Walking with the Lord: Rachel Bahn

In the literature of a nation, minor figures are usually crowded out by the major; the more brilliant the great authors, the higher the standards are for even "minor" status. A result of this reality of literary historiography is that most lesser authors are neglected, and those below second or third rank are totally ignored. Of course, such neglect is usually warranted due to a minor author's meager output, weak art or skill, or, most commonly, intellectual shallowness. This winnowing process obtains as well on smaller scales: on a regional or state basis, for example, Zane Grey or Lloyd Mifflin become major figures, and the lower ranks remain unknown. Although such rankings are necessary, they do take a toll in that much personal expression is lost. It is not until we reach local levels that rankings and criteria can be safely set aside, and we can begin to listen to the faintest voices of all. And we are often surprised to discover that even obscure and relatively untalented authors can make a few claims on our attention. It is, basically, a matter of listening closely, and sympathetically.

One such voice is that of a Pennsylvania woman who had within her a thin streak of poetry—Rachel Bahn. Bahn was born October 15, 1829, at "Stoney Brook," the family homestead in Hellam, about three miles east of York. She was the daughter of John Adam Bahn and Anna Liphart, both of old Pennsylvania-German families. Rachel's father was a descendant of old Jost Herbach, an early York County settler who arrived in America in the 1730s. In her family, then, were two other Pennsylvania-German poets, the theologian Henry Harbaugh (1817-1867), whose dialect collection *Die Harfe* (1870) is considered the height of dialect verse, and York attorney Henry Lee Fisher (1822-1909), who wrote both English and *Pennsylvaniaisch* poetry. Biographical information about the young Rachel is scarce—and why should it be otherwise? She doubtless led a normal life for the times as one of ten children in her rural, mid-nineteenth-century Pennsylvania-German family:
church, school, chores, play, and, perhaps, just a bit of giggly sparking.¹

In December 1849, at age nineteen, Rachel was stricken with a form of spinal paralysis. Although not degenerative, the condition proved incurable, and permanent. For the rest of her life—fifty-three years—she remained bedridden, a virtual paraplegic, reduced to seeing and hearing life from a distance. Her room, in effect, became her world. One obituary goes so far as to state that "she had never left her little couch which [was] placed by a window on the second story of her home."² Another reports that at her funeral mourners "will see her form leave the home for the first time in fifty-three years."³ This seems extreme, but it is not unlikely. One of her ministers, the Rev. Daniel Zeigler (1804–1876), adds that Rachel "could not even assume an erect position on her couch."⁴ Indeed, there are no photographs of Rachel off her couch; she never once mentioned her beloved Kreutz Creek Church so nearby; she never mentioned any activities of the outside world, not even the Confederate Army's march along Market Street, which ran in front of her house; she even speaks wrongly of shade trees over her parents' graves. (There were none. She never saw the graves.)

And from what we read in her writings, that half-century was one of loneliness, dependence, and almost constant pain. Physically incapacitated, immobilized, and an invalid, Bahn nonetheless read, reflected, corresponded, welcomed visitors, and wrote both prose and verse, thereby accomplishing some small measure of personal achievement. Thus she lived, and for fifty-three years. She died August 15, 1902. An unsigned obituary completes her biography:

For the past few years it became apparent that the end was rapidly approaching. Her advanced age and her infirmities were growing more in evidence every day. A couple of weeks ago she was stricken with paralysis, which left her helpless. She was conscious, however, to the end, and died peacefully shortly after four o'clock last evening.⁵

¹ All biographical information is from Rachel Bahn, "Annals of the Bahn and Liphart Families in America, 1731–1870" (1870), typescript with addenda at the Historical Society of York County.
³ Quoted from unsigned article appended to "Annals," 52.
⁴ Daniel Zeigler, Preface, Poems, by Rachel Bahn (York, Pa., 1869), i.
⁵ Appended article in "Annals," 51.
Bahn’s funeral service was in her Kreutz Creek Church, Monday, August 18, at 9:30 A.M. A long procession followed the cortege up the slight hill to the New Kreutz Creek Cemetery, where Rachel still lies.

Since 1902 a few people have written about Bahn, but all have turned her (inadvertently and without malice) into a pathetic cliché, “the happy cripple.” Her obituaries, and a 1923 appreciation of her by York County historian George R. Prowell (1849–1928) reveal this attitude: “she retained a jovial nature and refused to talk about her infirmity.”6 Harry Hess Reichard, writing in his 1940 volume Pennsylvania German Verse, used the same tone: Bahn “maintained a sunny disposition,” “her mind was ever ready to move from the dark to the light,” and that her half-century in bed “was a joyous religious poem.”7 But in 1970, Preston Barba, writing for the Pennsylvania German Society, was more objective. He was not so glib about her happiness, and quoted one of her prose sketches from an 1858 issue of The Evangelical Messenger: “Sometimes it is all sunshine and gladness, and Heaven itself lies not far off, and then again, it is all dismal, cold and dreary.”8 That is, the approach of death was cheering. Talking about Rachel was easy; being Rachel was not.

