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Grief, Anger, and Consolation

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G. W. Pigman III. *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985. Pp. viii + 184.

The central thesis of this little book is that there was a large-scale shift in attitudes toward grief and mourning in England between the middle sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a shift that is reflected in sermons, *artes moriendi*, handbooks on letter-writing, and, especially, elegies. Characteristic of many sixteenth-century works is the "angry consoler," who regards himself as a kind of physician. His duty is to shame the bereaved for their sorrow: to cauterize their wounds, as it were, and bring them back into a proper state of rationality and self-control. Thus Thomas Wilson, a rhetorician who put his theories about rational order into practice by personally lending a hand at the racking of Recusant prisoners, advises Katherine Brandon, the mother of two Dukes of Suffolk who died in 1551, to cease mourning, confess her offenses, and take "this scourge to come from God as a iuste punishment of Sinne, for the amendemente of all other in generall" (p. 18).

One reason for such fierce responses to mourning and grief is what Pigman calls "rigorism," a doctrine that "prohibits and condemns all grief for those who have died virtuously and are in heaven" (p. 27). A key text is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as the others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." There are two ways of interpreting Paul's admonition: Christians should not, like the pagans, mourn their virtuous dead, or they should not mourn them immoderately. Among notable rigorist interpreters were Tertullian and Cyprian. Although Calvin and other sixteenth-

century Reformers permitted moderate grief, "moderate," as Pigman demonstrates, could mean very little indeed.

Pigman accounts for rigorism, insofar as he does account for it, largely in psychological terms. He takes as his norm for bereavement modern theories of a "mourning process" in four stages: "numbing," "yearning," "despair," and "recovery." Mourning that sticks at one of these stages is "unresolved." Thus Pigman's method is at once to conduct a historically oriented investigation into the period and to impose a modern paradigm on it. His essentially psychological orientation works very well in some cases. Nicholas Grimald's "A funerall song, vpon the deceas of Annes his moother," is almost as revealing as if we had poor Grimald on the couch; Pigman's reading is wholly persuasive. With Ben Jonson, rigorist theories also have a part to play, but it is less clear what that part is: indeed Pigman seems to circle back in his conclusion to give a different and somewhat more complex accounting of "On My First Sonne" from what he offers earlier. On the whole, his readings account more fully for the minor figures than for the major ones.

Among the poets he discusses at length are Surrey and Spenser. Surrey illustrates well the effects of rigorism: with his times, he finds it hard to express feelings of bereavement. When he succeeds, as in "So crewell prison," it is by means of ingenious indirection. "In the rude age," on the death of Wyatt, expresses displaced anger against unnamed detractors rather than sorrow for Wyatt's loss. (The claim that this poem "has yet to receive an accurate paraphrase" is itself inaccurate; a note of the present reviewer's proposes essentially the same reading: *PMLA* 91 [1976], 914.) Spenser is more sympathetic to grief than Surrey; he can at least "excuse" sorrow as a human weakness, if not find it justifiable or rational. A conclusion to be drawn from his excuses is that, even when he allows himself or others to mourn, his very protestations demonstrate the pressure of contrary social norms.

Ben Jonson (to simplify the argument) represents a throwback to rigorism. He wrestles with conflicting emotions and beliefs—although whether he "tries to force his readers to suppress their tears" (p. 95) is arguable. Pigman himself finally admits to finding "On My First Sonne" more moving than "The Exequy"—which, as he argues, is very moving indeed. The reaction of many another critic to the poem suggests that this response is not eccentric. In *The Exequy*, Henry King wrote the first great English elegy that, in its expression of sorrow, is neither rigorist, nor hyperbolically exaggerated, nor defensively uneasy. Pigman particularly admires—and shows to be admirable, innovative, and surprising for its time—King's directness, his simplicity, and his emotional naturalness in mourning for his "friend's" death. If Romanticism was pre-invented in

the seventeenth century, as a reader of Milton may suspect, then King had a part in it.

