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God in the Darkness: Mysticism and Paradox in the Poetry
of George Herbert and Henry Vaughan

A thesis

presented to

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by

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ABSTRACT

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by

Elizabeth Anne Acker

While aspects of mysticism appear in the poetry of both George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, the general consensus among critics has acknowledged the mysticism of Vaughan while ignoring its roots in Herbert's writings. Among the leading authorities on the poetry of Herbert, there has been a general tendency to dismiss, ignore, or explain away mystical elements. A study of representative works by prominent critics to ascertain their positions on this issue reveals not only what can be known for certain about Herbert's theology, but also the interpretations that have been offered for his most famous poems. While these interpretations are useful, the discerning reader must look beyond them, both to the tradition of mysticism and to the Bible, to understand the intensely personal nature of Herbert's spiritual journey. Only then can the full extent of his influence on Vaughan be understood.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: MYSTICISM AND PARADOX

The analysis of George Herbert's influence on Henry Vaughan has always been a primary feature of Vaughan criticism. This focus, however, has been solely on the obvious influence apparent in the poetry itself, such as features of style and common themes. Significantly less attention has been given to the deep spiritual influence that informs Vaughan's poems. It is true that Vaughan embraces mysticism where Herbert does not; it is also true that Herbert, in the process of describing his own spiritual journey, incorporates many aspects of mysticism that seem to have shaped Vaughan's ideas of the relationship between God and the individual soul. Vaughan, like Herbert, remained fiercely loyal to the Church of England, even while exploring a deeply personal relationship with God. Like Herbert, Vaughan sought an inner transformation, though probably of a different sort than that of his mentor. Particularly, both saw not just God, but the soul's relationship with Him as profoundly paradoxical.

When one speaks of writers such as Herbert and Vaughan, one should probably begin by noting some important aspects of their understanding of God. These poets do not perceive God as a philosophical or theological construct consisting of postulates and propositions; rather, they address God as a Person Who is unique, transcendent, and willing to establish communication. They are not addressing a vague, powerful force, but the supreme individual -- a Personality with infinite complexity as well as infinite power and authority. Their theology is not subject to notions of relative truth; they regard each doctrine given by their mother church, the Church of

England, as absolute and unchanging, and they think and write inside the parameters of those doctrines. And they do not find this realm of absolutes to be at all stifling; rather, they discover a whole universe of poetic possibilities in the sixteen-hundred-year-old imagery of the Bible and the traditional liturgy that comprises the worship of their Church. All this bears significance because the devotional poetry of these writers reflects a great warmth and fervor flowing up from spiritual roots and flowering into creative exclamations of the pain and sorrow, exhilaration, and joy of religious experience.

None of this necessarily translates into mysticism; Vaughan was certainly a mystic, though Herbert seems to be uncomfortable with mysticism. Certain elements of mysticism do appear in Herbert's poetry, however, and they had a strong influence on the more surreal meditations of Vaughan. It is important to remember that God is, for these two writers, a Person because one of the central tenets of mysticism is the emphasis on a loving embrace with the Divine, and that assumes that God is capable of loving and being loved, with passion and utter abandon. Herbert recognized and explored the longing for union with God, and his insights inspired the mystical quest of Vaughan.

Before looking at these two poets, it might be helpful to have a concrete definition of what exactly is meant by mysticism. Like many religious terms, it has taken on a rather hazy meaning in post-modern society, but if it is to be serviceable to critics, there must be definitive characteristics that can be labeled and identified. Above all, those characteristics must be seen as distinct from each other because the purpose of this paper is not to prove Herbert a mystic, but to show how elements of mysticism are present in his works and could have influenced Vaughan.

The New Catholic Encyclopedia defines mysticism proper as “the direct, intuitional experience of God through unifying love.” This is distinct from the broader sort of mysticism which merely consists of “an intense realization of the difference between things of this world and the great otherworldly realities.” These are defined as “I-It” mysticism (union with a transcendent *something*) and “I-Thou” mysticism (union with a transcendent *someone*) (Gardiner and Larkin 179). To say of either Herbert or Vaughan that he was a mystic in the broader sense is not to say much at all because the same statement could be made of most Christians, and indeed a good many non-Christians. Mysticism can be found in most of the world’s religions and philosophies. To argue that the poetry of Herbert and Vaughan contain elements of mysticism proper is to state that at least some of their ideas belong in the same category as those of such persons as Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi, not to mention such Protestants as the Quakers who emphasize the “inner light.” In order for this to be true, there must be an emphasis on personal experience, not just an intellectual understanding; and the desired end of this spiritual journey always is union with God in this life, not merely the expectation of Heaven.

This has created some difficulties for scholars studying Herbert and Vaughan. While there is no question that both writers searched for the possession of a unique relationship with God and experienced the discovery of God through darkness (a prominent feature of mysticism), no critic can assert with authority that either man accomplished this goal. The evidence is simply not there to establish that either Herbert or Vaughan reached the consummation of his spiritual hopes. Further, mystics have always heavily emphasized the importance of personal experience, and there is a common misconception that all mystics consider their personal encounters with

God to be as authoritative as Scripture and tradition. Anyone who has read much mysticism, however, knows that most mystics are loyal to the authority of the established church and acknowledge the supremacy of Scripture. In *The Dark Night of the Soul*, a definitive work of medieval mysticism, St. John of the Cross clearly takes this position,

. . . I shall put my trust neither in experience nor in knowledge, since both may fail and deceive; rather, while availing myself as much as possible of the aid of personal experience and knowledge, I shall make use of Holy Scripture in everything that, with Divine help, I may be able to say; for, since He Who speaks therein is the Holy Ghost, we cannot possibly go astray. And if nonetheless I should be in error, it was certainly not my intention to deviate in any point from the sound sense and doctrine of our Holy Mother, the Catholic Church. I submit and resign myself to her better judgment. (4)

R. A. Durr attempts to correct the common misunderstanding of mystics in his book *On the Mystical Poetry of Henry Vaughan*. Based upon the definitions of mysticism given by experts such as Evelyn Underhill, he states that there are two things the critic must keep in mind: that the consummation of union with God does not have to be attained, only pursued, and that the mystics are not outside established church traditions but make them an important part of life. A mystic uses the Bible to interpret his or her experiences rather than using those experiences to replace the Bible (xiii). Having established that the methodology of mysticism does not conflict with the rigorous devotion of Herbert and Vaughan to the Church of England or the Word of God, there remains only to determine what themes or features of mysticism might be found in their poetry.

Love has always been the triumphant theme of Christian mysticism. The words and actions of the mystic, usually incomprehensible by all the laws of logic and common sense, become suddenly clear and explicable when that mystic is viewed as a lover rather than a philosopher. In his biography of Francis of Assisi, G. K. Chesterton explains why mysticism (and the asceticism that often accompanies it) cannot be understood apart from this:

Say, if you think so, that he was a lunatic loving an imaginary person; but an imaginary person, not an imaginary idea. And for the modern reader the clue to the asceticism and all the rest can best be found in the stories of lovers when they seemed to be rather like lunatics. Tell it as the tale of one of the Troubadours, and the wild things he would do for his lady, and the whole of the modern puzzle disappears. . . . All these riddles would easily be resolved in the simplicity of any noble love; only this was so noble a love that nine men out of ten have hardly even heard of it.

