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Teaching American Literature in the Deep (Israeli) South: Anne Bradstreet—Convergence and Divergence

Abstract: Although profound and fundamental differences exist between the religious doctrines of my students in a Teacher Training College in the South of Israel and the religious world of the early settlers in America, the very commitment of my students to an orthodox and devout religious life paradoxically facilitates cross-cultural conversation and, in turn, a deeper understanding of the completely diverse religious world of the early Americans. This paper describes my approach to teaching the Puritans to students who have absolutely no background regarding Christianity. I use the example of Anne Bradstreet to highlight some of the questions and conflicts that emerge in our classes.

The College and Students

Over the past six years I have taught an American literature elective in the English program of a teacher training college on Israel's southern frontier. In order to understand the distance between American literature and the realities of these students, some background about the college and its students is required. The college was established in 1995 on the outskirts of the town of Netivot, which is considered part of the block of communities surrounding the Gaza Strip. Netivot, founded in 1956 as a Negev development town, was first populated by immigrants from Morocco and Tunisia who were joined in the 1990s by immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia. As a development town in the periphery, Netivot has suffered from high unemployment and a low socioeconomic level.

When the immigrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries arrived in Israel in the 1950's, they suffered many hardships, on a socioeconomic level, in peripheral areas, and in transit camps. On a cultural level, they were considered inferior by the Labor-run establishment, made up mainly of secular Jews of Eastern European descent. It is not by coincidence that in 1997, then Labor Prime Ministerial candidate Ehud Barak chose Netivot as the site of an historic apology in the name of the Labor party to the Sephardi Jews.

1 *The New York Times* reported that number at 12% in 1997.
2 According to the Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel, Netivot received a ranking of 3 out of 10 in the government socioeconomic index of 2003.
(Greenberg). In addition to being a quintessential Southern development town, Netivot has also been called the Varanasi of Israel, owing to its status as a pilgrimage site. It was the home of Rabbi Israel Abuhatzeira, known as the Baba Sali, a leading Moroccan Sephardic rabbi and mystic who was said to work miracles and heal the sick. Just on the anniversary of his death, up to 100 000 people make the pilgrimage to his shrine. His son, the Baba Baruch, continues his legacy in Netivot along with other noted mystical rabbis.

While not all the college students come from Netivot, and not all of them feel a connection to the mystical rabbinical world of Netivot, the following generalizations can be made about them\(^3\): all of my students are women as the program is gender-separated for religious reasons; most are of Sephardic origin and are part of the first generation in their families to have been born in Israel. Their parents grew up in Middle Eastern and North African countries like Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, and Tunisia. The students grew up in the southern periphery of the country, which is poorer and less sophisticated than the center. They are practicing Orthodox Jews, and at least half in any given year are already married and often have children during their studies. In general, they marry young and often become mothers before the age of 23. As is customary in religious families, they will likely have at least four children, but probably more. They are often part of the first generation in their families to pursue higher education, and tuition is not taken for granted.

Even though the English majors aim to teach ESL in their futures, most of them struggle with English as their own second language. By the time they have completed the program, they are mostly proficient, but studying in their second language, as far as literary studies goes, poses many challenges. Their knowledge of American history is negligible, and their impression of the American ethos comes exclusively from popular culture. Therefore, approaching a survey course in American literature requires much groundwork and preparation, the opening of minds, and the widening of perspectives.

The course is therefore a survey that is not purely literary; rather it is full of history and religion, with each period requiring much background and elaboration before any literary text can be approached. While these students need close reading skills in their training to be

\(^3\) These observations are made not from an empirical sociological perspective, but rather as someone who has worked with this population for many years.
English teachers, an exclusively formalist approach is wholly insufficient in this course. Thus, in addition to reading texts closely, I take a broadly New Historicist approach: viewing history merely as background and literature as merely a reflection of that background seems as insufficient as a formalist approach that sees the text as standing alone. In the "old" historicist approach literary texts are always subordinate to historical records, but, according to the New Historicism, literary texts are bound up with multiple discourses and are part of a history that is still in the writing. Montrose described New Historicism's "reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (410). The questions of who produces and who consumes literature are central to this approach, as is the interpretation of history as opposed to facts of history.

New Historicism also insists on the subjectivity of the reader. The time, place and identity of the reader needs to be acknowledged, and our own biases need to be discussed. This self-reflexive examination of our classroom, of my students as readers and critics, makes for highly fruitful and interesting discussions of text, context, religion and bias. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper to discuss every topic we explore in this course; I have chosen, therefore, to focus on one illustrative example of an American writer covered in my survey in order to discuss the approach I take, an approach that encourages stimulating discussion and interesting cross-cultural translations.