The last poet discussed is Milton. Unfortunately, not even a full chapter does justice to such rich poems as *Epitaphium Damonis* or to Pigman's chief subject, *Lycidas*. His reading turns on the meaning of "Angel," in "Look homeward Angel"; he argues (with some precedent), that it refers to Lycidas, not Michael. This identification rests, however, on a series of questionable assertions. The word "now" in "Look homeward Angel now" need not be "otiose" (p. 117) if, as seems natural, it modifies "look" rather than "angel." It is hard to agree that there is a split between "thee" (as Lycidas's "spirit") and "thy bones" (as his body) when the poem clearly insists that "thee" and "bones" are both hurled about together by the sea. Finally, though, this argument merely amounts to quibbling over red herrings, since the central point—that Milton is untroubled, here and elsewhere, by a simultaneous venting of sorrow and expression of faith--stands regardless. This observation, it seems to me, is indisputable and important; indeed, it may be strongly supported by other poems, such as Sonnet 23, *Paradise Lost*, and *Samson Agonistes*.

I find the brief length of this book admirable (127 pages of text), so it may seem ungrateful to mention omissions. Still there are things I would have liked to have seen. Did no one in the period oppose to 1 Thessalonians the obvious text, famous as the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35)? What connection may there have been between Edwardian rigorism and the abolition of purgatory and prayers for the dead? How important were stoic teachings concerning the inadmissability of mourning? Pigman, whose fine article on *imitatio* (*Renaissance Quarterly* 33 [1980], 1-32) reveals an extensive knowledge of the classics that is confirmed here, could have said much more on this topic, which he touches only lightly.

Most important, I should have liked to have seen far more of an effort to account for changing attitudes toward mourning in terms of broad historical and social as well as psychological forces. For example, Pigman observes that rigorism reached its height in England during the reign of Edward VI. May there not have been public as well as private reasons for this efflorescence of rigidity? The sermons and memorial poems commemorating Martin Bucer's death in 1551 responded to a critical event—the death of a major Reformer just at the crucial turning point in English Reformation history—as well as to a psychologically determined attitude toward mourning. It is unseemly to howl and blubber after Bucer, almost everyone agrees, as the Papists would do; rather, we should mourn our loss of a great leader, search out our sins as

a nation, and rededicate ourselves to the providential cause of Reformation. That is the gist of many of the sermons and memorial poems.

So, too, Wilson's apparently personal advice to Katherine Brandon, that the deaths of the Dukes of Suffolk are a judgment on English sinfulness, which should occasion not just personal repentance but "amendemente of all other in generall," far from being only an expression of impartial rigor, is also a plea for recommitment to the cause that Wilson and Brandon hold in common (as patronness and tutor), a cause apparently set back by the deaths of two young political hopes.

As there were other than psychological reasons to explain the appearance of the first collection of elegies mourning Bucer in 1551, recent studies suggest that the appearance of a second wave of elegies, on the death of Sir Philip Sidney, was also political, and may well have been connected with the Queen's and Burghley's efforts to distract attention from the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, as well as with infighting between the Leicester and Burghley factions. Loss of patronage and the blasting of religious and political desires have long been connected with the third great outburst of elegies at the death of Prince Henry. Finally, nearly every poem in *Lacrimae Musarum* (1649), on the death of Henry Lord Hastings, represents a veiled Royalist political statement.

None of these considerations necessarily contradict Pigman's thesis, but they complicate it. To take just one instance in the poetry, is Surrey's anger in "In the rude age" at detractors who oppose mourning for Wyatt just a byproduct of a blocked or displaced step in the mourning process? May it not also be a riposte against an opposing political faction? The deaths of great men and ladies had, in the Renaissance, inescapable public consequences as well as private poignancy. They might result in anything from loss of a job or of a patron's influence to the failure of a political faction or even to the extinction of a grand cause. Thus Milton regards the death of Edward King (who was not an obviously prominent person) as part of a matrix of large, providential, public events. Such considerations inevitably modify our readings of the poetry.

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