

Mapping cultural identity in layers of devotional poetry: An indispensable outlook both of Henry Vaughan and of George Herbert's evangelical outlook of 17th century England.

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Abstract:

The charm and devotional practices, lust for God's grace was apparently different in the large and spectacular domain of the seventeenth century England. People of vast materialistic things were unable and hardly remember to the epistemological and subtle concept of God. The existence of God and His magnanimous milieu beyond the resistance of every creation were of inferior and subservient to them. The word 'devotion' and its very sense were seemingly menial to them. During that crisis of cultural-devotional identity of England, the identification and way of patronizing the God and His supremacy expounded by George Herbert (3 April, 1593-1 March, 1633) and Henry Vaughan (17 April 1621- 23 April, 1695) managed the baffling minds of people, germinating the seeds of a new culture and identity of devotion into the heart of England. The aim of this paper is to clarify how Herbert and Vaughan, in spite of the cultural as well as political turmoil due to ghastly shade of Civil War, molded a new vista of cultural and sacramental identity of England with the different layers and textures of their devotional works. The paper also aims to explicate the challenges of establishing a new propaganda made by them unconventionally.

Key words:

Concept of God, Crisis of cultural-devotional identity of England, New sacramental identity of England, Layers and textures of devotional works, 17th century England.

Introduction:

George Herbert, a leader and pioneer of new trend of seventeenth century poetry; i.e. the devotional poetry, brilliantly fabricated a way of surrendering and worshipping to God. A brilliant and dazzling attempt to change the concept and believe of God has been measured out by Herbert. Born in between the last part of sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century, Herbert was known and acknowledged with very concept of the disturbing weather of religious belief and existence of God throughout the England. The identity of culture as well as ecclesiastical atmosphere of England was changing and fluctuating rapidly. No one was there

to assess the right justification of both the existence of God and the Church, which one would be existed and worshipped- these types of nuances flattered the concept of religious and cultural identity and existence of England, and pushed them to the unhealthy atmosphere. Herbert aimed to blow a new arena of theology to establish the concept of God over the church (Drury 422). The seventeenth century represented the age of spiritual turmoil, irrational faith and conflict of religious identity. It is an age where people could not breathe or show their individual allegiance with their own beliefs (Golban). The word 'sacrifice' in the realm of seventeenth century had a strong aspect of both literally and metaphorically too (Seelig 14). People of seventeenth century wanted to testify the God and His existence, wanted to be out from the claustrophobic race in between Protestantism and Catholicism, establishing a new faith and belief onto God to be free from the cycle of dejection and sins of soul (Sandberg). Herbert started switch on the torch of devotional practice and kept this notion and belief focused during his entire life. The fading identities of both culture and religion needed to be reformed to rejuvenate the glory of seventeenth century England after its massive reformation. The function of Herbert's poetry, the way he was approaching the convictions of his poetry is of genuine taste with cent percent purity, paving the new ways of giving the concrete place to God in the diseased souls of seventeenth century people (Asals 109). Henry Vaughan, the true follower and devotee of Herbertian ideology, made a deep impact of the relation of God and human beings, and follow up people of that age to maintain their lost identity- the freedom of practicing the devotional doctrine. Herbert and Vaughan's goal was same but their methods of advocating God were different from each other. Herbert talked about the constant and enormous practice of devotion to arouse the feeling of God in the recesses of inner hearts of humankind of his age, but Vaughan talked about the subtle methods and different ways of practicing to equate the formula (Blunden 9). Vaughan was careful enough of listening the voices of the soul and its demand, trying to fulfilling these, but Herbert maintained consistency and made the soul to be accurate for enormous prayer to arouse the aroma of sacramental milieu.

