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0521662451 - The American Puritan Elegy: A Literary and Cultural Study

Jeffrey A. Hammond

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

Stephen Greenblatt once justified his attraction to the past by confessing a “desire to speak to the dead” (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 1). If Greenblatt’s motives appear morbid or nostalgic, mine will seem more so. In this book I have wished to speak to the dead *about* the dead, and in so doing to try making sense of a body of poems whose importance in their own time has been obscured by their nearly total neglect in ours. Although historians have traditionally justified their obsessions by claiming to explain the present or anticipate the future, the simple wish to connect with those who have gone before seems as valid and honest a reason as any for writing literary history. I do not deny that history can teach us something about ourselves by proposing the origins of current social and cultural practice and thereby shoring up – or perhaps debunking – our collective and individual place in the world. These high-sounding goals, however, nearly always mask something far more basic and even selfish in studying the past: the pleasure of hearing old stories and telling them back to life as fully and convincingly as we can. The historical impulse is, at root, a desire to tell stories about people who can no longer speak for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Like all history, this book tells a story about a story. The first story comprises what Puritans told each other about death and commemoration. The second story is my interpretive shaping of their story – my hearing of it. In telling this second story, I have replaced the validation of formal beauty that underlies traditional literary history with a focus on the utility of texts within their cultural and historical moment. Instead of the usual praise for the poem on the page as an isolated and supposedly timeless object, I describe the role that elegies played within a framework of literary practices defined by culture, psychology, religion, and other texts. Although this book does not enact a search for well-wrought urns, I in no way dismiss the importance of poetic form. Early New Englanders thought of their elegies as “poems” and read them as

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such, even though the surviving texts break nearly every modern rule surrounding the poetry of mourning. As I discuss specific textual traits in light of their functional significance for Puritan readers, I am playing the admittedly impossible role of a sympathetic ethnographer who tries to see another world through its inhabitants' eyes. David Perkins is surely right when he asserts that "sorting by genre is valid if the concept of the genre was entertained by the writer and his contemporary readers" (115). Puritans certainly recognized a "successful" elegy, by their lights, when they saw one. This book attempts to describe exactly what they understood a successful elegy to be.

In trying to illuminate a Puritan aesthetic of commemoration, I have tried to resist the usual belief that the judgment of early New Englanders was "wrong" or, more basically, that the present is somehow superior to the past. I do not approach early New England's elegies as primitive harbingers of a later "America" or as repressed foils to later expressions of loss that we find more beautiful or sincere. For me, the past does not exist to validate who we are or how we do things, including how we mourn and how we write our way through it. Mine is, in essence, an anthropological approach, and I take it in part as a practical necessity: the traditional questions posed by literary historians have not worked with these poems. If we read them according to our notions of selfhood and mourning, they seem like affronts to the fact of loss, heartlessly reductive in their dismissal of the survivor's agony. Modern notions of how skill and sincerity should intersect in elegy do not apply to these poems, at least not in obvious or predictable ways. Once we ask what the elegies did for their initial readers and hearers, we can avoid simply lamenting, once again, what they fail to do for *us*. That case has already been made too frequently to bear repeating, and not just about these poems but about Puritan verse generally.<sup>2</sup>

Asking certain questions about texts always entails the decision, conscious or otherwise, not to ask others. The most important lesson of literary theory for the literary historian is not that there are right or wrong questions, but that we must be aware of the kinds of knowledge that can be generated – or not – by the questions we choose. The questions asked in this book embody my belief that texts embody authorial intentions which are partly recoverable, and that recovering such intentions is indispensable to historical criticism. When seen from a discursive standpoint, of course, intentionality encompasses a great deal more than a writer's deliberate choices. An author's decisions are profoundly shaped by extrapersonal factors that are often felt as idiosyncratic and deeply