But our changing perceptions about the handicapped and the disabled have made the well-meant blandishments of the past little more than condescension. Pain, immobility, and loneliness were the forces that shaped Bahn’s life; she lived with them and in them. They became her element. Consequently she adapted to them (she had no alternative) in such a way and to such an extent that they dominated her perceptions of life and nature. Even her religious beliefs, her concepts of eternity in particular, were influenced by her paraplegia, and accordingly expressed. Fifty-three years so profoundly shaped her personality that we cannot comprehend Rachel’s poetry unless we understand her view of things. Anything

6 George R. Prowell, “Historic Figure of Kreutz Creek,” York Gazette and Daily, Nov. 2, 1923, p. 12.
7 Harry Hess Reichard, Pennsylvania German Verse (Norristown, 1940), xxv, Proceedings of the Pennsylvania German Society, XLVIII.
less would be denying the one distinctive quality she possessed, or only more condescension. We cannot glibly speak of her "happiness," or ignore her paralysis or gloss over her pains. Rachel certainly did not. In 1895 she gave some unknown friend or admirer a photocard of herself, a common souvenir-gift of her time. On its back she wrote in her neat hand:

Dec, 1849 the Lord saw fit in His infinite wisdome to prostrate me on a bed of affliction, namely 46 years upon which I have been since and am a great sufferer at times.

Sincerely Yours,
Rachel Bahn

I think, then, we should consider viewing Rachel Bahn as she viewed herself. If we can accept this proposition, we can begin to view life through eyes different from our own. The public may have created for Bahn the pose of "the happy cripple," but there was a far different reality to be seen.

Bahn's writings, though not extensive, are worth some attention. She took it upon herself to compile and annotate a family genealogy, "Annals of the Bahn and Liphart Families in America, 1731-1870," a fifty-page work rooted in her belief "He that forgets his ancestors is either stupid or wicked or both." She writes both brief entries and capsuled biographies, dutifully recording her family's progress through life. She had a nephew, Morgan, who survived eighteen battles in the Civil War, including the bloody combat of Mechanicsville, Second Bull Run, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. He was demobilized in 1865, apparently no worse for wear. Then again, another nephew, Adam, whom Rachel fondly remembered for his bedside visits, was captured at Fort Athens in 1864 and parolled in Alabama at the war's end, only to die two weeks later when the badly overloaded riverboat Sultana exploded below Memphis on April 27, 1865, killing more than 2,000 passengers. Most aboard were Union soldiers headed for home, and Rachel suspected sabotage. She had, however, little to say about herself: "She was born in Hellam Township, York County, Pa., Oct. 15, 1829. She lives on the old homestead with her sister Catherine."

9 Photo at the Historical Society of York County.
Even less was said about Catherine: "She is single and resides on the old homestead in Hellam Township." She summarizes the "Annals" with a sombre overview: "If we take a retrospective view over the past we derive nothing but fruitless sorrow." "Human happiness," she concludes, "is so imperfect that we are obliged to borrow its enjoyment from the time to come."

Rachel also kept up wide correspondences, wrote brief inspirational homilies for area newspapers, and, according to both Reichard and her will, also wrote "two Manuscript Books, one of poetry, one of prose." Intriguing as these volumes may be, we can only guess about their contents, since both—if extant—have eluded discovery.

But Bahn wrote most frequently in verse. She used various forms of common psalter-and-hymnal tunes and meters she found in her own hymnbooks: 3-, 4-, and 5-measure lines, usually in quatrains, and insistently rhyming in regular patterns. Such simple poetic forms have their American roots in the seventeenth-century psalters brought over by the Pilgrims and Puritans, and are enshrined in the 1640 Bay Psalm Book with its version of, for example, Psalm 23: "The Lord to me a shepherd is,/Want therefore shall not I." The great eighteenth-century hymnodist Isaac Watts (1674–1748) improved these basic patterns, and America's Lowell Mason (1792–1872) made them still more common. The 3- and 4-stress, ABAB lines make fairly monotonous reading, as in Rachel's

Many a dear and loving one  
Hath gone to that sweet rest,  
In yonder glorious world, where none  
Shall ever be distress'd.\textsuperscript{10}

Or

The Lord, "who dries the mourner's tear,"  
Will banish every grief and fear;  
He will the wounded spirit heal,  
His goodness and his love reveal.

