

## THE FUNCTION OF DEATH IN CERTAIN METAPHYSICAL POEMS

The neat classification by nineteenth-century cultural historians that labelled the medieval period as somber, overly pious, and death-enchanted but the Renaissance youthful, skeptical, and this-worldly has fortunately fallen into disrepute. It was a sort of "beast and beauty" formula, where the grotesque and crude of the medieval period sat in sharp contrast to the free reign of beauty of the Renaissance. In its place has come what might be called the "emperor's new clothes" approach, where we are told that there really is nothing new in the Renaissance, that we have just imagined something different entered the spirit of Europe but that actually everything can be traced back to St. Thomas Aquinas or Roger Bacon or Duns Scotus. The truth, I suspect, lies between these two interpretations, and time will probably show that the bridges built out of medieval stuff put Western man into a strange, new world.

In one area we still preserve the older "beast and beauty" distinction between the medieval and the Renaissance, namely, in thinking that though the medieval period practiced the *meditatio mortis*, the meditation on death, the Renaissance practiced the *meditatio vitae*, the meditation on life. It is true that as far back as the Church Fathers and the Venerable Bede the faithful had been admonished to think on the "Four Last Things", of which death was one. Yet a case could be made for the increase in concern for death toward the close of the medieval period and scarcely any slackening on through the seventeenth century. Witness, for example, that the famous *ars moriendi* books, the "how to do it" books for shuffling off this mortal coil, hit their peak of popularity in the fifteenth century. Émile Mâle, in his study of the religious art of the medieval period, has demonstrated that pictorialization grew more death-conscious and the depiction of the effects of death on the human body became more gruesome later in the period.<sup>1</sup>

It is an isolated voice like Spinoza's that says the man who follows right reason "thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life".<sup>2</sup> The more common experience is to find Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* recommending the skeleton as an object of meditation in the early sixteenth century and then 150 years later the wife of the "Great

Dissenter” Richard Baxter with a death’s head in her prayer closet; or Martin Luther writing his theological treatises while wearing a golden finger-ring with a small skull and the motto *Mori saepe cogita* on it; or Robert Southwell admitting:

I often look upon a face  
Most ugly, grisly, bare, and thin;  
I often view the hollow place  
Where eyes and nose had sometimes been;<sup>3</sup>

or the prostitutes of Shakespeare’s London devoutly wearing skull rings. The interest in death seems to have intensified in the seventeenth century, so much so that Helen C. White called it “perhaps the favorite theme of seventeenth century piety”,<sup>4</sup> and pious writing, Douglas Bush reminds us, comprised nearly three-fourths of the books in Jaggard’s catalog of English books in print in 1619.<sup>5</sup>

So prevalent was this concern for death that it is puzzling to note that George Williamson in *The Donne Tradition*, published in 1930, described the “Metaphysical Shudder” as a “quality of emotion that seems . . . peculiar to the Metaphysical mode of thought”.<sup>6</sup> Williamson’s theory, so far as I know, has neither been retracted nor refuted. I believe that every idea about death the major metaphysical poets — Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan — used in their poetry can be encountered in contemporaneous treatises or writing accessible to the poets. Their treatment of this mass of floating analysis of death, of course, varied. The purpose of this study is to set up generalizations about the poetic handling of death by the four above-named poets.

Before each poet is viewed separately, a word is in order about the semantics of death. There are two directions in which the language about death can face; they reflect two philosophical positions toward death. One block of attitudes views death as a divisive agent: it dissolves, separates, annuls, annihilates. Erasmus defined four kinds of death — all divisive. He stated that spiritual death is a “seuerance of god, from the mynde”, natural death is a “seuerance of the soule, from the body”, eternal death is the “deathe of hel”, i.e., the eternal separation of the soul and body from God, and transformatory death, “separation of the fleshe from the spyrite”, which offers salvation.<sup>7</sup> A second block of attitudes views death as a union or gain. Allen Tate has called this radical shift between death as negation to death as affirmation of association with God “the particular virtue, the Christian entelechy or final cause of mankind”.<sup>8</sup> Using the formula of whether the poet handles death as a divisive or unitive agent, we penetrate the heart of many poems and discover the link that binds together the pieces of many poems.