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“personal.” The postromantic aesthetic has mystified the artist’s role to such a degree that any author’s awareness of the extent to which his or her goals are *not* freely chosen is always problematic. The interplay between what is written and what must be written – between text and context, expression and ideology – is so extensive and complex that the traditional line between the “literary” foreground and the “historical” background cannot stand.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike other Puritan poems that hold greater appeal for modern readers, the elegy has consistently been pushed into the furthest recesses of its historical “background.” Early New England’s most ubiquitous form of popular verbal art, apart from the sermon, has been virtually forgotten in our nearly exclusive focus on a relatively small canon of poems restricted mainly to Anne Bradstreet’s reflective lyrics and Edward Taylor’s *Preparatory Meditations* and *Gods Determinations*. This selective sampling is unfortunate, not least because popular art often reveals more than critically accepted works about the interplay of text and context. This is true not because poems like Bradstreet’s and Taylor’s are any less firmly bound to their time and place, a view encouraged by the traditional search for timeless “masterpieces,” but because the continuing power of older constructions of “literature” makes such ties harder to discern in works that seem to satisfy modern aesthetic criteria. I thus approach New England’s elegies not as a collection of finished textual products to be assessed according to their capacity to provoke appreciation, but as scripts that organized a cluster of social practices surrounding a specific process of mourning. Ironically, early New Englanders intuitively grasped a truth that modern critics have only recently rediscovered: texts do powerful cultural work in addition – and often in opposition – to encouraging their appreciation as “art.” Given the Puritan use of texts as indispensable aids to salvation, the notion of literary experience as an ongoing and often volatile interplay of text and reader was far less alien to seventeenth-century New Englanders than it is to many of us today. We can access that notion only through our deliberate effort, prodded by the remorseless probings of theory, to break reading habits associated with the appreciation of literary masterworks. Puritans, by contrast, participated in a dynamic model of reading as a potentially self-altering process every time they opened a Bible, attended a sermon, and read or heard a pious poem, hoping that the words would transform the very root of their being.<sup>4</sup>

To say that texts and selves interact doesn’t tell us much about what a “self” is. The irresistible imperatives of culture refute the naive

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conviction that human nature is in all respects constant and immutable, that it always manifests itself in the same manner regardless of time and place. There is no need, however, to push this useful truth to the opposite extreme of denying that certain emotions and impulses are indeed universally “human,” and that they find analogous forms of expression in all historical and cultural settings. One such emotion, I believe, is the anxiety that results from loss, and one such impulse is to relieve this anxiety through the performance of ritual action, usually involving ritual speech. Despite radical claims that all human experience is linguistically and culturally constructed, I thus accept the traditional anthropological assumption that certain patterns of grief and mourning are transcultural and transhistorical. If social “power” is a cultural universal, then it surely follows that its inverse – a sense of impotence in the face of death – is also universal. While the impulses informing and sustaining these rituals are universal, the forms that the rituals take are decidedly culture-specific, often to the point of being unintelligible to outsiders. This is why we cannot simply read Puritan poems of loss and directly intuit their deeper significance. Moreover, although ritual practices from other times and places – and the ideologies they embody – are certainly not beyond our criticism (indeed, we often cannot help it), all such objections naturally derive from values appropriate to our time and place. Objections of all sorts leap to mind quickly enough when we consider the ideology of the American “Puritans,” whose very name has come to mean something largely malevolent in our popular culture and collective memory. For this reason, it seems especially important that critiques of Puritan culture start from a rigorous effort to understand and empathize with the people who inhabited that culture. Failure to do so will produce easy answers, a short-circuiting of historical understanding, and even worse, the literary historian’s chief occupational hazard: a sense of superiority to the people whose writings are providing his or her livelihood.<sup>5</sup>

William Empson once remarked that “the central function of imaginative literature is to make you realize that other people act on moral convictions different from your own” (*Milton’s God* 261). To forget this is to reduce literary history to romantic self-inscription, recasting the dead as primitive versions of ourselves and thereby begging the question regarding the past’s relevance to the present. While such models can make the past more appealing, they invoke historical sameness prematurely and thus obscure the past’s fundamental and inescapable alterity. In countering the tendency to refigure the past as a mere proto-present

