

A Reading of Bishop Henry King's "The Exequy"

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The New Critical approach to literature has been much maligned in recent years, and people have searched far afield for a more comprehensive and satisfying methodology. Criticism of the New Critics was inevitable and, indeed, necessary in order to pull them back from the excesses to which their initially polemical stance took them. Today much of the critical work being done could accurately be described as what Hyatt Waggoner calls "critical syncretism" (220). This sort of development, this eclectic approach, is necessary, healthy; but an utter rejection of the methods of the New Critics would be unfortunate. By the techniques of close reading learned from the New Critical school one can look at a work of poetry (or any other type of work) and begin to appreciate the nuances of the poet's often paradoxical or ambiguous language, discover the underlying unity of the poem (if such there be), and, it is to be hoped, avoid any of the serious misinterpretations often borne of a more cursory reading. In the pages that follow I hope to show how use of the techniques of close reading espoused by New Critics can achieve the aforementioned goals.

Bishop Henry King's poem "The Exequy,"¹¹ written to commemorate the death of his wife, was among the poems re-evaluated by T. S. Eliot in his landmark essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (24-25). Eliot's reference to the poem is exceptionally brief, yea even cryptic; but it has, until recently, succeeded in preserving the poem inviolate. He calls it "one of the finest poems of the age" but gives no reason for his evaluation, and later critics who mention the poem at all have been content simply to give the amen (24). The sparse references to the poem in critical writings have been effusive, but unsubstantiated: Douglas Bush writes that "it may be doubted if he [Donne] could have written an elegy of such selfless devotion, such

simple and suggestive clarity, such unified progression through diverse images of clusters..."; Dame C. V. Wedgwood calls it "a poignant expression of grief in which his [King's] personal manner for once rises superior to the influence of the greater poet whom he copied"; and even Ronald Berman, in his fine study *Henry King and the Seventeenth Century*, warns that one "can approach it only with a certain degree of trepidation" (Bush 162; Wedgwood 83; Berman 116). Such statements of praise and such warnings are fine for Masorettes, but they little suit the critic's purpose. Nevertheless, I hope to show in this essay that "The Exequy" is a fine poem for reasons if not unsuspected at least undeclared. It is a carefully constructed, tightly unified poem comprising what Rosamund Tuve calls "one after another of the conventional similitudes heightened and made 'strange' by an extreme expansion" (154). The poem represents the poet's attempts (perhaps never fully achieved) to come to terms with both his profound sorrow and the more rational thoughts that impinge upon his grief. He maintains a constant tension between emotion and intellect, trying at once to give vent to his feelings; to objectify his experience through his use of metaphysical conceits; and to express thoughts which are undeniable but perhaps, he feels, unworthy of his sorrow. After a careful examination of the details the reader can more fully respect the intensity of the poet's feeling, the breadth of his intellect, and the honesty with which he expresses, albeit through ambiguous language, his disruptive thoughts.

The second ghost I hope to lay to rest has also been abroad at Eliot's behest. He mentions parenthetically that "The Exequy" is "a poem which could not have been written in any other age" (24). Predictably, later critics have called it the consummate expression of the traditional Christian reaction to death. Indeed, Francis Berry calls it "the chief most obviously Christian love poem of the period" (111). I hope to show in the following explication that this poem is in no way a traditional expression of Christian grief. It is scarcely Christian at all, but I do not say this to the poem's detriment. Flannery O'Connor, in writing about the American South, has said that it is "hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (44). This is also true of "The Exequy": it is a poem set firmly in a

Christian milieu, but it is a poem about a man and his sorrow; and it makes use of Christian ideas, when at all, to a very personal end.²⁾ With these two goals in mind, let us turn to my unabashedly teleological explication of "The Exequy."

According to the *OED*, the English word *exequy* comes from the Latin *exsequi*, meaning "to follow out, to follow to the grave." The English definition is then given as "funeral rites." Dr. Johnson is more literal, giving the English denotation as "procession of burial." King's poem is, in every way, what it claims to be: the reader also follows the cortege and, in so doing, overhears the animadversions of the bereaved husband. The structure of the poem is admirable. As Robert F. Gleckner points out, it is divided into two 60-line halves, "each having its own development and climax independent of the other and yet remaining an integral component of the whole" (160). Equally impressive are the opening and closing six-line stanzas, in which one finds *in posse* the keys to interpreting the poem.

Accept, thou Shrine of my Dead Saint!
Instead of Dirges this Complaint;
And, for sweet flowres to crowne thy Hearse,
Receive a strew of weeping verse
From thy griev'd Friend; whome Thou might'st see
Quite melted into Teares for Thee(1-6).

