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A Vision of Death.
A Study in Three Poems by Henry Vaughan¹

Wizja śmierci. Studium o trzech poematach
Henry Vaughana

Образ смерти. Очерк о трех поэмах Генри Воона

The themes of passing — vanity and death — though treated differently in various epochs, have found their reflection in religious thought and literature since antiquity. One tradition of meditation upon death and vanity takes its roots from the Bible: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity", "Remember your death and you will never sin" says Ecclesiastes. This tradition, further developed in the Middle Ages and in the Baroque period by the exceptionally strong meditative tendency had a tremendous impact on the shaping of those ideas in art and literature². Meditation upon death widely and intensely cultivated, was believed to be a good instrument of self-knowledge — the first stage in a mystical experience. The Baroque formula for good life advised that one should live in such a way as to be prepared for death at any moment: "Consider the hour of death not as though wouldst a thing that were to come, but as if it were even now present" says St. Francois de Sales. Meditation was then regarded as an exercise essential for the ordinary conduct

¹ This is an expanded version of my paper *Wizja śmierci w utworach Henry Vaughana* (The Vision of Death in Henry Vaughan's Poems) to appear in *Biuletyn Lubelskiego Towarzystwa Naukowego*.

² cf. J. Białostocki: *Vanitas. Z dziejów obrazowania idei „marności” i „przemijania” w poezji i sztuce*, [in:] *Teoria i twórczość. O tradycji i inwencji w teorii sztuki i ikonografii*, Poznań 1961, p. 105—136, p. 106.

The article makes no attempt, however, to present the tradition of meditation on death and soul and body debates in the Middle Ages. Rather, attention will be focussed on the relationship between the poems in the sequence. For a discussion of the theme of death in Medieval literature see: R. Woolf: *The English Religious Lyric of the Middle Ages*, Oxford, At the Clarendon Press, 1968.

of "good life" and almost indispensable in achieving the highest stage in a mystical experience³.

With the appearance of the idea of the vanity of earthly life the belief in the future life that comes after death was strengthened, death being considered a border between the two worlds in which man existed. The loss of confidence in earthly qualities reinforced the belief that death was nothing but a longed for passing of the soul to a true existence close to godly eternity.

Henry Vaughan, a representative of the metaphysical school in English poetry was strongly influenced by the problem of vanity and death. In this study we shall focus our attention on three poems: *Death. A Dialogue, Resurrection and Immortality, Day of Judgement* — all coming from the volume of *Silex Scintillans*. An attempt will be made to examine the motif of death and ways of presenting it in these poems. The poems form a sequence which is by no means accidental, as they clearly display a similarity of theme and metaphor. Accordingly, the poems will be treated jointly as a cycle.

The first in the sequence, the poem *Death. A Dialogue* is written in the form of a dialogue between the soul and the body. The dichotomy between the material and the spiritual is an important detail here: it is meant to underlie the basic assumption of Christian religion that the soul although encased in the body, is independent of, and superior to it by virtue of being immortal. At the beginning of the dialogue the soul asks the body what it will look like when

death shall freeze I
 Thy blood to ice, and thou must stay
 Tenant for years, and centuries.
 (ll. 2—4)⁴

The soul leaves the body at the moment of death, and the body, being aware of it says:

I cannot tell. —
 But if all sense wings not with thee,
 And something still be left the dead,
 I'll wish my curtain off to free
 Me from so dark and sad a bed.
 (ll. 6—10)

³ cf. L. L. Martz: *The Poetry of Meditation. A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 137.

⁴ All quotations from Henry Vaughan's poems come from the following collection: H. Vaughan: *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Alan Rudrum, Yale University Press, 1981.

It is significant that the words *twelve* and *East* are italicized. The word *twelve* seems to be used here not only with the view of mentioning midnight but also to point to an important change (such as death) a human being must undergo. As soon as twelve has passed — the change has occurred — *blushing East* begins to appear with the Sun on the horizon.

The word *East* attracts attention to the rising Sun symbolizing in this context a hope of new life and resurrection. It is perhaps worth noting here that the line of argument which soul develops, conforms to the body's ability to perceive. The soul starts by giving an example and ends with a generalization which refers not only to the journey at night but to death itself.