**Approaching the Puritans**

No discussion of American literature can be complete without examining the Puritans, and the course really begins there (although we do discuss Native American culture and the cultural and physical conflicts between the European settlers and the indigenous population). I choose to focus quite closely on Anne Bradstreet, a choice informed by her gender, her language, and the topics of her concern. My students can much more easily relate to a woman writing about her husband, children, and her religion than they can to someone like Jonathan Edwards, preaching hellfire and brimstone.

But before we can analyse Bradstreet's poetry, the students have to understand what a Puritan is. In order to understand that, they have to appreciate what the Protestant Revolution was. And to understand what the Protestant Revolution was, they need to know
about the Church of England. To do that, they must learn about Roman Catholicism, and in order to really understand that, they have to learn about the origins of Christianity. This may sound exaggerated, but rare is the student at this college who has ever met a Christian, let alone thought about the history of Christianity and its different manifestations in various countries and historical contexts. Thus, over the years as a lecturer, I have also had to learn more about the history of Christianity in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of who the Puritans really were. And in teaching about Christianity, I also have to teach the students, who have been brought up in their own bubble of Sephardic Orthodox Judaism, to approach other religions as observers and learners, without judgment or bias.

The way I have found to be most successful is by first emphasizing the similarities between their own religious beliefs and observances and the Puritan way. The Puritans, after all, saw themselves as the New Israelites, and drew parallels between the exodus from Egypt and their exodus from England, and between Jerusalem, and the New Jerusalem in New England. Some examples of religious similarities include: a direct, unmediated relationship with God, strict adherence to biblical law, stringent sabbath observance, modest dress and their self perception as a chosen people. Significant differences beyond the obvious of the trinity and the New Testament have to do with the original sin as depravity, predestination, conversion and election.

The notion of immigrant is even easier for the students to swallow than that of Puritan. Framing both the Pilgrims and the Puritans as immigrants, I compare them to those early settlers to the land of Israel, who left their homes in Europe – often because of religious persecution – and had to drain the swamps and endure much hardship. And, since many of my students’ families left countries in North Africa and the Middle East because of persecution in the 1950’s and endured serious hardship on their arrival to Israel, the reality of immigration is personal and meaningful to them. We discuss the idea, common to all pilgrims and settlers of unexplored and unsettled lands, of moving to a frontier, leaving family and familiarity behind, and starting over in challenging conditions. We discuss local populations and the fraught relations between the native populations and the settlers. These comparisons, major differences notwithstanding, allows them to relate to the lives of the Puritan settlers. We discuss how ardent belief in an ideal is an essential element in this kind of immigration. For
the Puritans it was, of course, the vision of the "the shining city on a hill," as articulated by John Winthrop.

Anne Bradstreet: Mother, Puritan, Poet

After laying the ground for the literary texts of the Puritans, we approach Anne Bradstreet. One of the questions that I pose to the students involves the predominance of religion or gender in Bradstreet's poetry. We use Bradstreet's construction of her experience of motherhood as a frame for tackling this question. Anne Bradstreet produced and raised eight children, while at the same time writing poetry and prose, and her motherhood was an anchor in her life and in her poetry. This fact immediately endears her to my students, who often come from equally large families and/or plan to have their own large families.

In 1650, Bradstreet's first edition of poetry The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America was published, most likely without Bradstreet's knowledge. Her brother-in-law prefaced the work by saying: "Contrary to her expectation I have presumed to bring to public view, what she resolved should (in such a manner) never see the sun." Out of modesty, both as a woman and as a poet, and out of convention, Bradstreet would not have been able to work towards the publication of her own work, and only in this way could she unwittingly become the first American poet to publish poetry. Of course, the discussion of who publishes their work and how is a fascinating one, particularly in the light of New Historicism. While her brother-in-law robs her of agency regarding her own works, he simultaneously legitimizes her as a virtuous Puritan woman who would never seek publicity and fame on her own accord.