Bahn handled this limited stock of verse forms competently, but wrenched syntax ("When in the silent grave I be," or "That they

\textsuperscript{10} All quoted poems except those supported by notes 11 and 12 are from \textit{Poems}.\)
their poverty may see") and forced rhymes (rove/above, rove/love, river/ever), for example, are frequent, although a German accent may explain the rhyming. Such lapses and other flaws show only that Rachel was not fully the master of her craft.

Her verses appeared in local newspapers (the York True Democrat, and the York Pennsylvanian), and probably in the small paper put out by the Kreutz Creek Union Church. Verse is also scattered in the "Annals," and these are mainly elegiac. Bahn even wrote her own commemorative ode, the eighty-line "A Half-Century" (1899), which was printed along with her picture in a little souvenir pamphlet to honor her endurance:

The seventieth milestone of my life
I recently have pass'd—
Of them have fifty spent in bed
Yet time sped onward fast.  

Rachel's major poetic work, however, was a slender volume of her collected verses, Poems (York, 1869). Poems contains 131 poems in English (all but a handful devotional) and ten in the Pennsylvania-German dialect. The religious poems are as typical of the hymnal in their themes, imagery, and subjects as they are in rhyme and meter. They have the strongly evangelical flavor of rural nineteenth-century Protestantism—fervent, highly personal, high-minded, and above all inspirational, based as it was on unshakable convictions and faith. Only when she speaks directly of her sufferings do these themes occupy the background. Religiously her poems are utterly confident, and every bit as joyous. Her trust in God ran deep. To be brief, Poems has the tone of the revival, or of the camp meeting. Salvation is at hand through a personal relationship with Christ. But more than anything else, Rachel's focus is inevitably on the afterlife, and in both her and her period's view, heaven came close to losing all metaphoric value. Bahn's time sang of the heavens almost as a real location, a physical place. In her poems "I Long for My Eternal Home," "That World to Come," and "My

11 "Annals," 4, 19-20, 25, 42 and 44 (dialect), and 45-48.
12 Rachel Bahn, A Half-Century (York, [1899]), pamphlet at the Historical Society of York County.
Home is not Here" the afterlife is seen as an ornate urban landscape, the "Beautiful City" having literally golden streets, silver rivers, and pearly gates. Life, by contrast, was a "darksome vale of woe" for life-bound Pilgrim Christians, and Bahn's poems, like those of so many others, were the marching songs of a militantly evangelical Christianity which would see them through to the New Jerusalem:

Take courage, weary pilgrims, still,
   We soon shall reach our journey's end;
Then peace and joy our souls shall fill,
   If we do here on God depend.

Yes, we are lonely pilgrims true,
   No resting-place we find on earth;
With joy our journeys let's pursue,
   Till we attain our heavenly birth.

The world into which the pilgrim will be reborn is lush, as described in her "The Better Land":

There shall be eternal summer,
   Its beauties shall forever last;
There the good shall ever gather,
   When their earthly life is past.

*Poems*, then, is standard in form and content. It is not great poetry, and no amount of sympathy for its author will ever make it so. But in a number of respects Rachel Bahn's verses are not ordinary. What makes them valuable is her unique perceptions and her articulation of them in the poems—how her paraplegia shaped her work. In this we have insights worth reading.

The volume begins with "I Trust in the Lord," a simple, typical work which posits her central subjects—life, pain, and faith.

No healthful day on earth I know,
   No tranquil joy I see;
Nothing but pain I feel below,
   Yet, Lord, I trust in thee.

Her faith (German Reformed) was strong, and doubtless saved her from despair, although one poem, "Why?", has the tone of the
Bible’s Job. But it is not to be thought Rachel was content to bear her lot. Although “pain is the will of God,” “all suffering is for the best,” and “meekly accept affliction” are fine if conventional sentiments, her religion was ultimately only meliorating. We should not confuse spiritual consolation with physical comfort. The former does not result in the latter. On occasion she tried to believe such was the case, as in “Hymn,” in which she promises “But, Lord, I yield myself to Thee, / I shall no more complain,” or as in “Submission”:

Cheerfully I’ll submit to Thee,
Oh! Let me ever faithful prove;
Thy cup shall not discourage me,
Which Thou hast sent, hast sent in love.

