Sparke of Love up locks:  
And out will let it when I can't well Use.  
The gawdy World me Courts t'unlock the Box,  
A motion makes, where Love may pick and  
choose.  
Her Downy Bosom opes, that pedlars Stall,  
Of Wealth, Sports, Honours, Beauty, slickt up  
all.

Love pausing on't, these Clayey Faces she  
Disdains to Court; but Pilgrims life designs,  
And Walks in Gilliards Land, and there doth see  
The Rose of Sharon which with Beauty shines.  
Her Chest Unlocks; the Sparke of Love out  
breaths  
To Court this Rose: and lodgeth in its leaves.

This is quaint enough. So far as vehicle and tenor are concerned, it's a bit hard to know exactly what the silver chest represents, but one does not pause long at this literal level in Taylor. The image itself is probably entirely conventional, but there is something quite pleasing and memorable about that peddler's stall of a downy bosom, and there is a Tayloresque pleasure in the last phrase of the stanza, "slickt up all." The passage has the slight crazing of metaphorical slippage, like a pane of crazed glass, that seems to me so distinctive in Taylor. The speaker in the poem has a silver box, and in the box is a spark of love, which is feminine in gender. Then Love, the spark inside the box carried,

presumably, by the speaker, goes walking in Gilead and encounters a rose, wherewith she—Love—unlocks the box she is in, and out of it breathes the Spark, now converted by a pun into a beau or suitor—this sense of "spark" appears in Shakespeare's *Timon* in about 1600 and was stage slang by the time of Etheredge—who is prepared to court the rose. The last line of the stanza, which is perhaps the only one that is graceful in a traditional way, gives a luxuriant rhythm to its slightly erotic sense of arrival.

The slippage at the literal level has been treated by the critics I have read as either an instance of his crudeness, although most of them have found it a charming crudeness in the way of folk art or have tried to make a case for it as an effect of the baroque. I think it is an effect of the baroque, but saying so doesn't take us very far. I also think that it is charming, although not crude, if by crude one means inadvertent. There are, after all, only a certain number of guesses one can make about this writing. One is that Taylor did not notice the inconsistency or the unsettling malleability of his metaphors. Another is that he noticed and it was in fact an aesthetic effect that he aimed at. A third, somewhere between the two, is that he noticed and didn't mind because it was theological or doctrinal or—perhaps—emotional exactness he was aiming at. A fourth, slightly different, is that he noticed and, although it was not at the center of his intention, he liked the effect of the slippage, liked the freedom and the oddness of it, had what might be thought of as a cheerfully Platonist disregard for mere consistencies that resembles and anticipates in a curious way (as the baroque sometimes does) the attitude of surrealism. To say it another way, it seems likely that he saw and liked the aesthetic and cognitive effects of his imagery. He may have believed they mirrored his mind. In any case

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they became one of the habits of his mind.

Here are the next two stanzas in which he contemplates the rose:

No flower in Garzia Horti shines like this:  
No beauty sweet in all the World so Choice:  
It is the Rose of Sharon sweet, that is  
The Fairest Rose that Grows in Paradise.  
Blushes of Beauty bright, Pure White, and Red  
In Sweats of Glory on Each Leafe doth bed.

Lord lead me into this sweet Rosy Bower:  
Oh! Lodge my Soul in this Sweet Rosy bed:  
Array my Soul with this sweet Sharon flower:  
Perfume me with the Odours it doth shed.  
Wealth, Pleasure, Beauty Spirituall will line  
My pretious Soul, if Sharons Rose be mine.

This is the spark's courting song. He has rejected the downy bosom of the sluttish world and fallen in love with the blushing rose. The writing, like much of Taylor's writing in the meditations, would be conventional if it were not so odd. There is, first of all, something appealing in its exhilaration. The music—"the Fairest Rose that Grows in Paradise"—is in places like this reminiscent of Broadway lyrics. And then there are Taylor's particularities of imagination: the dew on the rose becomes "Sweats of Glory on Each Leafe," and this leads to what can only be described as sexual euphoria in the next two lines (they are hard to read without thinking of Blake's "The Sick Rose" as their underside). And finally there is this sort of showering dispersal of the image. The bower of the rose becomes a bed, and then apparel, and then perfume, and then some luxurious spiritual lining—he does not say what kind, a rose-petal lining, presumably, in place of sable or lamb's wool. And there is also the suggestion in "pretious" that the soul has become a jewel in a rose-petal setting.

These two pairs of stanzas are instances of two ways that Taylor's effects occur. In the first two stanzas, being literal about the allegory—one notices, for example, that the world courts the soul, but the soul is not courted by the rose; that would be contrary to Calvinist doctrine; the rose does the courting—releases the imagination to dream silver boxes and downy bosoms and peddlers' stalls and clayey faces and walks in Gilead and courting sparks in a whirligig of images. In the second pair of stanzas, not being literal in the elaboration of the metaphor of the rose as a blushing lover cascades insensibly into beds and flowery raiments and the soft linings of garments and a jewel.

The next stanzas are characteristic in a different way. George Herbert, in his poem on this trope, had mentioned the restorative properties of roses and hence of Christ, but Taylor the physician-poet is downright methodical in his development of this conceit, and once it has seized his attention, the courtship metaphor is abandoned altogether, having served its purpose. The next passage—in a manner almost Joycean—sits right at the edge of parodying a pharmaceutical manual:

The Blood Red Pretious Syrup of this Rose  
Doth all Catholicons excell what ere.  
Ill Humors all that do the Soule inclose  
When rightly usd, it purgeth out most clear.  
Lord purge my Soul with this Choice Syrup, and  
Chase all thine Enemies out of my land.

