

Through a Glass Darkly:
A Study of Henry Vaughan's
Vision as Poet and Prophet

M. A. Thesis

by

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1976

INTRODUCTION

Although it can be argued that anything which arouses curiosity is worthy of human enquiry, and therefore requires no apology, metaphysical poetry in general, and the religious writings of Henry Vaughan in particular, might still be considered enough of a dusty niche within the spectrum of the history of art and thought to at least require a brief foreword.

Why study the so-called metaphysicals? Why study the works of the poets writing in England during the seventeenth century? The usual answer to this sort of question relates to the business of "placing" a certain mode of expression within the ever-evolving history of English letters; or, stated another way, "determining" the influence of the particular works in question upon, and within, that same process. Such an approach is self-defeating in a study of seventeenth century poets, however; for the value of their contribution seems to have escaped the scrutiny of axe-grinding critics throughout the past three hundred years.

But the habit of ignoring the metaphysicals has been broken in the twentieth century. The reason for this is that modern and contemporary readers find themselves capable of empathizing with many thoughts and feelings recorded by John Donne and his followers.

The causes of this renewed interest in seventeenth century thought are, no doubt, myriad. However, the fundamental cause is that metaphysical poets recorded, through their written works, thoughts and feelings which they experienced in reaction to an environment remarkably similar to that of twentieth century man. Many people today are bewildered by the pace of change on all fronts. Human values are in such a state of flux in our time that a man scarcely knows what to believe. Science and technology, earlier touted as saviours of the human race, have reared the uglier side of their natures to the point where we recognize their ability to engulf us. The paradoxes are manifold. Nuclear energy, potentially a super-fuel with the ability to free man's age-old enslavement to menial drudgery, actually threatens, daily, to destroy the world. Miracle cures and vastly improved dietary practices, while they seem to benefit mankind, tend to

upset the population balance, to the point where we seem in danger of crowding ourselves off the face of the earth.

The anxieties which we experience constantly against the background of our contradictory social, political and religious environment, are much similar to those John Donne and Henry Vaughan felt in the seventeenth century.

In those days, monstrous social changes seemed to be trampling individual bodies and souls. On the political front, the traditional British monarchy was being challenged by an upstart movement toward parliamentary democracy. This conflict led to bitter civil strife and a country destined to be politically divided on this issue for generations. On the religious front, a complex ideological battle between Anglicanism and Puritanism rocked the souls of all those who took religion seriously. It is no coincidence that all of the so-called metaphysical poets were serious religious thinkers.

John Donne and Henry Vaughan tried valiantly to reconcile the careening world of their acute observation

with traditional Christian teachings of medieval origin. But the fungus of science, the dualism of Descartes, the seeds of empiricism, the dawn of what we know as science and technology, had all seeped into the consciousness of seventeenth century thinkers. While the vast majority of the people, incapable of recognizing the consequences of such a revolutionary way of looking at the world, merely went along for the ride, people like Henry Vaughan shrank in quiet despair before the spectacle of his world's destruction.

It is a sense of impotent despair which links contemporary thinkers to those of the seventeenth century. This is the basis of our empathy.

It is the purpose of this essay to re-examine Henry Vaughan's reaction to what he recognized as a doom-bound environment. Perhaps the reasons for his peculiar behaviour in the face of such a realization can be articulated anew.

The starting point must be the poems themselves, particularly those composed during an extraordinarily

productive period when he considered himself as newly converted to a life as a totally committed Christian. The purpose of the first chapter of this essay will be to determine and describe Vaughan's motivation as a poet and prophet, as well as the fountain of his thought and poetic inspiration and the modes of his expression.

The second chapter dwells at length upon the poet's environment, and the ways in which he reacts to the frightening and depressing life which he led as a young man. At all times, however, these considerations are related to the content and style of the poems in Silex Scintillans.

The third chapter relates and re-examines Vaughan's reactions to, and belief in, the power of the natural world to enlighten man on his spiritual journey through physical life. An attempt is made here to view Vaughan's "escape" into the world of nature as an entirely sane seeking out of refuge from the insane, ungodly world of men, a turning to a world where God's natural creatures exhibit devotion and faithfulness toward their Creator. Here again the emphasis is upon the influence of the natural world upon both the content of Vaughan's thought

and the style of his expression.

The fourth chapter endeavours to follow the quest of Vaughan's creative mind and thirsty spirit through the world of nature toward the fountain of all life, to God the Creator. It is the key chapter in this essay, because it attempts to suggest that the existence of Vaughan's poetic expression depends entirely upon, and stems directly from, his unique concept and apprehension of God. If there is anything "original" presented here, it is the claim that everything in Vaughan's poetic expression depends upon, and aims towards, his Divine Vision.

The fifth and final chapter attempts to deal with the question of the relative "success" of Vaughan's personal and poetic quest for the reunion of his immortal soul with its Source, ^{Christ our Lord.} (the God of Christ.) Such an attempt must naturally fall short because no man can begin to understand or know the state of another man's relationship with God. It is characteristic of the nature of man, however, to invade the borders of impossibility, and this essay, if nothing else, represents a minor manifestation of human impertinence. This chapter also lays the foundation for a final judgement upon Vaughan's

accomplishments as a poet and "mystic". It leads into a conclusion which attempts to trace the central thread of meaning of the entire essay and restate it in concise form.

This work claims nothing original in the awesome history of letters. It merely attempts to re-examine Henry Vaughan's thought and expression from the point of view of that which was obviously of primary concern to the writer himself, the state of his own soul.

Chapter One

Henry Vaughan's Poetic Stance

It is the poetry behind the particular poems that so many of us sense whenever we are reading Vaughan's work, a vision and an apprehension of things that is, on the one hand perfectly reflected through a number of poems that are really one poem, variations on one another, and on the other hand, is often to be glimpsed only in the gleams and flashes of fragmentary but intensely suggestive links and phrases.

Part of the difficulty in attaining the raison d'etre behind the religious poetry of Henry Vaughan can be attributed to a lengthy history of misguided criticism. Instead of allowing the poems in Silex Scintillans to stand for themselves and to make their own rules for being, no matter how "obscure", as Vaughan himself warns they may be,² critics through the centuries have used them to sharpen their biased axes.

In a refreshingly incisive book of recent vintage,³ J. D. Simmonds illustrates the way in which

nineteenth century criticism, through a combination of wishful thinking and erroneous deduction, created the myth of Vaughan's value as a precursor who exercised direct influence upon William Wordsworth. Critics have been all too ready to ferret out examples of Platonism, Herbertism, Hermetism, Mysticism and so forth, not for the purpose of shedding light upon Vaughan's work, but rather to embellish their own pet theories.

Such approaches have been very damaging to Vaughan's reputation as a poet and thinker. According to such arbitrarily applied measurements, his best work is not only vague but often puerile. "Strong lines"⁴ is the best that can be said of him from many narrow points of view. Pettet's thorough cataloguing of opposite forces in Vaughan,⁵ similar to Durr's careful tracing of the theme of regeneration,⁶ do not focus upon what is most important to Vaughan.

He consistently drives home a tantalizingly intimate experience of the immanence of God juxtaposed beside the utter other-worldliness and unknowable nature of God. Time and again Vaughan expresses a feeling akin to the phrase "so near, and yet so far", as well

as the frustration and despair which follow so naturally upon such feelings. In his own words, Vaughan "...felt through all this fleshly dresse/Brights 'shootes' of everlastingnesse"⁷. But at the same time he often⁸ expresses a sense of urgency and impatience.

In his preface to the second edition of Silex Scintillans, Vaughan expresses the hope that his poetic meditations will help his readers in their attempts to experience God. This is his primary aim in writing. His meditations often inspire him to express magnificently coherent visions, as in "The World" and "The Night". But his approach also results in his accepting artistic failures for the sake of preserving good⁹ teaching.

Quite in contrast to the habitually narrow approaches of his critics, Vaughan's poetic approach is "metaphysical" in the broadest sense of the term. His is a constant search for unity in diversity. His experience of the unifying nature of God with respect to fallen man is reflected in his constant attempt to synthesize apparently disparate phenomena.

T. S. Eliot's description of a metaphysical

poet applies to Vaughan as much as to Donne.

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter, falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter, or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.¹⁰

Elizabeth Holmes, in spite of the considerable damage she does to Vaughan in harping too strongly on the influences of Hermetism in his work, at least recognizes his constant concern with drawing disparate elements together to emphasize the essential unity of the cosmos. This is a deep-seated belief which forms the basis of Vaughan's thought and hence influences the very fabric and style of his writing.

He is essentially metaphysical in the wider sense of the word, when he expounds the "sympathy" that binds the natural world in one, when he interprets this sympathy as flowing from a divine source, or lays bare his own longing to return to the source.¹¹

Vaughan never overwhelms the reader with the manipulation of witty conceits. Although, at his best, he is intellectually stimulating, he is never bent solely on impressing the reader with his wit.

This is not to say that many of his images are not deliberately provocative in the Donnean sense. One of Vaughan's startlingly effective images arises quite innocently in "The Retreat". An ecstatic vision of Heaven is dramatically broken by "But (ah !) my soul with too much stay/Is drunk and staggers in the way."¹² Here the earth-bound soul is so far out of place in heavenly surroundings that it takes on the dimensions of its bodily prison in an extreme state of debauchery despite herculean attempts to break the bonds of physical attachment.

This complex image is easily related to the Donnean revolution which took poetry by storm in early seventeenth-century England. But the value of Vaughan's poetic achievement cannot rest on how closely his style resembles and diverges from that of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. What matters about this particular image in "The Retreat" is that it communicates in a very appropriate way one of the central and recurring concerns of Vaughan's poetry. As he writes elsewhere, in "Distraction", he feels his soul "Coffin'd in/This quicken'd masse of sinne"¹³. The important thing to realize here is that there is no distinction between what Vaughan expresses through these images on the one

hand, and his own feelings and ideas on the other. Stated otherwise, he is not deliberately and self-consciously expressing himself by means of Donnean imagery. What is actually happening in the mature religious poetry of Vaughan is that his expression takes a so-called metaphysical form because it corresponds precisely to Vaughan's vision of reality. Startling, paradoxical imagery is the natural outgrowth of what he conceives to be the startlingly paradoxical world around him.

Pettet is correct to dwell upon Vaughan's concern with opposing forces in nature, with darkness and despair on the one hand and the morning light on the other.¹⁴ But he misses the essential relationship between these forces in Vaughan.

