Anne Bradstreet and Mary White Rowlandson: an Escape From Puritan Captivity

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Alguns escritores conseguem exprimir sentimentos e crenças que se opõem de forma subtil às expectativas ideológicas e religiosas das comunidades em que se inserem. Os feitos literários de Anne Bradstreet e de Mary White Rowlandson são tanto mais notáveis se tivermos em conta o facto de terem vivido e criado no seio de comunidades puritanas, numa época em que a própria sobrevivência física se encontrava em risco constante. Convivendo quotidianamente com os mistérios e ameaças de um continente desconhecido, emigrantes numa terra estranha e confinadas às regras rígidas de um comportamento "feminino", estas mulheres, no entanto, adquiriram vozes poéticas próprias com as quais exprimiram sentimentos pessoais, numa época em que a literatura evidenciava objectivos estritamente racionais.

My decision to write about Anne Bradstreet's and Mary Rowlandson's writing sprung from a previous personal interest in the way some writers (male and female) somehow manage to express personal feelings and beliefs which subtly go against the current ideology and religious expectations of the communities of which they are a part. Bradstreet's and Rowlandson's achievements are even greater, if we remember that they lived and created in Puritan communities, in a time when primary energies had necessarily to be directed to pressing matters of mere physical survival. Living door-to-door with the threatening mysteries of the wilderness, emigrants in a strange land, and confined to strict gender rules, nonetheless these women acquired individual poetic voices in which to express personal feeling, in a time when literature was stern and serious and aimed to strict rationality.

Anne Bradstreet was one of the first North American poets, and her book of poems *The Tenth Muse* obtained considerable success. Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative was a best seller, both in America and in other countries. The fact that both came to acquire a large number of readers in their time apparently must, at first analysis, mean that their writing corresponded to the most popular genres of their time and that it corroborated the underlying Puritan power structure of their communities. Besides, the publication of women writing also had to mean that the content had already been supervised and sanctioned by the spiritual leaders, all of them men, since women writing was seen as potentially dangerous and virtually disruptive of the very cornerstones of Puritan society. The interpretation of written text – especially the Holy Scriptures – and intellectual production under the form of literary creation – usually sermons and rephrasing of Bible extracts – was, undoubtedly, a man's job: "[I]ndeed, intellectual activity of any sort on the part

of women was perceived as potentially harmful and overtly taxing, due to the frailty of feminine reason." (Castillo, 1995: 38) Women were not supposed to be capable of correct interpretation of sacred texts, let alone of literary creation. Dangerous tendencies like those from the part of women were violently repressed and condemned, on religious and social grounds – the case of Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian controversy is perhaps the most famous instance of the deep-seated Puritan uneasiness and prejudice towards women's potential for creation: "[P]rejudice was rationalised by religion in Puritan society, that to a great extent prejudicial and religious beliefs were indistinguishable." (Kibbey, 1986) Therefore, every element of the Puritan *ethos* was based on the notion of masculine superiority and its corollary, feminine compliance: "It has repeatedly been demonstrated that in Puritan society, the most highly valued characteristics in women were those related to passivity and submissiveness." (Castillo, 1995: 38))

In the case of Anne Bradstreet, transgression seems to be present, first of all, in the genre itself. In fact, Puritans did not appreciate poetry. They mistrusted it, most of all when it was used to express personal feeling and emotion. There was a dangerous subjectivity to it, a potentially subversive display of personal emotion, which could constitute a menace to Puritan principles of self-contention: the danger of it lied not so much in that poetry implied self-analysis, but in the fact that poetry depicted naked emotions, and personal and unmediated feelings. Self-analysis was indeed a part of Puritan religious upbringing, but it was only profitable to the individual and to the rest of the community when followed by a strict categorisation. Experience had to be classified, made to represent an example for self and others, in order to reinforce the idea of community. The exemplary nature of experience imposed by the Puritan *ethos* denied the uniqueness of the individual and of the experience itself. Every individual was expected to reflect upon the events of his / her life and offer them to interpretation as instances of divine wisdom.

It is true that most of the poems published in *The Tenth Muse* are curiously impersonal in tone, as befits a Puritan writer. Her famous "fours", such as "The Four Elements" or "Of the Four Humours in Mans Constitution" are clearly indebted to English Renaissance writers she especially admired. They present what is generally known as a "masculine" type of versification, full of erudite references. These longer poems could not be considered a real threat to the Puritan sense of community, but would certainly be deemed utterly useless: they did not reflect upon actual fact; they gave no contribution to the religious enlightenment of others – they were certainly considered as the idle pastime of a lady with literary delusions. Even those who decided to send the manuscripts for publication in London without her being aware of it found it necessary to vouch for her veracity. The prefaces written by several

