

## Biography

Henry Vaughan and twin brother Thomas were born to Thomas Vaughan and Denise Morgan on April 17, 1622.<sup>1</sup> He received private education with Rev. Matthew Herbert, rector of Llangattock, whom Vaughan gratefully addressed in the preface of *Olor Iscannus* in *Ad Posteros*. It is assumed that in 1638, Henry attended Jesus College, Oxford with his brother Thomas, although there is no record of his enrollment. Vaughan himself told Anthony Wood, prominent biographer on Vaughan, that he was a student at Oxford, but “stayed not att Oxford to take any degree.” Wood states that his time at Oxford was “two years or more.”<sup>2</sup>

At some point Vaughan left Oxford for the study of law, probably when he was eighteen. “In a letter he himself wrote to John Aubrey in 1673, he ‘was sent to London, being then designed by my father for the study of the Law, which the sudden eruption of our late civil warres wholie frustrated.’” It is while in London it “seems certain he mixed in the poetic circles around Ben Jonson.”<sup>3</sup> “His early poem ‘A Rhapsodie’ carried a longer title which explains that it was ‘occasionally written upon a meeting with some of his friends at the ‘Globe Taverne’, and celebrates ‘royall, witty Sacke, the Poets soule’, the young poet presenting himself as one of a group of drinkers who, he feels sure, will ‘after full Cups have dreames Poeticall’.”<sup>4</sup> In 1629 Charles I abolished parliament and ruled as an absolute monarch when a civil war broke out in 1642 between those loyal to the king, the Royalists or Cavaliers, and those in favor of restoration of Parliament, the Roundheads. Vaughan, a high-church Anglican who fought with the Royalists, probably referenced this war when he wrote,

I lived at a time where religious schism had divided and fragmented the English people, amongst the furies of priest and populace. . . . But so that my integrity and reputation may go unchallenged, you should know that I took no part in this great overthrow. We truly believe that innocent blood has a voice, and a power after death which teaches men to weep. . . . I

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<sup>1</sup> John Donne was born in 1573; Herbert in 1593; Crashaw in 1612; Cowley in 1618.

<sup>2</sup>www.litencyc.com.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

have never desecrated what is holy with hideous violence, neither was my mind or my hand stained (*Ad Posteros*, 64).<sup>5</sup>

After the war Vaughan practiced medicine and married Catherine Wise in 1646. He had a son and three daughters (Thomas, Lucy, Frances and Catherine). His first book *Poems with the Tenth Satire of Juvenal Englished* was also published in this year. Another other secular work was *Olor Iscannus*, which contained translations of Boethius Ovid, and Casimir, published in 1651 (without Vaughan’s blessing). Vaughan condemned these early secular works and thought little of them. He wrote, just a few years later, “I do here most humbly and earnestly beg that none would read them” (Ibid., 141). In the years preceding *Silex Scintillans*, Vaughan adopted the phrase *moriendo, revixi*, “by dying, I gain new life.”

Vaughan called himself a “Silurist,” after the Silures, an old Celtic tribe from southern Wales. The Silures had resisted the Romans when they invaded Britain, and this demonstrated the deep love he had for his Welsh roots.

Having become a widower, in 1655 Vaughan married his former wife’s younger sister Elizabeth, and they too had a son and three daughters (Henry, Grisell, Lucy and Rachel). He published several more works including the devotional book *The Mount of Olives, or Solitary Devotions* (1652); *Flores Solitudinis* (1654); *Hermetical Physic* (1655); *The Chemist’s Key* (1657); and *Thalia Rediviva* (1678), which also contained poems written by his brother Thomas. Henry Vaughan died in April 23, 1695. He is buried in St Bridget’s Church in Wales.

## The Preface to *Silex Scintillans* and Vaughan’s Views on Poetry

In 1650, and two years after his beloved brother William had died, he published the first part of *Silex Scintillans: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*. *Silex Scintillans* means “The Fiery Flint,” or “The Flashing Flint” to symbolize God striking his hard heart with the truth and igniting a flame of piety. The enlarged edition would not appear for another five years, in 1655. In the “Author’s Emblem” (a kind of preface to the preface, it seems), Vaughan begins with an address to God,

How great is your concern for your people! You allow for my reformation by another means, and alter your approach; and now, angered, you deny that love can prevail, and prepare to overcome force with force. You draw nearer and break that mass which is my rocky heart, and that which was

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<sup>5</sup>All pagination follows Henry Vaughan, *The Complete Poems*. Alan Rudrum, ed. New Haven: Yale, 1976.

formerly stone is now made flesh. . . . How wonderful is your might! By dying I live again, and midst the wreck of my worldly resources, I am now more rich ("The Author's Emblem," in *Silex*, 137).