Vaughan never finds a comfortable state of equilibrium between the forces of good and evil. He constantly emphasizes the dark side of things in contrast to their bright side. In the poem "Misery", for example, opposing elements in human nature are discussed. Vaughan's personal willingness to succumb to God's will, even though it may mean embracing abject slavery, is placed in juxtaposition to the poet's lack of

patience and infuriating readiness to give in to his baser appetites:

Thus wilded by a peevish heart
 Which in thy musick bears no part
 I storm at thee, calling my peace
 A Lethargy, and meer disease,
 Nay, those bright beams shot from thine eyes
 To calm me in these mutinies
 I stile meer tempers, which take place,
 At some set times, but are thy grace.¹⁵

Even though Vaughan recognized, almost as an afterthought, the reconciling nature of Divine intervention at such times, by far the strongest impression conveyed by the poem is the sense of frustration that Vaughan feels as a result of his inability to keep God's way in focus.

There is evidence throughout Vaughan's religious writings that he believes whole-heartedly in the immanence of a mystical world which is a binding thread for all created objects in the universe. As Pettet puts it, Vaughan's world is one "where everything, above and below, is linked by celestial rays and magnetic influences..."¹⁶ But what he seems to miss is that Vaughan repeatedly fails to maintain a unified vision of reality. Discontent constantly seeps through. Quoting from "Misery" again:

O send me from thy holy hil
 So much of strength, as may fulfil
 All thy delight (what e'r they be)
 And sacred Institutes in me¹⁷

The phrase in parenthesesⁱ is extremely significant. Here Vaughan admits, in what appears to be an afterthought, that he himself is incapable of knowing what God wants of him.

By far the strongest and most consistent feeling generated by the poems in Silex Scintillans is a sense of frustration resulting from Vaughan's mental inability to pierce the veil, from his soul's impatient longing to return to its source in the bosom of God the Creator, and from his persistent struggle to escape the strong pull of his earthly appetites.

Vaughan rarely accomplishes a sense of contentment in his poetry. Ecstasy or despair seem the only alternatives -- either the ecstasy of a consistent vision of God and the soul's unrelenting journey towards its primary source, or the absolute despair of being lost in a world of shadows, physical delights and soul-destroying mental fancies.

In "Regeneration" he relates the following vision:

Only a little Fountain lent
 Some use for Eares,
 And on the dumb shades language spent
 The Musick of her teares;
 I drew her neere, and found
 The Cisterne full
 Of diverse stones, some bright, and round,
 Others ill-shap'd, and dull.

If one takes the cistern to mean the world of man, and the stones to be individual men, it would appear that Vaughan recognizes a clear choice between, on the one hand, awareness of and participation in the mystical world of the spirit, where the Divine Essence prevails; and, on the other hand, complete blindness to anything but the physical world. Because Vaughan feels so deeply his inability to maintain existence on the mystical level, there is a pervading sense of melancholy in his work.

There is a basic contradiction in approach which is the result of an inherent frustration. Vaughan recognizes his goal as unattainable, except through Divine Grace. He acknowledges this in the concluding lines of "Regeneration": "On me one breathe/And let me dye before my death!"¹⁹ However, even though Vaughan's concern for salvation through reunion with his Creator causes him to embark on a mystical journey, he finds

himself unable to take the final step of total surrender, which is the absolute annihilation of self before the Divine Essence.²⁰

The reason for this failure is simply that Henry Vaughan is too much a man of his time. Grant argues very strongly that Vaughan is caught unknowingly

...under the pull of a Platonist-oriented theology which centres in a fundamental trust in reason (rather than faith and grace) to attain to archetypal and eternal truth by its own light.²¹

Whether or not Grant's view is over-emphasized, it is still evident from the general tenor of Vaughan's religious lyrics that he becomes frustrated in his quest for reunion with God. The greatest causes for such feelings are rooted in Vaughan's inability to devote his entire being, even his reasoning faculty, to God's will.

Even when he appears to be the most mystical, when he expresses the unknowable nature of God and life after the Resurrection, he does so in completely logical terms. For example, at the conclusion of "Death", he writes: "One everlasting Sabbath there shal runne/Without

22

Succession and without a Sunne". Here we see Vaughan's failure to express the complete other-worldliness of his vision in its own terms. The only way Vaughan, being trapped in the rational lineaments of his day, can explain a world outside the dimensions of time and space, is through the rational negation of time and space as they are known in the present world.

Although there can be little doubt that Vaughan's soul frequently attains a sense of being at one with God, his mind remains detached and critical. As a result, when he attempts to express his visions there is always a sense of awkwardness which seems to relate to the inadequacies of his predominantly rational approach. And yet there is a certain attractiveness in this awkwardness. It is often disarming in its simplicity and sincerity. Lines such as "I saw eternity the other night"²³ are impossible to ignore. In fact, this particular line can be looked upon as a distillation of the various elements in Henry Vaughan's stance as a Christian, as a man of his time, and as a poet. First, his belief revolves around his understanding of a mystical journey from this finite world to the eternal world of God.

Second, as a man of his time, he places himself in the centre of the universe.²⁴ And third, as a meta-physical poet, he constantly attempts to reconcile time and eternity, the finite with the infinite, and man to God.

It is in the forge of such struggles within Henry Vaughan himself that his poetic accomplishments are cast. It therefore seems appropriate to start a study of Henry Vaughan with an interpretation of his own human predicament, and then to proceed to show how, and by what means, he relates to nature, society, God and the universe.

The texture of Vaughan's poetry cannot be appreciated outside an approach of this nature simply because he is concerned with nothing else. Henry Vaughan is most definitely, and by his own confession, a Pilgrim and prophet first and a poet second. A single passage from the preface to the second edition of Silex Scintillans is enough to indicate the inspiration in what Pettet refers to as "the poetry behind the particular poems":

It is true indeed, that to give up our thoughts to pious 'Themes' and 'Contemplations' (if it be done for pieties sake) is a great 'step' towards 'perfection'; because it will 'refine' and 'dispose' to devotion and sanctity. And further, it will 'procure' for us (so easily communicable is that 'loving spirit') some small 'prelibation' of those heavenly 'refreshments' which descend but seldom, and then very sparingly upon 'men' of an ordinary or indifferent 'holyness'...25

Footnotes

Chapter I

1. E. C. Pettet, Of Paradise and Light: A Study of Vaughan's 'Silex Scintillans' (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 9.
2. Vaughan intimates his awareness of a certain "obscurity" in his religious poetry in his Preface to the Second Edition of Silex Scintillans, 1655. See F. Fogle, The Complete Poetry of Henry Vaughan (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1964), pp. 159 - 161. Note that all references to Vaughan's work will be taken from this edition.
3. J. D. Simmonds, Masques of God: Form and Theme in the Poetry of Henry Vaughan (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), p. 121.
4. In her book Henry Vaughan and the Hermetic Philosophy (New York: Russell & Russell, 1932), pp. 4 - 5, Elizabeth Holmes explains the relationship between Vaughan's inability to maintain both artistic intensity and spiritual vision.
5. Pettet, pp. 9 - 11.
6. R. A. Durr, On the Mystical Poetry of Henry Vaughan (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 29 - 30.
7. From "The Retreat". See Fogle, p. 169.
8. Particularly in "Come, come, what doe I here?", Fogle, p. 170, where Vaughan goes so far as to summon death to release him from his inability to reach perfection in this earthly life.
9. An endless string of critics have made this distinction. Perhaps the earliest is Holmes, p. 47.
10. T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1951), p. 287.

11. Holmes, pp. 3 - 4.
12. Fogle, p. 169.
13. Ibid., p. 162.
14. Pettet, p. 9.
15. Fogle, p. 239.
16. Pettet, p. 10.
17. Fogle, p. 239.
18. Ibid., p. 142.
19. Ibid., p. 143.
20. Durr, p. xviii.
21. P. Grant, "Hermetic philosophy and the nature of man in Vaughan's 'Silex Scintillans'", Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 67, (1951), p. 414.
22. Fogle, p. 146.
23. Ibid., p. 231.
24. Marlowe's "Dr. Faustus" and Shakespeare's "Hamlet" are dramatic reflections of the self-centred, self-conscious temper of the "Renaissance Man". Sir Walter Raleigh could be pointed out as a living example of this type; a sort of extraordinary achiever in many unrelated fields -- love, war, poetry, politics.
Henry Vaughan, while he tried to break free from the so-called "Humanistic" tendencies of his times, nonetheless found himself subconsciously bound by the Elizabethan way of looking at things.
The next chapter in this essay attempts to elaborate on this point.
25. Fogle, p. 260.

Chapter Two

The Human Predicament

He hath no root, nor to one place is ty'd,
But ever restless and Irregular,
 About this Earth doth run and ride,
He knows he has a home, but scarce knows where,
 He sayes it is so far
That he hath quite forgot how to go there.¹

These lines contain a universal truth. Yet it is entirely appropriate that they should have been written in the middle of the seventeenth century in England, and particularly by a man like Henry Vaughan.

Seventeenth century England experienced such rapid change in all aspects of living that Douglas Bush writes:

In 1600 the educated Englishman's mind and world were more than half medieval; by 1660 they were more than half modern...It is the impact of modernism upon medievalism that gives the age its peculiar character.²

Changes from medieval to modern approaches to living encompassed every aspect of human life:

in the political arena, it was represented by the fundamental shift from absolute monarchy to an apparently more liberal commonwealth approach to government; in business and commerce, it meant a shift from a rural-based economy to the rise of the urban merchant class and modern capitalism; in religion, there was a corresponding conflict between authoritarian Roman Catholicism and humanistic Puritanism.³ The most drastic manifestation of the conflict was embodied in civil strife which pitted monarchy against commonwealth and Anglicanism against Puritanism. It is interesting that in none of these separate aspects did one alternative prevail over the other in the seventeenth century. It was a long, painful process of compromise, both in external actuality as well as in the minds of men. Old ideals treasured throughout the Middle Ages died hard. What wonder, then, that thinking man should feel bewildered at the world about him.

If some writers were troubled by the belief that they were living near the end of the world, in a time of general deterioration, the mass of men, from politicians, merchants and colonizers down to ploughmen, were far too busy to be melancholy.⁴

Henry Vaughan, however, was not too busy to feel and express the bewilderment and bitter insecurity of his time. It is not clear whether he had actually taken up arms in the Royalist cause, but the defeat of the monarchy marked the defeat of his worldly ambitions. He had hoped for a career at court, but with the defeat of the King's forces, and with the temporary setback of the Anglican faith in favour of Cromwell's Puritanism, Vaughan sought self-exile to lick his wounds, to contemplate a world gone mad, in his eyes, and to try to reconstruct something out of the ruins of his own life. He returned to his native Brecknockshire and took up the profession of physician, in which he continued for the remainder of his life. For a time, however, he focussed his attention upon writing.