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and to wrench the dead into validating conformity with – or damning opposition to – current values and tastes, literary historians must try to read against their own grain. The elegies of early New England virtually compel us to do this: in their stubborn resistance to current conceptions of art and loss, there is much that these poems force us *not* to take for granted. Their longstanding critical dismissal is based on an aesthetic program so powerful that we forget that it is neither absolute nor universal, but the product of an institutional history in which we are all situated. To try reading these poems as Puritans once read them requires us to pretend that the subsequent “history” of poetry – the evolving construction of what good verse is and how one should read it – never happened. To be sure, such forgetting is something to attempt rather than achieve. This is why historical criticism can never be truly “objective,” perhaps especially when it deals with a people so freighted for modern Americans as the Puritans. We can never efface our own preferences, biases, and identities when we try to read historically. It might even be argued that the decision to read against those biases is itself a bias, one that produces merely a differently romanticized past, antiquarian and even exotic in its strangeness. I understand this risk but am willing to take it here. For a literary historian, having too much sympathy for the dead is better than having too little.

The critical neglect of early New England’s elegies has been reinforced, ironically enough, by a poet who not only wrote his share of them but stimulated a new understanding of the Puritan imagination. Since the rediscovery of Edward Taylor’s verse in the 1930s, the enormous scholarly attention he has received grew out of the premise that he wrote good poems. In the frenzy of this work, what “good” really meant – why we prized Taylor’s verse to begin with – was rarely questioned. He was, we knew, a bit like Donne and even more like Herbert – and *they* were good poets, weren’t they? I like Taylor immensely, and don’t for a minute think that the time and energy spent on him have been wasted. My point is simply that a reorientation of literary historiography around cultural practices has helped me understand more clearly *why* I like him. It also clarifies the extent to which this “good” Puritan poet has ended up making his contemporaries seem even worse. For years Taylor’s canonical status has kept us from coming to terms with those other poems that bore and puzzle us as much as his verse – some of it, anyway – excites us. While Taylor’s poetry has always seemed good enough for critics to read him in ways consistent with modern notions of poetic success, and

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even at times to refashion him into an artistic or national forebear, we have had almost nothing to say about the more “typical” poems issuing from seventeenth-century New England. Even Taylor has been distorted by his success. For all our excitement about *Gods Determinations* and the *Preparatory Meditations*, we have remained virtually silent about those poems which seem disappointingly “typical” of his time and place – roughly three-quarters of his extant work.<sup>6</sup>

At the center of this neglected body of Puritan poems is the funeral elegy. New England’s elegies underscore, with unusual clarity, theoretical problems surrounding the role of artistic assessment in literary history. How is the historical critic to redeem poems like these without either sealing them within their unfamiliar world or bending them to fit aesthetic categories emanating from our familiar world? How can these contrasting aesthetic horizons be negotiated without ignoring or violating either one? The answer informing this study is that such poems confront the modern reader with a dialectic of sameness and difference, a dialectic reflected in Louis Montrose’s comment that reading past texts “always proceeds by a mixture of estrangement and appropriation” (“Professing the Renaissance” 24). The Puritan elegy, issuing as it did from a culture that differed in many ways from our own, presents us with many points of alienating difference, puzzling features whose function and significance the literary historian must reconstruct. Yet because the poem was written from human impulses that have not changed beyond recognition in three centuries, it also offers points of similarity that are frequently obscured by its distracting surface. While poems from so remote a culture inevitably exhibit traits that frustrate our expectations, such differences conceal an element of sameness: an articulation of recognizable anxieties and satisfactions that lie beneath formal and ideological features reflective of the text’s cultural and historical moment. Puritan elegies, for instance, routinely convey an intense longing for heaven. Most late-twentieth-century academics consider this belief to be hopelessly naive, and thus find it difficult not to infantilize it when we encounter it in others, including historical others. But if we make no attempt to suspend – or at least adjust for – our disbelief in this most basic of Puritan reading and writing premises, the resulting interpretation will be profoundly off point, anachronistic at its very core.<sup>7</sup>

By the same token, to historicize such texts need not result in arid detachment or bloodless antiquarianism. Perkins is surely right when he remarks that it would be “paradoxical” and “dismaying” to literary his-