George Herbert and Henry Vaughan did lit a lamp of devotion in the obsessed and bewildering mind of seventeenth century England and showed the humankind a new dimension of securing the peaceful and pleasant lives. The cultural identity of mankind was worsening, the existence of the term 'belief in God' was declining too by the rapid influx of scientific invention with regular basis, swift changes of human ideology, behavior, lacking of allegiance and importance of moral and religious values were oscillating very rapidly before understanding. People were unrest and obsessed and excessively exhausted too mentally, rushing out to have some mental solace and peace. During that time, Herbert and Vaughan, keeping in mind the notion of devotion and evangelical practice, started to imbibe the ecclesiastical atmosphere into a perplexed and baffling situation, aiming to revive the soul and its direct unification of God (Benet 63). Their aim was to revive the lost identity of the culture as well as the evangelical thoughts of the entire mankind, and reciprocate these messages of God for the betterment of others dejected poor souls to procreate an invisible bond to Him (Calhoun *Preface*). Their ideas of associating and fermenting the man-God relationship are deep rooted and lasted a very long time in terms of their age, and gave a healing balm to be resourceful with devotional and spiritual milieu. Their endless and nonpareil contributions to rearrange the cultural and devotional identity of the entire seventeenth century age, and to remodeling and casting these with a new dimension are a matter of deep and serious homage (Betts 2). What Herbert longs for is not primarily the union with God, but he longs his will to be submitted to Him so that he will be free to sit inside the Church to chant Him in confidence.

For Herbert, it is *The Temple*, the church and its sacraments and symbols, his is the record of the devout churchman who had to struggle to attain and hold his poetry against the pull of the world. George Macdonald noted brilliantly “in a word, [Vaughan] says more splendid things than Herbert, though he writes inferior poems. His thought is profound and just, the harmonies in his soul are true, its artistic and musical air is elusive. Herbert is always gracious” (Durr 9). The perfection of form is the basic characteristic of Herbert’s poetry. The texture of his poems is as smooth as silken robe, feeling special comfort when one realizes these from the true recesses of the soul.

An Estimation of Henry Vaughan:

Henry Vaughan, a follower of Herbert’s devotional route, made us acquainted with the idea of the omnipresence of God, and unlike Herbert’s traditional route, he did not follow the devotional route of devotion, did not contemplate that God would be found inside the Church, as Herbert and Donne notified us, and rather idealized effectively that God’s existence would be found everywhere if the devotee could wish. Vaughan’s *Silex Scintillains* therefore, incorporating the viability of the devotional ground where the seventeenth century religion would flourish in its fullest sense with new possibilities and thinking, reminding us of how brilliantly he polished the faded glory of Anglicanism and tried to keep its shun by advocating the supremacy of God through the lens of nature’s artistic beauties. By *Silex Scintillains*, Vaughan imposed a fundamental and valid ground of prayer beyond the boundaries of English Church. No doubt his Book (including VOL. 1 & 2) is the last book of Renaissance of that form (Calhoun xii). Throughout both two Books of *Silex*, Vaughan defined and made us acknowledged with the fact of mystical identities found in the nature, but this does not intensify that Vaughan belonged to mystical group. The poetry of Vaughan’s *Silex Scintillains* are significant enough of assessing the reassessment of his past experiences and beliefs over the presence of God in this universe. (xiv). His works are no doubt varied and an amalgamation of different thoughts with special references of his mystical identity. A lot, therefore, has been discussed on the mystical beauties and objectives of Vaughan’s work, and may be granted perhaps for the detailed dissection. The temper, moods, and overall mentalities gyrated by *Silex Scintillains* are no doubt related with the central thoughts of the medieval and renaissance tradition. Vaughan’s poetry is seen to proceed from a typical adherence to scripture and doctrine and is readily interpreted by the catechism of the Sunday Schools (Durr xvi).