The unsettled nature of the society of his day is certainly reflected in Vaughan's poetry. As Bethell puts it,

...we are led to expect a poetry of mood, of heightened vision and of spiritual striving, rather than the sort which expresses the permanent lineaments of an achieved and settled character.²

supported his growing belief in the immanence of God.⁹ For example, the Song of Solomon is echoed in such lines as "The aire was all in spice" and "His locks are wet with the clear drops of night".¹⁰

Against this background, then, it seems quite understandable that Vaughan, who had already tried his hand at verse, should commit himself, in one fell swoop, to the Christian way of life as he interprets it from Herbert and the Bible, and also to the mission of a prophetic poet of the Christian faith.

In the preface to the second edition of Silex Scintillans, Vaughan proclaimed his calling: to concentrate on holy themes; to advocate the other-worldly life of contemplation. He accurately predicted that his contemporaries would fail to appreciate or understand his work. He knew that his poetry, based primarily on his own personal religious experience, would strike few responsive chords in the minds and hearts of his countrymen who, for the most part, were caught up in worldly pursuits. They would be as ready as we to scoff at the apparently insignificant simplicity of the statement "I saw eternity the other night".¹¹

Yet, imbedded in this line is the entire approach, message and motivation of Henry Vaughan as poet, Christian and thinker.

The use of the first person "I" reflects the egocentric approach of modern man, an approach which began with the so-called Renaissance humanism, which struggled for existence through the Elizabethan age and which, by the time of civil strife in the middle of the seventeenth century, formed part of the fabric of the enlightened Englishman's approach.

Throughout his work, Henry placed man (in fact, his own self) at the centre of the universe. Those who read Vaughan as advocating a return to a happier, previously-lived golden age with God at the centre, are barking up the wrong tree.¹²

Vaughan accepted, consciously or unconsciously, his position at the centre of his own world. From that vantage point, his mission was to 'see' beyond the world of 'night' (which could be interpreted, in part, as the chaotic world of the seventeenth century) to the infinite world of eternity. The core of his poetic quest was, through contemplation, to map a course to connect his finite

self with the infinite world of the spirit. His poetic activity, therefore, coincided with his own restless soul's struggle for salvation.

Vaughan felt isolated in a religious sense because the core of his faith, Anglicanism, had been suppressed by the Puritans. In addition, however, he was convinced that formalized religion of any stripe, by virtue of its being a social structure susceptible to the corrupting nature of man, had evolved to become a force destructive of the soul's quest for reunion with God. He believed that this could happen only through individual sacrifice and contemplation, and that organized religion tended to act as little more than an obstacle in the path to Heaven.

In his poem "Religion", the relevant verses of which are quoted below, Vaughan compares institutionalized Christianity to an underground spring. The farther it flows from its pure source (God), the more it is corrupted by worldly elements such as 'Sulphur' (sinful man). The poet's message here seems to be that organized religion, as a result of corrupt human mismanagement, should no longer be trusted as a vehicle

for the perfection of the individual soul. Indeed, Vaughan's poems themselves provide a sort of diary of a man who seeks spiritual perfection in private meditation, rather than through the traditional avenue of the Church-going Christian. When Vaughan speaks of Christianity in his religious lyrics, he invariably focuses upon specific doctrines, rather than upon intensely personal apprehensions of Christ's presence which Herbert finds even with the Anglican service itself.

No, no; Religion is a Spring
That from some secret, golden mine
Derives her birth, and thence doth bring
Cordials in every drop, and Wine;

But in her long and hidden Course
Passing through the Earth's dark veines,
Growes still from better unto worse,
And both her taste, and colour staines,

Then drilling on, learnes to encrease
False 'Ecchoes', and Confused sounds,
And unawares doth often seize
On veines of 'Sulphur' underground;

So poison'd breaks forth in some Clime,
And at first sight doth many please,
But drunk, is puddle, or meere slime
And 'stead of 'Phisick', a disease;

Vaughan believed that the Jews crucified Christ because they were too caught up in their own selfish pursuits to recognize Him as the Messiah.

The poet reminds us repeatedly of the tendency of man to corrupt everything in his experience, even religion.

Thus we see that Vaughan is not so shallow of mind as to blindly advocate one social organization over another, such as Anglicanism over Puritanism. His concern is always with the sincerity of the individual soul's approach to the question of its own salvation.

Vaughan, probably as a result of contemplating his own shattered dreams and the hollowness of his own courtly ambitions, was convinced that human depravity was bred by the corrupting influence of society, which appealed mainly to the selfish appetites of the body. It is extremely significant that Vaughan found simpler social states, such as that of the shepherds in Biblical times, or children in any time, more in tune with God and Nature.

In "The Shepherdes",¹⁴ Vaughan points out that the meaning of the eastern star in the story of Christ's nativity was apparent to shepherds in the countryside because their simple way of life kept them in tune with nature, and therefore personally receptive

Scholars such as Kermode¹⁷ and Durr¹⁸ point out that, in the tradition of St. Augustine and others of the mystical approach to life, sin is attributed entirely to the influence of bodily appetites, and it is only through the dominion of the soul that man can overcome the corrupting influences of the flesh to focus upon reunion with God and ultimate salvation.

All of this revolves around Vaughan's interpretation of the Fall of Man. According to Grant

Although Vaughan believed in the Fall, his sense of the effects of original sin swings noticeably away from the orthodox conviction of personal depravity under the pull of a Platonist-oriented theology which centres in a fundamental trust in reason (rather than faith and grace) to attain to archetypal and eternal truth by its own light.¹⁹

It surely appears through most of Vaughan's religious verse that he trusted human reason in a state of subservience under a soul bent upon reunion with God. Vaughan's arguments themselves, when deciphered from his self-designated 'obscure' poems, are mainly logical. But his reason fell short of

convincing him of his salvation. When Vaughan sought answers to the mystery of life, his reason carried him only to the point of recognizing his inability to perceive much beyond the mystery itself. In "Regeneration"²⁰ for example, when Vaughan seeks the whereabouts of God, he is answered by a rushing wind which whispers "where I please". In times of greatest illumination (i.e., with the strongest interplay of Vaughan's spiritual and logical faculties), his reason admitted the absolutely unknowable nature of God in anything resembling finite terms.

At other times, however, when the influence of his reason overpowered his spiritual insights, when Vaughan depended upon logic alone, he feared the unknown and often longed for immediate release. It seems there was constant conflict between his faithful soul and his doubting and reasoning mind. In "come, come, what doe I here?", for example, Vaughan writes

Ther's not a wind can stir
 Or beam passe by,
 But strait I think (though far,)
 Thy hand is nigh;
 Come, come!
 Strike these lips dumb:
 This restless breath
 That soiles thy name,
 Will ne'r be tame
 Untill in death.²¹

Here we discover another paradox involving the nearness of God felt by the human soul even while the reasoning faculty recognizes a vast chasm between man and God, a separation which Vaughan sees as caused by the corrupting influence of the human body and its appetites.

There is a constant swing of the pendulum in Vaughan's work between feelings of calm reassurance springing from his soul's apprehension of the all-pervading immanence of God at one extreme, and feelings of anxiety resulting from the application of his reasoning faculty to infinite questions which it cannot fathom because its function breaks down beyond the borders of the finite world.

This paradox, the central key to any understanding of Vaughan's thought and art, is embodied in the recurring images of the "veil" and the "night", both of which are found in many of Vaughan's more popular poems.

In every case, the night corresponds, on a symbolic level, to the state of man in this life: in absolute darkness, completely alienated from the

Creator. Paradoxically, it was usually during night time that Vaughan reached his most profound metaphysical insights. He believed that correspondences between the light of the human soul and the Heavenly light (often symbolized in the light of the stars), could prevail; but only after complete surrender of body, mind and soul to the task of concentrated contemplation during night and early dawn hours, as far as humanly possible away from the glitter of earthly distraction.

Similarly, the image of the "veil" usually refers to physical reality (often, specifically, the body of Christ) which paradoxically hides and reveals God's immanence. Vaughan perceived that, on the one hand, the corrupting influence of the physical world plays upon fleshly appetites and carries man further astray. On the other hand, he saw that the immanence of God can be discerned in every earthly object, animate or inanimate.

Thus the human predicament pictured by Henry Vaughan is characterized as a state of isolation. Although this view stems from his own personal experience, its application to a wider spectrum of reality is made by

Vaughan in an extremely convincing manner. The following stanzas quoted from "The Timber", for example, show that all men, particularly those who have repented and continually strive toward perfection, are separated from God while they find themselves imprisoned in their sinful bodies:

He that hath left life's vain joys and vain care,
 And truly hates to be detain'd on earth,
 Hath got an house where many mansions are,
 And keeps his soul unto eternal mirth.

But though thus dead unto the world, and ceas'd
 From sin, he walks a narrow, private way;
 Yet grief and old wounds make him sore displeas'd,
 And all his life a rainy, weeping day.²²

Vaughan's approach, taken in total, is didactic. What he teaches is that without a supreme effort of human will to overcome the temptations of the flesh and the lure of worldly gain, man very quickly becomes alienated from God, nature, the universe, his fellow men, and even himself.

Vaughan, however, is by no means willing to accept that man is doomed to this state of alienation forever. The remainder of this essay explores the ways and means through which Vaughan proposes, at least in his own experience, and as an example for others, to become at one with God, nature and himself.

1. Fogle, p. 246.
2. D. Bush, English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945; rev. 1962), p. 1.
3. Hundreds of textbooks have been composed upon great conflicts relating to the emergence of the modern world. Although it is true that the paragraph above comprises a list of gross over-simplifications, the writer feels that it is beyond the purpose and scope of this essay to analyze all aspects of the social, political, economic and religious scenes of Henry Vaughan's experience. All that is necessary at this point is to recognize the fact that disturbing elements of change drove Vaughan, physically and psychologically, to seek refuge in his native Wales.
4. Bush, p. 4.
5. S. L. Bethell, The Cultural Revolution of the Seventeenth Century (London: Dennis Dobson, 1951), p. 125.
6. Fogle, p. 245.
7. Ibid., p. 260.
8. Ibid., p. 194.
9. Ibid., p. 79.
10. Ibid., p. 176.
11. Ibid., p. 237.
12. For example, J. S. Harrison, in Platonism in English Poetry (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1903), p. 204, says that Vaughan "...longs to travel back to the time when, in his purity, he was nearer to God than he is now in his sinful state". Closer scrutiny reveals that Vaughan's poetry and imagination often span

the centuries. His quest reaches out beyond the spirit of man; it is a quest which defies measurements of time and space. All that is constantly evident is Vaughan's presence in the centre of his experience.