The Rosy Oyle, from Sharons Rose extract  
Better than Palma Christi far is found.  
In Gilliards Balm for Conscience when she's  
wrack't  
Unguent Apostolorum for each Wound.  
Let me thy Patient, thou my Surgeon bee.  
Lord, with thy Oyle of Roses Supple me.

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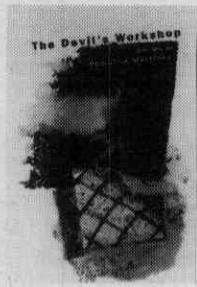


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[The *OED* records uses of *supple* as a transitive verb, meaning "to soften or mollify a wound," from 1526 to 1688. The last use is by Bunyan: "Lord, supple my wounds, pour Thy wine and oil into my sore."]

No Flower there is in Paradise that grows  
Whose Virtues Can Consumptive Souls restore  
But Shugar of Roses made of Sharons Rose  
When Dayly usd, doth never fail to Cure.  
Lord let my Dwindling Soul be dayly fed  
With Sugar of Sharons Rose, its dayly Bread.

[The verb *dwindle* first appeared in print in Shakespeare's plays; it was used to mean a shrinking in size or value; usages with the shading "degenerate" show up in several seventeenth-century texts. "Shugar" was made by crystallizing the juices of many different plants, often for medicinal purposes. The word *succor* derives from one pronunciation.]

God Chymist is, doth Sharons Rose distill.  
Oh! Choice Rose Water! Swim my Soul herein.  
Let Conscience bibble in it with her Bill.  
Its Cordiall, ease doth Heart burns Caused by Sin.  
Oyle, Syrup, Sugar, and Rose Water such.  
Lord, give, give, give; I cannot have too much.

The final stanza in this passage brings us back—with what seems like artistic self-assurance—to the metaphor on which it has been floated:

But, oh! alas! that such should be my need  
That this Brave Flower must Pluckt, stamp,  
squeezed bee,  
And boyld up in its Blood, its Spirits sheed,  
To make a Physick sweet, sure, safe for mee.  
But yet this mangled Rose rose up again  
And in its pristine glory, doth remain.

And the poem concludes with two more stanzas, which gather up its praise and frame its supplication:

All Sweets, and Beauties of all Flowers appeare  
In Sharons Rose, whose Glorious Leaves out vie

In Vertue, Beauty, Sweetness, Glory Cleare,  
The Spangled Leaves of Heavens cleare  
Chrystall Sky.  
Thou Rose of Heaven, Glory's Blossom Cleare  
Open thy Rosie Leaves, and lodge me there.  
My Dear-Sweet Lord, shall I thy Glory meet  
Lodg'd in a Rose, that out a sweet Breath  
breaths.  
What is my way to Glory made thus sweet,  
Strewd all along with Sharons Rosy Leaves.  
I'll walk this Rosy Path: World fawn, or frown  
And Sharons Rose shall be my Rose, and  
Crown.

The middles are usually the best of Taylor's poems. The endings, like this one, sometimes have an air of haphazard recapitulation. But it is not always easy to tell. It's hard to know, for example, whether the triple repetition "Glory Cleare," "heavens cleare Crystall Sky," and "Glory's Blossom Cleare" is a horn flourish of insistence—it picks up on a superior medicine's ability to produce clear purges—or a failure of invention. The one definite invention in it is the final transformation of the dew on the roses into stars in the sky. And that vernacular phrase in the penultimate line—"World fawn, or frown"—seems to try to make some gesture back to the little Bunyanesque allegory with which the poem began. One does not mind the ending, but one notices that when Taylor strings together abstract nouns, he is at his least compelling. One grants the breathless ardor that "In Vertue, Beauty, Sweetness, Glory Cleare" is intended to convey and prefers the strange mix of homeliness and sublimity in the metaphors.

George Herbert addresses this problem of adequate praise in "The Windows":

Lord, how can man preach thy eternall word?  
He is a brittle crazie glasse:  
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford  
This glorious and transcendent place,

To be a window, through thy grace.

But when thou dost anneal in glasse thy storie,  
Making thy life to shine within  
Thy holy Preachers; then the light and glorie  
More rev'rend grows, & more doth win:  
Which else shows watrish, bleak, & thin.

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one  
When they combine and mingle, bring  
A strong regard and aw: but speech alone  
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,  
And in the eare, not conscience ring.

Herbert, as he worked his way out from under the influence of Donne, developed a style of impressive clarity and simplicity, but even he does not do much with a line like "this glorious and transcendent place." He does not, however, risk rapture, so he does not, when he uses this diction, invite the distaste that some of the commentators have expressed toward Taylor's batteries of abstract nouns and adjectives. The style allows Herbert to achieve quietly brilliant effects—"Which else grows watrish, bleak, & thin," "but speech alone / Doth vanish like a flaring thing." Taylor's surfaces are too animated for such accuracies of perception and description. His famous lines, like the ones about the creation in "The Preface" to *Gods Determination*—

Who Spread its Canopy? Or Curtains Spun?  
Who in this Bowling Alley bowld the Sun?

—or the ones in Meditation 8, where his subject is a line from John, "I am the Living Bread"—

Doth he bespeake thee thus, This Soule Bread  
take.  
Come Eate thy fill of this thy Gods White Loafe?  
Its food too fine for Angells, yet come, take  
And Eate thy fill. Its Heavens Sugar Cake.

—come not from precision and purity of diction but from the sense of an unpredictable imagination taking delight in its own inventions. Although

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Meditation 4 ends with the triple insistence of God's clearness, the poem itself elects to be a "crazie glasse." As a writer one might have to choose between the styles of Herbert and Taylor, but as a reader, happily, one does not. Herbert's "The Windows" is a clearly marshaled argument without a word to spare. Taylor's organization, such as it is, is a kind of rough framework on which to spin out the rush of constantly self-transforming metaphors that are his gift: flaring things, one after another.