If Francis stood in the tradition of the troubadour, he is not the only mystic to borrow the language of *eros* to celebrate *agape*. In fact, the imagery the mystic uses to describe his or her love relationship with God is frequently so similar to the ecstasies of erotic love that the boundaries seem blurred. Song of Solomon has always been interpreted allegorically with Christ as the ardent, male lover who passionately and graphically enumerates all his beloved's physical attributes and unites with her in ecstatic embraces. So for the mystic, the Love of God consumes the soul in a burning heat that purifies (painfully) at first, then wraps it in pleasure and joy. According to Terry G. Sherwood, this is where Herbert does not fit the tradition of mysticism.

He argues that there is an absence of sexual imagery and that the allusions to Song of Solomon are sparse (37). He states, “. . . Herbert rejects the notion of love embrace and downplays the Song of Songs as a means of defining his union with God” (38). Vaughan, on the other hand, begins *Silex Scintillans* with “Regeneration,” a poem that uses the imagery of Song of Solomon to express the soul’s deepest desire.

Just as it is impossible to overstate the importance of love to the mystic, it would be impossible to place too much significance on the word “journey,” for mysticism is always a process and, usually, quite allegorical. Mysticism and allegory are both as old, at least, as Plato, and that is not coincidental. Mysticism deals with the otherworldly and with abstract truths; allegory is a form of literature that occurs when someone uses concrete images and personifications to represent those abstract truths. St. John of the Cross begins his *Dark Night of the Soul* with an elaborately labeled diagram of the soul’s journey up Mt. Carmel. Not surprisingly, most of the mystics rely heavily on the most passionate and allegorical book of the Bible, Song of Solomon; Bernard of Clairvaux preached seventy-seven famous sermons on this one short book, and Hannah Hurnard (the twentieth-century Quaker missionary) found there the inspiration for two allegories that are fine examples of modern Christian mysticism, *Hinds’ Feet on High Places* and *Mountains of Spices*. And the reader of the greatest allegory in all of English literature can be pardoned for wondering in passing moments if John Bunyan did actually dream of the journey to heaven. Similarly, Herbert and Vaughan both allegorize the spiritual journey. Herbert’s “Pilgrimage” begins with the poet forced to climb a hill (there is always a hill!) toward his hoped-for reward, because he is hemmed in by the “cave of Desperation” on one side and

“the rock of Pride” on the other (4,6). Vaughan’s pilgrimage in “Regeneration” centers around a garden taken, not surprisingly, from Song of Solomon, as he indicates at passage quoted at the end (150). Ross Garner argues that Vaughan’s particular fascination with allegory explains the apparent irony in his loving this world while longing for another:

Vaughan’s devotional poetry presupposes an allegorical method which depends on a scheme of things in which the abstract is the opposite of the immaterial and the middle term is the actual. Indeed, only by that scheme can the delight which Vaughan took in nature be reconciled with his longing for the other world. (42-43)

In other words, Vaughan’s mystical and allegorical view of things allowed him to love the beauty of this world as a reflection of the glory of the transcendent universe of ideals. Thus allegory expresses and explains a mystical view of spirituality, and it is significant that both Herbert and Vaughan choose to be allegorical.

The purpose of using this allegorical mode of literary expression can be easily ascertained; by representing the mystical experience as a journey, the author can emphasize that spiritual perfection is a gradual process, not something to be arrived at all at once, as John of the Cross does in *The Dark Night of the Soul*. This also has strong connections to authors of *The Temple* and *Silex Scintillans*, for whom poems are landmarks or stepping stones in a quest to place the soul in the proper relationship with its Creator. One cannot take the measure of either man’s spiritual experience in a single poem, but rather in the gradual maturation that takes place between the first poem and the last in their respective works as exemplified by some of both poets’ most distinct verses. The dilemma of one poem is the blessed discovery of another; the

paradox of one agonized verse at the beginning becomes the profound understanding of another at the end.

Paradox relates closely to the mystical emphasis on love, and Herbert and Vaughan are frequently paradoxical. Love accepts the beloved with all the facets and contradictions that can be part of one personality; but, when the beloved is the God of the universe, there can be no contradictions. Orthodoxy does not accept the possibility of any contradictions within the nature of God. If something appears to be a contradiction, it is only because the human mind is too small to comprehend the true reality. Instead, such apparent incongruities are labeled “paradoxes,” and the mystic not only accepts them, but revels in them. The mystic embraces those apparent inconsistencies because he or she celebrates a love and a Lover unlike any other and beyond the ordinary understanding of humankind.

Paradox, of all the elements of mysticism, is here given primary emphasis because it is an aspect of the God’s relationship with humanity that both Herbert and Vaughan were quick to seize upon and examine. Divine love, and the emphasis on the paradox it engenders, become central themes of their religious poetry. The consummation they both desired is probably best described by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 2:20 (KJV): “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” This may well be the central paradox of all Christian theology. Here the soul’s union with God *is* the paradox; self has died, but the apostle still lives because Christ is in him and living through him. Vaughan seeks this epiphany, and his poetry becomes the pilgrimage that leads to the garden of spices and intimacy

with his Beloved. According to Durr, this is distinct from Herbert who seeks a surrender of the will that makes obedience joyfully possible (xvii).

There has been a great deal of discussion among critics about how the mystical passages of Herbert should be read. Noted authority Louis Martz, in his *Poetry of Meditation*, argues that Herbert is really following a tradition of meditation that has occurred at various times in church history and had been reinvented in the Renaissance by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Martz writes,

. . . It is wise to be wary in dealing with the appearance of mystical terminology in this poetry: it is not by any means valid to argue that the poetry is therefore the product of mystical experience. The meditative writers of the time are constantly using the threefold way of the mystics as a framework for purely ascetic and devotional exercises: mystical terms provide powerful metaphors frequently used in cultivating the realm of devotion. The term “mystical,” then, may on occasion be valid when applied to certain passages in the works of these writer, or when used to describe the general tendency of the spiritual efforts represented in these writers, or when used to describe the general tendency of the spiritual efforts represented in these writings. But most of the poetry with which we are here dealing appears clearly to lie within the realm of meditation leading to devotion; and for this reason the term “meditative” seems to me more accurate than “mystical” when applied to English religious poetry of the seventeenth century.

(20)

So the poems are mystical, but they aren't. This seems like splitting hairs, if not outright

contradiction. Devotional poets use the way of the mystics, but they are not mystics; they practice the art of meditation that has always belonged to mysticism, and they are following the trail of the mystic Ignatius of Loyola, but Herbert and his fellow writers of the period are not mystics themselves. And all of this only explains the use of meditation in their poetry, not allegory, paradox, or the emphasis on love. It would be far more accurate to say that Herbert incorporates various aspects of mysticism, such as meditation, allegory, and paradox, but avoids other uses such as sexual imagery. Martz is ready to acknowledge that the reader may find mystical passages, but this is not quite sufficient; the reader finds veins of mystical ideas running throughout Herbert's poems.

