A funeral elegy for Thomas Danforth, treasurer of Harvard

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father of the science of chemistry. Hobbes disagreed concerning the interpretation of the famous experiments which Boyle made in his new vacuum pump, or 'pneumatic engine.' The issue of that controversy was the existence of the vacuum, the subject, in part, of Hobbes’ letter to Mersenne. Because Boyle was attacked by Hobbes, and also by an English Jesuit named Linus, he made further experiments in the course of which he discovered the law named after him, which states that the volume of an enclosed gas at constant temperature is inversely proportional to the pressure at which it exists.

The brevity of the letter is interesting in itself, as Brown has pointed out, because it indicates that Hobbes and Mersenne were living in the same town and consequently not dependent on letters for their contacts. Hence this one lacks the news of general interest with which others are marked.

I. Bernard Cohen

A Funeral Elegy for Thomas Danforth,
Treasurer of Harvard

One of the steadiest plodders on the nether slopes of the Puritan Parnassus was the pastor of Dorchester, John Danforth (1660-1730). A modest man, he probably had no illusions about his poetic stature. His most notable literary characteristic was the faithfulness and simplicity (too great at times) with which throughout his life he prepared a suitable 'copy of verses' whenever the occasion called for it. In almost every piece he rises to at least one brief passage of real though minor poetry; at least once in his life he achieved a poem of intensely personal though stark and thorny expression; once too, in his New Year’s poem for 1720, he came close to perfection in simple naive charm.

Nearly all of his works were written for special occasions, most of them upon the deaths of friends, relatives, and parishioners. Their value is not so much literary as historical and biographical, for conscientious workmen that he was, he rarely turned out the vague generalities prevalent in many an elegy of the day, but rather gave a solid factual account of the life of the deceased and a careful delineation of his character — this often the best part of the elegy literally. Thus in his verses the spirit of the second era of Puritan New England lives in its activities, principles, and aspirations, and from his lines the historian can attain an insight into the temper and attitudes of the period often lacking in the more material sources. To give just one example: in the elegy before us (Plate I) and in the one on Hannah Sewall (when speaking of her father John Hull) Danforth’s verse, graphic depiction of the New England Puritan attitude toward great wealth epitomizes a whole course of development.

The elegies generally appeared as printed broadsides, occasionally as appendices to books or pamphlets, occa-
sionally in the early newspapers. But the mills of time have ground most of them to pulp. Of the seven broadsides which can at present be located, only one has survived in as many as two copies; five others, still known to scholars in the nineteenth century, have subsequently disappeared. Since publication of The First Century of New England Verse, I have found two further poems of John Danforth's and notice of another, and it is rather probable that more of his verse will turn up in the course of time. While still working on the Danforth bibliography, however, my attention was called to the broadside before us, which subsequently came to the Harvard College Library through the gift of Carleton R. Richmond, '09. It had apparently been resting in the bottom recesses of a bookcase in a private home for about a century or so and seems never previously to have been so much as mentioned. It is the earliest of Danforth's broadsides now preserved (though the elegies on John and Anne Eliot appeared two years earlier, appended to a sermon).

This elegy, on the death of his uncle Thomas Danforth, typifies all the virtues and shortcomings of the poet's verse to a notable degree. As frequently, John Danforth here puts his worst feet forward in the singularly awkward first lines, but then he warms to his theme in the eulogy of Old England and of her sterling son, Nicholas Danforth, who refused the expensive honor of knighthood and brought his children Thomas and Samuel with him to New England, after having distinguished himself as a patron and protector of noted Puritan divines at his Suffolk home in Framingham.

The son Thomas carried on this honorable tradition of piety and public service in New England; and at this point we come to the finest portion of the elegy. With all its mixed metaphor, there emerges from it the clear image of a man deeply pious in speech and conduct, strong and positive in character, born to rule yet with no desire to rule, imbued with a strong sense of responsibility toward carrying on the founding ideals of New England, with a deep humanity, with a notable tolerance, courage, and independence of mind which caused him to stand out against the two popular hysterias of early New England, the witchcraft trials and the persecution of the Christian Indians during King Philip's War, as well as against the encroachments of political tyranny. The poet finds his best lines toward the end of the second column when he describes his uncle's steady influence on government and order, his judicial moderation, the kindly, homely wit with which he often settled the cases brought before him, his intuitive talent for detecting trouble before it came into the open, his reasonableness and complete lack of judicial vanity.

The passage on his long and generous services to Harvard lapses from literary grace, but is packed with information and bears out Morison's verdict on Thomas Danforth that no other person had so long, intimate, and important a connection with Harvard in the seventeenth century. Better again are the lines on his broad and deep learning (he was not college trained) and on his family life with the traditional New England intellectual influences to which Benjamin Franklin later paid such striking tribute. The
PLATE 1

JOHN DANFORTH’S FUNERAL ELEGY ON HIS UNCLE, THOMAS DANFORTH

BOSTON, 1699
poem concludes with religious reflections, a bit of heraldic and Japidary lore, and blessings on Thomas’ descendants.

With such a well-known public character, we cannot expect to find here many new facts contributing to his biography. From the superscription it is clear that the date of his birth was then set at 1622 rather than 1623, as more recent accounts will have it. One nice new tidbit adds to our lore about that ever-ready anagrammatist, the first John Wilson, who greeted young Thomas Danforth when he first assumed high office with the perfect anagram: ‘Handsom for that.’

On the whole, this elegy is one of Danforth’s best; it is of some literary merit, a good example of the later Puritan elegiac tradition, and a precious document of the New England way of life.

Harold S. Jantz

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Wordsworth’s Thanksgiving Ode: An Unpublished Postscript

ENGLISHMEN celebrated 18 January 1816 as a day of general rejoicing for the final defeat of Napoleon, and Wordsworth commemorated the occasion in his Thanksgiving Ode, published some three months later. Unfortunately, the Ode is a somewhat labored occasional piece. There is in it more of what its author called ‘rational patriotism’ and ‘sound philosophy’ than of true poetic fire. It does not seem to have enjoyed a wide contemporary popularity, and it has not worn well.

Wordsworth cast his poem in the form of an irregular ode. As he explained his choice to Southey,

It is a dramatised ejaculation, and this, if anything can, must excuse the irregular frame of the metre. In respect to a stanza for a grand subject designed to be treated comprehensively, there are great objections. If the stanza be short, it will scarcely allow of fervour and imperosity, unless so short that the sense is run perpetually from one stanza to another, as in Horace’s alexandrines; and if it be long, it will be as apt to generate diffuseness as to check it.

In its first edition, the stanzas or movements of the Ode were indicated simply by spacing and indentation. This practice led to a printer’s error which was a source of some vexation to Wordsworth, and of which he complained in the hitherto-unpublished postscript of a letter to John Scott:

* The Ode was sent to the printer about 18 March 1816, the date of its prefatory advertisement, for in a letter of April 9 to R. P. Gillies, Wordsworth speaks of having sent it ‘three weeks ago’, see The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (1937), II, 715. The published correspondence also indicates that the book finally appeared between May 3 (De Selincourt, II, 740) and May 16 (De Selincourt, II, 745). The Harvard copy of the Thanksgiving Ode contains a four-page publishers’ advertisement dated April, 1816, possibly indicative of a publication date early in May.

* De Selincourt, op. cit. II, 717.
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