13. Fogle, p. 150.
14. Ibid., p. 238.
15. Ibid., p. 226.
16. Ibid., p. 239.
17. F. Kermode, "The private imagery of Henry Vaughan", Review of English Studies, 1(1959), pp. 206 - 225.
18. Durr, p. xvi.
19. Grant, p. 144.
20. Fogle, p. 79.
21. Ibid., p. 170.
22. Ibid., p. 290.

Chapter Three

Clues in Nature

When on some 'gilded Cloud' or 'flower'
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity;¹

It is impossible to escape the central importance of the natural world in the religious poetry of Henry Vaughan. References to nature, landscapes, natural objects, and God's creatures form perhaps the most consistent fabric in the overall pattern of his poetic tapestry.

Anderson has emphasized the illustrative aspect of nature² as applied by Vaughan. It is always a means to some end, whether it be a point of departure for a didactic message, or a direct inspiration to man in his attitudes toward his fellowman and to God.

One of the best examples of this aspect of nature in Vaughan's religious poetry is found in the sustained metaphor of an underground spring in the poem "Religion".

...Religion is a Spring
 That from some secret, golden Mine
 Derives her birth, and thence doth bring
 Cordials in every drop, and Wine;

But in her long, and hidden Course
 Passing through the Earths darke veines,
 Growes still from better unto worse,
 And both her taste, and colour staines,

Then drilling on, learns to encrease
 False 'Ecchoes', and Confused sounds,
 And unawares doth often seize
 On veines of 'Sulphur' under ground;

So poison'd, breaks forth in some Clime,
 And at first sight doth many please,
 But drunk, is puddle, or meere slime
 And 'stead of 'Phisick', a disease;³

The movement of religion away from God takes it underground, closer to Hell in the centre of the earth,⁴ where it is contaminated by "Veines of Sulphur", or misinterpretation. Thus, as it resurfaces, it is misrepresented as something to be revered.

Here we see that Vaughan is not concerned with the river image in and of itself, but merely in its ability to illustrate the poem's message. In this poem, he is pointing out that religion, as a social institution, is corrupted by its contact with evil men.

A random glance at Vaughan's poetry testifies to his constant reference to the natural world. But he

always does so for some didactic purpose. Usually his weaving of natural allusions into his poetry goes far beyond simple literary device, and this aspect should not be overlooked.

Critics who have seen Vaughan's contribution to English poetry as a faint harbinger of Wordsworthian pantheism have been properly discredited.⁵ God for Vaughan is far more than the God of nature. Nature is only a part of the Deity's manifestation in this earth. God is beyond nature, which retains its relevance (for Vaughan) in its paradoxical shielding/revealing of the Godhead.

In "The Morning-Watch", for example, we see more substantive parallels among God, nature and man.

When I lye down! The Pious soul by night
 Is like a clouded starre, whose beames though sed
 To shed their light
 Under some Cloud
 Yet are above,
 And shine, and move
 Beyond that mistie shrowd.
 So in my Bed
 That Curtain'd grave, though sleep, like ashes, hide
 My lamp, and life, both shall in thee abide.⁶

Here the relationships between "the soul by night" and the "clouded starre" are more than merely representational. Star and soul share a similar experience "Beyond that mistie shrowd", hinting at Divine illumination. Nature, for Vaughan, is both metaphorically and actually a mysterious link between man and God.

With reference to "The Night", Rudrum recognizes the purpose behind Vaughan's concentrating on nature rather than human life alone:

The imagery of the first stanza, down to the humble 'Glo-wormes', is worked out in terms drawn from the world of nature rather than from human life, and an important function is assigned to generally cosmic imagery (noon, moon, light, night) which coalesces round the shadowy figure of Christ.⁷

Natural images, as they manifest themselves in Vaughan's religious poetry, phase in and out of focus as "mere illustrations" of his messages and "actual manifestations" of the tie that binds all reality.

This is not to say that Vaughan merely manipulates natural objects and images for his own poetic purpose. This would leave nature sterile and unimportant in itself. On the contrary, there are many aspects

of nature, as revealed in the poetry, which are not only central, but actually essential in Vaughan's approach to life.

First, Vaughan finds himself isolated from God in an unfriendly, frustrating world. When he returns to the valley of the River Usk in Wales, he seeks meaning in the natural world. He has great love and respect for nature. But it is not a simple giving and receiving of experience.⁸ One senses that Vaughan respects the integrity and faithfulness of the natural world in contrast to wilful, wayward man. What impresses him most about nature and natural objects is their constant and quiet "at-one-ness" with the Creator. Nature, unlike busy man, is intent upon the Godhead. And Vaughan sincerely looks to the natural world for guidance and direction.

As Leishman points out, "we often find in Vaughan an antithesis between the calm, orderly, and obedient behaviour of nature, and the restlessness, self-will, and disobedience of man."⁹

In his vision of "Jacob's Wel", Vaughan sees:

The angry Spring in bubbles swell'd
Which broke in sighs still, as they fill'd
And whispered, Jesus had been there
But Jacob's children would not here.¹⁰

Although nature is seldom personified in such a direct manner, Vaughan's message is consistent. Nature is unerringly faithful to the Creator, fallen man is not.

But even though nature can provide hints of God, it is by no means a direct route. The paradoxical nature of God is reflected in the natural world. In one manifestation, it is a world of incredible bounty, goodness, serenity, quiet -- contrasted by violent, destructive storms.¹¹ In another manifestation it is the "back side of God", simultaneously revealing and hiding the immanence of God.

Grierson recognizes this subtler element enclosed within the apparently hopeful message of Vaughan's meditative poetry. Nature, in its failure to provide immediate access to the Godhead, makes Vaughan aware of "... a wider consciousness of separation, a veil between the human soul and that Heaven which is its true home."¹²

Nature's failure as a direct avenue to God is clearly recognized in Vaughan's conclusion of "The Search":

To rack old Elements,
 or Dust
 and say
 Sure here he must
 needs stay
 Is not the way,
 nor just.
 Search well another world; who studies this
 Travels in Clouds, seeks 'Manna', where none is.¹³

Vaughan's is a most un-Romantic approach to nature. There is never a feeling of reconciliation; he never finds contentment in his relationship with the natural world. If anything, it serves to magnify his frustrations in that it strengthens his sense of the immanence of God at the very time that it is denying his attempt to pierce the veil.

Nowhere in his poetry is this impasse more apparent than in "Regeneration". Somewhat reminiscent of John Donne in "Twicknam Garden", Vaughan reverses the traditional application of the so-called "pathetic fallacy". He underlines the separateness of the beauty of his natural surroundings beside his innermost feelings, which are dark indeed:

A Ward, and still in bonds, one day
 I stole abroad,
 It was high-spring, and all the way
 'Primros'd', and hung with shade;
 Yet, was it frost within,
 And surly winds
 Blasted my infant buds, and sinne
 Like Clouds ecclips'd my mind.¹⁴

Here is a definite dichotomy between the perception of natural beauty and the perception of reality beneath the surface, which in this case coincides with Vaughan's own human imperfections.

Ultimately, this poem is a negation of the main thrust of Romanticism. The poet finds neither contentment nor fulfillment in nature itself. The reader is left with the merest hint of God's presence when the wind whispers "Where I please". There we find a strange intimacy, an uncanny sense of the inscrutable nature of God juxtaposed beside the recognition of an unspannable gulf -- an envisioned communion, yet a failure to achieve any sense of culmination or fusion with God.

So the Book of Nature is far from the whole story, as Vaughan reads it. Nature is definitely a means to an end, a vehicle through which one perceives God yet only "through a glass darkly".

Attempts to relate mundane human experience to wider significance of the natural world and the entire universe, within the context of the Divine, were certainly not original in Vaughan. As Pettet points out, the poet consistently displays

...that peculiar felicity that one finds so often in Shakespeare, the Authorized Version of the Bible, and early seventeenth century writing generally -- an immediate conjugation of the concrete and abstract that, engaging senses and intellect together, instantaneously irradiates the material and brings the abstract and ideal down to earth.¹⁵

On the other hand, it is not difficult to support the idea that Vaughan's mental and spiritual search goes beyond, or through, the concrete to something more transcendent. In "The Morning-Watch"¹⁶ he speaks of the "Pious soul" as a "clouded starre" which moves "Beyond that mistie shrowd". Vaughan, then, does more than merely apply a literary device common to his time -- he does so with a higher goal in mind than artistic perfection. His goal is reunion of man with God the Creator. And he speaks of concrete experience only as it supports the validity of such a quest. As Judson puts it:

...even the stones underfoot had hidden away in them a "tincture" or "touch", of the divine spirit. They spoke to him of order and obedience and of praise to God, and they occasioned some of his most profound thoughts about life and death.¹⁷

Vaughan turns to the natural world because of his disillusion with the tainted world of human society, and because of his inability to cope in that environment. It is obvious from his many poetic references to human institutions that he has little faith in their inherent ability to lead man into closer communion with God.

He sees quite clearly that social institutions, no better than the people of whom they are comprised, are prone to vice and corruption. In "The British Church,"¹⁸ for example, Vaughan envisions Anglican aspirants as going to the extreme of dividing and staining Christ's robe, an act to which even the Jews (whom he despises elsewhere)¹⁹ would not have stooped.

Vaughan had no alternative in his spiritual quest, then, but to turn to nature. There he sees a wonderfully ordered universe. Even though it must be admitted, after examining the religious poems very closely, that Vaughan focuses quite frequently on specific natural

phenomena, the over-all impression his poetry creates is that he was more concerned with the interactions of the larger elements and their relationships to one another, to God and to man.