John Donne offered more variations on the theme of death than any other metaphysical poet. For Donne, death was primarily divisive. On one fact he

is insistent: no death is natural, all death is the result of an intruding force. The ravages caused by death dominated his thinking. As a result, his pictures of physical dissolution, grave descriptions, and mental agony are especially forceful. Several poems in which death imagery either controls the poetic structure or stands out memorably betray by their titles the "all coherence gone" aspect of death — "The Legacie", "A Valediction: of my name, in the window", "A Valediction: forbidding mourning", "The Will", "The Funerall", "The Relique", "The Dissolution", "The Expiration". Typical of Donne's statements is a passage from "The first Anniversary":

Shee, shee is dead; shee's dead; when thou knowst this,  
Thou knowst how lame a cripple this world is.  
And learn'st thus much by our Anatomy,  
That this worlds generall sicknesse doth not lie  
In any humour, or one certaine part;  
But as thou sawest it rotten at the heart,  
Thou scest a Hectique feaver hath got hold  
Of the whole substance, not to be contrould,  
And that thou hast but one way, not 'admit  
The worlds infection, to be none of it.  
For the worlds subtilst immateriall parts  
Feele this consuming wound, and ages darts. (ll. 237—248)

Though many persons have marvelled at Donne's wide learning (for example, the usual assertion is that he was "another Pico della Mirandola . . . rather born wise than made so by study"),<sup>9</sup> nevertheless an analysis of Donne's treatment of death leads to the conclusion that his thinking was more pyrotechnic than logical. Donne handled death as something to play with. There was much of the poseur in him. One suspects that Donne himself must have laughed at people's fascination for the "gloomy Dean". He never presented a coherent, well-developed view of death. As he treated medicine, law, geography, and theology, so also he touched death — in a kind of hesitant, lack-of-commitment manner. He picked and chose what he dramatically and poetically wanted, for instance, that the good die easily ("A Valediction: forbidding mourning"), that a "subtile wreath of haire" from the beloved could keep the body from disintegration ("The Funerall"), that a "bracelet of bright haire" found on dead body could be interpreted as a saint's relic ("The Relique"), that the dissection of a body would reveal the beloved's picture on the heart of the corpse ("The Dampe"). Even when he came to prose, he played with facets of death. Thus, in a period of depression he contemplated suicide and wrote *Biathanatos* to prove "that Selfe-homicide is not so Naturally Sinne, that it may never be otherwise" (as the 1644 [?] title page stated) — but lived and circulated it among his friends; when he was extremely ill in 1623 he wrote *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, in which he toyed with the sound of bells, among other

death-related symbols, and wrote the book that was the most popular work of his during his lifetime; few descriptions of death have ever duplicated the macabre figure painted in *Death's Duell*, his own funeral sermon, as Walton labelled it, where death intrudes terrifyingly and regally but with a golden mantle of the Christian hope of resurrection around his shoulders. In Donne's works, death is useful as a vehicle of expression and as a topic for meditation; however, almost exclusively it breaks and disrupts an order.

George Herbert, in contrast to Donne, emphasized unitive death, not divisive death. He did not view physical death as a frightful experience; he said virtually nothing about the physical ravages of death. He did not gloat over death as the leveller of mankind. He evinced a mild desire for death, but the desire sprang neither from morbid curiosity nor from excessive impatience with the fortunes of life. His desire is explained by his hope of seeing and understanding God. The epitome of Anglican piety and orthodoxy, he remained confident in the bosom of his Mother Church; unruffled in his basic conviction (which nevertheless on the surface might be agitated by sin and emotional instability), convinced that his relationship with God was permanent, he was untroubled by fears of death. He was, however, no mystic of the classic Christian type, for he never used words associated with physical dying to express the ecstasy of a union with God. His little concern with physical resurrection implies that he believed fellowship in eternity with God would not necessitate the intervention of his physical body to the extent held by Vaughan. The death of Christ seems to have especially moved Herbert, and many of his poems build on the Saviour's death, or at least refer to it. Thoughts about his own death supply the basis for no complete poem. Many poems, however, treat Herbert's wish for separation from sins in this life by using words associated with death. In such discussions he longed for the better existence awaiting him after the sins were destroyed. Similarly, his thoughts about physical death admit that a separation from undesirable human predilections would occur and would be wanted, but more important by far would be the resulting heavenly gains. Herbert is, thus, closer to Crashaw than to any other metaphysical poet in his belief that death is primarily positive.