The third Meditation, "Thy Good Ointment," is one of the strangest of Taylor's poems and one of the most vivid examples of his practice. And more than enough, I think, to give a sense of what "the baroque" means in him. It's a sort of homemade verbal equivalent to a Bernini fountain, sweetly eschatological, and Calvinist to the core. It begins by taking up the odor of ointments:

How sweet a Lord is mine? If any should  
Guarded, Engarden'd, nay, Imbosom'd bee  
In reeches of Odours, Gales of Spices, Folds  
Of Aromaticks, Oh! how sweet was hee?  
He would be sweet, and yet his sweetest Wave  
Compar'de to thee my Lord, no Sweet would  
have.

*Reek* in the seventeenth century was applied—the OED says—to any "dense or unctuous smoke." The modern sense of a disagreeable odor didn't come in until the late nineteenth century. *Fold* was a pen or enclosure; it was also a wrapping or covering and, interestingly, an embrace. Shakespeare, in *Troilus and Cressida*: "Weake wanton Cupid Shall from your necke unloose his amorous fould." *Wave* in the seventeenth century meant both the displaying on an ensign—important for, possibly the source of, the military metaphor to come, as well as any motion of swaying to and fro. Herrick: "A winning wave (deserving note) / In the tempestuous petticoat." The run of "Guarded, Engarden'd, nay, Imbosom'd" is particularly wonderful, I think. He does manage to imbosom us in reeks of odors, gales of spice.

His elaboration in the next stanza is perhaps unnecessary, but the baroque principle seems to be that if you can keep inventing metaphors, you do:

A Box of Ointments, broke; sweetness most  
sweet.  
A surge of spices: Odours Common Wealth,

A Pillar of Perfume: a steaming Reech  
Of Aromatick Clouds: All Saving Health.  
Sweetnesse itself thou art: And I presume  
In Calling of thee Sweet, who art Perfume.

And then, having glossed the scriptural image, he proceeds to the development. Watch what happens. As the poem proceeds, nostrils get mixed up with nipples, and the military metaphor wanders in, with the bore of a gun, called to mind presumably by the shape of nostrils:

But Woe is mee! who have so quick a Sent  
To Catch perfumes puffed out from Pincks, and  
Roses  
And other Muscadalls, as they get Vent,  
Out of their Mothers Wombs to bob our noses.  
And yet thy sweet perfume doth seldom latch  
My Lord, within my Mammulary Catch.

"Muscadalls" are probably muscatel grapes, from which a strong sweet wine came. The Puritans took the grape from England to New England. "These Muscadell grapes," a grower wrote in 1601, "like wel and love cold countries."<sup>7</sup> But there was also a muscadell pear brought from Norfolk to Massachusetts. And best of all, "muscadines" were a kind of sweetmeat perfumed with musk; a cookery book from 1665 says that they went by the name of Kissing Comfits. As for "bob," here is a description of a fight from 1605: "The fellowe . . . got the foole's head under his arme, and bob'd his nose."<sup>8</sup> The "Mother's Womb" is presumably the earth, but that line is wonderfully strange.

The curious, in fact startling, "Mammulary Catch" gets taken up in the next stanza:

Am I denos'de? or doth the Worlds ill sents  
Engarison my nostrills narrow bore?  
Or is my smell lost in these Damps it Vents?  
And shall I never finde it any more?  
Or is it like the Hawks, or Hownds whose breed  
Take stinking Carrion for Perfume indeed?  
  
This is my Case. All things smell sweet to mee:  
Except thy sweetness, Lord. Expell these  
damps.  
Breake up this Garison: and let me see  
Thy Aromaticks pitching in these Camps.  
Oh! let the Clouds of thy sweet Vapours rise,  
And both my Mammularies Circumcise.

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Shall Spirits thus my Mammularies suck?  
(As Witches Elves their teats,) and draw from  
thee  
My Dear, Dear Spirit after fumes of muck?  
Be Dunghill Damps more sweet than Graces  
bee?  
Lord, clear these Caves. These Passes take, and  
keep.  
And in these Quarters lodge thy Odours sweet.

Explicating this is probably as hopeless as explaining a joke, but bear with me. The general idea is pretty clear: have I lost my sense of smell, he asks, that I can't distinguish the scent of the Lord from the foul vapors of the world? *Muck* in the seventeenth century meant, unequivocally, animal dung. This conflict is made elaborate at first by the military metaphor. The nostril becomes the bore of a gun, which suggests the idea of warfare between the Lord and the World, whose army has pitched camp in the speaker's nostrils. And Taylor prays for the Lord's army to expel them—with more puns on the nostril in the ideas of clearing caves and taking passes.

Complicated enough. But "mammulary catch" sets off another set of metaphors that could perhaps have only occurred to a seventeenth-century physician. *Mamilla* refers to the nipple of the female breast. *Mamillary* was a technical term for any nipple-like projection and came to be applied to the papilla of the tongue and nostrils. The *OED* cites Crook, *The Body of Man*, 1615: "The mamillary processes which are the Organes of smelling." By 1648 John Beaumont had made a joke of this bit of technical jargon in *Psyche*: "By the Mammillar Processions, I Embrace those pleasures which my Sweets impart." That clears up "Mammulary Catch" and perhaps even "Mammularies Circumcise," that is, scour my nostrils, which are dulled to the sweetness of the Lord. But it does not clarify "both my Mammularies," even if the phrase means "both my nasal passages," because Taylor's mind has already been nudged from papillae to breasts:

Shall Spirits thus my Mammularies suck?  
(As Witches Elves their teats,) and draw from  
thee  
My Dear, Dear Spirit after fumes of muck?