Perhaps, in attempting to understand how such a lover of formality and structure and ceremony could ever be connected with mysticism, one has only to look again at the passage from St. John of the Cross. The mystic is neither a rebel nor a reformer; he bases his understanding of the experiences he receives on the teachings of the Church and the Bible. Substituting only the Church of England for the Catholic Church, this restrained introduction to a piercing devotional work would have done credit to such a man as George Herbert. One cannot see such a quiet man as Herbert, seldom ruffled to the point of vehemence, seeking visions or miraculous manifestations, but the role of one who speaks from experience, humbly submitting that experience to the truth of Scripture and the common sense of Mother Church. If, by mysticism, one means that Herbert is the ardent God-lover who embraces the Divine as a personality full of passion and complexity, who longs for a union with that God through a necessary inner transformation, and that he revels in the open paradoxes of both God and man,

then the author of *The Temple* may be said to embrace the elements of mysticism. Further, to guide the hungry, searching soul to a greater intimacy with God is a role that suits Herbert well and one that he fulfills in his influence on Henry Vaughan.

While Herbert may be difficult to designate, the reader cannot question the deeply mystical nature of Vaughan's poetry. Stevie Davies states of Vaughan's own spiritual exercises, "The whole purpose of this life of prayer, meditation and reading was to move closer towards union with God" (119). Vaughan actively sought an epiphany and union with the divine. There is no ambiguity about the emotive nature of his poetry or his desire to have what he believed Herbert possessed, even going beyond Herbert in his conceptions of what this experience could be. Durr offers an excellent description of the different approaches of Herbert and Vaughan:

One finds in the poetry of both Herbert and Vaughan the Biblical conception of the heart as the Lord's temple. But the significance of the motif differs in the two poets. Herbert would have Christ inhabit his heart in order that the agonizing spiritual conflict between him and the Lord might finally be resolved . . . What Herbert longs for is not principally union with God of an immediate, experiential nature, but submission of his will to His ordained way . . . In Vaughan, the heart is the temple of God in this sense too, but, more than that, it is the virgin womb in which the Christ Child is eternally begotten; his desire, reaching far beyond submission and a quiet faith, is to be reborn in God, to have God born in him.

(xvii)

One can only wish to amend Durr by saying that Herbert does desire union with Christ -- Christ

living in him -- but Durr is correct in saying that Herbert desires this for purely pragmatic reasons; his goal is not ecstasy but joy in obedience. Vaughan, on the other hand, appears to have made significant progress on the *via mystica*. Durr cites Itrat-Husain who finds sufficient evidence to assert that Vaughan had accomplished the first three stages which involve awakening, purgation, and illumination. If Vaughan ever achieved the last two, the dark night of the soul and union with God, there is no evidence of it in his poetry. If anything, this emphasizes Vaughan's spiritual debt to Herbert, who, as will be seen, also comes to terms with issues of sin and the understanding of the love of God.

All this gives the reader a clearer picture of what to look for when considering whether or not a poem has elements of mysticism. Allegory and an emphasis on love will both be found in *The Temple* and *Silex Scintillans*, and paradox will prove inescapable. Whether or not either poet finds the desirable union with God is another thing altogether and will be examined later, but there can be no doubt that they are seeking to be uniquely identified with God, whether it is Herbert participating in the Eucharist or Vaughan seeing God in the nature he loved.

CHAPTER 2

GEORGE HERBERT'S PARADOX

Of all his poems, "Affliction (I)" is the poem that best illustrates the paradoxical nature of the Christian experience for Herbert. One could argue that the poem is one long, complex paradox with the first part of the poem devoted to describing the joys of divine service and the second part to cataloguing the contrasting evils that have also come to pass. The dilemma lies in the apparent contradiction between what the poet expects God to be and what he, through personal experiences, finds God to be. This is compounded by the dilemma of his human inability to pass judgment on God's actions or motives for he is himself paradoxical. The poet explores both the expectations and the experience, and his emotional response to the conundrum before him, in clear and poignant verses.

The first side of the paradox is presented in the first three and a half stanzas. God is the King of pleasures (13), his "service brave" (2), his household furniture fine (8), and everything about him seems to shine like the stars (11). While this may seem to the cynical, modern reader as youthful daydreaming, Herbert is on sound theological ground. His description of God as the King of pleasures is taken directly from Biblical poetry:

For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to
see corruption. Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of
joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore. (Psalm 16:10-11)

There is possibly a more direct allusion to the promises of the Bible, also from Psalms, in the line

in which Herbert expresses the desire to be a tree – surely he would “thrive” if he were a tree; at least he could bring forth fruit, or some bird could find shelter (57-59). But why a tree? It strikes the reader as a rather odd statement to make; one might even think Herbert was being whimsical. Unless, as might be possible, Herbert is making a deliberate Biblical allusion to Psalm 1, a passage worth quoting in its entirety:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish. (KJV)

Could it be spelled out more plainly? The passage is a conditional promise; if the individual pursues righteousness, he or she will be blessed and become like a thriving tree. One can see the wheels turning in the parson’s mind, for how could he not have thought of these verses? Has he missed something in the performance of his duties toward God? He does not seem to think so. Yet God does not appear to have kept any of His promises. The young clergyman/scholar has pinned his hopes on faith that seems to be slipping out from under him.

His hopes are dashed by the reality of human suffering from which, he soon discovers, he

is not exempt. Herbert describes his desolation in the most extreme terms: sicknesses permeate his body through every vein (27), his friends die (32), more sicknesses compound his misery (51-52), and he has been “wrapped” and “entangled” in a profession that seems bland and contentious compared to the glittering world of the Court that he might have claimed as his birthright (39-42). Worst of all, God demands that his servant react to all these afflictions with strength and steadfast meekness (61-62). According to biographer Amy Charles, there were several factors to the poet’s discontentment,

By 1617 five of Herbert’s brothers had distinguished themselves in military exploits or otherwise met the demands of active life with physical courage; Herbert, major fellow of Trinity and Master of Arts, now setting foot into the study of divinity, had been restrained by sickness for years, even before he wrote the sonnets of 1610, but particularly during the vacation of 1617, when he endured some serious illness, perhaps that mentioned in stanza 5. (86-87)

Charles notes that Herbert did not choose the academic profession; it was chosen for him, and he did not feel useful in this occupation (86). This gives the sense that Herbert felt what life he had was being wasted by a God who did not value him.

According to Christopher Hodgkins, Herbert acknowledges that he has misinterpreted the nature of God’s character by expecting pleasure and mirth (202), but there is no such open acknowledgment in the poem; he offers no excuses for his religious expectations. Can the reader argue that Herbert is unreasonable in expecting God to live up to the claims of Scripture? The poet’s interpretation seems theologically sound, but in this poem the experience does not

confirm the hypothesis. The paradox is a most unpleasant one that brings disillusionment at the deepest level of his being.