The preface to *Silex Scintillans* first criticizes the current state of poetry in England—in abundance but largely bad (this may remind some of the current state of blogs and worship choruses). "Well it were for them, if those willingly-studied and wilfully-published vanities could defile no *spirits*, but their own; but the *case* is far worse. These *vipers* survive their *parents*, and for many ages after (like *epidemic* diseases) infect whole generations, corrupting and unhallowing the best-gifted *souls*, and the most capable *vessels*" ("Preface," in *Silex*, 138). He notes that others "long before my time" had similarly complained" (139). He continues,

To continue (after years of discretion) in this *vanity*, is an inexcusable desertion of *pious sobriety*: and to persist so to the end, is a wilful despising of God's *sacred exhortations*, by a constant, sensual volutation or wallowing in *impure thoughts* and *scurrilous conceits*, which both defile their authors, and as many more, as they are communicated to (140).

Vaughan takes very seriously Jesus' words that man will give an account for "every idle word," and thus forbade the reading and writing of "idle books." He confesses that he himself once wrote such works. "But (blessed be God for it!) I have by his saving assistance suppressed my *greatest follies*" (140). He further criticizes those who write of sacred subjects "with their impious conceits" (141).

There was one man, however, whom Vaughan thinks first diverted "this foul and overflowing stream"—George Herbert. Vaughan writes his "holy *life* and *verse* gained many pious *converts*, (of whom I am the least) and gave the first check to a most flourishing and admired *wit* of his time" (142). "His *measure* was eminent" (142). Vaughan criticizes some of those who followed in Herbert's wake as merely having wanted to see their name in print. Yet he insists,

To give up our thoughts to pious *themes* and *contemplations* (if it be done for piety's sake) is a great *step* towards *perfection*; because it will *refine*, and *dispose* to devotion and sanctify. 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 *holiness* (142).

### Vaughan the Mystic

Poetry for Vaughan seemed to be a way of providing the fertile soil in which the

mystical union could grow and develop. George MacDonald said that he "belongs to the mystical school."<sup>6</sup> Helen C. White agrees: "Vaughan has the authentic thirst of the mystic for the reaching of God here and now in the individual soul."<sup>7</sup> She notes Eliot's disagreement on this point but seems to agree to Vaughan's mysticism nonetheless. White compares his mysticism with that of Crashaw's and finds the latter's more intense, with direction, and more precision of feeling.

Robert Ellrodt says, "What Vaughan has in common with Christian mystics is a yearning to recapture something lost," and connects it to his interest in time.<sup>8</sup> So Vaughan writes in "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 moved, In which the world  
And all her train were hurled (*Silex*,  
227).

He says in "The Search," "To rack old Elements,/or Dust/and say/Sure here he must/needs stay/Is not the way,/nor just" (*Silex*, 159); perhaps showing evidence of apophatic theology. The "Joy of my life! . . . dost steer/Me from above!" (*Silex*,

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<sup>6</sup>"A Mount of Vision--Henry Vaughan," in England's Antiphon, Macmillan & Co. Publishers, 1868, pp. 251-79. Reprinted in Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800, Vol. 27. Cited 1 December 2006. Online: <http://www.geocities.com/magdamun/vaughanvision.html>

<sup>7</sup>*The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience* (New York: Collier Books, 1936), 276.

<sup>8</sup>"Henry Vaughan," in *George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*. (Norton Critical Ed.; New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 339. Ellrodt explains, "To Donne and Herbert eternity was a mode of being and a metaphysical concept. To Vaughan, as in the more naïve interpretations of Plato, it is the 'country beyond the stars', a world of light, calm and insubstantiality" (340).

177)<sup>9</sup> he says elsewhere. MacDonald says,

It is this insight that makes Vaughan a mystic. He can see one thing everywhere, and all things the same--yet each with a thousand sides that radiate crossing lights, even as the airy particles around us. For him everything is the expression of, and points back to, some fact in the Divine Thought. Along the line of every ray he looks towards its radiating centre--the heart of the Maker.<sup>10</sup>

MacDonald's thought reminds one of Eliot's description of Donne's works as "a strange kaleidoscope of feeling; with suggested images, suggested conceits, the felling is always melting, changing into a nother feeling; we get a kind of unity in flux, which is Donne."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this kind of poetry is illustrated when Vaughan turns the simple matters of dew and frost to spiritual realities:

Blest be thy Dew, and blest thy frost,  
And happy I to be so crost,  
And cured by Crosses at thy cost.