In "The Search" Vaughan writes:

The angry Spring in bubbles swell'd
Which broke in sighes till, as they fill'd
And whisper'd 'Jesus had been there'
But 'Jacobs children would not heare.'²⁰

Here we see nature again personified and desperately trying to convey a vital message to busy man, who seldom takes time to listen. So, even though Vaughan often tends to focus upon specific natural phenomena, they are never studied or mentioned for themselves alone. As Judson puts it:

...to him nature seems chiefly appropriate in poetry as the illustration of some religious idea.²¹

However, Vaughan also perceives nature as an organic force, charged with hints of God's immanence, through which man can come closer to the Creator, if only man will take the time and bend his will toward the

task of perception. The manifestation of nature in Vaughan's poetry, then, serves not only to illustrate religious concepts, but also to provide an avenue, a connecting link, through which man can perceive God.

Vaughan's belief in the correspondences built into the universe by God pervades the religious poetry. It is present in such fundamentally natural words as "shoots" and "seeds" and "stars". But the concept is more readily recognizable in "Cock-crowing"²¹ where some mysterious substance within the rooster which draws it like a magnet to the sunrise, corresponds to the spiritual element in the human soul which should tend toward God, but which usually tends away from God since the Fall of man.

While the metaphysical poets before him had concentrated on more conventional means of salvation, Vaughan consistently presents nature as the key to man's resurrection, or reattainment of the pure state of his soul as it existed in the Garden of Eden:

...instead of the plea of sin and a divine sacrifice -- that which meant so much to Donne or Herbert or Crashaw -- he compares himself with herb or star, bird or stone, creatures which have kept their obligations; and looks for the atoning spirit which shall repair the broken link in the creation.²³

It is interesting to note that Vaughan presents nature in a negative light only when he is illustrating an idea. For example, when he speaks of sulphur spoiling an underground spring in "Religion"²⁴ he is merely emphasizing the way in which the purity of the first church has been contaminated by its being controlled by culpable men. The "broken links in the creation" have nothing to do with weaknesses in God's universe, but rather man's willful refusal, since the Fall, to seek and recognize the manifestation of God in himself and in the world around him.

Moreover, there is a certain innocence often apparent in the natural world of Henry Vaughan which is reminiscent of Eden before the Fall. It is difficult to determine whether, indeed, the natural world fell with Adam, or whether nature's freedom from sin keeps it in the category of Eden. This question formed a favourite topic for controversy among Vaughan's contemporaries.²⁵ But it is important to realize that, for Vaughan, such bickering in the name of religion was merely another example of busy, organized man failing to grasp the meaning of worship. Vaughan sees the natural world as far purer than such arguers over inconsequential issues.

Through nature he seeks a simple communion with God, uncluttered by insignificant issues of any kind. And the reason he is drawn so strongly toward the natural world is that, through diligent contemplation, he has perceived nature's kinship to and faithfulness towards God.

As Grierson puts it:

...Nature reveals herself...as a creature simpler than man, yet, in virtue of its simplicity and innocence, in closer harmony with God.²⁶

In "And do they so?" Vaughan relates what he considers to be the essential relationship between man and nature by way of a wish:

I would I were a stone, or tree
 Or flower by pedigree,
 Or some poor high-way herb, or Spring
 To flow, or bird to sing!
 Then should I (tyed to one sure state,)
 All day expect my date;
 But I am sadly loose, and stray
 A giddy blast each way;
 O let me not thus range!
 Thou canst not change.²⁷

There is a watchfulness in nature which Vaughan senses and repeats in many different contexts. Moral

lessons are the primary objectives throughout. He admits his didactic purpose. He records his experience as a model for the contemplative life. But all this aside, his comprehension of a certain integrity in nature comes through time and again. Upon reading a number of his poems, the various lessons are superseded by an overriding experience of the central importance of nature in Vaughan's attempt to re-establish a sense of at-one-ness with the Creator.

Vaughan believes that there is a sense of correspondence in the nature of things, no matter how various. Although he tackles this difficult philosophical question head-on in such poems as "sure there's a tye of bodies,"²⁸ it runs deeper, on a subconscious level, through the entire fabric of his poetry.

This phenomenon is closely related to the kernel of what Vaughan's poetry is all about. His purpose is synthetic. His kaleidoscopic vision, though it does not ignore or fail to appreciate the wondrous variety in things, nevertheless tends toward the reconciliation of a divided universe by means of human atonement. Pettet describes this world of variety as one

...of strangeness and wonder; ...where everything, above and below, is linked by celestial rays and magnetic influences ...and where all the Creation...is perpetually striving towards God, adoring Him, and eagerly expecting the Second Coming.²⁹

This is amply illustrated throughout Vaughan's religious poetry, but most strikingly in "The Night", where the world of nature is seen in an aura of living relevance for man's quest for God:

No mercy-seat of gold,
No dead and dusty 'Cherub', nor carv'd stone,
But his own living works did my Lord hold
And lodge alone;
Where 'trees' and 'herbs' did watch and peep
And wonder, while the 'Jews' did sleep.³⁰

Here God is not found in human "religious" interpretations, because these become mere idols, but rather in the guiltless watchfulness attributed by Vaughan to natural objects. It is through nature, then, that man will correspond more perfectly with God. It is for this reason that Vaughan advocates a meditative life by which the individual attempts to isolate himself from the distractions of human society and to find God in His more direct manifestation in nature.

The so-called Metaphysical poets mastered a technique of forcing disparate materials into a poetic mold

of common meaning -- for the purpose of bending the mind, shocking it into a new awareness. Vaughan, on the other hand, blends the disparate into a sense of one-ness -- the various are mysteriously linked by a unifying essence.³¹

As Holmes puts it:

He is essentially metaphysical in the wider sense of the word, when he expounds the 'sympathy' that binds the natural world in one, when he interprets this sympathy as flowing from a divine source.³²

And man is no exception. This is the second important "message" Vaughan attempts to convey -- that man, through the victory of the soul over the body, and through concentrating on the more fundamental relationships between God and nature, as reflected in sun, stones, sky, stars, clouds, night, sunrise, sunset -- can participate in the central bond of the universe. But this is a spiritual bond. So its attainment must follow upon man's turning his back upon physical pleasures and earthly ambitions, and upon his meditating on the immanence of God in nature.

It is highly significant that probably the majority of Vaughan's references to nature are literary, taken primarily from the Bible and, to a lesser extent, from Hermetic writings. This in itself indicates the secondary role for nature in Vaughan's poetry. He intended nature to act merely as a catalyst for the reunion of man and God. There is no doubt that God is something other than the manifestation of the physical world.

But perhaps some clues are available in the apparent harmony of nature, simply because the natural world has not strayed so far from God as man seems to have done through the centuries. This would account for the utter simplicity and clarity with which Vaughan telescopes God, angels, man and nature into such satisfyingly unifying visions as the following:

My God, when I walke in those groves,
And leaves thy spirit doth still fan,
I see in each shade that there growes
An Angell talking with a man.³³

Footnotes

Chapter III

1. Fogle, p. 169.
2. A. C. Anderson, "Agrippa and Henry Vaughan", Modern Language Notes, 41 (1926), p. 179.
3. Fogle, p. 150.
4. Pettet, p. 114.
5. Holmes, p. 2. As early as 1932, some critics began to see the fallacy of limiting Henry Vaughan's accomplishment to some direct influence upon William Wordsworth. Critics now feel that no such connection has been proven.
6. Fogle, p. 176.
7. A. W. Rudrum, "Vaughan's 'The Night': some Hermetic notes", Modern Language Review, 64, (1969), p. 15.
8. Pettet, p. 8. Vaughan's "private 'world' of imagination...almost certainly originated in those childhood days that (he) always looked back to as a time of revelation and rare experience...which must have been...pre-existent to Silex Scintillans, and in some sense distinct from the poems that embody it."
9. J. B. Leishman, The Metaphysical Poets (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1934), p. 162.
10. Fogle, p. 236.
11. Ibid., p. 175.
12. H. J. C. Grierson, Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), p. xlv.
13. Fogle, p. 79.
14. Ibid., p. 153.
15. Pettet, pp. 125 - 126.

16. Fogle, p. 176.
17. Judson, p. 156.
18. Fogle, p. 156.
19. In 'The Night', for example, Vaughan refers to the Jews sleeping through the significance of Christ's earthly visit. On one level, he seems to be saying that wayward man will stray in any age. On another level, there is a definite feeling that man is getting progressively worse.
20. Fogle, p. 201.
21. Judson, p. 156.
22. Fogle, p. 254.
23. Holmes, p. 14.
24. Fogle, p. 150.
25. Religious controversy raged at the English universities of the seventeenth century. What Vaughan grew to label insignificant bickering over the letter of certain doctrines, the rest of the country took very seriously. The Civil War was as much a religious as a political and economic struggle.
26. Grierson, p. xlvi.
27. Fogle, p. 146.
28. Ibid., p. 230.
29. Pettet, p. 10.
30. Fogle, p. 179.
31. Ibid., p. 68.
32. Holmes, pp. 3 - 4.
33. Fogle, p. 148.

Chapter Four

The Divine Vision

...I beg you by the words of prayer
which dying Narcissus uttered, by
his failing breath, by his life's
last struggles, by the sighs of his
faltering tongue, grant me the key
to these pathless tracts of remote
woodland where no ax has sounded
to the perplexed windings of this
place, and to the forest lairs...¹

It appears that Henry Vaughan had something resembling mystic experiences, especially in the solitude of contemplating nature. Olor Iscanus, usually considered a strictly secular work, nonetheless presents examples of Vaughan's longing for the answers to questions inherent in the natural world.

The above passage reveals a basic paradox in Vaughan's conception of God. He is seen as a subtle, elusive elixir of spring, an essence constantly eluding man's apprehension, like a diminishing echo. Yet, at the same time, he is the source and basis of all things. This is the primeval, mystic, "earth mother" concept of

God -- silent, passive, the source and destination of the human voyage.

In this ancient concept, God, things, and man are one -- that is why Vaughan refers to the Narcissus legend -- man seeks himself in nature. Each part reflects the essence of the whole; but each part participates only a little in the Divine Essence and must therefore subordinate its individual, wayward nature in order to concentrate on reunion with God, the source of all creation.

The birth of modern science struck England with immense impact in Vaughan's day. The metaphysical poets attempted to reconcile the new learning with the ancient picture of the universe. In the beginning, Donne's soul is tormented constantly by doubt and fear because he sees more than most of his poetical followers, and because the "new universe"² has not been digested. Vaughan, however, is in constant search of a common denominator, the "tie that binds" all reality. As a result, his spiritual journey has the benefit of a destination of which Donne, for all his depth and breadth of mind, was incapable.

In "Regeneration", one of the first poems in Silex Scintillans, Vaughan presents something resembling a conversion experience. The unifying concept is that of the human journey, with its destination as communion with the reality behind the appearance of things, or on the religious level, reunion with the Divine Essence.