So, "And both my Mammularies Circumcise" is as surreal as it seems. It refers to no known surgical procedure. He wants the foreskin off the nipples of his spiritual sense of smell. That elves sucking at the teats of witches should wander into this is quite delicious. And there is a final set of puns on *spirit*, which means here not just "soul" or "sprite" but also "wind," conceivably "strong spirits," and most probably "professional kidnappers." The *OED* cites two instances from the seventeenth century: Whitelock, 1645: "An Ordinance agains such who are called Spirits, and use to steal away, and take up children"; and the *London Gazette*, 1686: "The frequent Abuses of a lewd sort of People, called spirits, in Seducing many of his Majesties Subjects to go on Shipboard." It is a wild run.

The poem ends with the supplication, which is smooth and conventional enough, save for the exuberance of the first line, the somewhat less strange second line in which the hair is powdered with the talcum of grace, and the need to tie things up, which introduces food for the nose into the fifth:

Lord, breake thy Box of Ointment on my Head;  
Let thy sweet Powder powder all my hair:  
My Spirits let with thy perfumes be fed  
And make thy Odours, Lord, my nostrills fare.  
My Soule shall in thy sweets then soar to thee:  
I'll be thy Love, thou my sweet Lord shalt bee.

Meditations 3 and 4 are typical of the early med-

itations. They do, in a general way, follow the prescriptions in Richard Baxter's 1650 account of meditative practice, which Professor Martz has demonstrated to inform the organization of meditative poems throughout the period. The organization is tripartite, corresponding, as Martz points out, to the division of the faculties of the mind into memory, understanding, and will. The first part recalls a scriptural text, the second submits it to understanding, and the third disposes the will, although in Taylor's case will doesn't count for much. He simply asks his God to close the gap between them. It is the idea of understanding, the development of the theme, in Taylor that makes this organization seem the roughest of structures. Inside the development it is certainly not rational understanding to which doctrine is submitted but a wild, playful efflorescence of imagination. He makes poems as vigorous, strange, dreamy, and sometimes comic as any Joseph Cornell box, and like Cornell he makes them out of the smallest oddments and particulars of his culture.

Meditations 3 and 4 were not among the poems Thomas Johnson printed in the journal article that announced the discovery of Taylor's manuscript, and they were not among the poems published in the *Poetical Works* of 1937. They were perhaps too peculiar altogether to excite Johnson's admiration, or possibly he decided to introduce Taylor to the world in less eccentric modes. Nor are they included in any of the anthologies of American poetry that I am aware of. What usually represents the early meditations is "Meditation 8. I am the Living Bread," and it is through the lines I quoted earlier—

Come Eat thy fill of this thy Gods White Loafe?  
Its Food too fine for Angells, yet come, take  
And Eat thy fill. Its Heavens Sugar Cake.

—that most readers, if they read him, come to know the mix of homeliness and literalness and imaginative play that characterizes Taylor's images. They also get another Tayloresque line in the last stanza, delicious in its rhythms: "Yee Angells, help: This fill would to the brim / Heav'ns whelm'd-down Chrystall meelee Bowle, yea and higher." That run of six strong stresses does its work triumphantly. A "whelm" was a wooden drainpipe. Originally, whelms were made from tree trunks, split in half vertically, hollowed out, and "whelmed down" or, as the *OED* says, "turned with the concavity downwards to form an arched watercourse." The word is said to survive to the present in Midlands dialect. It's one of the lines that gives me the impression that Taylor's rhythms are at their surest when he is nearest the language of the particulars of his world.

And the opening of the poem is also like Taylor in that it does not—as if he cannot, or like a playwright would not, do without a double plot—simply develop the imagery of bread:

I kening through Astronomy Divine  
The Worlds bright Battlement, wherein I spy  
A Golden Path my Pensill cannot line,  
From that bright Throne unto my Threshold ly.  
And while my puzzled thoughts about it pore  
I finde the Bread of Life in't at my doore.

When that this Bird of Paradise put in  
This Wicker Cage (my Corps) to tweedle praise  
Had peckt the Fruite forbad: and so did fling  
Away its Food; and lost its golden dayes;  
It fell into Celestiall Famine sore:  
And never could attain a morsell more.

Alas! alas! Poore Bird, what wilt thou doe?  
The Creatures field no food for Souls e're gave.  
And if thou knock at Angells doers they show  
An Empty Barrell: they no soul bread have.

Alas! Poore Bird, the Worlds White Loafe is  
done  
And cannot yield thee here the smallest Crumb.

This movement from the stars to the lie of a threshold, and the introduction of the bird of the soul tweedling in its cage, and the move from that to the pecked fruit of Eden and celestial famine are very different from the conceits of Donne and Herbert, which are brought under the control of the intellectual force of their arguments. The cascade of metaphor and analogy in Taylor is restless and vertiginous, and it was probably the formulaic structure of meditative verse that allowed him both to loosen his imagination and give it a form. This perhaps explains why, having come on the form of the meditations in 1682, he persisted in it for forty years. It gave him access, as John Milton described it in *The Reason of Church Government*, to "what the mind at home in the spacious circuits of her musing hath liberty to propose to herself."

The term *baroque* was introduced into critical discourse about art by the German scholar Heinrich Wölfflin. He used it to describe the difference between what he saw as the harmonies of the high Renaissance and what came after. "The Baroque," he observed, "never offers us perfection and fulfillment, or the static calm of 'being,' only the unrest of change and the tension of transience."<sup>9</sup> It was this, perhaps, that the form of the meditative lyric allowed Taylor both to explore and to fend off, just as the worldly specifics in his poems, the processes of brewing and baking and metallurgy, the unguents and powders and medicines, the children's games and gambling games, allowed him to celebrate a world he was bound in conscience to deplore.