The inferiority of the body to the soul is reflected not only in the mode in which the soul addresses it but also in the manner in which the body speaks. As has already been said, while the soul speaks with determination, the body speaks vacillatingly using expressions which betray lack of certainty: *I cannot tell* (l. 6). This is further enhanced by the use of the conditional sentence: *If all sense wings not with thee* (l. 7) and it is vital here that fulfilling of the condition is dependent upon the soul. It is clear, then, that it is the soul on which the body must depend and not the other way round. The soul is the carrier of sense because it is conscious and active while the body is unconscious and passive. Unlike the body, the soul must constantly be on the alert:

But thou III
 Shalt in thy mother's bosom sleep
 Whilst I each minute groan to know
 How neer redemption creeps.
 (ll. 27—30)

The word *groan* is pivotal here; being emotionally loaded, it indicates distress and despair on the part of the soul. The soul is free, it wings away after leaving the body which is itself confined at this moment. This is emphasized by the word *tenant* used in line 3. It is the body's wish to be set free from its dark confinement described as

A nest of nights, a gloomy sphere,
 Where shadows thicken, and the cloud
 Sits on the sun's brow all the year,
 And nothing moves without a shroud;
 (ll. 11—14)

This description corresponds with the epigraph from the Book of Job which exploits similar imagery — darkness, clouds, shadow, gloomy

sphere — all create an obstacle for brightness, for the light that comes from God. The body after death, *sleeping in the mother's bosom* (i.e. in the ground) confined and surrounded by various obstacles, is unable to see this light. There is, however, a brighter prospect for it, too: the moment will come when the soul and the body will unite again and enjoy eternity together:

Then shall we meet to mix again, and met,
'Tis last good-night, our Sun shall never set.
(ll. 30—31)

Darkness of the night and gloomy sphere are contrasted with eternal brightness and the never setting Sun. It is interesting to note that in the debate on death the soul speaks of brightness, mentioning it twice, and is aware of the existence of the light that must follow the period of darkness. In contrast, the body's chief concern is the darkness and the absence of light. Thus it comes out that the body and the soul must belong to two different worlds — the former to the world of darkness, the latter to the world of light⁵.

The moment when the body and the soul unite after death, on Doomsday, is rendered in the poem by the change of personal pronouns: while the pronouns *I* and *thou* are used during the major part of the debate, the pronoun *we* and *our* appear when the two partners come to discuss the moment of uniting:

Then shall we meet [...]
Our Sun shall never set.
(ll. 31—32)

Resurrection and Immortality, which follows *Death*, in many respects resembles this poem. Like *Death*, *Resurrection and Immortality* is written in the form of a dialogue and the proportion of the lines allotted to the body and to the soul is roughly the same. Here again the body and the soul discuss the problem of death and the soul again is an instructor and speaks like one:

⁵ This contrast between darkness and light, light overcoming darkness, finds its fullest expression in the words of the Gospel according to St. John:

"And the light shines in darkness
And the darkness comprehended it not."
(1; 5)

The light comes from God and leads people towards Him, darkness will give way to light in the end:

"I am the light of the world; he that followeth me
shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life".
(8; 12)

Poor, querulous handful! was't for this
I taught thee all that is?

(ll. 19—20)

The instructing role of the soul is reflected in the word *taught*. The message of the debate in both poems is aimed at the reader who is forced to follow the line of argument, analyze the examples provided and draw conclusions for himself. The didactic character of these poems is enhanced by the fact that they have the form of debates in which different points of view are presented. It is significant, too that the two partners taking part in the discussions are not equal: the soul is superior to the body; it may utter opinions with an air of authority, thereby strengthening their appeal.

Not only does the superiority of the soul manifest itself in the tone of the utterances, in the soul's role as an instructor, but also in that the soul assumes the role of a leader even when both elements are reunited on Doomsday.

So shall thou then with me
(Both winged, and free),
Rove in that mighty, and eternal light
Where no rude shade, or night
Shall dare approach us;

IV

(ll. 61—65)

It is the body that will wing with the soul and not vice versa, which once more emphasizes the role of the soul as a leader.

Resurrection and Immortality, in spite of the similarity of ideas is far richer in stylistic devices than *Death*. What is striking is the use of an emblematic vision of a silkworm leaving its cocoon, which traditionally symbolized the liberation of the Christian soul into eternal life. In *Death* a similar image of the soul winging away from the body appeared but it was not accompanied by the emblematic illustration⁶.

The soul and the body which must be separated at the moment of death will be united again. Here they are compared to a bride and a bridegroom who will remarry. Vaughan's firm belief in the ability of

⁶ The motif of wings and winging away of the soul in the first stage and then of the soul and body together after uniting on Doomsday is significant here. It suggests vertical movement upwards, and in a religious poem it explicitly indicates movement towards God and is an expression of the desire to approach God and unite with Him. (cf. S. Barańczak: *Bóg, człowiek i natura u angielskich poetów „metafizycznych” XVII wieku*, [in:] *Sacrum w literaturze. Roczniki Humanistyczne KUL*, 1980, p. 221).

the soul and body to renew themselves is represented by the image of the ancient Phoenix⁷.