Vaughan presents man as a youth, fresh and inquisitive, "A ward and still in bonds" -- a reference here to dependence upon the external robes of human existence, such as family, or social boundaries. Perhaps he is also referring to the individual soul's imprisonment in the body, as well as to the restless search for truth common to all men. Most probably Vaughan has in mind all of these corresponding aspects of the human quest. He typically blends nature, feeling, and religious significance in such lines as "and sinne/Like Clouds ecclips's my mind."³

In this poem too, Vaughan's youth becomes aware of his grief and sees his "primrose" life situation as a wilderness, completely disruptive of his intended journey:

My walke a monstrous, mountain'd thing
Rough cast with rocks and snow.⁴

Immediately his quest becomes typically Christian, with reference to "a Pilgrim's Eye".⁵ Here he describes the moment of adult awareness, self-awareness that bids goodbye forever to the simple childhood communion with things as they appear. From this point on, the youth will see everything as complex and disturbing. Grass, for example, will no longer be merely a fresh-smelling, leafy green carpet. From here on it will represent food, economic necessity, and any number of things relevant to the sophisticated human mind.

This observation, far from any direct antecedent of the English Romantic writers' constant harping upon an Age of Innocence leading into an Age of Experience, represents a universal experience.⁶ Here Vaughan expresses, in his own particular way, the impact of maturation upon the budding mind of any contemplative youth.

But Vaughan goes at least two steps beyond this observation. The youth is neither defeated by awareness of his heretofore unwitting sins, nor even completely

overwhelmed by a sense of unworthiness and despair at the wilderness of his own soul. In nature he perceives something of the Divine Essence (symbolized by Jacob's bed; a restful field). The youth's senses are fed to a state of giddiness; the sun seems an endless source of invigoration.

But still the relentless, questing soul seeks signs. The youth's ear is drawn by a fountain wherein "The Musick of her teares"⁷ makes some stones bright, while others remain dull and lifeless. Later, referring to the next plateau of natural existence,⁸ some flowers open to the Divine Essence, while others ignore it and shrink fast asleep (somewhat reminiscent of the disciples who would not, or could not, keep vigil with Christ at Gethsemane).

Still restless for intimations of God, Vaughan's youthful soul, listening intently, hears a rushing wind whisper "where I please".⁹ Vaughan closes by quoting Saint John: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is everyone that is born of the Spirit."¹⁰

When Miss Holmes argues that

Vaughan's real subject is often indefinable and so eludes his effort to present it...¹¹

she is correct. However, her erroneous implication of Vaughan's artistic failure may stem from her own failure to see that Vaughan, in fact, intended to express the very "indefinability" of which she speaks.

So Henry Vaughan chose the beat of a drum far different from that of most of his contemporaries. His religious lyrics were incomprehensible enough to be ignored in his own time, and for centuries thereafter. Explanations of the Christian life in terms of vegetable and mineral natures would have baffled Vaughan's contemporary readers unless they were uncannily in tune with ancient religious writings, or interpreters such as Thomas Vaughan.¹²

The Hermetists believed in a Divine quintessence, partaken of by all things. A belief of this nature is evident in all that Vaughan says and thinks. He constantly applies it in such a way that it appears remarkably appropriate.

The engraving which introduces Silex Scintillans, an interpretation of which is side-stepped by most critics,¹³ presents a fascinating example of Vaughan's incessant blending of the most unlikely materials to put across his belief in unity despite diversity, stemming from this concept of a "tie of bodies".¹⁴ The engraving consists of a stone heart, bombarded by thunderbolts grasped by a hand, which in turn emanates from clouds at the top of the engraving. Droplets of liquid appear to be falling from the stone heart.

All elements in this engraving have Hermetical significance. The stone could represent that adamant which medieval Hermetists believed capable of possessing and transmitting the Divine Essence so necessary in the mysterious transmutation of base metals into gold.¹⁵ The lightning could also represent the Divine spark of Hermetical origin which Vaughan makes reference to throughout the text.¹⁶

At the same time, however, this unusual engraving¹⁷ is open to a strictly Christian interpretation. Here the heart-shaped stone could represent

the wilful human soul melting after severe bombardment by heavenly thunderbolts.

It may also be worth speculating upon the strikingly contemporaneous flavour of the engraving. Could it be that Vaughan recognized in flashing flint the new emphasis upon matter, motion and energy -- the basis of experimental science?

Probably closer to the mark would be the admission of these, and many more possible interpretations. For Henry Vaughan, as a physician and serious Christian, was certainly familiar with all aspects of his day's thought mentioned above. And we have already witnessed his penchant for multiple levels of meaning in his poetry.¹⁸

According to Grant,¹⁹ Hermetism was based on Gnosticism and Stoicism, both of which upheld the evil nature of matter and the innate goodness of spirit. Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, views evil as part of the universe, part of God's plan. Vaughan, while he seems to oscillate between these two notions, is basically optimistic about man's ability to turn himself away from the fears and pleasures of the body toward the Divine destination.

Platonic concepts prevail in Vaughan's consideration of the Divine destination of the human soul. In "Resurrection and Immortality",²⁰ a conversation takes place between body and soul. Vaughan has the body ask the soul whether the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly intimates immortality. The soul chides in reply that the Divine Essence binds all, so that every natural death implies rebirth.

Vaughan's quotation from I Corinthians²¹ "Then I that here saw darkly in a glass,"²² reiterates an earthly world of Platonic shadows. But Vaughan also emphasizes a corresponding Platonic vision of reality, in another world without shadows, without dreams, where all will be united in God:

One everlasting Saboth there shall runne,
Without Succession and without a Sunne.²³

Platonic concepts of a purer world beyond the physical world are also intimated in "Day of Judgement", where Vaughan describes the second coming:

When one lowd blast shall rende the deepe
And from the wombe of earth
Summon up all that are asleepe
Unto a second birth.²⁴

While the concept of regeneration is completely orthodox Christianity, Vaughan usually associates it so closely with nature and the earth as in the case above, that it becomes far more than a religious credo. It is not so much a rebirth as a metamorphosis into a different plane of existence outside time, outside space, in reference only to the Divine reality which cannot be understood in this life, or even apprehended, except in brief flashes or glimpses.

Again, in his poem "Vanity of Spirit",²⁵ Vaughan speaks of "Hyero-gliphicks", remembering a previous existence. Such feelings come upon him when he is confronted by God during quiet times when he attempts to escape from thought. As he tries to piece the puzzle together, however, he finds that the object of his soul's quest is light, which he finds unattainable in a world of night.

By comparison, this world is night, eternity is day. In this world of time and space we have a sun which reminds us of the previous "brightness" of eternity. Yet this presents only a dim reflection, for eternity lies on a different plane, in a different dimension where there is "no Sucession, and without Sunne". The sun will be

unnecessary in eternity for God, the source of light, will be All.

In utter obeisance to the impossibility of his task (i.e., attaining a glimpse of the Godhead in this life), Vaughan offers his life at the end of "Vanity of Spirit",

In the work of Vaughan two distinct phases of...Platonic idealism are present: one in which the poet looks back upon eternity as a fact of the soul's past experience, and the other in which he directs a forward glance to the future when the soul shall find its eternal rest.²⁶

What Harrison sees as "distinct phases" seem to coalesce into a kind of unity in "The Retreat".²⁷ Here Vaughan presents the innocent state of childhood through the eyes of an experienced man gazing back, imaging an innocent state where the child's relationship to nature is one-to-one, without the beclouding interference of jaundiced experience:

And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity.

The return Vaughan seeks in "The Retreat", therefore, is not only an escape to the carefree life of the child, but also to Heaven, to the source "Where first I left my glorious traine".

A recurrent mystical image, used by the Pseudo-Dionysus and St. John of the Cross, pictures a spiritual ladder which the soul laboriously climbs toward ultimate salvation and union with God. Vaughan capsulizes the image and startlingly reverses it to describe his pilgrimage as that of a blind groping man returning to a primeval state, where direct communion with God is restored, rather than achieved for the first time.

In this sense, then, Vaughan's central vision embraces a single Platonic idea wherein the marooned soul embarks upon a single-minded voyage towards reunion with God. Distinctions of time and space are irrelevant to this process.

It is a lonely, intensely personal process. Every step of the way is a new mystery to us because Vaughan is constantly pouring forth from his own "private 'world' of imagination"²⁸ as Pettet calls it.

A world -- for another unforgettable impression -- of strangeness and wonder; where streams run red; where stones, like those 'which in the darkest nights point to their homes', have a sentience and often a mysterious significance; where everything, above and below, is linked by celestial rays and magnetic influences, so that the cock with his grain of star-fire, his 'sunny seed', responds instantly to the return of the sun...²⁹

Part of this private world of Henry Vaughan's mind was undoubtedly formed by his twin brother, who has been touted as a major Hermetic influence.³⁰ Whatever may be true on this score, it is quite evident that the presence of Hermetic language, rather than speaking for itself, merely serves as a convenient, and exceptionally appropriate, means of illustrating Vaughan's unorthodox Christian beliefs. Far from being a convert to Hermetic philosophy, Vaughan never mentions it as such, but rather, makes use of some of its phrases and images to enhance his own expression of the mysteries of creation and the relationship between man and nature, and between God and man.

Vaughan's purpose in choosing such strange language is apparent in the last stanza of "The Night":

There is in God (some say)
 A deep, but dazzling darkness; As men here
 Say it is late and dusky, because they
 See not all clear;
 O for that night! where I in him
 Might live invisible and dim.³¹

His purpose in employing the Hermetic paradox of "dazzling darkness" here is mainly to illustrate the mysterious, unknowable perfection of the Godhead. This Divine Vision is equally germane to Hermetic and Christian concepts of God the Creator and Destination of the human voyage.

The most convincing argument relating to the extent of the influence of Hermetism on the finished works of Henry Vaughan is that of Ross Garner. After dwelling at length upon the question, he concludes that Vaughan's borrowings from the Hermetic canon are primarily used to help the poet express his experiences as a mystic and as a Christian. Such borrowings are always subordinate to Biblical, or at least Christian, influences or doctrines.

Vaughan's use of the Hermetic imagery seems to be the same as that of any other imagery he lighted upon; in fact, he saw the Hermetic image in the same way he saw the allegorical image, and he used it in the same way. But the allegorical image, drawn from Biblical commentary, apparently shaped his use of Hermetic material, and not vice versa.³²

However, the relative importance of Hermetism is not crucial to an understanding of Vaughan's basic intention as a poet on a mystic quest. His purpose, in exile, became the accomplishment of his own personal salvation. His religious lyrics record for posterity the meditative experiences which took him, step by painstaking step, back towards reunion with God.