We approach the question of gender and religion by exploring how motherhood is a spiritual role for Bradstreet. This is something that is completely relatable for these students, about half of whom in any given year are married and plan to have children, are pregnant or already have children. In Orthodox Judaism, the spiritual dimension of motherhood is predominant, and bringing children into the world and educating them are religious acts, both in Jewish lore and law. In a confessional letter "To My Dear Children" Bradstreet describes the physical and spiritual pains of being a mother:

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4 Most critics agree that Bradstreet indeed did not know that her work was to be published. Helen Campbell, one of the only dissenters from this view, argues that she allowed her brother-in-law to seek publication because, as a woman, she could not do so herself (Schweitzer 145).
It pleased G-d to keep me a long time without a child, which was a great grief to me and cost me many prayers and tears before I obtained one and after him gave me many more of whom I now take the care, that as I have brought you into the world, and with great pains, weakness, cares, and fears brought you to this, I now travail in birth again of you till Christ be formed in you.

This excerpt reveals Bradstreet’s intense longing for children and the awesome physical and spiritual responsibility she experienced when she did become a mother. In the above confession, Bradstreet moves from the physical experience of childbearing, to a spiritual use of the concept. Here the mother is the agent of her children’s spiritual rebirth. Bradstreet valorizes her maternal duty to nurture, educate, and instruct her children in order to facilitate their spiritual success. While the word "Christ" evokes immediate internal opposition in them, the prominence of motherhood as spiritual work in these students' present lives or in their futures (and indeed in their own mothers’ lives) enables them to identify with Bradstreet despite this opposition.

"From the Author to Her Book"

The combination of motherhood and creativity is examined in depth through Bradstreet's use of the mothering metaphor in her poem: "From the Author to Her Book," which Bradstreet wrote in reaction to the publication of her poetry. She opens with a self-deprecating description of her poetry and her mortified reaction to the fact of its publication:

Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain
   Who after birth did'st by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
   Who thee abroad exposed to public view,
Made thee in rags, halting to the press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call.
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight,

This self-denigration – revealed in the words “ill-formed,” “feeble,” snatched,” “friends less wise than true,” "exposed," "errors," "blushing," unfit for light," "irksome”—reveals both her innate modesty and her awareness that writing poetry as a Puritan woman ran counter to social expectations. This is also something that my students can relate to: particularly in the Sephardic tradition, the woman’s sphere is seen to be the private and domestic as opposed to the public arena in which the man in the family operates. Gender patterns are slowly changing in that society, and my students are part of that change, but they have no problem relating to the idea of separate spheres, and the avoidance of public view, certainly in relation to their own grandmothers and mothers. My aim is to get them to look at this public/private, domestic/creative divide in a different way, one that allows for creativity despite the clearly drawn gender divisions.

The first line of Bradstreet’s poem: "Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain" seems to maintain the division between body and mind especially since Bradstreet denigrates the issue of her mind. Bradstreet also draws attention to the separation between her written "offspring" and actual children in her addition of the parentheses in the line: "My rambling brat (in print) should mother call." Here the poet seems to feel the need to remind the reader that she is referring to her poems and not to actual children. I try show my students, however, that she is drawing attention to the vulnerability of women to the "public view" and censure of ill-formed children and poems. Moreover, by this subtle connection between the products of the mind and actual offspring of the womb, Bradstreet actually defies the separation between creativity and procreativity. She insists that the progeny comes from her mind and calls her name "in print," yet simultaneously connects the creative offspring to actual babies. Being a mother and a poet become coexisting and somehow allied parts of the poet's identity.

In the next part of the poem a change in the speaker's attitude, marked by "Yet," becomes apparent:
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could.
I washed thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou runnest more hobbling than is meet.
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun Cloth, in the house I find.
In this array, amongst Vulgars mayest thou roam.

From this point, Bradstreet's simple statement: "Yet being mine own" becomes the pervading feeling of the poem. As much as her poems have "defects" and "flaws," they belong to her. She created them, she is responsible for them and she will tend to them despite their faults. This feeling is created by the homely images of a loving mother gently washing her children’s faces, cleaning their blemishes, helping them walk, and sewing their clothes. Her nurturance does not succeed: she washes the face "but more defects I saw;" she stretches the joints "to make thee even feet," but "still thou runnest more hobbling than is meet;" and she aims to "better dress" them, but finds only "home-spun cloth."