The poet begins by addressing the shrine of his "Dead Saint," which is at least nominally Christian. One should beware, however, of the context. King, a close friend of John Donne, was writing this poem after having undoubtedly seen in manuscript such poems as Donne's "The Canonization." The context of the poem itself, as I hope to show, also militates against our reading this line in strictly Christian terms. This poem fits very well with other Metaphysical texts preaching the religion of love, and the Christian overtones, given the often idolatrous nature of the saint cults, serve only to reinforce this reading.³⁾ Having invoked not Christ, but his own saint, he pointedly distinguishes his poem from the traditional threnody. This is no dirge, but a "Complaint." This is not the Job of "the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" but the Job of "Let the day perish wherein I was born" (1:

21 ; 3: 3). Berry argues that the poet later gives over his complaining, but I think we shall see that this attitude of complaint, though expressed in a "relentless" series of metaphysical conceits and ultimately mitigated by other thoughts and feelings, continues to the end, functioning as a unifying technique (Berry 113, 115; Berman 126). In these opening lines we see also the tension between emotion and cerebration that becomes the hallmark of this poem: he will not begin with the traditional elegiac catalogue of weeping flowers, but will bring "weeping verse"(3-4). He juxtaposes the idea of being "melted into Teares for Thee" with the unusual and poignant epithet "thy griev'd Friend" (5-6). With these six lines the tone is set. The situation is the same that both Johnson's philosopher in *Rasselas* and Parson Adams will find themselves in, although on a more serious level: the erstwhile comforter is now confronted by tremendous grief, in the face of which he attempts to objectify his experience; but more importantly, focusing entirely on the "Dead Saint," he weeps and complains.

To the title "Dead Saint" the poet adds the salutations "Deare Losse" and "Lov'd Clay," displaying the Metaphysical penchant for *discordia concors* (7, 11). The focus is entirely upon this "Lov'd Clay" and her "untimely fate" (11, 7). He rather deftly combines two seemingly unrelated metaphors, comparing his grief first to reading and then to business. The connection is achieved through common reference to the eyes. She is the book he reads "[t]hough almost blind," and his only occupation is to discover "[h]ow lazily Time creeps about / To one that mournes" (9-11; 13-18). George Williamson somehow misreads line 15's "wett glasses" as "wet hour-glasses," when clearly the reference is to eyes wet with tears (*The Proper Wit* 57). Ample precedence for reading "glasses" as "eyes" is provided in the *OED*, but it seems hardly necessary. The mercantile language of lines 13-20 serves to counter the tremendous emotion behind the lines, as had the book imagery earlier. And with poetic results such as "For Thee (Lov'd Clay!) / I Languish out, not Live the Day," we willingly suspend our disbelief when the poet says he has no other exercise but "what [he] practice[s] with [his] Eyes" (11-14). The stanza ends with a moving transformation of the sighing Petrarchan lover's situation (19-20).

Perhaps the richest passage of the poem is lines 21-38, a typical, but

most appropriate metaphysical conceit. Having discussed the slow passage of time in lines 11-20, the poet moves naturally to a day metaphor in order to describe the catastrophic reversal he has experienced. She "[w]ho wast [his] Day" has set before reaching noontide, thereby throwing the poet back into an unnatural night (21-26).⁴⁾ This unprecedented setting of the sun at noon has caused everything to go awry. It also prepares us for the portentous astrological imagery that follows (34-38). Stressing his loved one's youth, he remarks that her sun has set before she has seen "so many Yeeres / As Day tells Howres"(28-29). This reference to her time of life as "Noon-tide" is commensurate with Donne's reference to the aged Mrs. Magdalen Herbert's time of life as "evening," and his calling her the sun is, significantly, putting her once again in the place which Christ occupies in, say, Donne's "Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward" ("Elegy X" 21). She has been eclipsed by death, but has in turn eclipsed Christ in the language of this poem. With line 30 the poet begins to use increasingly the language of astronomy tintured with strong astrological overtones. She is the source of his "Love and Fortune," but she is likened first to a falling star and then to an eclipsed sun, the latter being so strange that it surpasses the wonders of the "Almanake" (30, 33-34, 35-38). There is certainly a play on the idea of earth eclipsing the poet's sun, i.e. both in the traditional sense and in the sense that the earth will soon cover her. Given the dire circumstances that such celestial aberrations were thought to portend, we can see that the poet's "Love and Fortune" have only dim prospects for the future.