Nowhere in the poems, however, does the reader become convinced that the poet has achieved the Divine Vision. Vaughan always conveys a sense of having fallen short. All the steps in the mystical journey are present save the last stage of total passivity, total surrender to the limitless Grace of God. Vaughan's fundamentally rational, egoistic approach will not allow him this final step.

1. Fogle, p. 68.
2. Prior to the Seventeenth Century, serious thinkers accepted Ptolemaic theories of the universe, which placed the earth at the centre of the solar system. When Copernicus proved that this long-held belief was wrong, a general melancholy fell over European thinkers like a shroud. They felt that perhaps all of their basic assumptions about man, their world, the universe, and probably even God, could be wrong.
3. Fogle, p. 79.
4. ~~Op. Cit.~~
Ibid.
5. ~~Fogle,~~ *Ibid.* p. 80.
6. Nearly a century and a half after Vaughan wrote Silex Scintillans, William Blake placed these labels on the so-called Romantic conception of the differentiation between childhood and manhood. We must take care, however, not to conclude that because the Romantics dramatized this distinction they also discovered it. This concept is one of the main themes in the literature of Western culture.
7. Fogle, p. 80.
8. Aristotle believed that all natural beings are informed by a soul, or animating force. This soul displays a progressively higher level of capability, beginning with earth and rock at the bottom of the scale, and ranging upward through plants, animals, man, angels, and finally to God.
In this image of the fountain, however, Vaughan seems to emphasize that God's animating force is ignored, to some extent, by stones, flowers and man in this life.
9. Fogle, p. 80.

10. ^{Ibid.}
~~Op. Cit.~~
11. Holmes, p. 4.
12. In Henry Vaughan: A Life and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), F. E. Hutchison argues in favour of the influence of Thomas Vaughan, Hermetic philosopher, upon the poetry of his twin brother. Note particularly pp. 152 - 155.
13. Note Durr, p. 30. However, this is merely one of a handful of examples of critics who merely mention the engraving. At any rate, the very unconventionality of this engraving indicates that it merits closer attention.
14. Henry Vaughan, probably because of his familiarity with Hermetic writings, employs this concept, usually subconsciously, throughout his poetry. The unifying, animating spirit of God was a very real part of Vaughan's way of looking at the world. While his contemporaries debated the validity of this concept, Vaughan accepted it wholeheartedly.
15. The best analysis of this topic is found in R. H. Walters, "Henry Vaughan and the Alchemists", Review of English Studies, 23 (1947), pp. 107 - 122.
16. This idea manifests itself in many ways in Vaughan's religious poems. Most notable are his emphasis on the "divine seed" growing in all things, and on the illuminating spark of stars.
17. Engravings were common in the early days of printing because the printing press had actually evolved from the European tradition of wood block carving. By Elizabethan times, engravings were more a matter of convention than for the purpose of textual illustration. For example, each printing shop could be identified by an engraving of its coat of arms. Also, certain writings were advertised by their own engravings -- William Shakespeare employed the swan.
- What is unusual about the engraving that introduces Silex Scintillans is that it appears to provide clues to the interpretation of Vaughan's text.

18. Note particularly "Regeneration", Fogle, p. 79.
19. Grant, p. 412.
20. Fogle, p. 160.
21. Vaughan's references to the King James Version of the Bible run the gamut from direct quotation to subtle allusion. For the best analysis of his technique see L. H. Chambers, "Henry Vaughan's allusive technique: Biblical allusions in 'The Night'", Modern Language Quarterly, 27 (1960), pp. 371 - 387.
22. I Corinthians, Chapter 13, verse 12 reads
"For now we see through a glass,
darkly; but then face to face:
now I know in part; but then shall
I know even as also I am known."
23. Fogle, p. 146.
24. Ibid., p. 147.
25. Ibid., p. 167.
26. Harrison, p. 202.
27. Fogle, p. 169.
28. Pettet, p. 8.
29. Ibid., p. 9.
30. Hutchison, pp. 152 - 155.
31. Fogle, p. 84.
32. H. Garner, Henry Vaughan: Experience and the Tradition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 90.

Chapter Five

Mysticism and the Self

The whole underlying theme of Vaughan's poetic message is the soul's search for its pure and original state. His poems are the thoughts which leap like fire from flint, and which he describes as "the lightnings of the soul struggling with darkness".¹

In this effort to explain the origin and significance of the title Silex Scintillans, Stewart hits upon the central motivation in Henry Vaughan's life after his conversion away from worldly pursuits toward a concern for the salvation of his immortal soul. For a number of years after his exile from the secular world of affairs to the natural beauty of his native Wales, Vaughan catalogued the various steps in his mystical quest. Critics generally agree with Durr

that the experiences of the first three stages of the 'via mystica', awakening, purgation, and illumination, are readily identifiable in the poems, but that there is no sure evidence of the last two stages, the dark night and union.²

beginning to end in his religious poetry, fails to get beyond his own selfish desire for beatific union.

A clue to Vaughan's difficulty here is hinted at by Grant when he points out the following comparison between Vaughan and his spiritual master, George Herbert:

The central differences between (the) poems (of Herbert and Vaughan) might be summed up by saying that Herbert when he writes about the Fall is mainly interested in behaviour, while for Vaughan the Fall is seen mainly in terms of cosmology and in the way man fails to fit into the ordered scheme of the universe.⁶

In "Corruption", Vaughan says

He drew the curse upon the world and Crackt
The whole frame with his fall.⁷

In such words can be discerned Vaughan's concern with the widest possible view of reality, with the relationships between man and the natural universe. At first glance it would appear that such considerations are related to the mystic journey; for the recognition here of man's depravity would seem necessarily to precede some sort of spiritual embarkation toward God.

What happens in Vaughan's vision, however, is that he fails to direct the recognition of the depravity of man inward upon his own soul. What constantly frustrates Vaughan is his inability to escape the tug of his physical state. Just as tragic circumstances alienated him from his worldly ambitions, so his acute awareness of his physical separation from God alienated him from his mystic task of totally denying the self in order to reach beatific union.

In "The dwelling-place", Vaughan intimates his alienation from God.

What happy, secret fountain,
 Fair shade, or mountain,
 Whose undiscover'd virgin glory...
 Was then thy dwelling?
 ...I do not know
 What lodged thee then, nor where, nor how;
 But I am sure, thou dost now come
 Oft to a narrow, homely room,
 Where thou too hast but the least part,
 My God, I mean 'my sinful heart'.⁸

The hollow tone of the phrase "I am sure" reflects the tragedy of Vaughan's mystical quest. While concentrating as he does upon the Divine mysteries, he fails to get beyond his own selfish desire for regeneration. His mental framework takes on mystical language and imagery. But he never gets beyond Platonic

rationalism to the point of freeing his own soul.

Durr points out that

...in the whole of Vaughan's sacred writing these two great classes of symbolism are interfused: the imagery of the quest implying the idea of transcendence and the imagery of growth and transformation implying the idea of immanence.⁹

Against the background of these ideas it is interesting to take a careful look at Vaughan's "Quickness".

False life! a foil and no more, when
 Wilt thou be gone?
 Thou foul deception of all men
 That would not have the true come on.

Thou art a Moon-like toil; a blinde
 Self-posing state;
 A dark contest of waves and winde;
 A meer tempestuous debate

Life is a fix'd, discerning light,
 A knowing Joy!
 No chance, or fit: but ever bright,
 And calm and full, yet doth not cloy.

'Tis such a blissful thing, that still
 Doth vivifie,
 And shine and smile, and hath the skill
 To please with out Eternity.

Thou art a toylsom Mole, or less
 A moving mist;
 But life is, what none can express,
 'A quickness, which my God hath kist'.¹⁰

It is not difficult to see the transcendent, true "discerning light" illuminating life beyond the false life of a "meer tempestuous debate". Also implied is the quest for true (i.e., divine) illumination.

Equally discernible is the immanence of God in the closing line. But the disturbing element, with reference to the mystic quest, creeps into the line "Wilt thou be gone?". Here, as in many places throughout Vaughan's religious poetry, he reveals his impatience, not with his own sinfulness, but rather with the corruption of the entire social environment. Implied here is a desperate longing for escape from a life where Vaughan experienced alienation on all fronts. Implied here is a longing for a here-and-now guarantee of salvation. Such longing was widespread in Vaughan's time.

Religion dominated both national and personal life in the early seventeenth century; in both it was a matter of life and death. 'Whosoever bringeth in innovation in religion is a capital enemy of the Commonwealth' the House of Commons resolved in 1629; among individuals many, like Baxter, were 'serious and solicitous about my soul's everlasting state'.¹¹

Throughout his quest, Vaughan's soul is tainted by this universal, and fundamentally selfish, concern with personal salvation. In this sense his religious poetry is primarily Christian, even while it wraps itself in mystical images and describes Vaughan's spiritual journey in mystical language. For it is possible, in Christian terms, for the soul to be satisfied by mere salvation. In a mystical quest, even the security of salvation is not enough. Reunion with God is everything to the true mystic.

With reference to the conclusion of "Regeneration"¹² Durr states

that beyond all a man can do the attainment of the final goal of the mystic way is an act of Grace. To be sure, he must strengthen his will, once he has awakened to reality, in order to undergo the rigors of the purgative way. Otherwise there is no hope at all. But even so, ultimate union is "not of him that willeth or runneth but of God which hathe mercy" (Rom. ix, 16). It is the final poignant note in Vaughan that though he desired greatly, he was not chosen.

Seventeenth-century thinking enters Vaughan's work through the concept of God's active participation

in the process of salvation. The picture presented at the beginning of Silex Scintillans is that of an active Deity forcefully reminding the wilful, adamant soul of its proper destination. Here one is reminded of Donne's plea in "Batter me ^{my heart,} ~~or thou~~ three person'd God".¹⁴ In "The Dedication", which introduces Volume I of Silex Scintillans, Vaughan addresses Christ as if His blood were somehow a manifestation of God's steel. Here Vaughan intimates that through suffering he has seen the light, sympathizes with the crucified Christ and implores Him to exact his rent.

Even through his most apparently Hermetical language and themes, Vaughan reiterates the active participation, not only of the individual soul, but also of Christ the redeemer and intercessor.