In Vaughan the heart is the temple of God, but more than that is the virgin womb in which the Christ child is eternally begotten, his desire, reaching far beyond submission and a quite faith to have God born within him. Frank Kermode aptly noted that “Vaughan is no sense at all a mystic but merely makes a poet’s use of the mystic’s language” (Durr xix). Vaughan’s *Silex* incorporates a brilliant record of both the separation and the nearness to the God which Vaughan feels though his gradual manifestation of soul and his regular understanding of himself to examine the effects and essence of God around him and beyond him. On the one hand the feeling of the separation leads through a series of pessimistic expressions- the earth or the body as a prison, on the other hand, the feeling of nearness leads through a series of the optimistic understanding of himself, of his soul so that he would understand the glory of the God. Vaughan knows the condition of the place of the human beings as well as of the universe- imprisonment and full of exile without breathe of freedom. He, through his writings and observation, continuously speaks of being “detain’d on earth”¹, of man’s having “lost the Sunne”², and being “condemned’ hither”³, to this “desart” of a world⁴.

Additionally, intellectual history is so necessary to Vaughan as to make classification and characterization of Vaughan's work in its own isolated context less valuable than establishing the traditional minds out of which the poems grow and arise. He remained himself as a question that couldn't be avoided by himself. **Vaughan's central theme is the traditional idea, especially attractive to his age, of the exiled soul's beginning to return to its heavenly home, the world of light.** The aspect of man's nature which both the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries liked, what Ross pointed out "to contemplate was his place next to the angels" (25). Herbert's main importance was in helping Vaughan utilize his awareness of nature in verse, acknowledging its effects to us sincerely by his skillful production of *Silex*. Itrat-Husain brilliantly noted that "Vaughan seem to have received sign of favor from Christ, and this was really the cause of his conversion and the greatest transformation" (Durr 4). The concept of the immaterial for much of the longing after transcendence is central in Vaughan. The pre-existence of the soul is by no means a recurring idea of Vaughan's writings. It is a notion that emphasizes Vaughan well and always to express the stasis of the soul explicitly. Vaughan's turn from secular to the sacred one was a result of the complete conversion before 1650. In fact, not only did

Vaughan write secular poetry after his conversion, as Marilla noted that "he also demonstrated the political and as well as religious problems of the state of the England during the Civil War that unrest the psychology and mentality of the entire mankind.

It is principally acknowledged that 1650 edition of *Silex* is not really different from the *Poems* and *Olor Iscanus*, but only a logical sequence of Vaughan's increasing seriousness as revealed in the secular verse. Vaughan's development during this period was his principle forte to encompass the central thought of his introspection regarding his master, God. Vaughan is pessimistic about human nature and their sense of reasoning the Ultimate with the deep lens of his hermetic philosophy. Hermeticism is troublesome to Vaughan, defining some special psychological and personal life in his life. The relationship in between hermeticism and the tradition in which Vaughan lived is not at all clear to us to understand the artistic appeal and charm of this canon used and employed by Vaughan. He was and must be remembered and admired too for his intimate and religious feeling for nature, even his poetry can best be assessed with the creed of nature. Robert Sencourt realized that "it must not be supported that nature provided him with the same direct stimulus as the church's mysteries" (Durr 18).

He was most certainly Christian in his primary philosophical attitudes, and he most certainly was not a dualist. Durr in this regard had brilliantly argued that "indeed, it is something of a surprise to learn that the possibility of his being regarded as a dualist thinker is in question at all" (23). In any event, Garner has obviated either misconception, if perhaps at the cost of some tediousness: in outlining the orthodoxy of Vaughan's poetry; and one wonders how relevant or necessary the argument is.

Hermeticism was attractive in the seventeenth century English mind, elevating some revelation in opposition to reason and on empiricism in opposition to logic seemed to fit in with the fideistic, skeptical and scientific currents of the age. Sir Thomas Browne perhaps represented and established the concept of hermeticism more distinct way in the seventeenth century. In the *Religio Medici*, occult notions were worked into the very fabric of his thought and style. Garner disclaims 'the majority opinion' that the hermetic authority is 'fundamental and all-pervasive' in the Silurist's work, and demonstrates that hermetic ideas and images functioned for Vaughan as analogies or parallels to Christian truth rather than as doctrine. Garner's authorities have found that in hermeticism currents which spring from irreconcilable philosophical bases are mingled without apparent awareness of their repugnance; views which presuppose a rigid dualism of matter and spirit as evil and good are

juxtaposed with views which find the transcendence of God through His immanence. **Hermeticism, additionally, is not a systematized philosophy but a religious tendency; and Garner himself recognizes that by the seventeenth century.....citing Hermes Trismegistus had a history almost as old as the Christian era (Durr 152).**⁵

