A Welsh Poet of the Seventeenth Century

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Source: The Irish Church Quarterly, Vol. 7, No. 25 (Jan., 1914), pp. 41-56

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/30067770

Accessed: 21-06-2016 14:37 UTC

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A WELSH POET OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

THE course of English poetry in the earlier half of the seventeenth century, if we exclude the drama, presents, perhaps, at first sight a not over-inviting highway from the Faery Queen to Paradise Lost. But when we resign ourselves to the adventure, neither dazzled nor hurried by the Miltonic splendours ahead, we find that, like every other road, this has its beauties and is intersected by many inviting pathways. And we can feel with childish vanity that we are the discoverers of such by-ways; we can fall in love with these minor poets in a proprietary manner. It is absurd to argue with one's friends about the charms of Milton or Shakspere, but it is the most inevitable and delightful thing to carry on a feud with anyone who persists in remaining indifferent to Campion or is perverse enough to prefer Crashaw to Vaughan. One such by-way is occupied by a remarkable group of religious lyrists-Herbert, the sometime courtier and pious priest of Bemerton, whose name grew to be a legend for charity and self-devotion, and whose life and poems directly inspired the other two members of the group: Crashaw, a Royalist divine who was ejected from his fellowship, starved in Paris in the service of the Queen, joined the Roman Church, and died tragically in Italy, a singer of seraphic exaltation at his best, and uneven beyond conception; and after these, and rather aloof from them, our Welsh poet, Henry Vaughan, the Swan of Usk.

Unlike the others Vaughan was a layman; he never haunted courts or colleges; his life had no romantic sorrows or joys to add interest to his writings; he had none of Crashaw's passionate devotion for the heroines of the faith, little of Herbert's active ardour of service. His eye turned from nature, the veil of the eternal, to

the eternal in his own bosom; he cared little for other men; he looks past our finite experience into strange abodes of light and darkness; he broods on death and eternity and the radiance of innocence, and his voice at its best has the ring of something timeless and remote.

And yet, if ever there was an age to force a man to realize his surroundings and choose between the warring forces of the earth, it was that in which Vaughan spent the first thirty or forty years of his life. He was born in 1622 at Newton St. Brigid, by Usk, in Brecon, the eldest son of a well-to-do family of Royalist views. All we know of his childhood is that he looked back to it as to a time of happiness and peace.

Fair shining mountains of my pilgrimage, And flowery vales, whose flow'rs were stars, The days and nights of my first happy age; An age without distaste and wars!

He seems to have led a lonely life, wandering at will about his home, free to absorb all the influences of the beautiful hilly country of Brecon. In those years he had an intimate consciousness of the divine in nature that later inspired him with passionate longing and regret. No poem of his, perhaps, is so well known as The Retreate, describing the time when he "shined in his angel-infancy;"

When yet I had not walk'd above A mile or two from my first love, And looking back—at that short space—Could see a glimpse of His bright face; When on some gilded cloud, or flower, My gazing soul would dwell an hour, And in those weaker glories spy Some shadows of eternity.

On its own merits it well deserves its inclusion in the Golden Treasury, that classic anthology of English lyrics, and it has a further interest in its connexion with Wordsworth's Ode on the Intimations of Immortality. The general resemblance of thought is close, and it is

interesting to discover that Wordsworth owned a copy of Vaughan's poems.

We may assume that the "vision splendid" was fading from his boyish eyes when, at the age of seventeen, Vaughan went up to Cambridge. While at College he produced the first poetic attempt of which we have a record, some complimentary verses for a royal visit. These are not otherwise remarkable than as containing the unfortunate prophecy:—"Here no commotion shall we find or fear, But of the Court's removal, no sad tear Or cloudy brow, but when you leave us."

He spent two or three years at the University, and thence went to London, where his father wished him to

"obtain some knowledge in the municipal laws. But soon afterward the Civil War beginning, to the horror of all good men, he was sent for home, followed the pleasant paths of poetry and philology, became noted for his ingenuity and published several specimens thereof. Afterwards applying his mind to the study of physic, he became at length eminent in his own county for the practice thereof and was esteemed by scholars an ingenious person, but proud and humorous."