#### His Development

It's hard to read Taylor without wondering where these poems came from or to wonder that they came at all, let alone that they came from what was, literally, the remotest edge of European civilization. When Ezra Pound invented the belatedness of Hugh Selwyn Mauberly—

For three years, out of key with his time,  
He strove to resuscitate the dead art  
Of poetry; to maintain "the sublime"  
In the old sense . . .

—he did not have before him the example of Taylor's belatedness. John Donne died in 1631, George Herbert two years later. Richard Crashaw was dead in 1649, when Taylor was five years old. Henry Vaughan, twenty years older than Taylor, died in 1695, but he had written and published almost all his poetry by 1655, when Taylor was thirteen years old. Long before Taylor arrived in New England, the style of English poetry had changed, as styles do. This was already reflected in the first book of poetry to come from New England, Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, which was published in 1650. Bradstreet's poems, written twenty or so years before any Taylor poems that can be dated, were nevertheless much closer to the English style in midcentury. Her large, ambitious poems were skillful, learned, and written in the new smooth couplets that were becoming fashionable. They were also pretty conventional. Here are some lines about summer, from the set of poems on the four seasons:

Now go those frolic swains, the shepherd lads,  
To wash the thick clothed flocks with pipes full  
glad  
In the cool streams they labour with delight  
Rubbing their dirty coats till they look white;  
Whose fleece when finely spun and deeply dy'd  
With robes thereof kings have been dignifi'd.<sup>10</sup>

It was the sound in poetry that people then ad-

mired. Now it glazes the eyes, both the rhythm and the diction. Nothing in it is really seen. And although the knowledge that the New England economy, like the economy of Bradstreet's native East Anglia, was based on sheep raising gives the subject some force, the conventional images—compare them to the smell of the barnyard in Taylor—drain it away.

The poems of Bradstreet that we read today are, for the most part, the personal ones that she did not publish in her lifetime. These lines, for example, are from a poem addressed to her husband. She was about to give birth to a child, which was, as she knew, a risky business. She uses the couplet again, but listen to the difference:

How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,  
How soon't may be thy lot to lose thy friend,  
We both are ignorant, yet love bids me  
These farewell lines to recommend to thee,  
That when the knot's untied that made us one,  
I may seem thine, who in effect am none.

It's *soon't* that tells us how closely she is listening to her own voice; it's a bit of speech one can still hear among country people in Norfolk and Suffolk. And there is this, from another poem to her husband, which carries the same plainness and earnestness: "If ever two were one, then surely we. / If ever man were loved by wife, then thee." The rest of the poem is conventional, but these lines in Bradstreet with their adamant and Protestant plainness, their attention to speech and the inner movement of feeling, seem almost to leap forward 140 years; they anticipate both the strictures of Wordsworth in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* and the sound of his poems.

Taylor, when he arrived in Boston in 1668, at the age of twenty-six, seems to have brought with him the poetic practices of 1633, when both Donne's poems and Herbert's *The Temple* were first published. It's not possible to date his early work with any exactness, but there is evidence that the miscellaneous poems were written before 1691, the year that Taylor made a fair copy of the first forty meditations and the eight Occasional Poems. And the miscellaneous poems are numbered. The sixth of them, "Upon Wedlock and the Death of Children," can be dated to the events that occasioned the poem, the deaths of two of his children in infancy, the youngest of whom died in 1682. The poem after that, "Upon the Sweeping Flood," is dated by Taylor to August 1683. If this is an indication that the poems are arranged in chronological order by date of composition, it allows us to assume that the first five of these poems were written before 1682 and may have been written in the order in which they occur in the manuscript.<sup>11</sup>

How much before 1682, the year he began the meditations, they were written, it's not, as far as I know, possible to say. I have seen attributions that suggest they were written after 1673 (when Taylor was about thirty) on the grounds that the earliest of his poems that can be dated, the acrostic verses contained in letters to his first wife when he was courting her, are crude and that the miscellaneous poems, because they represent an advance over this apprentice work, must have been written afterward. The argument doesn't seem very persuasive given that it's perfectly possible to write quite bad poetry after having written some that isn't. So what we are left to guess is that the first five of the miscellaneous poems were written before Taylor began the meditations and that they represent, possibly in the order that he wrote them, the apprentice work he wished to preserve for himself.

In any case the first of these poems is a pure imitation of Donne. It's entitled "When Let by Rain." It has a Donne-like stanza, with lines of irregular

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length and an invented rhyme scheme, Donne's colloquial diction, his abruptness of entry, and his subject, ambivalence about departure. The first stanza looks like this:

Ye Flipping Soule,  
Why dost between the Nippers dwell?  
Not stay, nor goe. Not yea, nor yet Controle.  
Doth this doe well?  
Rise journey'ng when the skies fall weeping  
Showers.  
Not o're nor under th'Clouds and Cloudy Powers.

The development is Taylor. He cannot settle on a metaphor:

Is this th'Effect,  
To leaven thus my Spirits all?  
To make my heart a Crabtree Cask direct?  
A Verjuice Hall?  
As Bottle Ale, whose Spirits prisond nurst  
When jog'd, the bung with Violence doth burst?

Shall I be made  
A sparkling Wildfire Shop  
When my dull Spirits at the Fireball trade  
Do frisk and hop?  
And while the Hammer doth the Anvill pay,  
The fireball matter sparkles ery way.

I will resist the temptation to gloss this, but it's evident that we are already in the territory of his love of the details of the home crafts. He does not do what Donne so often does, marshal the metaphors into a surprising argument. He takes the smithy metaphor through one more stanza and then, in a sudden and terse ending, drops it:

One sorry fret,  
An anvill Sparke, rose higher  
And in thy Temple falling almost set  
The house on fire.  
Such fireballs drooping in the Temple Flame  
Burns up the building: Lord forbid the same.