Indeed, these lines become a statement of motherly duty as well as creative effort. In combining these roles, the poem hints that the functions of mother and poet are complementary. What binds the roles is the very basic conviction of the poems and the children "being mine own." Whether the womb or the brain yields the offspring, and whether the offspring is less than perfect or not, it is a part of its creator and as such cannot be disowned. The poet thus closes the poem by claiming her poems as her exclusive progeny:

In Critics' hands, beware thou dost not come,
And take thy way where yet thou art not known.
If for thy Father asked, say, thou hadst none;
By declaring that her poems have no father, Bradstreet makes several contrary statements at the same time. On one hand, the fatherless poems are illegitimate. Here Bradstreet admits her precarious position: the publication of poetry by a woman was not a legitimizing act in the Puritan context. By claiming sole parentage over the poems, though, Bradstreet simultaneously asserts her exclusive ownership and authorship of them. The poems were "snatched from thence by friends" to be "exposed to public view" without the author's knowledge. In reaction, Bradstreet is here reclaiming her authority over the book. However, that Bradstreet does this self-deprecatingly ("thy mother, she alas is poor"), through the metaphor of motherhood, re-legitimizes her in the context of Puritan society. Motherhood, after all was the legitimizing role for a Puritan woman. Yet, paradoxically, this legitimating metaphor, by connecting the offspring of the womb to the offspring of the mind, also subverts the traditional separation between creativity and procreativity. In "The Author To Her Book" the integration of the roles of mother and poet is not smooth; but—through negation and affirmation or, to adopt Alicia Ostriker's term, "duplicit" (41)—it is achieved. As I accompany the students on this interpretive journey, we at least partially deconstruct domestic and public, creative and physical, and discuss some of the conflicts and challenges posed by this deconstruction, in Bradstreet's time and in their own.

"Before the Birth of One of My Children"

We also examine Bradstreet's poem "Before the Birth of One of My Children," where we discuss mortality and attachment to this world. Here, the poet addresses her beloved husband, bidding him farewell before what she feels is her imminent death. This poem primarily expresses Bradstreet's sincere love for her husband, but also provides insights regarding Bradstreet's conception of motherhood. For example, Bradstreet's linkage of childbirth and death strikes the reader immediately, for, although the title of the poem invites the expectation of a description of the joyous event of childbirth, the first lines quickly dispel that anticipation: "All things within this fading world hath end, / Adversity doth still our joys..."
attend." She acknowledges the joys of life, but recognizes that misfortune threatens at every occasion. This was especially true of childbirth – a precarious situation for any woman at the time, but particularly so for a woman of Bradstreet's frail health. The poet struggles with the human vulnerability to death and our impotence in the face of the "most irrevocable" "sentence past." She accepts death, "a common thing," as "inevitable," but, "yet oh," clearly desires life.

Because Bradstreet is a Puritan poet confronting death, we expect some reference to God and the afterlife; but in this poem she takes no comfort in religion. It seems to me that this poem is an instance of Bradstreet struggling with the issue of "weaned affections." I explain to my students the Puritan ideal of weaning oneself of one's love for the world, one's possessions, and even one's family and, in the words of Robert Daly, "to convince himself finally the world he loved was subordinate to its creator" (Daly 86). We discuss the challenging nature of this demand, in both a theological and personal sense. In "Before The Birth of One of Her Children" Bradstreet seems so attached to her loved ones, so "unweaned" from her life and earthly connections that her emphasis lies in the search for immortality rather than in unification with God.

Bradstreet moves in the poem from general statements to the intensely personal, addressing her husband with heartfelt love. The speaker knows that her husband might remarry after her death and bearing this in mind, considers her children:

And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains
Look to my little babes, my dear remains.
And if thou love thyself, or loved'st me,
These O protect from step-dame's injury.

She refers to her children with the greatest affection, calling them "my little babes." Moreover, she conceives of them as her "dear remains." Her reference to them as her "remains" and her repeated use of the possessive "my" emphasizes her strong connection to her children. On one hand "remains" refer to her corpse, but on the other, to what she has left behind, her legacy. By her use of the double meaning of the word, Bradstreet emphasizes that her children are a part of her in the most physical sense. They also become a
replacement for her "oblivious grave." Instead of remembering her by revering her dead body, she wants her husband – "if thou love thyself, or loved'st me" - to direct his love of her, and of himself (for their children are a part of him too) onto the children. She thus implores her husband to shelter them "from step-dame's injury."

Reading the final lines of the poem, we forge the connection between her children and her poetry:

And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,
With some sad sighs honour my absent hearse;
And kiss this paper for thy love's dear sake,
Who with salt tears this last farewell did take.

Unlike "The Author to Her Book," no metaphor forges the connection here; rather the reader realizes that her children are not her only remains. As her children should cause their father to remember her, so her poems will also provoke her memory. Like "The Author to the Book," this poem connects the products of the body and the mind, granting them similar value. The poems, like the children, stand in for her body. Because she can no longer physically "lay in thine arms," her husband should hold the poems and "kiss this paper for thy love's sake." Both her poems and her children grant her immortality.