This succinct biography by a contemporary passes over some incidents of Vaughan's life which call for a brief notice. It appears all but certain that he bore arms in the royal service for some short period at the outbreak of the war, and that later he suffered some hardship for his political opinions. But he can never have been a violent partizan when he could give this title to a poem written about 1646: An elegy on the death of Mr. R. W., slain in the late unfortunate differences at Rowton Heath, near Chester.

The first "specimen of his ingenuity" was a small volume published in 1646, Poems, with the tenth satire of Juvenal Englished by H. V., Gent. Another volume of similar work appeared in 1651 with the title of Olor Iscanus, from the opening poem in praise of the Usk. The contents of both are miscellaneous: translations.

chiefly of late Latin writers, elegies and epistles in the fashionable style, ingenious and Donne-inspired lyrics of compliment and gallantry to an unidentified Amoret, and accounted for in his preface in these terms:—

"You have here a flame, bright only in its own innocence, that kindles nothing but a generous thought: which though it may warm the blood, the fire at highest is but Platonic; and the commotion, within these limits, excludes danger."

In fact, the commotion produced by the love ditties and the satires is faint; the verse does not differ materially from the average minor poetry of the time, except possibly in occasional touches of natural description, accurate and suggestive beyond the ordinary.

However, before this passage was actually printed, the real Vaughan, the true poet, had been evolved. The title page of Olor Iscanus declares that its contents were "formerly written by Mr. H. V. Silurist, published by a friend"; and this friend declares in a preface: "I have not the author's approbation to the fact (of printing), but I have law on my side, though never a sword. I hold it no man's prerogative to fire his own house." We have not to look far for an explanation of what had happened. Naturally pious and introspective, at an age given to self-questioning, troubled by the religious and political upheavals of the time, Vaughan had come across a copy of Herbert's Temple, and in that record of spiritual struggles and ultimate peace found the guide he sought. He believed because one came to him from the dead: for it is the Temple surely that he thinks of when he calls books

> The dead alive and busy, the still voice Of enlarg'd spirits, kind Heav'n's white decoys.

He was burdened with repentance for his past life, especially for his time misspent in the idle ambitions of a poetaster, and with a convert's zeal he accused himself

¹ This title refers to the ancient tribe of Silures which occupied Brecon in Roman times.

of having been a devil's decoy. Some of his early works he burnt; what is left is certainly not pernicious. Not content with this blotting out of sin, he devoted his pen henceforward in all humility to the service of God, and in 1650 and 1655 appeared the two parts of Silex Scintillans, the enduring monument of his genius and his faith. This odd title, The Fiery Flint, is explained by the emblem that appears as a frontispiece, and symbolizes his stony heart that could not be warmed or brought alive until it was smitten and broken.

The full title is Silex Scintillans, Pious Thoughts and Ejaculations, and this description will warn the reader not to expect a reasoned series of connected arguments, but the outbursts of a soul as it pursued the Light, now thankful and adoring, now heavy with the consciousness of sin, now reaching up into the infinite, now weeping by a brother's death-bed. The poems are unequal: this is largely due to the influence of Herbert, for the disciple felt himself drawn to imitate his master with greater piety than sense of his own artistic powers. He writes on similar subjects, or he takes over the idea of a lyric in the Temple and remodels it in his own words and rhythms, or he borrows actual lines and phrases, generally with unfortunate results. Herbert's quaintnesses were his own, and part and parcel of his thought, and when transplanted become almost or quite grotesque. We must, in fact, no matter how enthusiastic we may be, confess that much of the Silex is poor: Vaughan did not write more than about a dozen poems that are excellent through and through. He is a poet of flashes and inspirations, and the reader has to be his own anthologist, picking out sections and stanzas and lines of pure metal from a good deal of alloythe poems on Church Festivals and on portions of Scripture, for example, written on Herbert's model, are for the most part negligible—but what remains after all the excisions is of peculiar charm. A few mysteries occupied his mind, and he comes back to them repeatedly, deriving inspiration, it seems, from their baffling obscurity, and rising instinctively in his treatment of them when more obviously attractive subjects produced nothing but commonplaces. One such engrossing subject is the loss of innocence—the contrast of the child with the man, of the youth of the world with our own time. In a poem called *Corruption* we see again the Wordsworthian train of thought:—

Sure, it was so. Man in those early days
Was not all stone and earth;
He shin'd a little, and by those weak rays
Had some glimpse of his birth.
He saw heaven o'er his head, and knew from whence
He came, condemnèd, hither;
And, as first love draws strongest, so from hence
His mind sure progress'd thither.