The Dew doth Cheer what is distrest,  
The frosts ill weeds nip, and molest,  
In both thou work'st unto the best (*Silex*, 224).

In the "Holy Scriptures," "souls are hatched into Eternity" It continues,

In thee the hidden stone, the *manna* lies,  
Thou art the great elixir, rare, and choice;  
The key that opens to all mysteries,  
The *Word* in characters, God in the *voice* (*Silex*, 198).

The one who "opens all mysteries" is at the same time "hidden." In "The Night," Vaughan turns the idea of light on its head:

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<sup>9</sup>This possibly refers to a dead loved one, that now since gone to heaven is able to offer guidance.

<sup>10</sup>*op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup>T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1993), 148.

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 (*Silex II*, 290).

### Special Emphases of Vaughan

Of the many themes that run through the works of Vaughan, three emerge as important: 1) a longing for the resurrection and immortality, 2) death, and 3) a profound sense of poet's unworthiness. Often these intertwine within poems. Nature also plays a very dominant role in his poetry and is the basis of most of his conceits. Vaughan's country-side residence, unique among the metaphysical poets, gave way to much meditation of God's creation. Nature to Vaughan in all aspects was one great revelation of God. George Macdonald writes that "I do not know a writer, Wordsworth not excepted, who reveals more delight in the visions of Nature than Henry Vaughan." In "And do they so?" Vaughan writes, 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 (tied 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."<sup>12</sup> He saw nature ever praising Him and wishes he could be as constant.

*Longing for resurrection and immortality.* "The Dawning" may be uneven in quality, but evokes grand images of Christ's return nonetheless: "Ah! What time wilt Thou come! When shall that cry/ The Bridegroom's coming! fill the sky?" In "Come, Come! What Do I Here?", which was most likely written concerning the death of a loved one. He writes of the grief he experiences from this loss ("since he is gone") which turns his thought to Christ's return:

COME, come ! what do I here ?  
Since he is gone  
Each day is grown a dozen year  
And each hour, one ;  
Come, come !  
Cut off the sum :  
By these soil'd tears !  
Which only Thou

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<sup>12</sup>MacDonald, George.

Know'st to be true,  
Days are my fears.

There's not a wind can stir,  
Or beam pass by,  
But straight I think, though far,  
Thy hand is nigh.  
Come, come !  
Strike these lips dumb :  
This restless breath,  
That soils Thy name,  
Will ne'er be tame  
Until in death.

In writing "The Morning Watch" he notes that he hears a "symphony of nature" and hence Vaughan in "The Dawning" says morning will be the best time for Christ to return: "All now are stirring, every field/ Full hymns doth yield,/ The whole Creation shakes off night. . . . All expect some sudden matter, /Not one beam triumphs, but from far /That morning-star." And asks that the Lord would "Grant, I may not like puddle lie." Continuing a few quatrains down, Vaughan says, "So when that day, and hour shall come/ In which Thy self will be the Sun,/ Thou'lt find me dressed and on my way, /Watching the break of thy great day."

In "Son-Days," the Lord's Day's glory is found in its connections with the eschaton: "Heaven once a week;/ The next world's gladness prepossessed in this; /A day to seek / Eternity in time."

We see another example in "The Pilgrimage," "Expect still when Thou wilt appear/ That I may get me up, and go./ I long, and groan, and grieve for Thee,/ For Thee my words, my tears do gush," He also asks for "Strength for the journey" as he must here wait and endure until He does come. In another poem he evokes the language of Scripture: "One everlasting Sabbath there shall run/ Without succession, and without a sun."<sup>13</sup>