Illustrative of the above position that death occupies in Herbert's poems is such an expression of the "naturalness" of death as in "Repentance":

life still pressing  
Is one undressing,  
A steadie aiming at a tombe.      (11. 4-6)

In "Faith" he wrote:

What though my bodie runne to dust?  
Faith cleaves unto it, counting ev'ry grain

With an exact and most particular trust,  
Reserving all for flesh again. (11. 41—44)

In "Grace" death is longed for:

Death is still working like a mole,  
And digs my grave at each remove:  
Let grace work too, and on my soul  
Drop from above. (11. 13—16)

In the *meditatio mortis* tradition, which spawned Donne's "Death be not proud", but lacking the pictorial quality of Donne's poem, is "Mortification". Where Donne battles against death because it is an alien force, Herbert sees death as a part of God's system; thus, he ends, not with Donne's shout — "death, thou shalt die" — but with the conviction:

Man, ere he is aware,  
Hath put together a solemnitie,  
And drest his herse, while he has breath  
As yet to spare:  
Yet Lord, instruct us <sup>so</sup> to die,  
That all these dyings may be life in death.  
(11. 31—36)

Richard Crashaw presents radically different language about death, scarcely hinted at by the other metaphysicals, except, for example, in Donne's "The Canonization". For a comprehension of meanings that Crashaw extracted from analogies with dying as well as an analysis of his thought, Counter-Reformation mysticism must be understood. Of all the metaphysicals, Crashaw alone can be classified a mystic in the authoritative tradition of St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross. In some of his funeral elegies, death is viewed as a destructive force. But without exception the poems which can be considered reflections of personal experiences view death as a positive, unitive force. He had nothing to say about his own literal death; he was unconcerned with questions concerning the resurrection of the body. When he used the language of death, its meanings were spiritualized. Thus, Crashaw spoke about the state of absorption into the being of God, the goal for the mystic, with death language. Unconcerned with things of time, he centered his attention on the possibility of gaining the Beatific Vision in this life. The best-known example of the mystic's language of death occurs in his poem in memory of St. Teresa, in which he said of her:

Thou art Loves victim, and must dye  
A death more misticall and high,  
Into Loves hand thou shalt let fall,  
A still surviving funerall. (11. 75—78)

St. Teresa, as one recalls, sought as a mere child to be a martyr-missionary to the Moslems. Crashaw believed that God restrained her from this physical death to award her the "death more misticall and high". In the same poem Crashaw spoke

Of a death in which who dyes  
Loves his death, and dyes againe,  
And would for ever so be slaine!  
And lives and dyes, and knows not why  
To live, but that he still may dy. (ll. 100—104)

Here is a death that needs no resurrection to complete its cycle, for it culminates in the union with God:

these thy deaths so numerous,  
Shall all at last dye into one,  
And melt thy soules sweet mansion:  
Like a soft lump of Incense, basted  
By too hot a fire, and wasted,  
Into perfuming cloudes. (ll. 111—116)

Death in Henry Vaughan's poetry appears the most philosophically complete in comparison with its portrayal in other metaphysical poetry. Vaughan was concerned with the effect of death on himself and also on the world of nature. The terminology of death suggests the divisive aspect more than does Herbert's and far more than does Crashaw's but not so much as Donne's. Intensely aware of spiritual separation from his Creator, he often described that condition by analogies with physical dying. For an interpretation of Vaughan's handling of death, an understanding of his view of nature is necessary. He regarded nature as a sacrament from which he could derive spiritual lessons. He never forgot that all nature is permeated by death. To him that permeation taught lessons of humility and reliance on God for deliverance. Vaughan is peculiarly the poet of immortality. Tied up with his picture of death is his insistence on the theory of the literal resurrection of the human body and the hope of a harmonious reintegration of the forces of nature at a point in eternity. Though Vaughan saw death as destructive, his confidence in an ultimate resurrection of the human body in a changed universe made death seem less fearsome, perhaps even desirable. A man of practical observation and realism, he spoke of the physical ravages of dying and of grave scenes. In short, death in Vaughan's poems appears primarily as a destructive force, ultimately caused by sin, but elements of the positive, unitive side enter when the theory of the resurrection of humanity and of the reconstruction of nature is added.