Then man "drew a curse upon the world and crack'd The whole frame with his fall"; but even yet Heaven was near and could still be seen "in some green shade or fountain." With the passage of ages these glimpses grow fainter and fainter until we retain only

One sullen beam, whose charge is to dispense More punishment than knowledge to my sense:

and, judged by that feeble ray, youthful simplicity, "those white designs that children drive," becomes beyond all else desirable and inaccessible.

I cannot reach it, and my striving eye Dazzles at it as at Eternity.

From the whiteness of innocence we turn to the shadow of death. The thought of death was continually present in his mind, for he saw it all about him in the world; all created things "speak one large language, death"; and he saw in it the great lesson none could afford to neglect:

As he that in the midst of day expects
The hideous night,
Sleeps not, but shaking off sloth and neglects,
Works with the sun, and sets,
Paying the day its debts:
That—for repose and darkness bound—he might
Rest from the fears in th' night;
So should we too. . . .

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To him especially Death had spoken in clear accents. Some time in the year before Silex appeared he lost a dearly-loved brother, and between the writing of the two parts he was himself sick almost to death. We find in him many moods of resignation, anguish and hope, from the bitterness in which he could write:

Sleep, happy ashes!—blessed sleep!—
While hapless I still weep,
Weep that I have outlived
My life, and unrelieved
Must—soulless shadow!—so live on,
Though life be dead and my joys gone,

to the certainty of faith we get in lines like these:

That (the body), dark and dead, sleeps in its known
And common urn;
But those (the spirit and soul) fled to their Maker's throne
There shine and burn:

O could I track them! but souls must
Track one the other,
And now the spirit, not the dust,
Must be thy brother.
But I have one pearl, by Whose light

All things I see;
And in the heart of earth and night
Find Heaven, and thee.

The personal loss is merged in the universal: his brother loved him on earth, and that love must go on, still guiding the survivor: and this ministry he then recognizes cannot be single; all the dead are powers to help.

God's saints are shining lights: who stays
Here long must pass
O'er dark hills, swift streams and steep ways
As smooth as glass;
But these all night
Like candles shed
Their beams, and light
Us into bed.

Again, in the nameless hymn, "They are all gone into the world of light," which many consider his finest complete achievement, he rises from a contemplation of the death of his own friends to that invocation:

> O beauteous death! the jewel of the just Shining nowhere but in dark,

which almost rivals in its sublimity the thanksgiving of St. Francis "for our sister, the death of the body." There is little to be said about this poem: it has a couple of awkwardnesses, and the last verse seems, to one reader at least, unworthy of its company. The proper criticism is to quote it in full or, space failing that, to refer to the later editions of the Golden Treasury, where it is most readily accessible.

Such are a couple of the subjects particularly frequent in the pages of Silex, but through all and above all Vaughan is thinking of the outward face of nature, the green slopes of the hills, the misty lake, the primrosed alley, each growing plant and bird and beast, the moving pageant of the sky. Allowing for the interval of a century and a half, and a little genius instead of a great one, he is the Wordsworth of his time in preaching the religious aspect of nature. The universe is knit mystically together; nature is the shadow of the eternal, and man is part of it, freer, however, than the rest of creation, and so capable of falling away from the divine purpose. Everywhere the world is full of lessons: some inspire the soul with mysteries of the faith; as when the poet, grieving for his brother's death, moralizes over the safe winter sleep of the plants "that would e'er long come forth most fair and strong,"

Then sighing whispered, "Happy are the dead.

What peace doth now
Rock him asleep below!"