But accepting her condition as the will of God eased only the soul, not the body. Rachel did complain, and in Poems is very rarely cheerful. Thus there is a large number of poems in which she does cry out in suffering: “Affliction hath Paled My Brow,” “Chamber of Sickness,” her paraphrase of Job “My Soul is Weary of this Life,” “Weary of Life,” and some of the bleaker poems such as “Let Me Die in Springtime,” “Time is Short,” and “The Grave.”

When in the lone and silent grave,
Naught shall disturb my quiet rest;
From grief and pain I shall be safe,
When lying on earth’s senseless breast.

Wrapt in the thin and pallid shroud,
In the lone coffin I shall lay,
And sweet repose shall be throughout,
Until the resurrection day.

She was often blunt: “I Long for My Eternal Home” begins “Young and beloved, I long to die / And be from pain and sickness free.” Her aptly-titled poem “Life” is clearest:

How sad and mournful is this life!
It is all murky and all drear;
’Tis full of sorrow, care, and strife;
No joy doth in the soul appear.
My God, my God, grant peace to me—
Make me from grief and trouble free.
Regardless of the occasion or the ostensible subject of the poem—family, friends, nature, land, seasons, music, God, or heaven—"pain and grief" become parts of it, since they were parts of her life. But if life led to great pain, then that pain led to a greater faith (as in the standard imagery of Rachel's "Bearing the Cross"), and her synthesis of life, pain, and faith makes God and spirit, the suffering Christ in particular, a real presence in her life. God and salvation became more than conventional images of religiosity because for Rachel life was a literal and not metaphoric "vale of woe." She could, for example, genuinely identify with Luke 22:42, which she paraphrased in "Not My Will, but Thine be Done":

"It is Thy will" that I shall here
From joy and gladness be bereft;
But this sweet thought my soul doth cheer,
That Thou, my God, to me art left.

The spiritual world, then, was Rachel's prime reality.

After 1849, Bahn had little if any direct experience with physical nature. She recalled, we can be sure, the sensations of running through fields of clover or walking through snow, but memory fades, and may even have become painful. Because of her condition, she was removed from contact and physical experience; her perceptions of nature, therefore, were formed from a distance. Thus she described nature as she perceived it, only seen and heard from her second-story window. Involvement is lacking; there is in her verse an absence of tactility, or of physical immediacy. For example, "Summer-Time" praises that time of year "when everything looks bright"; in "Autumn" "winds are wailing heard / Through forests brown and sere." Her four-poem sequence "The Seasons" is likewise limited: spring "looks fresh"; autumn changes leaves "crimson to the view"; winter strips the trees "which in summer look'd so fair." In fact, sight and hearing dominate her verses; "to see" and "to hear" are in most of her poems, regardless of the subject. Whenever Rachel writes of nature, there is a strong sense of distance, or of remoteness. Consequently nature becomes two-dimensional, a tapestry or painting—images without depth or substance. Indeed, her only tactile references in Poems are to passively-felt heat and cold.
Denied the physical experience of nature, she turned to her religious beliefs, and transformed nature into something she could experience—spiritual lessons. For Rachel, nature came more to mean than to be. With little real meaning, nature took on vast spiritual significance. It was God’s handiwork, wonderful “to the admiring eye” and “charming to the eye” in “The Works of God.” Seasons became, as they often do for religious writers, metaphors for stages of life. Summer turns to life’s autumn, and the flowers of spring vanish (“no more their charms are seen”). Winter hides nature, which “No more the eye doth cheer,” until spring and rebirth to a new life. “Summer-Time” includes a stanza which is biographically interesting, and perhaps a fantasy:

’Tis beautiful in summer-time  
When, at the cooling brook,  
We sit and muse upon God’s works,  
So wondrous fair and good.

The poem ends with the realization that the sky’s “boundless blue expanse” leads, as it did in the poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Cullen Bryant, directly to the divine. The closeness of God and nature appears in many of her poems, such as “Sunset Thoughts,” “May,” or “God Shining in the Sky.” Her enforced removal from nature was also expressed in (and perhaps compensated by) her view of Heaven. It was “a land of rest,” an eternal springtime afternoon in “May” and in “There is a World of Bliss.” In the afterlife she would find fulfillment. Bahn’s compensatory imagination filled the afterlife with parks, fields of flowers, streams, brooks, rivers, gardens and bowers, all of which she intended to experience at firsthand. As we could expect, though, Heaven was also described in visual terms: in “Time is Short” she longs for the “other scenes we shall survey,” and in “My Heavenly Home” she prays “May I thy beauties see.”

We also recall Rachel’s isolation, as expressed in “Loneliness,” “Gone,” and especially the plaintive “I Have no Living Parents Now.”