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torians “if, after they had related texts to their time and place, the texts left them cold” (39). Alien texts can still speak to us if we translate their ideologically bound features into affective terms accessible to modern readers. Although most of us no longer hope for heaven, we still know what hope is – along with sadness, anger, fear, envy, disappointment, joy, and, to cite an emotion particularly central to the poems considered here, anxiety at the prospect of dying. By recovering the basic emotions that underlie the explicit formal and ideological features of a text, we can rediscover that text as a human expression without insisting that the expression assume the forms that we would choose. Although early New England’s funeral elegies do not speak easily or directly to modern constructions of death and commemoration, it is possible to probe the contrast between off-putting embodiments of ideological difference and those fundamental samenesses by which modern reader and older text can unite. By clarifying how the poem articulates emotions that find expression in all cultures, including ours, we link the elegist’s choices not to the conventions of modern poems of loss, but to deeper impulses that Puritan verse and “our” verse – the postromantic elegiac canon – were both written to express. In this way it is possible to explain, and even defend, textual features of the Puritan elegy without either ignoring the historical terms of its production or denying the modern reader meaningful access to the poem as a document shaped by human need. If the poems are read in light of this dialectic of sameness and difference, their more puzzling features become legible as confirmations of historical and cultural particularity, as reminders of the simple fact that early New Englanders did many things differently than we do, including the writing and reading of elegy.

With this recognition, deeper impulses with which modern readers can identify are allowed to break through the text’s unfamiliar surface. The personal link with these distant poems emerges once we see that they have far less in common with “poetry,” as we usually define it, than with the idealizing impulse of eulogy, and indeed of memory generally. The Puritan elegy gains significance not as a mere historical document or a failed attempt at poetic craft, but as a ritual script designed to bring comfort to people within a particular culture – the same sort of comfort, fundamentally, that ritual texts still provide, through less frequently and conspicuously. Within this realigned perspective, the most interesting questions about these maligned poems are the simplest ones. Why did Puritans write them? Why did they write so many of them? Why are the poems so much alike? Why are the commemorated dead variations on

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a single personality? What responses, satisfying or otherwise, did these poems probably generate? And finally, how do these responses differ from “modern” readings divorced from the mourning ritual in which the poems were originally embedded?<sup>8</sup> In practical terms, the anthropological approach requires that we suspend some of our deepest assumptions regarding the nature and uses of poetry. It forces us, most basically, to think of a poem in premodernist terms: as something that *does* rather than something that *is*. It forces us to confront a notion of artistic performance that does not center on original thought or expression, and thus does not foreground the professionalism and virtuosity of “authors.” Finally, it asks us to resist the patronizing uses that the present often makes of the past. I have no interest in arguing for the quaintness of the Puritan elegy or describing it in ways that make modern attitudes toward poetry and grieving seem contrastively more sophisticated. There will be no confirmations of literary, cultural, or national progress here, no affirmations of how far we have come as poets, readers, or mourners. By the same token, I have no interest in theorizing the Puritan elegy to the point of claiming for it a modernity that anticipates our notions of linguistic or psychological complexity. Too much theory, like too little, can become yet another means of marginalizing the past as periphery to our center.

In basing my discussion of these poems on models and mentalities prevalent in Puritan culture rather than on those privileged by my own time and place, I am aware that I am substituting one “fiction” with another, replacing an essentially postromantic artistic model with an alternative built up from early New England statements on art, death, grieving, and religious experience. This is, of course, my construction of a Puritan construction – an inevitable and necessary falling away from “truth” inseparable from the fact that nobody writes or reads or even sees “pure.” The most we can hope for is plausibility, a goal that becomes more attainable if we try to inhabit the mindset of the people whom we study rather than willfully or unwittingly imposing our own. The major drawback of failing to resist our own preferences, of course, is that the results are not very interesting: the highly predictable “knowledge” of our disappointment at the failure of the Puritan elegy to meet our aesthetic demands. A better, though imperfect, alternative is to attempt a reconstruction of the cognitive and affective terms in which these poems were experienced by their initial audience. There’s no avoiding the conclusion that Puritan readers drew strength and consolation from the didacticism and conventionality of their elegies – the very qualities that