And yet, how few believe such doctrine springs
From a poor root,

Which all the winter sleeps here under foot,
And hath no wings

To raise it to the truth and light of things;
But is still trod
By every wandering clod:

some instil practical virtues. One long poem is occupied

with teaching how a Christian's day should be spent: the idea is borrowed from Herbert; but we find nothing in his verses as large and impressive as this survey of the creation:—

To heighten thy devotions, and keep low
All mutinous thoughts, what business e'er thou hast,
Observe God in His works; here fountains flow,
Birds sing, beasts feed, fish leap, and th' Earth stands fast;
Above are restless motions, running lights,
Vast circling azure, giddy clouds, days, nights.

The mystic sympathy is not only with objects naturally beautiful but with what is ugly or insignificant: "Mists of corrupted foam chide and fly upward." He has read Rom. viii. 19, and immediately bursts out:

And do they so? have they a sense Of ought but influence? Can they their heads lift, and expect, And groan too? why, the elect Can do no more.

The stars that look down on our disordered world and still keep their courses undisturbed and undimmed would seem, we might think, indifferent to us, and man is but idle to watch them. But no; their twinkling light is a symbol of Christian aspiration—"a restless, pure desire and longing for Thy bright and vital fire"—and they teach us lessons of harmony, industry, and obedience:

But seeks he your obedience, order, light, Your calm and well-train'd flight Where, though the glory differ in each star, Yet is there peace still and no war?

And if such far-off, lonely things preach service, all the little creatures of the earth, growing and toiling after their kind, steadily, day by day, are nothing but examples for our guidance.

I would I were some bird, or star, Flutt'ring in woods, or lifted far Above this inn And road of sin Then either star, or bird, should be Shining, or singing, still to Thee.

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Or we may take a fine expansion of the parable of the seed growing secretly, ending thus:

Then bless thy secret growth nor catch
At noise, but thrive unseen and dumb;
Keep clean, bear fruit, earn life, and watch
Till the white-winged reapers come.

But man, part as he is of nature, has power to shut his eyes and ears; he may have "a lesson read him by the wind and wave" but he will not hearken. He will rather do all he can to break the wide harmony of service; it has become natural with him to live unnaturally, restless, unsteady, quick to change and tire. This is the burden of several poems; and most noteworthy of all is one called Man:—

Weighing the steadfastness and state
Of some mean things which here below reside
I would—said I—my God would give
The staidness of these things to man!

Man hath still either toys or care,
He hath no root nor is to one place tied,
But ever restless and irregular
About this earth doth run and ride.
He knows he hath a home, but scarce knows where;
He says it is so far,
That he hath quite forgot how to go there.

He knocks at all doors, strays and roams,
Nay, hath not so much wit as some stones have
Which in the darkest night point to their homes
By some hid sense their Maker gave;
Man is the shuttle, to whose winding quest
And passage through these looms
God order'd motion but ordain'd no rest.

These extracts—and such as they could be taken from almost every page—give some notion of the obvious didactic treatment of nature in Vaughan's works. Perhaps one ought to modify the doubtful adjective: he is assuredly didactic, but he has not that gesture of the pedagogue which is often distressingly noticeable in

Wordsworth's shorter nature poems, the Lesser Celandine for instance. Vaughan has rather the wonder and eagerness of a child that is continually making discoveries in this "brave new world," and must declare what he has found. He has too, perhaps, the imperfect sympathies of a child; for he displays more tenderness towards the nurslings of nature than towards mankind. He is full of pretty references to the birds; he thinks of unprotected nests and their tiny inmates, so fragile to withstand all the forces of the elements and yet so wonderfully safeguarded.

And now as fresh and cheerful as the light Thy little heart in early hymns doth sing Unto that Providence whose unseen arm Curb'd them and cloth'd thee well and warm.

Is there not a fond and understanding impulse in the verse that pities the dry timber that has once been green and living and populous with birds?

Sure thou didst flourish once! and many springs, Many bright mornings, much dew, many showers Pass'd o'er thy head; many light hearts and wings, Which now are dead, lodg'd in thy living bowers.