Illustrations for the above points are readily discoverable. An obvious example exists in "Resurrection and Immortality":

But when times restles wave  
 Their substance doth deprave  
 And the more noble Essence finds his house  
 Sickly, and loose,  
 He, ever young, doth wing  
 Unto that spring,  
 And source of spirit, where he takes his lot  
 Till time no more shall rot  
 His passive Cottage; which (though laid aside,)  
 Like some spruce Bride,  
 Shall one day rise, and cloath'd with shining light  
 All pure, and bright  
 Re-marry to the soule, for 'tis most plaine  
 Thou only fal'st to be refin'd againe. (11. 37-50)

Death fitted into a prominent concept of Vaughan's, namely, his circular view of human existence, which has often been interpreted as similar to the Wordsworthian theory of pre-existence. Thus "The Retreat" concludes:

Some men a forward motion love,  
 But I by backward steps would move,  
 And when this dust falls to the urn  
 In that state I came return. (11. 29-32)

And in "The Evening-watch" he wrote:

The last gasp of time  
 Is thy (i.e., body's) first breath, and mans *eternall Prime*.  
 (11. 15, 16)

In this paper I have attempted to show the variety of functions of death in some poems of four metaphysical poets. I have maintained that the theme of death was part and parcel of the intellectual milieu of the period in which these men wrote. I have implicitly rejected Williamson's thesis that a "metaphysical shudder" separated the poets from their contemporaries and bound them together by a "quality of emotion that seems . . . peculiar". I have implied that by the formidableness of death in these poems the authors were carrying out the philosophical ideal of Socrates, who believed that the "true votary of philosophy . . . is always pursuing death and dying".<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *L'Art Religieux de la Fin du Moyen Age en France* (Paris, 1922), Chapter VI. See also Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London, 1924), Chapters XII and XV.

<sup>2</sup> *Ethics*, tr. A. Boyle (London, 1938), p. 187.

- <sup>3</sup> "Upon the Image of Death", 11: 7--10 in *The Golden Hind*, ed. Roy Jamson and Hallett Smith (New York, 1942), p. 308.
- <sup>4</sup> *English Devotional Literature, 1600--1640* (Madison, 1931), p. 243.
- <sup>5</sup> *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century 1600--1660* (Oxford, 1948), p. 294.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Donne Tradition: A Study in English Poetry from Donne to the Death of Cowley* (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), p. 90.
- <sup>7</sup> *Preparation to Death, a Booke as Deuout as Eloquent Compiled by Erasmus Roterodame* (London, 1543), sigs. [B8<sup>v</sup>] — C1<sup>v</sup>.
- <sup>8</sup> "The Point of Dying: Donne's 'Virtuous Men'," *Sewanee Review*, LXI (Winter, 1953), 76.
- <sup>9</sup> Edmund Gosse, *The Life and Letters of John Donne* (Gloucester, Mass., 1959), p. 14.
- <sup>10</sup> "Phaedo" in *The Dialogues of Plato*, tr. Benjamin Jowett (New York, 1937), I, 447.

#### EDITORIAL NOTE

Dr. Robert G. Collmer is Dean of the Wayland Baptist College at Plainview, Texas, USA. He has a doctorate in English Literature of the University of Pennsylvania, and has done research in England and Holland, especially on the Renaissance period. The present paper was read at the South-Central Renaissance Conference at the University of Houston on March 15, 1963. Since Dr. Collmer is particularly interested in reciprocal arrangements for exchanging scientific viewpoints and cultural broadening, his paper is published here as part of such an arrangement.