What this suggests is that he took from Donne a racy freedom of diction and the use of the conceit, but he was not tempted by, or up to, or persuaded by the ingenuity of Donne's intellectual force.

The next poem, "Upon a Spider Catching a Fly," will remind some readers, in its subject, of Donne's "The Flea," but its style, the short-lined, knotty stanza, is much closer to Herbert. The language is brilliant, playful, and offers a more intensely observed description of the natural world than anything in either Donne or Herbert. It begins by addressing the spider:

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 foul therein.  
Whom yet the 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.

Then he contrasts the spider's treatment of the wasp with its treatment of a fly:

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

This is very good writing, and the stanza form has a comic daintiness, or wariness. After it he draws out the theological implications and the moral in an argument that I, and others, have found rather confusing. So far as his development is concerned, what's interesting about the poem is the language ("Thou sorrow venom Elfe" could hardly be bettered), the humor, and the closeness of observation. It is certainly more disciplined about sticking with the metaphor, but it does not have what goes with this in Herbert, the deftness and clarity of thought. And, in fact, Taylor doesn't quite stick with the metaphor. At the end of the poem he abandons the insects, assuring the Lord that if He frees humankind from the spider's net of the world,

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

And ends, one also notices, with an English, not a North American, bird.

The next poem, "Upon a Wasp Child with Cold," returns to the subject of insects. It's written in tetrameter couplets, a form much more congenial to midcentury writers. He must have been working in this form at about the same time Andrew Marvell was, and there are passages in which he deploys it so brilliantly and playfully that one wishes he had explored it a little more. Here, for example, is the description of the wasp dealing with an icy northern wind:

Doth turn, and stretch her body small,  
Doth Comb her velvet Capitall.  
As if her little brain pan were  
A Volume of Choice precepts cleare.  
As if her sattin jacket hot  
Contained Apothecaries Shop  
Of Natures receipts, that prevails  
To remedy all her sad ailes,  
As if her velvet helmet high  
Did turret rationality.

The poem ends, in less distinguished fashion, with a wish to learn from the wasp a nimble spirit in the world's cold winds.

The fourth miscellaneous poem, "Huswifery," is the one by which Taylor is most widely known. It's written in the Herbert stanza he was to use in the meditations. It has Taylor's technological thoroughness, and, like Bradstreet's lines, it describes a principal feature of the colonial English domestic economy; he looks at what happens to the wool once Bradstreet's swains have sheared the sheep, and he turns it into an ingenious lesson in Calvinist theology. Reading it, one feels that it must have been the very poem that a scholar looking for a Puritan metaphysical poet, composing homely verses on the colonial frontier, might have written. But it is not at all typical of Taylor, mainly because it is—although one might not notice if one doesn't know his other work—humorless and static:

Make me, O Lord, thy Spining Wheele  
complete.  
Thy Holy Worde my Distaff make for mee.  
Make mine Affections thy Swift Flyers neate  
And make my Soule thy holy Spool to bee.  
My Conversation make to be thy Reelee  
And reele the yarn theron spun of thy Wheele.  
Make me thy Loom then, knit therein this  
Twine:  
And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:  
Then weave the Web thyselfe. The yarn is fine.  
Thine Ordinances make my Fulling Mills.  
Then dy the same in Heavenly Colours Choice,  
All pinkt with Varnisht 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 Cloath'd in Holy robes for glory.

It is his most perfect poem in Herbert's mode, but it is certainly not his liveliest. And it is not where the drama of his writing lay, in that cross between the literalness that's in this poem, the attention to the stuff of the world, and his teeming, endlessly transforming imagination. Nor does the poem contain the great peaks and abysses of emotion that the meditations suggest were the core of his spiritual experience. It seems a pity, for that reason, that this is the poem by which he is so often represented. It is well enough made, and the working out of the metaphor has its virtue, but it does not get at what is most his own in Taylor's verse. Hopkins's description of a "Pied Beauty" seems near the mark—"All things counter, original, spare, strange; / Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)"—although Taylor at his best is hardly spare.

#### His Resonance

It was probably sometime after "Huswifery" (but not long after, given that he had found his way to Herbert's six-line stanza) that Taylor undertook the meditations. I think the best of them are in the fifty poems or so of the first series, written between 1682, when he was forty years old, and 1692, when he was fifty. Something got released in him in those poems. It was partly no doubt the form that freed him to make his fountaining inventions, but it must also have been that it gave him a way to probe the relation on which he had staked his life. To examine this argument requires a brief look at Taylor's theological convictions. I have never understood how practicing Calvinists dealt with the conviction of their absolute helplessness before their God or how, having once experienced election, they sustained the experience of it. I think it is no accident that very early in the meditations—it is the fourth poem in the series—Taylor placed one of three poems that are not based on scriptural citations and do not seem to have been texts chosen for his sermons on the occasion of the Lord's Supper. Each of them has a separate title. This poem is called "The Experience." It seems to be an account of his own conversion experience, which seems to have occurred when he received the sacrament.

Over the course of his life Taylor's theology—he lived into his middle eighties—grew to be antique. His conservatism apparently tried the patience of his church, and the issue on which he resisted change was just this one of who was eligible to receive the sacrament. The doctrine of his youth was clear. No one was permitted to the Lord's Supper who had not had a conversion experience and who was not therefore absolutely certain of salvation. Taylor's lifelong nemesis and rival was a popular minister in nearby Northampton named Solomon Stoddard, who insisted, as Norman Grabo puts it, "that no man could know he was saved with absolute certainty" and concluded that "the only safe course, therefore, was to admit all well-behaved Christians to the sacrament in hopes that they might thereby secure saving grace."<sup>12</sup> Taylor resisted this view vehemently, and over the course of his life the tide of opinion turned against him. His tenacity, this poem suggests, was rooted in the deepest experience of his life.