Or we may take a little poem on the Bible, strange and rather moving: the poet recalls to the all-seeing eye of the Creator the flax of which the sacred pages were made, the tree that gave the wood for the cover, the "harmless beast" whose hide became the binding; each is set before us living and happy, then cut off for our good. He vividly and gratefully realizes their life and their death, and makes one single prayer for their resurrection and his own.

We are led, perhaps, to over-emphasize this side of his work, for two reasons. His attitude towards the lesson of the universe was not common at his time: we certainly find copious "unnatural history" in the other metaphysical poets, but merely as tags patched on for the sake of an ingenious simile, not as with him making up the tissue of the thought itself, and he is alone in his passion for the beauty of the world and his perception of

its splendours in the commonest things. Again, in our own time we are rather overdone with the descriptive treatment of nature, and his serious pursuit of edification has a novel charm for us. Yet, if considered solely as an impressionist, Vaughan stands high. Hardly a page is without some phrase or epithet—"the purling corn," the stars that "nod and sleep and through the dark air spin a fiery thread"—of admirable truth and suggestiveness. We get a wonderful impression of loneliness and space in these few lines:

And as a pilgrim's eye
Far from relief
Measures the melancholy sky,
Then drops and rains for grief:

and there is breadth as well as picturesque detail in this description of sunrise:

All now are stirring, ev'ry field
Full hymns doth yield;
The whole creation shakes off night
And for Thy shadow looks, the light;
Stars now vanish without number,
Sleepy planets set and slumber,
The pursy clouds disband and scatter,
All things expect some sudden matter,
Not one beam triumphs, but from far
That morning star.

The only poet of the time who can be compared with him in this, Milton always excepted, is Herrick, and the comparison is not without interest. It is very much another setting of the thesis of Browning's Old Painters at Florence. The Vicar of Dean Prior had an eye for all natural beauty, in man as well as in plant and flower; he was sympathetic, he had a tongue of gold and an infallible artistic sense which the Silurist could not, consciously, come near; but—for there is a but—set side by side with Vaughan's, his muse is totally unspiritual. He was a hearty, decent-living pagan, ordained priest though he was, and his work has the rounded and finished charm of the finite; for his message of beauty and transitoriness and enjoyment adequate words can be

found. Vaughan is less perfect, but he is beaten in a struggle with the infinite; no human language could compass his visions and strivings, and he is continually forced into a cloudy symbolism. Sometimes we have merely a vague sense of something behind, a thrill for which the actual printed word seems hardly responsible; sometimes he rises to the height of apocalyptic splendour, as in the vision of the world:

I saw Eternity the other night,
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright;
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,
Driv'n by the spheres
Like a vast shadow mov'd; in which the world
And all her train were hurl'd.

Of the life that lay behind these poems we know very little. He succeeded to the family property some time about 1650; he was married; he practised as a doctor in and about Brecknock; he had within reach a few cultivated friends, including at least one other poet, Mrs. Katharine Phillips, "the matchless Orinda." Though the Silex is chiefly concerned with the experiences of his soul, it yields us some information on his daily occupations. Obviously he adored the country, and walked much and studied often in the open air—

Where he might view the boundless sky And all those glorious lights on high.

But his rusticity did not lure him into slackness or sleepy quietism, if we may judge by the almost Stevensonian ideal of living which he sets up in a piece called *The Dawning*:

Grant I may not like puddle lie
In a corrupt security,
Where, if a traveller water crave,
He finds it dead and in a grave;
But as this restless, vocal spring
All day and night doth run and sing,
And though here born, yet is acquainted
Elsewhere and flowing keeps untainted;
So let me all my busy age
In thy free services engage.