Discussion:

Vaughan's age was one in which historical distinctions between theology and religion exist much. The infinite complexities of theological controversy seem to give the seventeenth century a heterogeneity in which every human being was set apart and in which he felt that his differences from his neighbor were the controlling factor and state of his relationship to him; the old jibe that where there is one Scotsman there in one Presbyterian church and where there are two Scotsmen there are two Presbyterian churches could, in a sense, have been applied to almost any community in seventeenth century Europe. Vaughan's experience of the transcendent God grew out of Christian dogma, and that at the same time the essential orientation of his personality, the attitude which dogma initiated, was the similar to that of Christians all over Europe, whatever their particular creed, who felt in their lives the Being of the transcendent God. If Vaughan's theology was particularly Anglican, his mysticism was nonetheless particularly Christian.

The 1655 edition of *Silex Scintillians* in which "The Night" has a marginal and single note, is significant. The structure of the poem is two four-stanza sections and a one-stanza epilogue. In the first section the poet longs for Nichodemus's experience, in the second one, he addressed the night the best time to be amalgamated with the divine light and spirit in the secluded place for the purgation of his soul:

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.

The poem, as it is acknowledged so, is a planned whole. The juxtaposition of the last stanza of the first section, in which Christ is said to be found in the things of nature, with the opening of the second section makes *night* the link between the soul and the Divine. The concept of the night not only pervades the entire poem but, as a symbol of the incarnate Christ, links the two major sections. This is, without recommending to Christian theology the link between the parts of the poem is not clear, Christ is both immanent and transcendent, both the early Jesus and God the Father, and we certainly arrive at the second by the first.

No doubt, Vaughan's verse depends for its validity on literary associations entirely apart from his religious predilections. Vaughan asserts the longing; he carries and bears his longing to the point of equating it with its metaphysical objects, as does Crashaw. Vaughan's times were full of expressions of transcendence, reading and assessing the literature of religion and knew what Christian could be, but he did not try to introduce into poems like "Regeneration" and "The Night" mere hearsay. Garner, in this regard observed that, 'Vaughan never

asserted any more than longing because longing was the limit of his experience, for it was not the limit of his reading” (139). “The Night” may exhibit attitudes that go far deeper into the ways of looking at the relationships which form all of reality than do textual echoes. In chapter 3 we found external validity for the steps of the poem in spiritual autobiography and the manual of perfection. Vaughan was a practiced mystic. His poetic genius is a good one. Kermode says that “Vaughan was a poet of predominantly literary inspiration who, for a few years, achieved a remarkable mental condition in which much thought, reading, and conversation coalesced to form a unique corpus of homogeneous poetic material, available whenever some external stimulus called it into creative action for the development of any suitable theme of poetry.....something happened, something to do with poetry, and not with prayer; a trumpet sounded and the bones lived” (Durr 137).

As Etienne Gilson, in explaining the concept of “Christian Philosophy”, noted that “A man seeks the truth by the unaided effort of reason and is disappointed; it is offered him by faith and he accepts; and having accepted, he finds that it satisfies his reason” (Garner 116). Vaughan, in pleading for the restorative grace of the Holy Spirit, bases his argument on the argument that the *contacta essentia* is possible between man and God because there is in man a spark of the Divine fire, a seed of the Tree of Life (Durr 32):

Seeing thy seed abides in me,
Dwell thou in it, and I in thee.