The opposite nature of the soul and the body is treated very consistently in the poem. This finds additional illustration in the presentation of the soul as *the more noble Essence* (l. 39) which leaves the body — its *passive cottage* (l. 45) to come back to it when it is eternally renewed.

The final vision presented in the poem deals with eternity — mist, darkness surrounding the body after death are like those in *Death*, replaced by

eternal light
Where no rude shade, or night
Shall dare approach us;
(ll. 64—66)

V

As in "*Death*" the final conviction is that there will follow eternal rest (*Sabbath shall run* (l. 69)) and time will not pass (*without succession and without a sun* (l. 70)). This belief is stressed by the quotation from Daniel 12; 13 in the form of an epigraph:

But go thy way untill the end be, for thou shalt
rest, and stand up in thy lot, at the end of the days.

The idea of eternity which occurs in all the poems under discussion finds a strong expression in another poem in the sequence *Day of the Judgement*. Earthly life is a mere preparation for Doomsday and the fate which every human being will find in eternity. Earthly life is transitory and the sufferings that accompany it should not depress us because bitter experiences can purify our soul and in this way help us gain reward on the Day of Judgement:

Give me, O give me crosses here,
Still more afflictions lend,
That pill, though bitter, is more dear
That brings health in the end;
(ll. 32—35)

⁷ Alan Rudrum in his notes to Vaughan's poems (p. 534—535) claims that *Resurrection and Immortality* displays the influence of the hermetic writings. According to the Hermetic philosophy, "men call the change death, because when it takes place the body is decomposed, and the life departs and is no longer seen". This idea is reflected in the poem in lines 35—37:

Nor are those births which we see
Thus suffering see
Destroyed at all;

(35—37)

Unlike the first two poems, which view death and Doomsday from the perspective of earthly life, *Day of Judgement* reverses the perspective and looks at earthly life through the prism of Doomsday.

The first six stanzas of the poem present an image of the Day of Judgement. Due to their uniform syntactic structure they form a unity within the poem since each stanza begins anaphorically with the word *when* and every stanza is a presentation of a different element of the Day of Judgement. After these descriptive stanzas the climax follows: the statement is made:

O then it will be all too late
 To say, *What shall I do?*
 Repentance there is out of date
 And so is mercy too;
 (ll. 25—28)

In consequence an apostrophe to God follows, expressed in three successive stanzas. The speaker asks God to help him in preparing during this life for the Day of Judgement.

It should be observed that it is God who prepares man for Doomsday, man cannot prepare himself since his activity is very limited. In his total dependence on God man cannot do anything himself but accept and realize God's will.

The final stanza in the poem has a concluding function: it enumerates the conditions under which man can expect salvation:

A living FAITH, a HEART of flesh
 The WORLD an Enemy,
 This last will keep the first two fresh,
 And bring me, where I'd be.
 (ll. 41—44)

*A living Faith, a Heart of Flesh*⁸ in opposition to that of stone, and a conviction that the world in which we live is hostile to us will help man to get ready for the Day of Judgement and eternal life. The central idea of the poem is reiterated in the epigraph from St. Peter:

Now the end of all things is at hand, be you
 therefore sober and watchful in prayer;

⁸ This is an allusion to Ezekiel 11; 19:

„And I will give them one heart
 and I will put a new spirit within you
 and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh
 and will give them an heart of flesh.”

Since terrestrial life is transitory, all of us will be summoned after death into a *second birth* (l. 20). This juxtaposition of death (eternal sleep) with a birth to eternity seems to be paradoxical⁹ here since death in the context of the poem becomes a prerequisite of a new life to which we are born anew. It is interesting to note that the poet was highly consistent in his use of metaphor — here a clear relationship can be found between the expression *womb of earth* (l. 18) and „*second birth*” (l. 20). The consistent application of metaphor can be found not only within this single poem but also in the previous poems in the sequence: in *Resurrection and Immortality* a similar metaphor *womb of things* (l. 27) is introduced. The use of similar metaphors in three sequential poems suggests that these poems ought to be discussed jointly: they create a kind of entity both in the subject matter and the choice of metaphor. The metaphors used in the poems *Death* and *Resurrection and Immortality* are also similar in that the image of wings and liberation is used to present the soul which flies away on wings from its bodily confinement. The motif of wings itself is important since it suggests movement upwards. This in religious literature indicates movement towards heaven and God and at the same time is an expression of the desire to unite with God.

The first two poems in the sequence differ slightly from the third poem, *Day of Judgement*. The former discuss in the form of a dialogue between the soul and the body the problem of death. Only at the end of each dialogue do they mention Doomsday as a moment when the soul and the body, which are separated at the moment of death, can be reunited. The poem *Day of Judgement* goes further than the previous two poems in that it deals mainly with the vision of Doomsday, it is a warning against sin and a reminder that man ought to prepare for Doomsday during his earthly life. Thus the poems *Death* and *Resurrection and Immortality* pave the way for the considerations of the third poem.