In "The Incarnation and Passion", for example, Vaughan places a strangely Hermetical cloak around active Christian sacrifice.

To put on clouds instead of light,
And cloathe the morning star with dust,
Was a translation of such height,
As, but in thee, was n'er exprest;

Brave wormes, and Earthe! That thus could have.
O God enclos'd within your Cell
Your maker pent up in a grave,
Life locked in death, heav'n in a shell.¹⁵

Here Vaughan finds his spirit spellbound and incredulous before the miracle of Christ's choice of death in return for the salvation of undeserving man.

Curious as such Hermetical references as "morning star" and "Brave wormes" appear in this context, the intended message comes through loud and clear -- it is an essentially Christian, rather than mystical message -- salvation depends upon the active participation of God in life, not only upon the quest of the human soul.

Thus it seems that what appears most unfamiliar in Vaughan's religious poetry, the sense of the immanence of God in nature, actually has, in Vaughan's presentation thereof, as much traditional Christianity in its intent as it has of Hermetism in its texture. Similar language, with a similar implication of Divine participation (as well as the difficult and vital necessity of human participation) presents itself in "The Tempest".

Plants in the root with Earth do most comply
 Their Leaf's with water, and humiditie.
 The Flowres to aire draw neer, and subiltie,
 And seeds a kinred fire have with the sky.

All have their keyes, and set ascents; but man
Though he knows these, and hath more of his own,
Sleeps at the ladder's foot; alas! what can
These new discoveries do, except they drown?¹⁶

The message, again, is ultimately Christian in intent. Until man takes up his rightful place in the universe, until he listens to the incessant plea of God, passed on through natural objects and the example of the Bible, he is doomed. That is, until he recognizes himself as sinful, and atones for his sins, he will never attain salvation.

In such poems Vaughan seems much less concerned with the achievement of beatific vision than with the salvation of his soul in a Christian context.

Chambers, through careful analysis of Vaughan's allusion to the Bible in what is supposed to be one of his more mystical efforts, "The Night", concludes that the main thrust is traditional, Christian, and orthodox. He finds that Vaughan, in the typical metaphysical manner,

has explored the significance of the 'dazzling darkness' oxymoron in terms of applicable biblical imagery and reconciled its anti-theoretical elements in the related

paradoxes of life and death, sleep and wakefulness. Death is eternal life...The religious attitude is conventional, but the poetic statement is not, although...the poem makes a statement of Christian faith through complex and artful coalition of images drawn primarily from Biblical sources.¹⁷

Thus it would seem that Vaughan's apparently mystical approach is only such by accident rather than design. His feeling of spiritual alienation springs as much from other aspects of alienation in his experience¹⁸ as it does from spiritual discontent. His message is far more traditional than it appears at first glance. What he seems to miss in his spiritual life is that which his contemporaries sought -- salvation. His feelings of discontent stem from his continued inability to belong in any social sense.

Perhaps the main reason why the natural world is so prominent in Vaughan's religious verse is that he had nowhere else to turn for meaning and reassurance. Exiled to his Welsh homeland, he sought answers to life's mysteries in night-time contemplation, always against the background of Biblical teachings and readings from Donne, and especially George Herbert.

His unique contribution, strangely enough, stems from the inclusion of his intensely personal experience of, and reaction to, the world of nature. Skilfully blending this experience with a smattering of Hermetical language likely gleaned from conversations with his brother Thomas,¹⁹ Henry sensed, and communicated through the vehicle of his poetry, a dark world shining inwardly with the immanence of God.

It is this contribution which grips the reader of Vaughan's religious poems. Whether or not Vaughan achieved beatific vision, or even sought it, remains secondary in importance to his central vision, which tends to bind all experience in the Divine source and destination, rather than to emphasize the distinctions in things.

FootnotesChapter V

1. B. P. Stewart, "The meaning of Silex Scintillans", Philological Quarterly, 22 (1943), p. 80.
2. Durr, p. xviii.
3. Fogle, p. 30.
4. R. Garner, Henry Vaughan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 9.
5. Bethell, p. 39.
6. Grant, p. 410.
7. Fogle, p. 196.
8. Ibid., p. 216.
9. R. A. Durr, "Vaughan's theme and its pattern", Studies in Philology, 54 (1957), p. 19.
10. Fogle, p. 212.
11. M. Cox, "The background to English literature: 1603 - 60", The Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Donne to Marvell (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1956), p. 27.
12. Fogle, p. 179.
13. Durr, p. 28.
14. Grierson, p. 88.
15. Fogle, p. 164.
16. Ibid., p. 222.
17. Chambers, p. 386.
18. With the advent of Puritan political domination, Henry Vaughan was frustrated in his own court ambitions. Also, his Anglican faith was suppressed, so that he had no choice but to become anti-social, a recluse, in order to continue in his secret beliefs.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this essay has been to re-examine Henry Vaughan's religious verse, as well as criticism relating thereto, in the hope of determining the central core, purpose and texture of this most lively and unique fragment of English poetry. Toward this end, five aspects of his life experience and poetic achievement emerged as most significant: his poetic commitment; his peculiar and intensely personal reactions to the social, political and religious turmoil of his day; his dependence upon nature as a refuge for his tortured spirit, and as an endless fountain of "intimations of immortality"; his unique apprehension of God; and his tantalizing sojourns, mental and spiritual, near the borders of mystical experience.

There is no doubt that Henry Vaughan's commitment as a poet coincided, both in time and intention, with his conversion to an utterly Christian life experience. Although critics universally recognize the superior quality of Vaughan's Silex Scintillans in comparison to his earlier secular verse, there is a tendency to explain this phenomenon in terms of his maturing as a literary artist. While such

claims cannot be denied, Vaughan's religious poetry is so much more alive that his improvement should be understood mainly in terms of a shift in inspiration. While the poems in Olor Iscanus are largely derivative, patchy, consciously repeating Donnean themes and styles (indeed, not without the stamp of Vaughan's unique temperament), they are really nothing more than finger exercises when compared to the full-blown religious verse, which more often than not strikes clear notes of truth, ranging from cries of exultation to cries of despair. While such a view can be sufficiently corroborated from the poems themselves, Vaughan's own proclamation of the holy purpose of his contemplative verse in the introduction to Silex Scintillans should be pejorative. It is difficult to understand why critics in general have made so little of this fact. In the opinion of the writer, Henry Vaughan's primary inspiration, his recently renewed zeal for the Christian way of life, somehow became his poetry.

Such an incredible phenomenon took place against an equally incredible background of social, political and religious turmoil. This turmoil, in many ways, drove Henry Vaughan to his spiritual and poetic accomplishments. Vaughan's political ambitions fell with the Royalist cause,

his Anglican beliefs polarized in spite of the Puritan onslaught, and he thereupon embraced self-exile in his native Wales. The preponderant emotions of frustration and despair, resulting from a sense of alienation, which emanate constantly from Vaughan's religious verse, undoubtedly find their origins in his reaction to the thwarting of his ambitions, political and spiritual. Of course, he expressed these feelings in universal terms; but the compulsion is always present, once one gets inside his poetry, to believe that he is acting out his own rage and frustration, as much as expressing what all contemplative men feel.

Thus driven from any opportunity to contribute according to his talents to the country he loved, Vaughan turned to nature to soothe his aching heart and to provide him with a sense of order and stability, a starting point from which to construct for himself a new life. Nature turned out to have far more significance in the poetry of Henry Vaughan. What began as healing balm became embroidered into the very fabric of Vaughan's thought. Nature is somehow transformed through his pen to become a dusky looking glass through which Vaughan discerns the paradoxical nature of God. He describes nature as "dusky" because it is, indeed,

an imperfect and transient vehicle for man's apprehension of the Creator. But as a result of intensely concentrated contemplative experiences, especially during the night and early morning hours, Vaughan began to sense a Divinity speaking to him through natural phenomena.

The importance of this Divine Vision in the life, thought and poetic accomplishment of Henry Vaughan cannot possibly be overstated. First of all, it is the goal of all his endeavours to move closer towards this Divine immanence. It is the one single ray of hope that pierces the atmosphere of gloom that pervades the poetry in Silex Scintillans. It is this Divine Vision which Vaughan depends upon to brighten the despair of his political and spiritual self-exile. At times, though, Vaughan's impatience wells up from within the depths of his fundamentally Elizabethan soul, and he is overwhelmed by a sense of impotence at being so close to God in contemplating nature, yet at the same time, so far away from any prospect of reunion with God before death. It is for this reason that he often cries out for death in his religious poems. Critics who see this aspect of Vaughan's expression as a subconscious death wish have failed to place such emotional outbursts into the context of the rest of Vaughan's religious verse.

It is merely an indication of Vaughan's spiritual impatience to escape the bonds of physical life. From Vaughan's point of view, his feeling could aptly be described as a "life-wish".

This wish motivates Vaughan to embark upon what appears to be a mystical journey. Critics generally recognize his failure to complete the journey (or, more correctly, to express in his poetry such completion). However, few venture to provide sufficient overview of Vaughan's poetic and Christian accomplishment and motivation to enable us to understand why such an important quest should stall just before consummation. Some look to the Hermetic flavour of the religious verse for clues to Vaughan's peculiar brand of mysticism. The results of such studies are unconvincing because Hermetic thought falls far short of encompassing all of Vaughan's expression. In the first place, his purpose, far from espousing Hermetic thought as such, is to influence his readers to put aside earthly pursuits and turn their attention toward God. Everywhere in his religious poems, Henry Vaughan speaks in terms of a Christian God, often indistinguishable from Christ. The God of Hermetism, however, is viewed primarily as a life-force, or omnipresent tincture informing things (in the Aristotelian

sense). Although it cannot be denied that the concept of this sort of God influenced Vaughan's thinking (hence, an extreme kinship with Hermetic ideas of correspondences between God, man and natural objects), at the same time it must be asserted that his journey, and its purpose, begin and end far beyond the scope of Hermetic influence. Perhaps the Hermetic concept of the paradoxical revelation/veiling of God by natural objects affected Vaughan so deeply that it accounts for his spiritual inability to reach at-one-ness with God. But this seems to ignore too many other influences.

Henry Vaughan's religious poetry often expresses the anguish of a tantalized spirit. Paralyzed by a feeling of "so-near-and-yet-so-far" in his relationship with God, he was incapable of getting beyond his concern for the salvation of his own soul. He thus acted very much like a post-Elizabethan Englishman, self-centred and incapable of giving himself over completely to anything, even God.

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