male friends and acquaintances on that occasion let show some amazement and wonder about the fact that such poems could come from the pen of a woman, which was quite natural for Puritan ideology. Thus, the prefaces work as a legitimising frame: they refer to a woman's writing, but one that has been duly read and approved. Her strength of character and originality of writing were considered as exceptional by her male entourage, so much that they secretly took care of the publication of her works. Notwithstanding this fact, we know for certain that she was criticised by many because of her literary efforts and that many thought that she ought to dedicate her exclusive attention to her domestic chores. It is therefore surprising that only with the support and encouragement of a few family members she managed to engage in her writing in such a discouraging environment. She had to brave very adverse conditions, and the worst of all were the geographic wilderness and the Puritan wilderness. However, she persevered both by temperament and by religious upbringing. She kept on writing in spite of all the difficulties she had to face – as a matter of fact, she is most remembered by the poems which reflect upon the troubles and afflictions in her life. Clearly, her writing was, for her, a useful and creative outlet for the pressures inherent to her life of seclusion. It is possible to detect in them an intense voice, quiet in tone but at the same time firm and joyful, affirming and commenting on the simple facts that constituted her daily life: the birth of a child; the separation from a husband she loved; the individual characters of her children; her ambivalent feelings towards her recently published book of poems – in all these situations, her writing clearly represented her own interpretation of events, an act of independence against established interpretative canons: "In sober phrases, without striking imagery or simile, in simple end-stopped couplets rhyming mainly on monosyllables, the writer says what is imperative for her to say." (White, 1971: 202)

It is true that we can detect an inner sense of contention in all of her writings. Her "defiance" is not overt, it is always to be found beneath the immediate surface. Defiance, for instance, is the fact that she clearly sees herself as a writer. She never denies any of the traditional roles allotted to women; on the contrary, she seems to rejoice in them. But in addition to being a dutiful wife and mother, she wants to be recognised as a competent Puritan writer. Her art doesn't aim to distinguish her from the other individuals: Anne Bradstreet is undoubtedly a Puritan writer, as well as a woman, since her sole purpose is to glorify God: "[I]t was within a Puritan Aesthetic that Anne Bradstreet aspired and wrote. What is remarkable is that so many of her verses satisfy a larger aesthetic [.]" (Rich, 1981: XIX) This happens because in spite of being a woman and a Puritan, Bradstreet escapes the prevailing didactic orientation of Puritan literature writing. She achieves individualism by means of an apparently slight deviation: "Her individualism lies in her choice of material rather then in her style." (Ibid.)

Bradstreet's poem "The Author to Her Book" embodies this dual voice of the mother / writer. Her book is the result of a creative birth. This is another sort of motherhood that she also reclaims to herself, in that she gave birth to the poems, as much as she gave birth to her eight children. She feels elated about all her creations, joyful despite all the flaws she detects in them. This parallelism undoubtedly felt by Bradstreet between literary creation and motherhood is also brilliantly exposed in verse 42 of John Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1959):

> When by me in the dusk my child sits down
> I am myself. Simon, if that's loose,
> Let me wiggle it out.
> You'll get a bigger one there, & bite.
> How they loft, how their sizes delight and grate.
> The proportioned, spiritless poems accumulate.
> And they publish them
> Away in brutish London, for a hollow crown."

In her Prologue to her book, Anne Bradstreet effectively summarises her attitude towards public recognition and her positioning in a patriarchal society such as hers. First of all, she duly places herself in a position of declared inferiority to the literary accomplishments of men. Very cunningly, she explicitly states that her own writing is not meant as a threat to masculine achievements. Her own Muse is weak and flawed: "A weak or wounded brain admits no cure." (Lauter, 1994: 292) In the first part of her prologue, Bradstreet is internalising and absorbing every possible objection or criticism to her literary work. Thus, she is very effectively establishing a dialogue with her detractors inside the very conceptual frame that is being criticised. Possible objections are put forward and cast aside in an apparently humble attitude, dismissed as unnecessary because of the lowly status of such feminine writing. Then, the poem takes a turning in style and content. After the first pacification, the poet strikes back, making a courageous defence of women's worth. A poisoned dart is shot to those who criticise her literary activities: "I am obnoxious to each carping tongue/Who says my hand a needle better fits" (Ibid); another goes to those who are unable to believe that a woman can actually write anything original: "For such despite they cast on female wits:/If What I do prove well, it won't advance,/They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance." (Ibid).

After these attacks, the author – rather shrewdly- retreats again to a safer ground, acknowledging men's superiority: they have the precedence, so they can be generous and let women have their place as well: their "thyme or parsley wreath" will only make men's golden crown of glory shine more brilliantly. This masterpiece of cleverness and ingenious cajoling of male vanity demonstrates Bradstreet's capacity for understanding her community

and adopting the only attitude that could ensure any kind of public recognition to her work.

In rather the same way, Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative had to have male sanctioning in order to be published. Rowlandson had an initial advantage: hers was a most popular genre in North America. In fact, captivity narratives were best-sellers, and they provided Puritan readers with exciting stories about forbidden themes: "For a readership bored with the stiff platitudes of Victorian horsehair morality, the stories of those who had lived among the Indians proved to be very titillating indeed [...] Then as now in the publishing industry, sex, violence and adventure were highly marketable commodities, and as a result captivity narratives sold like hotcakes." (Castillo, 1995:54).