*Death.* Vaughan spent much time contemplating the separation of the soul and body and has two poems in which the two are found in dialogue. In "Death. A Dialogue" the Soul says to the Body, "But thou/Shalt in thy mother's bosom

sleep/ Whilst I each minute groan to know/ How near redemption creeps."<sup>14</sup> While in "Resurrection and Immortality" we find the soul reminding the body that they will be reunited again: "Re-marry to the soul, for 'tis most plain/ Thou only fall'st to be refined again." In "The Burial," Vaughan seems concerned with what happens to his remains while his soul is separate from the body. He asks "Thou great Preserver of all men!/ Watch o'er that loose/ And empty house,/ Which I sometimes lived in," and later comforts himself with the thought that "The world's Thy box: how then (there tossed)/ Can I be I be lost?" . The death of an infant stirs Vaughan to write, "Death weaned thee from the world, and sin," and again talks of the infant's body waiting in the earth "Expecting till thy Saviour comes/ To dress them, and unswaddle death."<sup>15</sup> Yet we also see a great confidence regarding death. In the "Easter Hymn," he tells death and darkness, "get you packing," He goes on, "Graves are beds now for the weary,/ Death a nap, to wake more merry." Death should not be feared, as Vaughan says in the "Evening Watch," "The last gasp of time is Thy first breath and man's eternal prime."

*A Profound Sense of the Poet's Unworthiness.* "The Relapse" illustrates this theme well:

MY God, how gracious art Thou ! I had slept  
Almost to hell,  
And on the verge of that dark, dreadful pit  
Did hear them yell ;  
But O Thy love ! Thy rich, almighty love,  
That sav'd my soul,  
And check'd their fury, when I saw them move,  
And heard them howl !  
O my sole Comfort, take no more these ways,  
This hideous path,  
And I will mend my own without delays :  
Cease Thou Thy wrath !

Vaughan's sense of unworthiness extends into other poems too: "Accept, dread Lord, the poor oblation,/ It is but poor,/ Yet through Thy mercies may be more" and later in the same poem, "Suffer no more this dust to overflow/ And drown my eyes,/ But seal, or pin them to Thy skies" ("The Match"). As he senses the "Day of Judgment" coming, he prays, "Lord, God! I beg nor friends, nor wealth / But pray

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<sup>14</sup>"Death. A Dialogue"

<sup>15</sup>"The Burial of an Infant."

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<sup>13</sup>"Resurrection and Immortality"

against them both; Three things I'd have, my soul's chief health! / And one of these seem loath, / A living FAITH, a HEART of flesh, The WORLD an Enemy, This last will keep the first two fresh, / And bring me, where I'd be." In

"Unprofitableness," he realizes that only the grace of God brings refreshment:

Thus thou all day a thankless weed dost dress,  
And when th' hast done, a stench, or fog is all  
The odour I bequeath.

He laments in "Repentance" of "stones much softer than my heart." He writes in "Misery":

So my spilt thoughts winding from thee  
Take the down-road to vanity,  
Where they all stray and strive, which shall  
Find out the first and steepest fall;  
I cheer their flow, giving supply  
To what's already grown too high,  
And having thus performed that part  
Feed on those vomits of my heart.

#### Henry Vaughan and George Herbert

Henry Vaughan, as mentioned above, was greatly influenced by George Herbert. Both Vaughan and Herbert wrote dedications to their works: Vaughan's much lengthier begins:

My God! Thou that didst' die for me,  
These Thy death's fruits I offer Thee.

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Dear Lord, 'tis finished! And now he  
That copied it, presents it to Thee  
'Twas thine first, and to Thee returns,  
From Thee it shined though here it burns.

Herbert also gives his poetry as fruit to God:

Lord, my first fruits present themselves to Thee;  
Yet not mine neither for from Thee they came.

Another example is in Vaughan's "The Pursuit" and Herbert's "The Pulley." Vaughan writes that restlessness was God's secret design placed within man at creation:

That was Thy secret, and it is

Thy mercy too ;  
For when all fails to bring to bliss,  
Then this must do.

Ah, Lord ! and what a purchase will that be,  
To take us sick, that sound would not take Thee !

A similar theme lies in Herbert's "The Pulley." At the creation of man, God held back rest as a way of driving men to Himself, the ultimate Rest:

Yet let him keep the rest,  
But keep them with repining restlessness :  
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,  
If goodness leade him not, yet weariness  
May tesse him to my breast.<sup>16</sup>

In "Judgement," Herbert writes that God "And thrust a Testament into Thy hand: / Let that be scanned. / There Thou shalt find my faults are Thine." Compare that with "Holy Scriptures," where Vaughan writes, "Read hear, / my faults are thine. This Book, and I / will tell Thee so; Sweet Saviour Thou didst die!"

George Herbert's "Frailty" fears that his soul, "It may a Babel prove / Commodious to conquer heav'n and thee / Planted in me." Yet in his "Disorder and Frailty" Vaughan says that it is *grace* that is planted in him: "'Let not perverse, / And foolish thoughts add to my bill / Of forward sins, and kill / That seed, which thou / In me didst sow."