“The Collar” also expresses Herbert’s dramatic discouragement and his keen sense of what God has not given him. Michael C. Schoenfeldt agrees that “The Collar” takes up where “Affliction (I)” leaves off. The angry tone of the poem startles the reader and belies Izaak Walton’s image of the frail and saintly priest whose halo is clearly visible. Rather, Herbert appears once again as the offended employee who finds himself in a dead-end job with lousy benefits. So intense is his ire that he even begins to despise himself for his past moments of tenderness and contrition, commenting almost sarcastically, “Sure there was wine/ Before my sighs did drie it: there was corn/ Before my tears did drown it” (10-12). It is almost as if the brunt of his wrath is directed at himself this time rather than at God. Whose fault is it if he has not profited from his talents and opportunities? Herbert has no doubt who is to blame. He states, “Not so, my heart but there is fruit,/ and thou hast hands” (17-18). Helen Vendler points out that Herbert seems not so much attracted to the pleasures he speaks of, as he is frustrated at himself for not having the gumption to pursue them. The poem has a decidedly negative tone because Herbert appears to despise himself and his own nature.

Unlike “Affliction (I),” Herbert is not making a complaint directly to God. Strier points out that the narrator seems to be debating with himself. Instead of acting on his new plans, the narrator fills his lines with justifications; in Shakespeare, Strier argues, this indicates indecision or an “inauthentic” resolution (219). In other words, the narrator never is really going to walk away from his calling, but he certainly feels like doing so, and so he is taking counsel with

himself. Strier asserts, “We realize that the poem is dramatizing a state of mind rather than a decision. By the third line we could already guess that the speaker did not, in fact, go anywhere” (220). This leaves the reader to explore exactly what it is that has Herbert so divided. Herbert poses and answers the questions one by one. How did he find himself trapped in this miserable, cold world of theology and dusty books?

Certainly, as Vendler claims, Herbert blames himself. In line 22, the poet refers to a “rope of sands,” which has become a cable binding him as law. This enigmatic phrase, itself a paradox, is explained by Harold A Dickey, who refers to an obsolete meaning of “sands” as given by the OED; “sands” in this definition, and most likely in “The Collar,” refers to messages from a lord, or the dispensations of God. Dickey states,

In most of the examples in the entry the message or messenger is sent by God or some powerful lord and the message is usually not a pleasant one . . . The possibility is strong that Herbert is having his rebellious priest say, on one level of wit, perhaps a devilish level, that he finds he has built himself good cable out of a collection of church of ordinances. (157)

He is given to too much thinking and, therefore, his thoughts have made “Good cable, to enforce and draw,/ And be thy law,/ While thou didst wink and would not see” (25-26). The reader must note, however, that this still does not acquit God of the charge of injustice. It is God’s fault, presumably, that he has “no harvest but a thorn” (6). It is the paradox again; God is supposedly just, but he does not reward the faithful. Herbert sees his service as a self-inflicted bondage (Dickey 26).

Unlike “Affliction (I),” which ends in agonizing frustration, “The Collar” has a very quiet resolution. God interrupts the speaker. Vendler argues that the narrator has literally forgotten himself (by his disgust with his own submission to the strict discipline of his calling), and so a resolution is possible by God calling, “Child,” which brings him back to his senses (135). Interestingly enough, Herbert does not respond, as one would expect, by calling God, “Father.” Herbert instead, according to Schoenfeldt, retreats into the role of servant, addressing Him as “my Lord” (110). Schoenfeldt argues that Herbert had trouble thinking of God as a Father because he never knew his own biological father, and his step-father was too young (and appeared too late) to have created a paternal bond (111). This leaves the poet to place God within the context of his hierarchical society. Schoenfeldt maintains that “Affliction (I)” reveals the poet’s own “fascination with the trappings of power” (71). The same might be said for the narrator of “The Collar” who feels the heavy hand of Divine authority and yearns to break free. God appears as the Father, however, in spite of rebellion and unwillingness on the part of His servant. Schoenfeldt adds that God’s quieting reply at the end is meant to remind the poet that his service is not all hardship; “The speaker discovers that his God offers not only chastisement but also love in a time of choler” (109).

Such paradoxes as the fierce God/paternal God were a natural part of Herbert’s spiritual experience. Arnold Stein argues that they are “characteristic” of the way Herbert thinks. They are a way of grasping and formulating the complexity of a philosophical or theological issue. Stein states,

Paradox is one way of seeing, as well as resolving, the contrarities of experience.

It is a means of ordering matter both doubly and singly, so as to impose limits on singlemindedness by bringing forward an obstacle to facile simplification. (91)

In other words, a paradox can by its complexity provide the alternative to a platitude, and Herbert is in no mood for platitudes. In "The Collar," he is quite angry and only grows angrier as he lists all the good things he has missed, just as in "Affliction (I)" where he laments the evils that have befallen him. He wants an answer to this seeming betrayal. Stein argues that Herbert is seldom content to accept God's nature as incomprehensible (95). Vendler suggests that Herbert is seeking "a law by which God's actions can be brought into the range of a reasonable hypothesis" (44). He seems determined, in the manner of an expert debater, to lay out his case before God in his search for justice.

In his quest for that answer, Herbert falls in line with the Biblical tradition of lament and complaint that addresses the same issue of why God allows his servants to suffer. Stein states that the religious tradition is foremost in the poem, and the literary tradition has a secondary role (87), but it would be better to say that, in this case, they are one and the same. The book of Job, for example, is one uninterrupted tale of woe in which God, while not sending disaster himself, allows Satan to rob Job of everything but his life, and even the people who ought to be comforting him (his wife and friends) seem to exist only to rub salt in his many wounds. Herbert, the poet and musician, must have appreciated Job's imagery of despair: "My harp also is turned to mourning, and my organ into the voice of them that weep" (Job 30:31). In lines 53-54, Herbert laments, "Thus doth thy power crosse-bias me, not making/ Thine own gift good, yet me from my wayes taking." Literally, God has directed his life in ways that oppose the very

inclinations that God Himself has created in him; this paradoxical statement makes God seem particularly unfair; God has given him natural human desires and then deliberately denied their fulfillment. Job, too, reminds God that he is His creation, “Is it good unto thee, that thou shouldest oppresse? that thou shouldest despise the work of thine hands? And shine upon the counsel of the wicked? . . . Remember, I beseech thee, that thou has made me as the clay, and wilt thou bring me into dust again?” (Job 10:3 and 9).

Robert W. French, in his article “Herbert as Jeremiah: A Note on ‘Affliction’ (I),” acknowledges an obvious relation between Job and Herbert but also points out a link to another prominent Old Testament figure. Jeremiah, like Herbert, finds his service sweet in the beginning (15:16) but becomes an outcast (20:7). In Jeremiah 20:9, Jeremiah also seeks to abandon his sacred calling: “Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.” French concludes,

Jeremiah’s anguish, then, and his response to it, are precisely parallel to Herbert’s in the ways that have been indicated . . . In any case, it seems clear that these passages from the book of Jeremiah must be considered as part of the intricate fabric that forms the background of this great poem. (202-3)

French might also have made mention of the book of Ecclesiastes with its chronicle of all the ills of earthly life, the book of Lamentations, which contains the sorrow of Jeremiah after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, and several of the Psalms written by David while under the oppression of his enemies (Vendler 43). It is sufficient to say, however, that when

Herbert offers up his complaint to God, he is following in a long Biblical tradition of those who question God without getting any immediate answers.