## FUNKCE SMRTI V NĚKTERÝCH METAFYZICKÝCH BÁSNÍCH

Objasnění filosofické koncepce smrti v básních významných představitelů anglické metafyzické poezie XVII. století umožňuje vyvodit obecné závěry i o způsobu, jakým zkoumaní básníci — John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw a Henry Vaughan — přistupovali k motivu smrti, který je ústředním námětem mnoha jejich básní. Tato studie vychází z přesvědčení, že poměrně rozšířený názor na středověk jako období, kdy v metafyzickém myšlení převládalo rozjímání o smrti a na renesanci jako dobu, kdy zcela převládlo rozjímání o životě, není zcela oprávněný. Spinozův výrok, že rozumný člověk „nemyslí na nic méně než na smrt a považuje za moudré přemýšlet raději o životě než o smrti“, je v XVII. století téměř ojedinělý. Naproti tomu v tehdejší náboženské literatuře (zahrnující skoro tři čtvrtiny tištěných publikací) je smrt snad nejoblíbenějším předmětem úvah. Není také oprávněně tvrzení George Williamsona (v knize „Donnova tradice“ z r. 1930), že pro anglické metafyzické básníky příznačný pocit „metafyzické úzkosti“ nemá téměř obdobu v soudobém obecném myšlení a cítění. Tento pocit je ve skutečnosti charakteristický pro intelektuální ovzduší jejich věku, aspoň v oblasti nábožensko-filosofické; a všechny myšlenky a představy o smrti, které čtyři básníci zde uvažovaní vyjádřili, mohli najít v soudobých náboženských pojednáních a spisech, které nepochybně znali. Pocit metafyzické úzkosti a záliba v rozjímání o smrti je jim společná; ale v chápání smyslu a významu smrti stejně jako v uměleckém zobrazení svého osobního vztahu ke smrti se navzájem jasně liší a někdy zcela rozcházejí. Při zkoumání a hodnocení jejich individuálního přístupu k motivu smrti i k jeho básnickému zobrazení je důležitým vořítkem jejich postoj ke dvěma protikladným interpretacím smrti jako činitele buď kladného či záporného, rozkladného či sjednocujícího, děsivého či žádoucího. Tomuto postoji je proto ve výkladu jednotlivých autorů a básní věnována zvýšená pozornost.

V Donnových četných variacích na motiv smrti obrazy fyzického rozkladu a duševní agonie jasně převládají nad křesťanskou nadějí ve vzkříšení a věčnou blaženost. Ale v básnickově pojetí smrti je zmatek a nedůslednost a v některých verších úsilí o efektní účinek a preciózní výraz potlačuje citovou upřímnost, kterou se vyznačují nejlepší básně Herbertovy nebo Vaughanovy. Herbert a Crashaw na rozdíl od Donnova důrazu na děsivou tvář a ničivou funkci smrti vyzdvihují její kladnou úlohu — splynutí lidské duše s Bohem. Právověrný anglikánský pastor Herbert nezná skoro strachu před smrtí, v níž vidí jen přirozenou součást božího řádu. Katolický konvertita Crashaw, který jako jediný z metafyziků může být označen za mystika z rodu sv. Teresy z Ávily, užívá motivu fyzické smrti hlavně jako vhodného symbolu k vyjádření své mystické touhy po duchovním splynutí s Bohem. Čtvrtý metafyzický básník, Henry Vaughan, podává filosoficky nejpůlnější zpracování motivu smrti. Je především básník nesmrtnosti a ačkoliv fyzickou smrt považuje za zhoubnou sílu (jejíž prvotní příčinou je hřích), věří pevně nejen ve vzkříšení lidského těla, ale i přírody.

Svým pokusem o objasnění a ilustraci rozmanitých funkcí smrti u těchto čtyř básníků

autor implikuje jednak popření shora zmíněné teze Williamsonovy, jednak vlastní závěr, že uvedení angličtí metafyzičtí básníci svým uměleckým zobrazením děsivé moci smrti ve skutečnosti uskutečňovali filosofický ideál Sokrata, který věřil, že „ti, kdo jsou opravdově oddáni filosofii, nezabývají se sami ničím jiným než umíráním a smrtí“.

*Karel Štěpaník*