This extended astronomical metaphor has a somewhat restrained tone, but again the poet offsets the effects with the next two stanzas, stanzas in which his powerful feelings all but gain the upper hand. The atmosphere of the poem becomes increasingly less cerebral as we near the first of the two climaxes mentioned by Gleckner (160). Berman reads lines 39-46 as a contemporary setting of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. The poet does call on his dearly departed to return, but these lines seem more clearly to echo the Persephone myth: she is allowed to "darken" his "sad Clime" for "a time" during which he foregoes "mirth" provided that she will "promise to returne." This clearly parallels Persephone's sojourn in

Hades during which time Demeter mourns, and the earth darkens and puts away its joy against the return of spring. This mythic parallel serves to unify this stanza, but the lines are also marked by the proliferation of first person personal pronouns. Here in this supremely egocentric passage the poet complains without restraint. It is common for people grieving to try to assert themselves, what they want, what they do not want, and, to use the poet's word, what they will "allow"(39). Death has taken his beloved while he stood by helplessly, and he wants to assert himself, to take charge, but to no avail. Even the decidedly Christian idea embodied in the next stanza does not assuage his grief, his frustration.

Lines 47-60 are certainly written within a Christian framework: the Christian idea of the resurrection of the body informs the stanza. But the use to which he puts this idea is repugnant to traditional Christianity, although it makes for powerful love poetry. Williamson classifies King with the "profane" line of seventeenth century poets, and this stanza and the next should show us why (*Donne* 142-150).⁵ He begins with the classic statement of despair, "woe is mee," and, harking back to his earlier allusions to prognostication, bewails the fact that all of time will not be long enough to "calculate" his beloved's return (47-48). Even the ideas of Judgment Day and the resurrection of the dead, which St. Paul gives for the Christian's solace, are given at first in tones of complaint (1 Thess. 4: 18). Still lamenting the fact that their former life and love is over, he dwells upon the terror of the Day of Wrath: that day

Which shall the Earth to cinders doome,
And a fierce Feaver must calcine
The Body of this World, like Thine,
(My Little World!) (52-55).

No metaphysical poem would be complete without a passing reference to the microcosm / macrocosm dichotomy, and so we see that the beloved is his world in addition to being his object of worship. The short-lived relief that comes, (the first in the poem), comes in lines 55-60. Here we have magnificent love poetry from which no one should want to detract, but it is a million miles from anything Christian. In five rather amazing lines the poet says that upon resurrection their "Bodies shall aspire / To [their]

Soules' blisse," and that their "cleerer eyes" shall be better able to see not God, but each other. They will enjoy an endless Day during which they can marvel over not the sights of the Heavenly City, but each other. This sounds like Dante Gabriel Rossetti with his "Blessed Damozel" frolicking in God's sight, which passage, like the one we are considering, is wonderful love poetry, but it has never been called Christian.

This climax of line 60, which parallels the climax of line 120, is undermined by the inexorable claims of Death. That time of blissful reunion awaits, but "Meane time, thou hast Hir Earth" (61). In this latter half of the poem, although the underlying tone of complaint continues, the atmosphere changes somewhat as the initial tide of grief ebbs, and calm reason begins to intrude upon the poet's thoughts. In the stanza comprising lines 61-78 the poet has reached the gravesite; the time of interment is impending, and he consigns the body of his "Dead Saint" to the earth. This stanza, though inevitably offensive to modern sensibilities, is also ensconced in a Christian framework. As Berman notes, "It could not be said of King that he had no myth to sustain his vision" (122). But again, the use to which he puts this myth is anything but Christian in tone. Compare the passage here with the conclusion of Izaak Walton's *Life of Dr. John Donne*:

He was earnest and unwearied in the search of knowledge; with which his vigorous soul is now satisfied and employed in a continual praise of that God that first breathed it into his active body, that body which once was a temple of the Holy Ghost and is now become a small quantity of Christian dust.

But I shall see it reanimated(271).

Walton's prose resounds with Christian hope, assurance, and joy. King's treatment of this same theme strikes the reader quite differently. Reverting to his earlier business-like tone, in a parody of generosity he says:

Much good

May my harme doe thee. Since it stood
With Heaven's will I might not call
Hir longer Mine; I give thee all
My short liv'd right and Interest

In Hir, whome living I lov'd best:

With a most free and bounteous grief,⁶⁾

I give thee what I could not keep (61-68).

He waxes fastidious as he charges the earth to keep careful record in its "Doomsday book" of "[e]ach Grane and Atome of this Dust" (69, 78). There is no Christian hope or joy here, only a morbid and rather niggardly calling of the earth to account. This section is by far the least successful for us, and it seems to have caused King a great deal of trouble as well (Crum 43).