This leads the reader to wonder why, if he is not going to get the response he craves, he should bother to ask at all. The ending of “Affliction (I)” is singularly dissatisfying. Helen Vendler describes the sort of conclusion that the reader might desire when she writes, “A satisfactory ending would in some way exculpate God, reconcile Herbert to remaining in God’s service, and offer him the renewal of energy he needs to persevere or advance, extinguishing his helpless exhaustion” (46). But God is not exonerated, Herbert is hardly reconciled (in the sense of being in harmony with his circumstances), and there is no balm from Gilead. Far from peace, he seems to turn back to God simply out of fear of the alternative. As Schoenfeldt points out at the end of “The Collar,” Herbert seems to recoil from resolution of life without God (105), and that is true at the end of “Affliction (I)” as well; he is appalled by the possibilities created by his rebellion. Vendler notes that as Herbert declares he will find another master, he cannot help but remember that, according to Christ, there are only two – God and Satan (45). Having arrived at the negative conclusion of lines 63 and 64, he is horrified by the prospect and falls back upon God and yet another unrelenting paradox, “Let me not love thee, if I love thee not” (66). Then has the poet questioned to no purpose? Stein asserts that grief seldom appears in Herbert’s poems simply for its own sake. He argues,

At his best the expression of pain and longing is always qualified by something else – by his disciplined detachment, by his awareness of contrariety in human experience, by his imaginative ability to perceive and relate what he finds real

within and without himself. His chief theme is the grief to be felt in contemplating the mysteries of human failure to love God. Therefore every complaint is also, more or less, a declaration of praise and love. (97)

Though the poem abounds with pain and misery, there is love in it also, desperate as it is. The last line is an expression of longing; he desires to give God something that, paradoxically, only God can enable him to give. Similarly, the conclusion of “The Collar,” though more satisfying, still leaves the poet up in the air as to what ultimate purpose can exist to justify all his pain and heal his sense of loss. Yet it is God who speaks to him in the last lines of “The Collar,” and that is something; God has heard and God is answering. He is reminding the poet not only to be submissive, but that there is an enduring love-bond between them (109).

If the poet vents his frustration within the poems, the reader may be frustrated and baffled by such enigmatic conclusions. What exactly is Herbert asking of God in the last line of “Affliction (I)”? Edgar Gibson, in his footnotes to *The Temple*, offers one reading: “The lines seem to mean, ‘Although forgotten of God, unless my love to him still continues in my desolation, let me never be able to love Him’ (57). In other words, one who cannot love God in the midst of suffering is not worthy the privilege of loving God at all. This is a plausible explanation, though it does not offer any insight into the sudden, drastic turnaround in the previous line. Vendler interprets the passage as insight into Herbert’s understanding of the nature of love; to have no love at all is worse than any degree of material suffering, so Herbert tells God “that if he fails to love, God may punish him by preventing him from loving” (46). This seems reasonable because the Bible defines God as being love and light, and to turn from

devotion to God would plunge the poet into the darkness where no love exists. Hodgkins proposes that Herbert, by examining the course of his spiritual career, has discovered his past love to be inadequate (hence his complaint and disappointment) and desires that God would make him capable of a nobler, purer love:

Throughout the poem he has struggled to understand the nature of his early ‘love’ for God, but he has found that this love was shot through with the ‘fiercenesse’ of self-interest. He concludes by pleading that God would enable him to ‘love’ Him in a manner worthy of the name – with a love that depends not on uncertain hopes and human circumstances, but on the sure ground of God’s re-creative, sovereign grace. The fact that this plea is in the negative – that Herbert is willing to be excluded utterly from human and divine benefits rather than be a hypocrite – underlines his longing for a pure and simple love, free from mercenary motives (203).

Ultimately, the conclusion to such a poem as “Affliction” cannot be simple because the problem it addresses is not simple. One cannot completely resolve a paradox in one bromide. Herbert is aware that if God is paradoxical, he himself is paradoxical, for he is made in the image of God. God’s complexity is answered by Herbert’s own complexity as God’s unique creation. In this context, any effort to understand the precise meaning must be secondary to understanding that there is no simple meaning.

Any reading of “Affliction (I)” or “The Collar” must take into account that these are only two poems in a collection of poems. For this reason, Hodgkins’ reading of the last lines of

“Affliction” is particularly helpful; Herbert will use other poems to reflect on the bitter spirit that moved him when he composed these verses. There are many other poems in the *The Temple* that celebrate and offer thanksgiving. The conundrum that appears insoluble in this poem is addressed in a more positive manner in other poems such as “The Pulley,” just as the answers that cannot be found in Job may be wrangled out of Philippians or Song of Solomon.

Other poems will provide a sense of resolution, but Herbert must be aware, finally, that his paradoxes remain insoluble within the context of time. Joseph A. Summers affirms this:

Herbert might be considered a ‘mystic’ of the *via positiva*, in something of the sense that most Christians are times ‘mystics’: valuing union with God, but expecting it fully only with death; expressing joy for the moments of the presence of God and lamentations for the days of absence; believing that the proper service of God consists in works as well as arts of devotion; conscious of sin but striving to conform to the will of God; seeing in the world and human life images which show God’s creation and His love.” (69)

The reader perceives this poem of loss and lamentation as a cycle in the whole of Herbert’s spiritual journey, remarkable both for its unrestricted honesty and the beautiful manner in which it is articulated. By engaging the reader’s emotions in the inner spiritual conflict of his life and challenging the reader’s understanding with the obscurity of the paradox, he makes his audience to understand the complexity of the human dilemma of serving of a just God in a world that is intrinsically unfair. He opens questions in such a way that it is worth the reader’s time to pursue the difficult answers just as it is in the best interest of the poet to turn back to his faith at the end

of his verses.

CHAPTER 3

THE INWARD JOURNEY

Among all the characteristics that might be considered part of a mystical experience, the inward journey is perhaps the most significant. The mystic does not seek material evidence to support the discoveries that are made; a mystic relies upon internal revelation. The mystic remains individualistic, believing that the profoundest truths God reveals are whispered to the soul, not shouted to the multitude. This might be construed as arrogance if the company of mystics did not include such uncomfortably unpretentious people as Francis of Assisi and Julian of Norwich.

Herbert might well have been content with the communal experience that the Church afforded if it were not for the inescapable paradox. He was a priest, after all; his hands administered the Eucharist and his authority performed the other offices and sacraments that are considered the sacred duty of the ordained. If this congregational experience alone assured resolution to the spiritual dilemma he faced, there would have been no need for him to search for something other. Herbert looked for an experience that would satisfy a personal dilemma. It was not that he felt he needed to look beyond the Church of England for salvation -- far from it; nor was it that the Church could not touch his deepest need; his most complex poetry reflects the imagery of church rituals. He never considered himself a separatist, but, for that matter, the same might be said of the great medieval mystics. Rather, his poems seem to ache and pulsate with a longing for intimacy with God and a need to understand what God is doing with him and why.

Why does God make his servant suffer when he is only doing his best as a sinful human in a fallen world? What does God want from him? *The Temple* follows the course of his inward spiritual journey and the process of resolving the paradox he confronts.