And it's interesting that this issue, which preoccupied him as a minister, bears so directly on the subject and occasion of the meditations. It makes a reading of "The Experience" illuminating because the poem must have been written in

Westfield in the early years of his ministry about the moment in his earlier life that confirmed his election and his faith and drove him out of England. It gives us a glimpse into the experience on which his convictions and his sacramental poems were based:

Oh! that I alwayes breath'd in such an aire,  
As I suckt in, feeding on sweet Content!  
Disht up unto my Soul ev'n in that pray're  
Pour'de out to God over last Sacrament.  
What Beam of Light wrapt up my sight to finde  
Me neerer God than ere Came in my minde?

Most strange it was! But yet more strange that  
shine

Which filld my Soul then to the brim to spy  
My Nature with thy Nature all Divine  
Together joynd in Him that's Thou, and I.  
Flesh of my Flesh, Bone of my Bone. There's  
run

Thy Godhead, and my Manhood in thy Son.

Oh! that that Flame which thou didst on me  
Cast

Might me enflame, and Lighten ery where.  
Then Heaven to me would be less at last  
So much of heaven I should have while here.  
Oh! Sweet though Short! Ile not forget the  
same.

My neerness, lord, to thee did me Enflame.

I'le Claim my Right: Give place, ye Angells  
Bright.

Ye further from the Godhead stande than I.  
My Nature is your Lord; and doth Unite  
Better than Yours unto the Deity.

Gods Throne is first and mine is next: to you  
Onely the place of Waiting-men is due.

Oh! that my Heart, thy Golden Harp might bee  
Well tun'd by Glorious Grace, that e'ry string  
Screw'd to the highest pitch, might unto thee  
All Praises wrapt in sweetest Musick bring.  
I praise thee, Lord, and better praise thee  
would

If what I had, my heart might ever hold.

Not a very strong poem, I think. Taylor does better with some of these themes elsewhere, for example in Meditation 44, in the second series:

You Holy Angells, Morning-Stars, bright Sparks,  
Give place: and lower your top gallants. Shew  
Your top-saile Conjues to our slender barks:  
The highest honour to our nature's due.  
Its neerer Godhead by the Godhead made  
Than yours in you that never from God stray'd.

What's interesting about it though is that the poem is not about having had the experience once and for all but about having had it and longing for it, for the reassurance of the sensation of being at one with divinity. And also that this longing takes the form of desire for adequate praise:

Oh! that my Heart, thy Golden Harp might bee  
Well tun'd by Glorious Grace, that ev'ry string  
Screw'd to the highest pitch, might unto thee  
All Praises wrapt in sweetest Musick bring.

It tells us something about the forty-year labor of the meditations and connects Taylor's poetic and spiritual practices to a permanent state of distance and supplication, which he hoped his imagination might—but must also have believed could not—overcome, at least in this world.

It's this sense of longing, I think, that makes him a poet who still resonates with readers altogether remote from his theology. His euphoria and anguish, rooted in his faltering belief in the power of his own imagination, seems in many ways to echo down to the present. It makes me think, first

of all, of the Coleridge of "Dejection: An Ode," suffering from "A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear, / A stifled drowsy unimpassion'd grief" and hoping that the sounds of a coming storm "Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give, / Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!"

The terms are different. Although Coleridge addresses his semiallegorical "Lady" in much the same terms that Taylor addresses his God, Coleridge seems to think, as Taylor, at least officially, could not, that the solution could come from himself:

Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth  
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud  
Enveloping the Earth—

Still one feels, listening to him, that Taylor and Coleridge are engaged in the same conversation. This is clearly not a matter of influence. The connection, I think, is this: at least since Taylor's time, the dilemmas of English Protestant spirituality have visited English poetry with the problem of sustaining an imaginative and inward relationship to whatever the sources of meaning are.

It's not quite the case that if you substitute Nature for God and imagination for grace, Taylor and Coleridge are writing the same poem—you have to squint a little to blur the philosophical niceties—but it is nearly the case. That's one of the reasons why it has come to seem that, when the English metaphysical tradition died with Edward Taylor in the remote fastnesses of New England in 1729, American poetry had already begun. A hundred and forty years after his death, a little further up the Connecticut River watershed, Emily Dickinson would be writing lines that seem to take up the same issues:

There's a certain Slant of light,  
Winter Afternoons—  
That oppresses, like the Heft  
Of Cathedral Tunes—

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference  
Where the Meanings, are—

And eighty years after that, downriver in Hartford, Wallace Stevens, with neither a living God nor the wounding absence of God to refer meaning to, would still be revolving the problem in a poem called, appropriately enough, "The Poems of Our Climate." In it he is meditating on newly fallen snow and wrestling with the longing for a perfection elsewhere:

Say even that this complete simplicity  
Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed  
The evilly compounded, vital I  
And made it fresh in a world of white,  
A world of clear water, brilliant-edged.  
Still one would want more, one would need  
more,  
More than a world of white and snowy scents.