Lines 79-80, functioning something like stage directions, signal that the burial is finished and inaugurate the sleep imagery that will unify the next stanza. As Williamson points out, the lines referring to the beloved's "cold bed" do recall the imagery of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," although the tone is quite different (*The Proper Wit* 57; King 81; Marvell 31-32). This passage is perhaps the most tender in the poem, but it also serves to introduce, via several ambiguous utterances, some of the disquieting thoughts with which the poet must attempt to come to terms. He bids her "[s]leep on" until the day that he will join her and "fill the roome / My heart keeps empty in Thy Tomb" (81-88). Perhaps the most powerful line in the poem is 83, in which he exclaims, "My last Good-night!" It has the same gripping finality, the same noble grief that makes Dryden's line "Thou hast already had her last Embrace" or Catullus's "Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale" ring in the mind (Dryden "To the Pious Memory of . . . Mrs. Anne Killigrew" 173; Catullus 101. 6).

The section beginning at 89 marks the poet's move, however grudging, toward resignation and reintegration into society. We need not see the resignation as complete, but some degree of acquiescence is necessary for his survival; and the poet, too, seems to realize this, however little he wants to at the moment. Lines 89-104 allude to a similar situation in 2 Samuel 12: 15-23, and the allusion is most telling. David, after grieving excessively for the sick child of Bathsheba, suddenly arises, washes himself, and worships when he hears that the child is dead. In answer to the queries of his puzzled servants, David says, "But now he is dead,

wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (23). Similarly, the poet here writes, "Stay for mee there: I will not faile / To meet Thee in that hollow Vale" (89-90). But David made his comment as he returned to daily life; the poet here realizes he must do the same, but he feels guilty about doing it. Very recently he called her his "Saint," his "Sunne," his "Little World," and so he tries to continue in this vein, as many do; nevertheless, the ambiguous language and the unnatural elements in the extended nautical metaphor and in the martial imagery of lines 105-114 undermine this forced effort. He says he is following "with all the speed / Desire can make, or Sorrowes breed," and he says that he shall sit down by her "slowe howe're my Marches bee" (93-94; 113-114). In both instances the language is deliberately ambiguous because reason (or a clergyman's experience) tells him that desire and sorrow will wane and, thereby, slow his march. The imagery is unnatural: he is attempting to focus on the grave, so that when the sun rises in the east he rises "nearer [his] West"(98). He tries to turn from the sun, and his compass bears "downward" (101-102). This turning from life is unnatural, and he knows it cannot last. The very language he uses belies his admirable attempt to remain true to his first grief. He says that his advanced years "might" claim precedence "in the Grave"(109-110). Again the language is far from definite, and the poet knows that such a wish for death, though perfectly commensurate with moments of intense grief, will fade with time. As Tuve points out, the poem is replete with "imagery with far-echoing suggestions, exquisitely controlled" (177). The ambiguities and paradoxes of these lines reveal a mature attitude, an amazingly "imaginative grasp of diverse materials," as Cleanth Brooks says about one of Tennyson's poems (177). These are not the sentiments of Wordsworth's child who, in her innocence, cannot admit of death or those of Hopkins's who cries but does not know why; these are the mature thoughts of a man struggling with the most profound grief who, because he thinks, knows that this grief will be, if not completely, at least substantially assuaged with time (Wordsworth "We Are Seven"; Hopkins "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child").

The climaxes of lines 60 and 120 are quite different, and the language

leading to them, under close scrutiny, tells us why. In the first 60 lines the poet is still in the throes of sorrow, and he imagines a rapturous reunion without alloy. In the latter half of the poem the grave has been closed and experience has whispered to him that the madness of grief will pass. As he looks again to their eventual reunion, he sees the years of life preceeding it; and, though he tries to convince himself that death would be better than life, the very language he uses denies it. Most critics, ignoring these less than romantic nuances of thought, end their readings at 114, not realizing that the last six lines are the perfect climax to this deeply troubled latter half of the poem. King writes:

The thought of this bids mee goe on,
And wait my dissolution
With Hope and Comfort. Deare! (forgive
The Crime) I am content to live
Divided, with but half a Heart,
Till wee shall Meet and Never part(115-120).