Paradoxically, however, the event of birthing children brings her into a painful awareness of her mortality. My students, many of whom have given birth themselves or are pregnant or are planning on having children in the near future, really relate to Bradstreet's reckoning with her mortality. Certainly childbirth is no longer the life-threatening condition it was for Bradstreet, though it certainly holds its dangers and risks, but they can relate to the fear of their children losing their mother and themselves being forgotten in the event of death. It might bear mentioning that living on the southern frontier, just several kilometers from the Gaza strip, involves frightening and life-threatening events, like rocket attacks in times of tension. These women know what it is to face their mortality and several students shared that they have written letters to their families in the case of their death, who might "kiss this paper for thy love's sake."
"Verses upon the Burning of our House, July 10th, 1666"

Finally, we analyze Bradstreet’s "Verses upon the Burning of our House, July 10th, 1666" for this poem seems to shrink an enormous religious and cultural gap. Every year I am taken back by how closely they can relate to Bradstreet's way of seeing the world as if centuries, religious chasms, and oceans did not lie between them and her. The poem describes how on a "silent night" a fire destroyed their home—"a flame consume my dwelling place":

And when I could no longer look,
I blest His name that gave and took,
That laid my goods now in the dust.
Yea, so it was, and so 'twas just.
It was His own, it was not mine,
Far be it that I should repine;
He might of all justly bereft
But yet sufficient for us left.

Bradstreet shows remarkable faith in the face of this disaster, and these words resonate so strongly amongst my students. In Jewish tradition, similar words are recited at a funeral: "God gives and God takes, Blessed be God's name." In the event of a death, a benediction is recited, blessing God as "the true judge." The acceptance of the justice of any loss—"twas just"—whether material or even of one dearly departed, is the mainstay of Bradstreet's Puritan faith, but also of my students' most profound beliefs. The true acceptance that "it was His own, it was not mine" is central to both faiths, and the acceptance of difficult decrees from above only strengthens that faith. This does not amount to aesthetical renunciation of property. Indeed, Bradstreet misses her possessions and we hear the longing in her tone as she describes their loss:

My pleasant things in ashes lie
And them behold no more shall I.
Under thy roof no guest shall sit,
Nor at thy Table eat a bit.

But the ultimate focus is the world to come:

Thou hast a house on high erect
Framed by that mighty Architect,
---
A price so vast as is unknown,
Yet by His gift is made thine own;
There's wealth enough, I need no more,
Farewell, my pelf, farewell, my store.
The world no longer let me love,
My hope and treasure lies above.

Bradstreet places her faith in the next world, in her eternal soul. Interestingly, my students read this on a superficial level and relate to it as if it was part of their own theology, which also sees this world as a mere preparation for, or corridor to, the next world. I have to remind them about the trinity—and how the "price" and "His gift" refers to the sacrifice made by Jesus. I also remind them how, according to Puritan faith, eternal life is not guaranteed—it is Bradstreet's "hope" that she is elected. It must remain only a "hope" because, as I explain, a Puritan may not have confidence in being a recipient of grace. The idea of predetermination and election is one of the hardest ideas for them to accept, as the Jewish religion emphasizes the ability to repent at any moment in one's life and earn the world to come. My students read a quiet confidence in Bradstreet's words, and they are correct. This is unusual for a Puritan writer whose theology demands a constant awareness of depravity on one hand and the uncertainty of one's religious destiny on the other. Indeed, our conclusion, after working through this unit, is that Bradstreet was an unusual woman: a devout Puritan, a devoted mother, and an accomplished poet. Although they cannot relate to certain fundamental principles of her faith, my students come to admire her in all these areas of her life.
Conclusion

I once asked my students if they thought that their own deeply religious commitment helped or hindered their understanding of the Puritan mindset. Their response, in general, was that being intensely committed to a religious framework requires leaps of faith and a profound devotion to something beyond the self, beyond the here and now. It requires a submission to laws and mores that are not always understood by the outside world. So, although the tenets of their faith are far from Anne Bradstreet's, their very submission to the demanding laws and requirements of that religion creates an invisible bond to her, and by extension to the Puritans. They expressed a conviction that they more easily identify with and understand Bradstreet than someone with a purely secular mindset. Living in a frontier town, as the daughters of immigrants who suffered hardship and religious persecution (both in their home countries and on their arrival in Israel) also opens up a door to understanding the Puritan experience. And, through building these bridges to cultural appreciation, the foundation is prepared for the remainder of the course.


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