I have no living parents now,  
They’re calmly sleeping side by side  
Beneath the sod and the cool shades  
Of Kreutz Creek Cemetery’s height.
“No more their voices I shall hear,” she laments. Heaven was again perceived in light of her condition, and consequently it became, frankly, a very crowded place. It was, in fact, in her “Seek the Better Land,” “Where you shall be never parted / From the friends you love so well.” Rachel outlived most of her contemporaries, and thus longed for a huge spiritual family reunion. Again and again she sings “Meet in Heaven,” “The Good Shall Meet in Heaven,” “We Shall Meet in Heaven,” “Gladly Will be Our Meeting.” Heaven was a vast camp meeting, as in “That World to Come.”

There never shall be weeping,
   None shall be sad or lone,
There always is rejoicing,
   There in that world to come.

In this poem her view of Heaven is clear: “There everyone is happy, / There in that world above.” In “Content” she is even stronger:

Friends there shall meet to part no more,
   No parting tear shall ever flow;
United they shall God adore,
   And hand in hand forever go.

This pleasant idea is a fixed point in Bahn’s conception of the afterlife. Amidst the bowers on the banks of the Jordan mingle crowds of friends and relatives, none of whom would ever have to leave at sunset to return to York, or before dark to return to Hellam, and none of whom would ever part in death.

Her dependence on others also influenced her views in that the conventional concepts of man’s dependence on God and his need for divine assistance became paramount for Bahn, and they take on, as did her view of life as a “vale of woe,” literal significance. In “Rock of Ages” she prays “O let me to Thee ever cleave,” with as much physical as figurative meaning. Her “Going Home to Jesus” again expresses this dependence: “To be at home with Jesus, / To lean upon his breast,” as does “Hymn,” subtitled “For One That is Afflicted and Longs to be at Rest”: 
Thou know'st how frail my body is,
And all the strength it needs
When shall I reach that land of bliss,
And be from sufferance freed?

In this poem joy was “to lean upon [the] Savior’s arms,” a posture she knew well. In her paraphrase of Psalm 104, “My Meditation of Him Shall be Sweet,” she saw salvation and divine assistance in terms she knew best: “He will uphold my feeble frame, / And help me to endure.” Briefly, her concept of divine love was physical support and strength, revealing again her perceptions.

But the most poignant feature of Rachel’s spirituality and concept of the afterlife was the direct result of her paraplegia. Detached from nature, she conceived of Heaven as a vast park; lonely in life, she conceived of it as a reunion. Immobile in life, she conceived of a kinetic heaven, a paradise of movement: walking, standing, strolling, roving, running, roaming are everywhere in Poems, most frequently in her conclusions. Heaven for Rachel was the ability to move, the independent and effortless use of the legs. Her poems form a litany to motion. Without understanding her life and condition, this exaggerated presence of movement becomes merely redundant, an eccentric obsession, or a lunging for rhymes (home/roam, land/stand, talk/walk). But understanding her perceptions makes it perfectly clear, and meaningful. In “Home in Heaven” she longs “to roam and ever be at rest,” a concept we would consider a contradiction but Rachel considered glory. Such lines as “There’s where my spirit longs to roam,” “He will us safely onward lead,” “we’ll firmly walk,” “we shall walk the golden shore,” “we shall walk with our savior walk” are ubiquitous in Poems. Her poem “Up, be Doing!”, ordinarily an inspirational poem based on metaphors, is for Rachel a fervent prayer for the kinetic joy of God:

“Up, be doing!” never faint
On your onward march to God;
Never utter a complaint
While you walk the narrow road.

Soaring and flying are also common: “O That I had Wings Like a Dove” has her dreaming of flight, thereby experiencing “endless
bliss.” An eternity of standing before the Lord terrified both Huck Finn and Mark Twain, but to Rachel it was indeed Heaven.

On all counts Bahn’s conceptualizations and images are the direct result of her paraplegia. She perceived of nature, life, and eternity as she did because her condition shaped those perceptions. Denied direct contact with nature, society, and life, and denied mobility, she concentrated on the spiritual, and transformed the afterlife into her ideals of existence.

Rachel Bahn and her small achievement should not be neglected, not because we pity her suffering or marvel at her endurance, but because she offers insights into the spirituality and artistic imagination of those many who cannot enjoy the activities we take for granted. In her poems we see, as we should in art, life through different eyes, and from different perspectives. Confined to her second-story couch for more than half a century, living in a world of architectural barriers, limited medical knowledge, and well-meaning condescension, her spirit nonetheless soared. Despite her body’s being bedridden in Hellam, Rachel Bahn envisioned herself eternally running through a new Eden.

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