In the "Dawning" Herbert uses the phrase "Awake, Awake," encouraging a sad person to Awake and turn to Christ. Vaughan uses the same call several times in "Christ's Nativity."

#### Criticism

George MacDonald called Vaughan, "careless and somewhat rugged," yet said that "he has grander lines and phrases than any in Herbert;"<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth is in turn grander than Vaughan. He adds, "I do not know a writer, Wordsworth not

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<sup>16</sup>George Williamson compares "The Pulley" by George Herbert with Vaughan's "Man." (*Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide* [New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1967], 201-202).

<sup>17</sup>*op. cit.*

excepted, who reveals more delight in the visions of Nature than Henry Vaughan.”<sup>18</sup> MacDonald compares Vaughan to Herbert his teacher and Wordsworth his student, and notes his interest in the relationship between nature and humankind.

MacDonald is criticized by Alexander Grosart, who is incredulous that MacDonald would judge Herbert to be greater than Vaughan. Grosart says, “Henry Vaughan indubitably is a Poet of an incomparably loftier and original caste. There are things in Vaughan's poetry that Herbert never could have dared to reach.”<sup>19</sup> Later he adds, “Vaughan's thought is always true, his feelings fine and his utterance melodious. Herbert's thought is often thin and his feelings oftener valetudinarian, and his wording commonplace.”<sup>20</sup>

T. S. Eliot says of Vaughan that he was “in some ways the most original and difficult of all the followers of Donne” and that of the metaphysical poets he was “the most various.”<sup>21</sup> Eliot agrees that Vaughan is better for memorable lines than any “perfect poem.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>“Essay on the Life and Writings of Henry Vaughan, Silurist,” in *The Works in Verse and Prose Complete of Henry Vaughan, Silurist*, Vol. II, edited by Rev. Alexander B. Grosart, Blackburn, 1871, pp. ix-ci. Reprinted in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, Vol. 27. Cited 1 December 2006. Online: [http://www.geocities.com/magdamun/vaughan\\_grosart.html](http://www.geocities.com/magdamun/vaughan_grosart.html).

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>T. S. Eliot, “Mystic and Politician as Poet: Vaughan, Traherne, Marvell, Milton,” *Listener* (2 April 1930), 590, cited in Ronald Schuchard, “Editor's Introduction” in T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 21.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 168.

Joan Bennett<sup>23</sup> compares Vaughan with Herbert, and concludes that one man's strength is other's weakness. Vaughan rarely knows how to put the entire poem together, whereas his “gift of song” is often lacking in Herbert. “He can convey the ecstasy of joy or grief or worship by the movement of the verse, and he has a stronger instinct than Herbert for the magic of words and phrases.”<sup>24</sup> She echoes the observation the best Vaughan produced were lines and not entire poems. Interestingly, Chambers disagrees with Bennett specifically on that latter point, with an article on Vaughan's “The Night” as way to prove it.<sup>25</sup>

“The best poetry of Vaughan,” says Ellrodt, “is subjective. . . . He addresses God.”<sup>26</sup> He contrasts Donne and Herbert's focusing on “a centre” while Vaughan must seek and long. He too notes Vaughan's “uterine link” with nature. Vaughan is provoked from the outside, whereas Donne and Herbert are from within. Ellrodt thinks this also emerges in differing theology between Vaughan and the two greater poets in the realms of anthropology and the Atonement. Vaughan's “realism of the symbolic imagination extends to all the recurrent images and lends substance to spiritual emotions.”<sup>27</sup> He says that Vaughan's uneven works lend themselves more to individual *lines* that haunt, rather than entire poems, lacking both the “artistry” of Herbert and “intensity” of Donne.

### Conclusion

Though not as great as other the metaphysical poets Herbert and Donne, Vaughan is important in that he speaks in memorable and imaginary ways of the Christian experience. He speaks of longing and the soul's hunger for God. From him, the godly soul will find not small, but some great “prelibation of those heavenly refreshments.” With his aid we continue to search through the “deep, but dazzling darkness.”

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<sup>23</sup>*Four Metaphysical Poets: Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>25</sup>“Henry Vaughan's Allusive Technique: Biblical Allusions in ‘The Night’” *Modern Language Quarterly* 27 (1966), 385.

<sup>26</sup>*op. cit.*, 337.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 342.