He does not appear to have taken an active part in politics, but he was shrewd to recognize the meaning of events. "Kingdoms too have their physic, and for steel Exchange their peace and furs." And he was shaken with passionate horror of the waste and ruin of the war and of its authors, "who cannot count those they have slain," as he says in a fine piece of rhetoric called Abel's Blood. That he joined the Protector in this condemnation will seem clear to any reader of the second verse of The World, which runs thus:

The darksome statesman, hung with weights and woe,
Like a thick midnight fog, mov'd there so slow,
He did not stay nor go;
Condemning thoughts—like sad eclipses—scowl
Upon his soul,
And clouds of crying witnesses without
Pursued him with one shout:
Yet digged the mole, and lest his ways be found,
Work'd under ground,
Where he did clutch his prey; but One did see
That policy;
Churches and altars fed him; perjuries
Were gnats and flies;
It rained upon him blood and tears, but he
Drank them as free.

His religious views might quite possibly have incurred the censure of the orthodox Anglican divine, but he was a loyal son of the Church of England and viewed with repugnance the changes in ritual; he looked upon the nonconformist attitude as one in which "the children chase the mother and would heal The wounds they give by crying Zeal," and prayed for a time when the Church might wear "her perfect and pure dress, Beauty and Holiness."

With the Restoration he had the satisfaction of seeing his own party in power again and the Church once more as by law established. He probably was horrified by what he soon heard of the licence of the Court and not over-pleased by the compliance of the clergy. In 1650 he had mourned the Puritan enactment against keeping

Christmas; now he finds almost as much to pain him in its celebration by the cavaliers:

So, stick up ivy and the bays, And then restore the heathen ways. Green will remind you of the spring, Though this great day denies the thing, And mortifies the earth, and all But your wild revels and loose hall.

Dress finely what comes not in sight, And then you keep your Christmas right.

This poem, The True Christmas, is found in Thalia Rediviva, a volume partly secular, partly religious, published in 1678. Like Olor Iscanus, it was issued by the author's friends, not himself. The sacred lyrics contain much good verse, and if they never rise as high as parts of the Silex their average merit is more even. The rest of the volume embraces the miscellaneous compositions of thirty years. There are more quaint, flowing versions of Boethius and Claudian; there are a couple of Royalist elegies; epistles to his friends; a pastoral dialogue lamenting the death of his brother Thomas, the noted alchemist and Rosicrucian, Eugenius Philalethes: all are soberer and more rounded than the similar works of earlier date. Etesia succeeds Amoret as the lady who is praised and besought and made the target of comparisons; passion is singularly wanting, but the sentiment is graceful and the short-lined stanzas very sweet to the ear. Perhaps the most remarkable poem in the collection is an odd rhapsody called The Eagle. The eagle was supposed to have the power of out-staring the sun and flying higher than any other bird; accordingly he uses it to express "our soul's bold heights in a material dress," its unwearied questionings and "the thoughts that wander through eternity." This seems obvious enough, perhaps; but when it is well infused with a pictorial rendering of the constellations-

Sometimes he (the eagle) frights the starry swan, and now Orion's fearful hare, and now the crow—

and a considerable knowledge of astrology, the reader is inclined to echo the opening phrase, "'Tis madness sure." Yet the thing has its merits. There is splendour in the personifications: the eagle from "the upmost air faces the Sun and his dispersed hair." And a magnificent fancy guides the eagle about the universe.

Leaving the moon, whose humble light doth trade With spots, and deals most in the dark and shade, To the day's royal planet he doth pass With daring eyes, and makes the sun his glass. Here doth he plume and dress himself, the beams Rushing upon him like so many streams; While with direct looks he doth entertain The thronging flames, and shoots them back again. And thus from star to star he doth repair And wantons in that pure and peaceful air.

These few lines about the sun give us almost as lively a sense, I think, of radiance, power, light in essence, as Milton's description in the third book of *Paradise Lost*.

The devoted Vaughanite will read with pleasure much of the secular poetry, the love-poems in particular, so guilelessly sentimental; and the translations in their tripping metres, prettily serious, like a very good child, soon win a place in his affections; but this must be confessed an acquired taste, a kind of parti pris. Silex Scintillans contains all that really matters, all that raises Vaughan from the ranks of the poetae minimi. We cannot, indeed, claim for him that he is more than a minor poet, but we can claim that he has left a little treasure of pure pearls whose particular lustre shines for us in the works of no other English author.

He died in 1696 and entered that darkness into which his mortal eyes had gazed so long.

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!

OLIVE PURSER.