Before Herbert can begin to address and resolve the dilemma posed in “Affliction (I)” and “The Collar”, there must be a necessary change from his perspective in those poems to a more constructive view of affliction. Christians have always regarded it in mixed ways. On the one hand it is obvious that no one enjoys suffering. On the other hand, Christianity also teaches that affliction can have positive spiritual results. John Donne reflects on this latter tradition when he writes in Meditation 17, “. . . affliction is a great treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it. No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction” (1123). It is this more positive view of suffering that emerges in Herbert’s “The Pulley.”

In many ways, “The Pulley,” though highly inventive in its language and imagery, reflects only a very traditional Christian view of why God allows his people to endure hard things. That is not to diminish the depth of the poem but to underscore what has already been said about Herbert’s devotion to the authority of the Church. It is not his place to topple sixteen hundred years of thought and reasoning by the most brilliant minds of the Church Fathers, scholastics, and Reformation theologians. Rather, it is for Herbert to translate what he knows into his native tongue, poetry, and so experience it for himself. The poem becomes Herbert’s way of taking the truth from his head and transplanting it in his heart; it is also his way of instructing his readers, for there is little doubt that Herbert means for his poems to edify whoever happens to peruse

them. For Herbert, God withholds peace from the troubled human soul because affliction perfects the soul and throws it back upon the mercy of a waiting God.

To what extent Herbert borrows this concept from other writers probably cannot be measured, but the originality of his expression is striking. Janet Grayson argues for the possibility that both the idea and the choice of expressions came from Bernard of Clairvaux's *De Diligendo Deo*, which, she maintains, Herbert could conceivably have read. In Herbert's poem, God pours out on man all his blessings except rest (peace); he holds this one in reserve because he knows that if man is complete and lacks nothing, he will cease to trust God. By denying him rest, God seeks to drive man back to Himself. Bernard states,

Thus, the impious wander about, naturally longing for that which would end their longing, and foolishly rejecting that which would end their need – an end not in consuming but in consummation. Instead of seeking to be consummated in blessedness, they wish to be consumed in empty pursuits – they who delight in the look of things rather than in the Creator would rather run through the experiences of the world one by one than attain the Lord of the universe. (qtd. in Grayson 52)

Such words as “consummation” and “attain the Lord of the universe” are fitting expressions for Bernard, a passionate mystic himself. Mystics believe that what God primarily wants from sin-lost humanity is to be loved and known and, therefore, acts to draw the human race to Himself. And this sounds exactly like Herbert's argument, including the statements made by God in lines 13 and 14 that “He would adore my gifts instead of me,/ And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature.” Grayson further argues that Herbert also borrows from Bernard's paranomasia, or

extended word play. The poem plays on meanings of “rest”, and this is paradoxical; God does not give man “rest”, but gives Him the rest of His gifts generously (Routh 45).

This complex use of the term “rest” reflects the author’s awareness of God’s complexity. According to Routh,

God both gives and denies the same thing, rest, which actually turns out to be two different things; and that the upward/downward movement of the poem’s God-man pulley turns upon a word denoting stasis, “rest” – suggests something about the mystery of God. (45)

Elizabeth Clarke, however, grasps something else in this poem. She argues that God withholds rest by allowing failure in anything that is not glorifying to Himself. All other purposes must be abandoned. Thus, rest can only come as the poet dies to self and self-seeking; as long as he lives for himself, God will withhold peace. She states, “The poet does not need to understand the ultimate purpose, as long as he knows there is one and he knows that those who are also following the way of the cross will understand” (271). That way of the cross is the subject of one of Herbert’s least discussed poems, yet one that has enormous significance for understanding Herbert’s view of the relationship between man and God.

It has already been said that mystics often use allegory to illustrate truth, and of all Herbert’s poems, “The Pilgrimage” is perhaps the most allegorical. The narrator of the poem is a pilgrim attempting to reach the fulfillment of his spiritual hopes. The reader knows from the beginning that the ultimate goal of the pilgrim is not to do something, but to be at a certain place. This “expectation” is to be found on a hill (1); he is seeking a more elevated spiritual awareness

and he knows the journey will be lengthy and tedious (3). As in Bunyan's allegory, the pilgrim is driven to this journey, however, because of the misery of his present circumstances. He is hemmed in on both sides. On one side, there is the rock of Pride (6), which means that he could choose to stand in apparent self-sufficiency, having seemingly done as much as God could reasonably require, but the poet knows this to be a delusion for Romans 3:10 says, "There is none that doeth good, no not one." If, though, he goes to the other side, there is the cave of Desperation (4) which might be interpreted as the Pit of Hopelessness. In that extreme, he would become consumed with the sense of his own spiritual inadequacy and would fall into the sin of Despair by believing himself beyond redemption. The one remaining option is to leave the place altogether and look for a more secure position.

Although allegory is not usually autobiographical, it is possible that certain elements of the narrative come from Herbert's personal experiences. Herbert also left the flower-strewn meadow, in his case the rank and prominence that might have been his by birthright, to continue a seemingly barren spiritual quest. In "The Pilgrimage" he states, "Fain would I here have made abode,/ But I was quicken'd by my houre" (9-10). Herbert never enjoyed good health, and his gradually worsening tuberculosis must have been a constant reminder of his mortality and the brevity of life. The pilgrim wishes to impress upon the reader that, however our spiritual journey unfolds, there is only a short allotted span in which it must be completed. The pilgrim meets other obstacles and forsakes both the temptation to ease and the threat of discouragement in pursuit of the final goal.

So far so good, but it is here at the summit that Herbert gives his narrative an ironic twist.

After all this trouble, the pilgrim arrives at the top of the hill, and by all that he has hitherto known, he has arrived. He then looks around and discovers that there is nothing there but filthy water (5-6). Clarke maintains that this kind of experience is typical of Herbert: “The characteristic effect of God’s mortification in Herbert’s poems is extreme disappointment and bewilderment” (216). Here again is the sharp contrast between what Herbert expects from God and what he actually receives. Instead of the living water Christ spoke of (John 4), he finds a brackish pool. External sacrifices have not satisfied the Divine calling, and there seems to be no other outward surrender left for him to make. But the poet reveals that this is a matter of the heart, for the pilgrim at the brackish lake is stung by tormenting fears that descend upon him in a swarm (13-14). Discouraged and disappointed, the narrator turns to the one place where an answer can be found.

Frustrated and exhausted, he calls upon his King to answer: are the journey and the destination to be equally miserable? “Yet taking heart I rose, and then perceiv’d/ I was deceived” (17-18). Who has deceived him? No one but himself. He had nothing, apparently, but his own sight to rely on to tell him that his expectations could be realized at the top of that particular hill. Yet he has not seen wrongly altogether. What he really seeks is further on, but further on in the same direction; he has, at least, been going the right way, even if he seems not to know what the journey really involves or what resolution the end of it will bring. This false summit marks the turning point in Herbert’s spiritual journey; up until now, all the pressures, sacrifices, and temptations have been external, but now, with no torment but his own fear and disappointment, the journey has been internalized and, possibly, so has the end he hopes to achieve. Helen

Vendler maintains that Herbert begins to personalize the journey in the middle of the poem when he stops labeling places with typical names such as “the Rock of Pride” (95).