To summarize, Vaughan was deeply interested in the problem of

⁹ In the baroque period, paradox is intrinsic to the most characteristic figures, and is particularly often used in religious Christian poems. Wellek and Warren explain: "Truth is complex. There are many modes of knowing each with its own legitimacy. Some kinds of truths have to be stated by negation or calculated distortion. God can be spoken of antropomorphically, for he made men in his own image, but he is also the transcendental Other. Hence in baroque religion, truth about God may be expressed by analogous images (the Lamb, the Bridegroom). It may also be expressed through compiling of contradictories or contraries as in Vaughan's "deep but dazzling darkness" (cf. R. Wellek, A. Warren: *The Theory of Literature*, Penguin Books: Harmondsworth 1963, p. 198).

death and viewed it from the perspective of the immortal soul and mortal body. In his religious approach to the duality of the human being he explicitly emphasizes the superiority of the immaterial soul over the body. Death is not presented, in the manner of the Middle Ages, as a frightening image but rather as a necessary step in the gaining of eternity. The Day of Judgement is a moment of leaving a dark confinement of the grave by the body and uniting with the soul to enjoy eternal felicity.

In his poems Vaughan employs symbols and figures typical of the religious lyric. The most widely used symbol is that of the veil and clouds standing for separation from God and heavenly brightness¹⁰. The use of emblematic images eg. wings and the silkworm leaving the cell help the poet better to attain his artistic aim — that of expressive rendering of the function of death.

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł jest analizą trzech utworów Henry Vaughana zawartych w zbiorze *Silex Scintillans: Death. A Dialogue, Resurrection and Immortality* i *Day of Judgement*. Utwory te poświęcone są problemowi śmierci; występują w zbiorze obok siebie i ze względu na podobieństwo tematyki i metafor zostały omówione tutaj łącznie.

Przedmiotem rozważań dwóch pierwszych utworów, napisanych w formie dialogu duszy z ciałem jest śmierć, Dzień Ostateczny i życie wieczne widziane z perspektywy życia ziemskiego. W trzecim utworze perspektywa ta została odwrócona i życie ziemskie rozważane jest z punktu widzenia Dnia Ostatecznego i wieczności. Życie ziemskie przedstawione jest w omawianych utworach jako okres przygotowania do życia prawdziwego—wiecznego, śmierć zaś jest etapem koniecznym do osiągnięcia tego życia, do którego człowiek narodzi się na nowo w Dniu Ostatecznym.

¹⁰ The image of the veil occurs frequently in Vaughan's writing: clouds, mists etc. appear in all poems under discussion, and they are all symbols of separation, generally speaking, of a human being from God. This symbol is often used in the 17th century mystic tradition. According to M. M. Mahood: *Henry Vaughan: The Symphony of Nature*, [in:] *id.: Poetry and Humanism*, London 1950, p. 264. Vaughan's use of veil owes much to the symbolism to be found in Hermetic and Neoplatonic writers (Cornelius Agrippa's sentence is very famous: "Cast the veil that is before your faces"). The main source of Vaughan's symbol is the Bible: the motif of veil appeared in St. Paul's 2nd letter to Corinthians (3; 14—16), Apostle Izaiah's prophecy (25; 7) and the letter to Hebrews (10; 20). Vaughan used the line from the letter to Hebrews as an epigraph to his *Resurrection and Immortality* which explicitly indicates that the biblical influence was strong: "By that new and living way, which he hath prepared for us, through the veil, which is his flesh".

РЕЗЮМЕ

Статья является анализом трех произведений Генри Воона собранных в сборнике *Silex Scintillans: Death. A Dialogue, Resurrection and Immortality and Day of Judgement*. Эти произведения посвящены проблеме смерти, в сборнике они соседствуют друг с другом, в виду схожести тематики метафор в настоящей статье они рассматриваются в совокупности.

Объектом рассуждений в двух первых произведениях, написанных в форме диалога души с телом, является смерть, Последний суд и вечная жизнь, увиденные с точки зрения земной жизни. В третьем произведении мы имеем дело с абстрактной перспективой: земная жизнь рассматривается с точки зрения Последнего дня и вечности. Земная жизнь указывается в обсуждаемых произведениях как время подготовки к настоящей, вечной жизни, смерть же как необходимый этап для приобретения той жизни, для которой человек родится заново в Последний день создания.

The first part of the history of the
 world is the history of the
 human race. It is a history of
 progress and improvement. It is
 a history of the human mind
 and the human heart. It is a
 history of the human soul. It
 is a history of the human
 spirit. It is a history of the
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