



Anne Bradstreet

(1612-1672)

The Flesh and the Spirit (1678)

In secret place where once I stood
Close by the banks of lacrim flood,
I heard two sisters reason on
Things that are past and things to come.
One Flesh was called, who had her eye
On worldly wealth and vanity;
The other Spirit, who did rear
Her thoughts into a higher sphere.

“Sister,” quoth *Flesh*, “what liv’st thou on--
Nothing but meditation?
Doth contemplation feed thee, so
Regardlessly to let earth go?
Can speculation satisfy
Notion without reality?
Dost dream of things beyond the moon,
And dost thou hope to dwell there soon?
Hast treasures there laid up in store,
That all in th’ world thou count’st but poor?
Art fancy sick, or turned a sot,
To catch at shadows which are not?
Come, come, I’ll show unto thy sense
Industry hath its recompense.
What canst desire but thou mayst see
True substance in variety?
Dost honor like? Acquire the same,
As some to their immortal fame,
And trophies to thy name erect
Which wearing time shall ne’er deject.
For riches dost thou long full sore?
Behold enough of precious store;
Earth hath more silver, pearls, and gold

Than eyes can see or hands can hold.
Affect'st thou pleasure? Take thy fill;
Earth hath enough of what you will.
Then let not go what thou mayst find
For things unknown, only in mind."

Spirit: "Be still, thou unregenerate part;
Disturb no more my settled heart,
For I have vowed (and so will do)
Thee as a foe still to pursue,
And combat with thee will and must
Until I see thee laid in th' dust.
Sisters we are, yea, twins we be,
Yet deadly feud 'twixt thee and me;
For from one father are we not:
Thou by old Adam wast begot,
But my arise is from above,
Whence my dear Father I do love.
Thou speak'st me fair but hat'st me sore;
Thy flattering shows I'll trust no more.
How oft thy slave hast thou me made
When I believed what thou hast said,
And never had more cause of woe
Than when I did what thou bad'st do.
I'll stop mine ears at these thy charms
And count them for my deadly harms.
Thy sinful pleasures I do hate,
Thy riches are to me no bait,
Thine honors do nor will I love,
For my ambition lies above.
My greatest honor it shall be
When I am victor over thee
And triumph shall, with laurel head,
When thou my captive shalt be led.
How I do live thou need'st not scoff,
For I have meat thou know'st not of;
The hidden manna I do eat,
The word of life it is my meat.
My thoughts do yield me more content
Than can thy hours in pleasure spent.
Nor are they shadows which I catch,
Nor fancies vain at which I snatch;
But reach at things that are so high,
Beyond thy dull capacity.
Eternal substance I do see,
With which enriched I would be;
Mine eye doth pierce the heavens, and see
What is invisible to thee.
My garments are not silk nor gold
Nor such like trash which earth doth hold,
But royal robes I shall have on
More glorious than the glist'ring sun.
My crown not diamonds, pearls, and gold,
But such as angels' heads infold.
The city where I hope to dwell
There's none on earth can parallel;

The stately walls both high and strong
 Are made of precious jasper stone;
 The gates of pearl both rich and clear;
 And angels are for porters there;
 The streets thereof transparent gold,
 Such as no eye did e'er behold;
 A crystal river there doth run,
 Which doth proceed from the Lamb's throne;
 Of life there are the waters sure,
 Which shall remain forever pure;
 Nor sun nor moon they have no need,
 For glory doth from God proceed;
 No candle there, nor yet torchlight,
 For there shall be no darksome night.
 From sickness and infirmity
 For evermore they shall be free,
 Nor withering age shall e'er come there,
 But beauty shall be bright and clear.
 This city pure is not for thee,
 For things unclean there shall not be.
 If I of heaven may have my fill,
 Take thou the world, and all that will."

ANALYSIS

Anne Bradstreet expresses religious beliefs and personal conflict in "The Flesh and the Spirit," using the forms of (1) Platonic dialogue and (2) psychological allegory to dramatize a struggle within herself between body and soul. She is not an orthodox Calvinist. Like Harriet Beecher Stowe two centuries later, Bradstreet affirms a more humane Puritanism. Her beliefs were those of the common people, like those in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown": Brown is the one of the few in his village who actually believes in the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, which drives him insane. In Bradstreet's poem, through constant inner warfare the spirit attains salvation by transcending the materialistic values of the flesh—which is contrary to the orthodox Calvinist doctrines of total depravity, election and predestination.

For thousands of years "dualism," a belief in the polarity of the material and the spiritual, has been expressed in mythologies and religions and by western philosophers such as Plato—and by Descartes in Bradstreet's own century. She employs a Platonic dialogue to dramatize the conflict between the flesh and the spirit traditional in Christianity and described by Saint Paul in the eighth chapter of his Epistle to the Romans. She begins her poem "In secret place," suggesting that the setting is private, within herself, and the poem what Melville called "an inside narrative." This form evolved from the Medieval tradition of dream allegory, adapted by Hawthorne in "Young Goodman Brown." She is in a mood close to "Lacrima flood," close to a flood of tears, when she hears two sisters in dialogue--Spirit and Flesh, "who had her eye / On worldly wealth and vanity."

As a materialist, Flesh challenges Spirit, "Can Speculation satisfy / Notion without Reality?" Can faith in "things beyond the Moon" satisfy the mind without earthly pleasures? Flesh is an Atheist in denying the existence of God and she appeals to the senses, offering earthly delights--honor, fame, riches, sensory pleasures. Spirit has devoted herself to fighting against these temptations embodied in Flesh, her "foe": "Be still my unregenerate part, / Disturb no more my settled heart."

Spirit declares that human nature is divided between body and soul: "For from one father we are not, / Thou by old Adam wast begot, / But my arise is from above, / Whence my dear father I do love." Hawthorne makes the same contrast in *The Scarlet Letter* (end Chapter 6), when Hester tells Pearl "Thy Heavenly Father sent thee!" but Pearl denies it, saying "I have no Heavenly Father!" Both are correct in the

allegory of Hester's struggle for redemption for her sin of adultery, since Pearl embodies both Flesh and Spirit: both her mother's sin and her potential for salvation. Pearl is a mirror figure, reflecting Hester's soul, the "pearl of great price." God sent Pearl to Hester much as He sent Christ, like a conscience, to guide her to repent her sin of the Flesh, which was fathered on earth "by old Adam" or fallen human nature, not by God.

Spirit aspires to rise to the Celestial City: "For my ambition lyes above... My thoughts do yield me more content / Than can thy hours in pleasure spent." Heaven is pure Spirit: "This City pure is not for thee, / For things unclean there shall not be." In her model of the psyche, Bradstreet identifies Spirit with "meditation" --the head, as well as the heart and the soul, like the medieval scholastic philosophers. Flesh is the body and what today would be called the ego. This is consistent with the metaphors in her Meditation 62: "As man is called the little world, so his heart may be called the little commonwealth: his more fixed and resolved thoughts are like to inhabitants. Here is also the great court of justice erected, which is always kept by conscience..."

Bradstreet's identification of thoughts with the heart rather than the head is evidence of psychological integration, balance and wholeness. Like many women poets, Bradstreet thinks in her heart, as does Emily Dickinson. Hawthorne is exceptional among males in doing so. Holistic thinking in the heart is not to be confused with popular sentimentalism, acting on feelings or impulses without thinking at all, which Hawthorne consistently criticizes. In *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) he evokes the Puritan legend of the courtship of Myles Standish and personifies Flesh and Spirit in the two sisters Zenobia and Priscilla, echoing Anne Bradstreet.

Michael Hollister (2015)