According to Puritan standards, Rowlandson's narrative demanded a double scrutiny: it had to be edited by the religious leaders to make sure that such experiences among the "heathens" contained no harmful and demonistic elements to the rest of the community; and it had to be "purged" of excessive or improper display of womanly feeling which could become the seed of religious doubts. This point is especially relevant in a narrative such as Rowlandson's, which presents a highly personal tale of astonishment and bewilderment when facing the totally unexpected. The publication of this narrative depended on the approval of Puritan ideology, and she knew it well. Narratives such as Rowlandson's were useful as significational supplements to the Scriptures, thus helping to legitimise the prevailing spirituality in the Puritan community. Increase Mather, its editor, meant it to be a tale of exemplification: its usefulness would lie on its serving as an example for the other members of the community, first, of God's punishment for our sins, and secondly, of God's forgiveness when repentance duly came. Rowlandson's narrative is important for Mather (and everything he stands for) because its author is a witness from within; for a while, she was a part of the wilderness, and her narrativised -- and, of course, highly sanitised – experience can be a tool for Puritan ideology to encompass human living. Her captivity is therefore seen as a mere instance of the endless possibilities of human experience, and what makes it valuable for Mather as a religious leader is the writer's direct and immediate exposure to it. Accordingly, Rowlandson is to find evidence in her remembrances of recession that could fortify Puritan faith. Most times she tries to abide by her instructions, in part because she was a Puritan herself, and also because she knew that abiding was her only possibility of acquiring a public voice; nevertheless, she (sometimes unwittingly) escapes and questions Puritan ideology, and there we see that she wants not only to confirm, but also to affirm. Rowlandson's narrative intends to glorify God and that is its main objective. On the other hand, it lets show a process of transformation: it is not just the story of a common

housewife captured by the Indians who is later restored to her former life. The narrative elicits the difference between a previous state of affairs and after-captivity one, which can never be the same as before. Some points in her narrative escape the layer of Puritan conditioning that attempts to superimpose it, thus shedding some light on questions carefully evaded by the public discourse.

Rowlandson's incursion into the wilderness is an experience that contains in itself the seeds of subversion: the wilderness is inexplicable, out of bounds for Puritan minds: it escapes categorisation and it becomes difficult to read according to Puritan typology. Sometimes she finds elements that do not conform exactly to a Puritan world vision, even if it happens against her own will. This disobedience *a contrario* corresponds to an individual margin of self-expression where her own will to interpret is foreground. In fact, her narrative consists in a desperate attempt to make sense out of the unknown, and also, as Mitchell Breitwieser very accurately points out, a work of mourning. The conclusion of the verbal narrative doesn't put an end to the questioning - it is a work in progress, in the sense that it announces the opening of an altered worldview. The writer of the Prologue to this narrative, "Per Amicum" (probably Increase Mather himself) needed it to confirm the restoration of a previous state of being, as a result of repentance and faith in God, after the intrusion of the wilderness. Nevertheless, Rowlandson questions the very possibility of this return to a previous unchanged state. That would imply forgetting everything that was exceptional about her experience, and clearly, she doesn't want to forget.

As Breitwieser demonstrates, the dangerous element in her writing is her attitude towards grief, which sometimes comes to the surface, menacing the cornerstones of the very society it was meant to confirm and help sustain: "Of Puritanism's numerous opponents, the unassimilated and implacable grief that struggles to expression in Rowlandson's narrative is perhaps not the loudest or more conspicuous, or most confident, but it would have been among the most vexing because by its nature it challenges the fundamental premises of Puritan exemplaristic typology, and with them the social project they were intended to justify and sustain." (1990) She is in fact refusing the exemplarian nature of Puritan sociopolitics when she mourns the death of her child and the death of her world. "Excessive" mourning could disrupt the expectations created by such a narrative of consolidating a unified spirituality in the bosom of a Puritan community. Mourning is one of the roles traditionally attributed to women. As it is a form of emotional expression (and one which is not always possible to control or subdue) it can easily assume threatening forms, when it transcends mere individuality and contaminates others.

Rowlandson's writing defines her as something other than a vehicle for Puritan doctrine, in clear opposition to the careful Prologue by "Per Amicum", which reclaims to himself a supervisionary role, thus apparently rendering feminine writing harmless and useful. It builds a complex structure of successive interpretative frames, which try to distance and sterilise "anomalous" emotion in Rowlandson's narrative.

As we can see, both women, Bradstreet and Rowlandson, learned to reclaim a voice of their own. In order to achieve it, they had to establish a very careful and ingenious dialogue with their detractors, real and virtual. Two ideologies, two different worldviews are at stake: how to make Puritan communities accept the literary expression of subjectivity? How to manifest a personal experience of bewilderment and incompleteness in a religious community whose aim was to encompass all human life in God's designs? Their writings function as "ritualised passages", "narratives of initiation" (Fender, 1992). They are in a similar position to the young and budding North American literature of their time: they both seek their own voices, in a state of bewilderment caused by the continuous overflowing of meaning, escaping fixed categories, potentially threatening in nature, mixing genres and crossing every frontier. They certainly led the way for other poetic voices, both male and female.

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