There would still remain the never-resting  
mind,  
So that one would want to escape, come back  
To what had been so long composed.  
The imperfect is our paradise.  
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,  
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,  
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

I think it's in this way, his theology aside, that I find myself reading Taylor. Some critics have taken Taylor's complaints about the crudeness of his art as confirmation of their judgment of it. I think that's both to misjudge his poems and to miss his point. There is art enough in his poems, and there

## New Titles from New Issues

**Household Mechanics**  
by Sarah Mangold  
Foreword by C.D. Wright  
Winner of the 2001 New Issues Poetry Prize

"Awareness begins at home, 'eye level with the cake,' or so one could infer from Sarah Mangold's *Household Mechanics*, a disquieting review of indirect disclosures, internal churnings, and palpable notions... The voice is consistent, distant. The sentence is disjointed; the thinking continuous..."  
—from the foreword by C.D. Wright



**Côte Blanche**  
by Martha Serpas  
Foreword by Harold Bloom

"Martha Serpas is, in a highly individual way, a Catholic devotional poet from Louisiana, and she has perfected this, her first book, across fifteen years. Many rereadings persuade me that a double handful of these poems may achieve permanence."  
—from the foreword by Harold Bloom

**Something Black in the Green Part of Your Eye**  
by Kevin Cantwell

"'Song of the Black Corona,' 'Choral Lines from the Sumerian,' the title poem, 'The Wooden Trap'—these poems say that the world is on fire but only the steadiest and most masterful hand can show us the burning. Kevin Cantwell's steady and masterful poems blend poise and intimacy in a style that is his own and built for the ages."  
—Frank Bidart



**In the Evening of No Warning**  
by Kevin Clark

"Kevin Clark's new volume of poetry, *In the Evening of No Warning*, wears the anxious velvet mantle of Time gone magical with sleights of hand... This is a wonderful book."  
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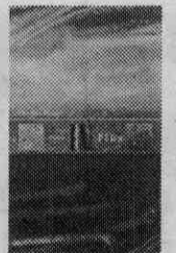
**Night with Drive-by Shooting Stars**  
by Jim Daniels

Jim Daniels' latest collection bears witness to a life both mis- and well-spent: to the family, remembered and new; to the melancholy pull of drugs and casual sex; to growing up; and to the only tenable way of growing old, which is to embrace every small joy even as one laments its brevity. *Night with Drive-by Shooting Stars* rages against poetic and existential complacency.



**Flux**  
by Cynthia Hogue

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—David St. John



**Autobiography of So-and-so: Poems in Prose**  
by Maurice Kilwein Guevara

"Guevara's attention to organic cycles of growth and decay infuses the poems with a tenebrous resonance that always comes ineffably back to earth... The powerful storytelling and nuanced imagery of these cross-cultural imaginings should draw acclaim..."  
—Publishers Weekly



**When the Moon Knows You're Wandering**  
by Ruth Ellen Kocher  
Winner of the 2001 Green Rose Prize

"Ruth Ellen Kocher is remarkably attuned to 'the overture of the object,' the intimate disclosures of rain, bougainvillea, sweet carrot... I think anyone opening this book will discover 'the singular way inanimate things come to love us/by giving us back some of ourselves.'" —Allison Funk



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could never be, for him, art enough in the flawed words. It's that that makes the final poem in the meditations, written when he was eighty-one, so moving. The scripture he is meditating on at the end also comes from the *Song of Solomon*: "I am sick of Love." By some last irony, the first stanza is not entirely legible. In Stanford's edition it reads like this:

Heart sick my Lord heart sick of Love to thee!  
 \*\*\*\*\* pain'd in Love oh see  
 Its parchments ready to crack, it was so free.  
 It so affects true love \*\*\*\*\*  
 As taken \*\*\*\*\* sends my Lords pledge  
 But seeing its so small and hence not fledged.

But it is fledged enough, although it looks like the metaphors, after Taylor's fashion, have mixed up a book and a bird. ◀

#### NOTES

1. Austin Warren, "Edward Taylor's Poetry: Colonial Baroque," *Kenyon Review* 3 (summer 1941): 355-71.
2. From "The Reflexion." Quotations from Taylor's poems come from *The Poems of Edward Taylor*, ed. Donald Stanford (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).
3. Wiggleworth's remarks occur in "The Praise of Eloquence" (notebook located in the New England Historical and Genealogical Society), cited by Karl Keller, *The Example of Edward Taylor* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), 304.
4. Louis Martz, foreword to Stanford, *The Poems of Edward Taylor*, xii-xvii.
5. For an account of the origins of the Puritan migration, see David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). There is also a study of Leicestershire pronunciation in Taylor's rhymes. See Bernie Eugene Russell, "Dialectical and Phonetic Features of Edward Taylor's Rhymes: A Brief Study Based upon a Computer Concordance of His Poems," 6 vols., Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1973.
6. In *Albion's Seed* Fischer offers several examples of the sharp differences between East Anglian and Midlands speech. Horses in East Anglia *neighed*; in the Midlands they *whinnied*. East Anglians were *scared*, when folk from the Midlands were *frightened*. Rotten wood was *dozie* in the Midlands, a word Taylor uses in the phrase "Dozie Beam." He

also uses *millipuff* for *fuzzball*. The OED gloss of this word is particularly happy. It cites Josselyn, *Voyage to New England*, in 1674: "Fuss-balls, mullipuffes, called by the Fishermen Wolves-farts, are to be found plentifully." See also Craig Carver, *American Regional Dialects: A Word Geography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987).

7. OED, s.v. "muscatel."
8. OED, s.v. "bob."
9. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, trans. Kathrin Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966). The book appeared in German in 1888. Wölfflin's remark is quoted from Harold B. Segal, *The Baroque Poem: A Comparative Survey* (New York: Dutton, 1974), 16.
10. Quotations from Bradstreet's poems are from *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967). For the three quotations I use here, see, respectively, pp. 68 ("The Four Seasons of the Year"), 224 ("Before the Birth of One of Her Children"), and 225 ("To My Dear and Loving Husband").
11. See the discussion of chronology in Thomas Davis, *A Reading of Edward Taylor* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 15-17, 48-49.
12. Norman Grabo, *Edward Taylor* (Boston: Twayne, 1961), 32.

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