God’s noblest creation has in him intrinsically the Ground of the union with the Creator; for when man was made the Lord breathed His own spirit into him. Therefore the poet cries and says so;

If a meer blast so fill the sail,
Shall not the breathe of God prevail?

All creation may watch and wait, but man alone has within his the seed that could grow into the flower and fruit of God’s own garden; he alone was granted and still retains under the fleshy dross a full and pure glance of the primal and bright Light, a spark of the Divine fire, the Maker;

All have their keys, and set ascents, but man
Though he knows these, and hath more of
His own,
Sleeps at the ladder foot.....

The author of *Silex Scintillians* is a changed man, and this change is of the highest importance for Vaughan to be treated as a poet of high honour. In the first part of *Silex* Vaughan’s humble and absolute indebtedness to Herbert is everywhere apparent. Vaughan was moved by what he had heard about *The Temple* of Herbert’s character and holy living.

God’s way of mending is hard, for fruitfulness is the result of reducing. Affliction is as necessary to man’s spiritual flourishing as grace. Vaughan’s prayer is to that Man who, in Isaiah’s prophecy, ‘shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest’ (Durr 56). The flower of the divine life can find little sustenance in this bleak and alien land.

Conclusion:

Ross Garner, in his recent books on Vaughan has taken it up in a most penetrating way by focusing upon ‘The Night’ to determine the nature and extent of mystical experience reflected in Vaughan’s poetry. Gerner’s general position on the argument of Vaughan’s mysticism⁶ is sound as he reciprocates it in one place. E. C. Pettet describes as one of the three pervasive qualities of *Silex Scintillians* the evocation of “a strange otherworldliness that marks it off from all the other religious verse of his age”. Vaughan’s poetry also makes use of a scaffolding that conforms to the general framework of a meditation. Edward Bliss Reed added that, in 1912, Vaughan’s poetic development was his receiving a copy of Herbert’s poems and also added that ‘Herbert’s enduring effect on Vaughan was gained not by furnishing him definite models for his verse but by stirring his spiritual emotions’ (2). Felix Schelling argued that “Vaughan is at times a great if unequal poet, and his close observation of nature and his loving sympathy with all loving creatures indicates an age far in advance in these respects of his own” (4). *Silex Scintillians* as a whole is the representation of the conflation of two opposed strands of feeling: loss of God and the deep and strong awareness of God’s glory and faith, the first one signifying the separation from Him, and the second symbolizes nearness to Him. Vaughan’s poems are sparkling from the flints narrated in the title. It’s like a derivative of the words.

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¹ *The Timber*, B. I.

² *The Pursuite*, B- 1.

³ *Corruption*, B-1.

⁴ *The Mutinie*, B-1.

⁵ Hermeticism is the name given to the occult philosophy that accumulated around Greek texts attributed to the Greek god Hermes as he became identified with the Egyptian god Thoth and known as Hermes Trismegistus, “Thrice-greatest Hermes”. It had its beginning in the second and third centuries B.C., with the incorporation of Greek science into Egyptian priestcraft. Three or four centuries later, it received an infusion of philosophy from the mystery religions of the East and the schools of the Greco-Roman Empire. Later, it flourished among the Arabs, during Middle Ages found its way back into the Western world, and has served as the center of occultism. In the Renaissance it had tenuous, but nonetheless definite, associations with Protestantism and the beginnings of modern science.

⁶ To Pfleiderer, mysticism is the immediate feeling of the unity of the self with God; it is nothing, therefore, but the fundamental feeling of religion, the religious life at its very heart and centre. To Caird, mysticism is religion in its concentrated and exclusive form. It is that attitude of the mind in which all other relations are swallowed up in the relation of the soul to God. It is, according to Berdyaeff, the inner depths of Christianity and the mysteries of the spiritual life are revealed within Christian mysticism. Christianity is the revelation of the mystery of the spiritual life. Apart from that it is Lasson who said that ‘dogmatic is the skeleton, mysticism the life-blood of the Christian body.