The journey must continue then, but it will be a journey of his heart and not of his feet. In this “The Pilgrimage” is quite a different sort of poem than “Affliction (I)” or “The Collar”. In “The Collar,” the narrator vows to he will go somewhere, then goes nowhere; the author of “The Pilgrimage” realizes that he has been on a journey all along, but it has not led where he expected to go. In “Affliction (I),” the poet recounts the trials he has endured, demands an explanation, receives none, and resolves to remain dutiful only because he does not know where else to go; in “The Pilgrimage,” he receives a vision of the real goal of his journey that enables him to “take heart” and continue. “The Pilgrimage” reveals that the poet has made progress; his afflictions have not diminished, but he has accepted them and his hope has been renewed.

Herbert, however, immediately disabuses the reader of the idea that this makes everything suddenly alright. As soon as he rises to continue his journey, he receives a warning, “None goes that way/ And lives” (33-34). It does not matter where the cry originates, though one is tempted to hear it as the voice of God warning the pilgrim, “You will find what you want, but it will cost you all you have, even your life, to obtain it.” The pilgrim is not deterred by this advisory, however. After the misery of the journey, he does not believe death can be any worse. Vendler remarks on the surprising nature of Herbert’s reaction. She states,

Such revulsion at the total Christian pilgrimage is, so far as I know, unheard-of outside this poem. The true wayfaring Christian may have his trials and his sloughs of despond, but it is unthinkable that Piers Plowman or Christian should

fling out in anger, “After so foul a journey, death is fair.” There is some global indictment of life here that a stricter ‘allegory’ would forbid, because the trials of the pilgrim would, in a more traditional poem, fall under the generally approved rubric of Christian purification by suffering” (94).

Herbert adds something, though, that gives the reader pause at the end of this narrative; he states, “After so foul a journey death is fair,/ And but a chair” (35-36). It is possible that Herbert uses “chair” to describe Death as the final resting from the afflictions he has suffered. But there is another Renaissance use of the word that could be helpful. By “chair”, he could mean that death is only a facade or appearance. This line is the first hint that Herbert has finally grasped the full import of his spiritual journey. The only thing left to determine is what exactly Herbert meant by “death”.

Herbert would have been familiar with the various uses of the word death in Scripture. Physical death is dreadful, partly because of the awful mystery and terrible finality of it, but also because it is the ultimate renouncing of all earthly ties and holdings. When one dies, everything accumulated and adored in this life is lost forever. Hence Christ’s warning in Matthew 5 (KJV) to “lay up treasure in heaven . . . because where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” If people regret to leave this life, it is because they are leaving the things that matter most to them, and this is precisely the attitude Herbert has managed to shed through his sufferings. He no longer has anything left in the world that he would mind losing. Death is, then, a hollow experience because there is really nothing it can take from him; it has lost the power to hurt him. This death to self is described in Galatians 5:24, “And they that are Christ’s have crucified the

flesh with the affections and lusts.” Through the sacrifice of earthly passions and ambitions, by giving up all claims to live for self in order to live for Christ, the individual experiences all the pain and loss of death and thus may share the resurrection of Christ to eternal life. It is a death before physical dying. The twentieth-century writer of the allegory *Mountains of Spices*, Hannah Hurnard, has her protagonist Grace-and-Glory explain this to Lord Fearing as she visits him on his deathbed and tries to comfort him; he comments sarcastically that if he had drunk of the springs on the High Places that she speaks of, he would not be dying, and she responds, “No, you would have passed through death already and be alive forevermore” (129). This is the journey that lies ahead of Herbert as he moves from the hill of his expectation to the place that he really desires; he will pass through a death of self that will reduce the eventual physical death to a mere formality. Having nothing left on earth that he cares to lose, death has lost its sting; if the dead are raised to eternal life, the grave has lost its victory. This will provide the resolution of his paradox; he will find life through death. For Herbert, this is what it means to follow One who said, “And he that taketh no his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt. 10:38-39). The paradox of suffering is answered with a new paradox; he will lose life to find it. This surrender of self will bring about the desired end of Herbert’s spiritual dilemma; it will bring joy in obedience.

All of this, of course, sounds extremely heartless on the part of God. He demands nothing but sacrifice and surrender. He requires His follower to die to self, to separate themselves from every desire that is not a desire for God, so that God alone may be glorified. In

“The Pilgrimage,” there can be no rest or enjoyment in this world; there must be a constant, uphill journey through the wastelands if one is to achieve spiritual fulfillment. Even if one asserts that the God of the universe is entitled to demand whatever He wants, it seems strongly inconsistent with the New Testament teaching of I John that God is love. Yet love is the only thing that can explain these Divine demands. The reasoning of God in “The Pulley” is the reasoning of love; He keeps back one thing knowing that the human heart will come looking for it, and eventually find the way back home. The misery of “The Pilgrimage” finds its justification in the unknown treasure that awaits the sojourner on that last hill. To explain Herbert’s discoveries, it is necessary to turn to that favorite book of the Christian mystics, Song of Solomon: “Set me as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame” (8:6). The question, then, is not whether God will send suffering to drive the wayward heart back to Himself, but the lengths He will go to in the process.

Herbert explores this in the poem “Love Unknown.” In this poem, a servant complains that his Master has treated him harshly, even cruelly. Cristina Malcolmson describes the actions of the Master as “His own autocratic but nevertheless terribly successful methods of cultivation” (162). The narrator appears as a rather obtuse individual who readily acknowledges his faults, even while utterly failing to see how God’s correction mends them. Richard Strier asserts that, with few exceptions, the narrator of this poem is the densest and least perceptive voice in *The Temple*, and is obviously unreliable (159). Vendler characterizes him as the sort of garrulous and endearing individual known to all who loves to sit and recount all the miseries of life (all its

aches and pains) in graphic detail. He is looking for a sympathetic listener, and apparently assumes that his audience wants to hear his story as much as he wants to tell it (Vendler 87-88). But the friend who hears him out and replies to his complaints appears to possess a better knowledge of God and insists on correcting the servant's misunderstanding (171). Clarke points out that the friend may be divine, and could actually be Christ retelling the story; she suggests that this is why the friend's version is the correct one (173).

The Master's methods do seem extraordinary by any conceivable standards. When the servant offers the Lord his heart (in the middle of a plate of fruit, of all things – 6-7), the Lord ignores the fruit and has the heart cast into a fountain of blood to be washed, dyed, and wrung out (13-18). Herbert places a dazzling assortment of Biblical images in this one scene. The servant offers the Lord the same unacceptable sacrifice that Cain offered in Genesis 4; it is the work of his hands that he is offering God, a sacrifice that Scripture declares unacceptable (Eph. 2:8,9). The Master soon corrects this error by taking what He really requires; He signals to a servant who proceeds to clean the heart in a fountain of blood, which the reader knows must be the cleansing blood of Christ (I Jn.1:7). The blood flows from a rock, reminiscent of the rock that Moses struck in the wilderness to provide the Israelites with water, and flows from the *side* of the rock as water and blood poured from Jesus' side at the crucifixion. The friend points out to the narrator that his heart must have been quite dirty; thus confronted, the narrator freely admits to frequent violations of his terms of service, and the Master's unfailing mercy in forgiving him (18-22).

