

“The Broken Wing Shall Soon Be Well Again”: Observations of Nature in the Religious Writing of Elizabeth Payson Prentiss, 1818-78

Elizabeth Payson Prentiss: prolific writer of moral texts in many genres, including:

- Christian Poetry: *Golden Hours*, 1873
- Spiritual Autobiography: *Stepping Heavenward*, 1869
- Children’s Books: *Little Susy’s Six Birthdays*, 1853
- Anti-alcohol polemics: *The Old Brown Pilcher: A Tale*, 1868
- Translations from German: *Griselda: A Dramatic Poem*, 1876

Two approaches to Prentiss and her work flourish:

1. Hagiography: to see her as an exemplary Christian person, one who is an unfeminist role-model for contemporary, 21st-century women:

e.g., Sharon James, *‘More Love to Thee’: A Biography of the Author of Stepping Heavenward* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006).

“In most western nations equal opportunities for women had been achieved by the mid twentieth-century” (p. xiii).

The revival of interest in Prentiss’ work coincides with 1990s’ women challenging “the dogmas of extreme feminism” and with a concomitant “revival of femininity and domesticity” (*ibid*).

2. To engage seriously with the changes and subtleties of Prentiss’ theological views:

e.g., Miho Yamaguchi, “Elizabeth Prentiss’ Faith ... the Wesleyan and the Higher Life Doctrines”, *Literature and Theology*, 18 (2004),

Prentiss: life-long, growing scepticism about the possibility of true perfection.

3. A new possibility? An ecocritical reading: to study Prentiss’ poetry in particular for its observations of nature:

To receive Prentiss as a writer who offers us all a glimpse into a past where western families are somehow connected to nature.

A disparity: a complacent attitude towards nature in Prentiss’ actual life; an active identification with flora and fauna in the poetry.

WILLY: The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks.

LINDA: We should’ve bought the land next door.

WILLY: The street is lined with cars. There’s not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don’t grow any more, you can’t raise a carrot in the backyard. They should’ve had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?

LINDA: Yeah, like being a million miles from the city.

WILLY: They should’ve arrested the builder for cutting those down. They massacred the neighbourhood. [Lost] More and more I think of those days, Linda. This time of year it was lilac and wistaria. And then the peonies would come out, and the daffodils. What a fragrance in this room!

LINDA: Well, after all, people had to move somewhere.

WILLY: No, there’s more people now.

LINDA: I don’t think there’s more people, I think –

WILLY: There’s more people! That’s what’s ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening!

Articulate
millers
presence
about
consumer
cultures
detachment
from nature

1. The 1856 hymn, "More Love to Thee":

More love to Thee, O Christ, more love to Thee!
 Hear Thou the prayer I make on bended knee;
 This is my earnest plea: More love, O Christ, to Thee;
 More love to Thee, more love to Thee!

Once earthly joy I craved, sought peace and rest;
 Now Thee alone I seek, give what is best;
 This all my prayer shall be: More love, O Christ, to Thee;
 More love to Thee, more love to Thee!

Elizabeth
 Payson-Prentiss,
 1818-78



2. Reverend George Prentiss on "More Love to Thee":

It is 'simply a prayer put into the form of verse. She wrote it so hastily that the last stanza was incomplete ... She did not show it, not even to her husband, until many years after it was written; and she wondered not a little that, when published, it met with so much favor'.

3. Prentiss' self-deprecation about her hobbies (letter):

I amuse myself with making flower-pictures, with which to enliven our parlor, and assure you that these works of art are remarkable specimens of genius'.

4. The Hymn from *Susy's Six Birthdays*:

Knowest thou how many flies
 Are playing in the warm sun?
 Or of fishes in the water?
 God has counted every one.
 Every one He called by name
 When into the world it came.

5. Personal appreciation of the cornucopia of nature (letter):

[The children] come with their little hands full of dandelions, buttercups and daisies, and their hats full of primroses ... the hills and fields are covered with primroses, daisies, cowslips, violets, lilies, and I don't know what; in five minutes we can gather a basketful'.

6. "Seeking the Water-Brooks": Identification with a Hunter Hart:

Hunted, oh hunted, this weary world over
 Refuge none finding my God, save in thee,
 Thus pants my soul Thine abode to discover,
 Thus stretches onward Thy glory to see.

7. The Broken Wing of a Christian psyche can be healed: "The Broken Wing":

Thou wilt be as strong in love;
 Soft as a dove,
 Yet hovering as an eagle's wings around. .

8. The ephemerality of human and animal life: "The Cry of the Young Wife":

We'll grow up together, my baby,
 You and I together;
 We'll go hopping from bough to bough,
 Little birds of a feather!
 And we will play
 In fragrant hay,
 And berries sweet
 Together eat.

Down 'mid high grass a mother-bird built her a nest;
 I was that bird; and my nestling it lies there at rest!

9. *How Sorrow Was Changed into Sympathy*: the Christian Mother as Protective Bird:

No bird had e'er so sweet a nest,
 In which to hide away and rest;
 Now nestle in it soft and warm,
 Nothing shall come to do thee harm.