Here the poet affirms his resolution to go on with life, not without sorrow, but strengthened with the assurance that one day he and his beloved will be reunited. He does mention his "dissolution," but the context of his new resolve denies it any force. It is certainly more tame than the strained, morbid hankering after death of the preceeding 35 lines. It is the sentiment of these lines that we must focus upon. When the poet looks into the grave, for all his ravings to the contrary, he resolves to live. To think of one's own life, to realize that one's protestations about dying with the loved one are not completely sincere seems scandalous at the time of bereavement, and it is to the poet's credit that he admits it. Others have openly discussed this "desperately human" characteristic and been thought cold. Lucretius, whose candor results in his frequent misconstruction, says:

Sweet it is, when on the great sea the winds are buffeting the waters, to gaze from the land on another's great struggles; not because it is pleasure or joy that any one should be distressed, but because it is sweet to perceive from what misfortune you yourself are free (65; 2.1-5).

And Jonathan Swift, in his "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D.,"

takes Rochefoucault to task for his maxim: "In the Adversity of our best Friends, we find something that doth not displease us." This trait is undeniable, but terribly disconcerting; so it is often left unexpressed. Here we must credit King: he has taken this desire for life, different only in degree from the frank, but somewhat callously expressed ideas of Lucretius and Rochefoucault, and woven it into this poem about his moment of paramount sorrow. It is an ambitious attempt. He says clearly that he is "content to live," but calls it a crime. Significantly, the poem ends by harking back to line 88, with the poet confessing that he will live with "but half a Heart, / Till [they] shall Meet and Never Part" (119-120). As in the opening six lines, so in the closing six lines, we can see adumbrated the thoughts and feelings with which the poet is struggling: he is resolved to live, although the proximity in time of his beloved's death still causes him to feel guilty about his resolution; and, all the blustering of the graveside aside, he affirms his love for his "Dead Saint" by calmly and more believably confessing that this life he so desires will be lived with half a heart until they meet again.

Berman, likening "The Exequy" to *In Memoriam*, says that King's poem is "a brilliant attempt at comprehension... [and] also a brilliant failure of the mind to ease the spirit" (126). The poem does attempt much. Coming to terms with sorrow, anger, bitterness, and with the more rational thoughts that mercilessly (or mercifully) intrude upon one's grief is no mean accomplishment. That the poet has not effected a complete resolution of these conflicting thoughts and emotions is not shameful. Indeed, that he has been able to incorporate so many disparate elements into a unified poem of 120 lines is admirable by any standard. This poem is all that Eliot, Bush, Wedgwood, and Berman say that it is and more for reasons I have tried to elucidate. It is not an exemplary Christian poem, nor should it be; it is an extraordinarily honest poem about human love and grief.⁷⁾

Notes

1) The poem is to be found in one early pirated edition (1657) and in numerous manuscripts, but the textual variants are surprisingly few in number and largely inconsequential. Subsequent editions are those of John Hannah (1843), Lawrence Mason (1914), George Saintsbury in *Minor Poets of the Caroline Period* (1921), and John Sparrow (1925). The latest and most complete edition is that of Margaret Crum (1965). Crum's edition includes full bibliographical documentation as well as a brief biography of King. For an early, but important article concerning King's life and canon, see Mason.

2) Those with a philological penchant for the study of literary biography might take exception to my claim here, pointing out that, as King was a distinguished Christian leader, this conclusion seems incongruous. On the contrary, I think his being a clergyman and yet not taking advantage of the solaces with which he was wont to comfort others makes this poem a more beautiful expression of love: here is not a minister reading the obsequies for one of his parishoners, but a man mourning his wife.

3) Theodore Redpath conjects that the *Songs and Sonnets* were written "at various times over probably as much as twenty years," suggesting that some of them may have been written before 1590 and adding that there is no evidence to indicate that he wrote any of them after 1612 (xvi). For the circulation of Donne's manuscripts, see MacColl. A brief, but excellent discussion of the saints' cults is that of Brown.

4) Williamson points out that "præposterous" in line 22 is a latinization of *backward* (*Proper Wit* 57). For a most bizarre reading of this passage, in which the writer constantly refers to the poet as going "arsy-versy," see Berry 113. In relation to these lines one cannot but think of Milton's *Comus* 381-385.

5) Williamson's word choice is regrettable, but perhaps he became fixated on this particular binary pair (sacred / profane) and could not escape the choice short of abandoning the pair altogether. Could these two categories ever be found to merge? Could they collapse upon one another? One thinks of Burns, of Byron.

6) For a most interesting analysis of oxymoronic phrases such as "bounteous grief," see Burke.

7) I am happy to say that this essay was essentially completed before I read Roland Barthes. Had I read Barthes before I finished my research, I could scarcely have found encouragement to continue; indeed, given the nature of my analysis, and seeing that the author is dead, the critic undermined, I could have found encouragement for little else than jumping out the nearest window.

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