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distance the poems from us. If we wish to understand and appreciate the Puritan poetry of loss, we must learn another way of reading.<sup>9</sup>

Although my primary aim is to describe a decidedly alien mode of commemoration, anyone who sees the past chiefly as difference must answer an important question: what's the point? If literary history has so little to do with *us*, why bother with it at all? The answer lies, once again, in the recognition that we are only partial outsiders to the past, that older texts embody transhistorical sameness as well as historical difference. In the points of sameness we find reasons to read that transcend merely professional motives or antiquarian obsessions, provided we dig deeply enough to get beneath the distractingly alien surface that these poems present to us. Although the bulk of this study insists on the otherness of Puritan commemoration, significant spiritual and psychological continuities rooted in the experience of loss underlie and counter the alterity inscribed in the contrasts between Puritan and modern verbalizations of grief. I hope that these subtler continuities pulse just as strongly, if less explicitly, throughout this book. I believe that behind the forbidding otherness of these poems, modern readers will find much that is recognizable and even familiar.

Because literary historians tell stories that they cannot help telling, they must be aware, as Perkins states, "of whatever desires motivate them" (31). Hans Robert Jauss correctly observes that historians must bring their "own experience into play" when they confront the past (*Toward an Aesthetic* 34). In fact those experiences come into play whether we want them to or not. Even an excursion into seventeenth-century funerary poems reveals the truth of Marianna Torgovnick's observation that "The 'I' is a heady release conflicted by a potent nostalgia" (153). I have come to see that much in my personal history prepared me to respond sympathetically to the Puritan elegy, despite the fact that my professional training pushed me in the opposite direction. The extent to which my Protestant upbringing preconditioned a sympathetic response to Puritan poems of loss has made this book a far more personally engaging project than I ever suspected it would be. Although this study stresses the suspension of current subjective and aesthetic values, it also demonstrates the usually latent truth that historians are, as Montrose puts it, "historical subjects" whose positioning shapes the stories we tell ("Professing the Renaissance" 23). In the end, any desire to speak to the dead is both subverted and enabled by who we are. Their voices achieve coherence, finally, only in relation to ours, as Greenblatt discovered

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when he learned that “if I wanted to hear the voice of the other, I had to hear my own voice. The speech of the dead, like my own speech, is not private property” (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 20). Although Greenblatt gives up on historical objectivity in anything like an absolute sense, his concession is perhaps as close as we can come to achieving it. This dilemma makes for bad history only if we ignore it. And it makes history unwriteable only if we insist on standards of theoretical purity that can be imagined, perhaps, but not achieved. Like most human activities, the practice of literary history is inherently and inescapably paradoxical: we accept contradiction and impurity as preconditions for doing it at all.<sup>10</sup>

“Historical writing,” as Brian Stock has aptly remarked, is “an apologetic whose moral is coherence” (84). Perkins puts this another way when he states that the ultimate criteria for assessing such writing are not empirical but “aesthetic” (110). In this rage for order, the literary historian, like any other storyteller, cannot keep from fitting the materials at hand into a scholarly narrative that creates an illusion of control and even mastery over the past. If I had not closed one eye and pursued that illusion, there would be no book here – and probably not even this sentence. But the uses that historians make of the dead as a matter of professional course need not reinforce the accompanying illusion – one that is far more destructive – that we are somehow superior to those distant voices we are straining to hear. Having once lived inside a twentieth-century version of the Protestant Christianity that animated Puritan elegists, I have probably erred too far in the direction of sympathy for these forgotten poets. But even though traditional Christian responses to loss no longer hold personal meaning for me, I cannot fault people who lived three centuries ago for making choices different from what mine would be today. By resisting the urge to fault them for not “escaping” certain ideological strictures, as on good days I like to think I did, I hope that early New Englanders emerge here as neither devils nor angels, but simply as human beings who coped with loss as best they could, who struggled to allay familiar fears with tools that have become alien to us.