The heart is now "clean and fair" (23), but the Master puts the servant through a second

ordeal. The servant discovers a cauldron of boiling water named Affliction that clearly belongs to his Master. The oblivious servant, thinking to ingratiate himself, brings a sacrifice. Much to his surprise the man at the cauldron snatches his heart instead “and threw my heart into the scalding pan;/ My heart, that brought it (do you understand?)/ The offerers heart” (35-37). The servant’s indignation at this is almost comic; he takes great pains to emphasize to his friend that it is *his* heart, his very own heart that belongs to *him* personally, that has been taken and tossed into the pot. Herbert probably emphasizes this to make the reader pause and think about the servant’s claims to ownership. Apparently, the narrator’s memory is as deficient as his spiritual insight. Technically, the heart belongs to his Master; he gave it to Him a few lines ago, and he should not be surprised that the Lord uses it according to His own judgment. The friend leaves alone the question of ownership and suggests that the process was needed because his (the servant’s) heart was hard (37). Once again, the servant freely confesses his fault and offers further information about his spiritual plight. His heart was calloused, in spite of the Master’s constant efforts to soften it. The servant has, apparently, been drinking wine into which the Master has secretly, for his benefit, mixed holy blood. This is, as Strier states, a picture of the Eucharist and emphasizes that the sacrament is not a chore or a formality but a gift from God (164). This is, also, however, good evidence that Herbert is seeking (or already obtaining, perhaps) a personal spiritual experience outside the ceremonies of the church. The Eucharist alone has not availed to soften his hard heart; God has taken some extraordinary measure beyond that. If the wine mingled with blood had been sufficient, the cauldron would have been unnecessary. Here is how Herbert will reconcile the formality of the rituals he honored with the

possible mystical experience; the sacrament has been a constant preparation for the ultimate moment of renewal.

The Master has not finished, however; the servant has one last refuge in his humanness. Exhausted and weak, he flees to his own house and rushes to bed (one can almost see the poor man leaping onto the mattress and pulling the covers over his head). But here also the Master has visited him with trials. Like the Psalmist, he has been beset behind and before (Ps. 139:5). What is the one thing that the magnanimous God has denied his human creation? The servant's bed has been filled with thoughts that are thorns and will not let him rest (51-53)! Only the Master has the key to his house, so there can be no other source for his discomfort (54-55). The friend suggests that perhaps his heart had become sluggish (56), and once again the servant admits the truth of his spiritual inadequacy, while at the same time acknowledging God's mercy. His spiritual energy had waned, but Christ has paid the debt for his negligence (57-60). Once again, he seems not to have been revived by the performance of religious duties; it was his very half-heartedness in those performances that condemned him. God has recharged him through very intimate means – from the inside out – in private, quiet hours.

All these experiences, taken together, become a radical religious experience. Strier argues that the purpose of the poem is not for the narrator to be resigned to God's will, but to experience joy (164). The friend informs the narrator that God wants him to be "new, tender, quick" (70). The servant has been utterly renewed and scarce knows what he has become. The Master has completely transformed his heart through the terrible circumstances he has been forced to endure. What Strier says of resignation is crucial: formal, ceremonial religion demands

resignation because it seeks to maintain balance and the status quo. Something powerful and dramatic has transpired. The heart has ceased to exist as it once existed. Strier suggests that there is a pun on the word “dy’d” (dyed and died), and he appears to be correct. In Philippians 3:10-11, Paul states the ultimate goal of his own spiritual journey, “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.” There must be death before there can be resurrection. Nor is it likely that Paul is merely speaking of an experience that occurs only at the end of life. Galatians 2:22 makes it clear that identification with the death of Christ, and a subsequent spiritual resurrection in which Christ lives through the Christian, is an attainable goal in this world. In “Love (III),” Herbert seems to think it is possible.

There has been some debate over just when the action of “Love (III)” takes place. Most critics assume that poem is eschatological and refers to final union of the soul with God in heaven. Vendler takes this position and asserts that Herbert is describing a scene in heaven (276). Chana Bloch disagrees. She states,

Herbert’s poem is about the love of man and God – on earth, as it is in heaven – not simply ‘the entrance of the soul into Paradise,’ as Vendler suggests, a reading which considerably diminishes the poem’s meaning. The feast of love to which god has invited man is at once the earthly communion (with the implied pun on Host) and the heavenly marriage supper which it anticipates. (331)

In further support of this reading, Bloch points out that Herbert was not comfortable with imagining things about Heaven (332). Further, he describes the guest as “guiltie of dust and

sinne” (2). How can there be dust and sin in heaven? If the reader takes the admonitions of I Jn. 3:2 that everyone in Heaven will be like Jesus, there is no way for anyone to be imperfect or unworthy.

There are two main reasons why critics interpret “Love (III)” as a poem about Heaven. The argument is made that, in the poem, the narrator sits and eats with Love. Given that the poem abounds in imagery of the Eucharist, and given that Herbert was a staunch supporter of church rituals (which required the communicant to kneel when receiving the host), how could he envision the soul sitting to partake of Love’s feast anywhere but in Heaven. Those who make this argument cite a passage from Herbert’s pastoral manual, *The Country Parson*, in order to support this position. Strier uses an excerpt from this passage (quoted in footnote 41) to assert that Herbert was rebuking the practice of sitting at Communion, and indeed Herbert did just that. But a reading of the whole passage reveals that the poet was not offended by the sitting; he argued that human unworthiness “asks kneeling,” but he never states that kneeling is commanded. Rather, the overall passage appeals to Christian charity; if other communicants, not to mention those in authority in the Church (such as Archbishop Laud), insisted that kneeling was the only correct posture, it was uncharitable and offensive for anyone to remain sitting in the pew (78). When Herbert states that those who sit contradict an apostle, he is referring to just this breach of love within the fellowship of Christ. No apostle ever commanded Christians to kneel at communion; Paul does state over and over again the importance of each believer taking care not to offend his or her fellow Christians. This passage is not an example of Herbert being dogmatic; it is Herbert’s exhortation against dogmatism. If this is the only passage that critics

can find to support the assertion that Herbert would not conceive of sitting for an earthly communion with Christ, it is utterly inadequate.

The second argument for the eschatological position is that “Love (III)” comes at the end of a series of a poems about Heaven and, therefore, belongs with them. There is internal evidence, however, that this is not the case. Virtually every critic who discusses this poem notes that the guest draws back from Love’s invitation and does so wrongly. Yet the significance of this has not been altogether understood. How can the guest be behaving badly in Heaven? Strier, while himself endorsing the eschatological view, emphasizes the wrongness of the guest’s behavior (79). He states the guest cannot look on Love because he is too busy looking at himself, and adds, “Herbert has a strong sense of the arrogance implicit in this humility. The speaker is not only ashamed; he is also, in a sense, morally outraged. He would rather be damned than have his sense of propriety so deeply offended” (80). Arrogant? Ashamed? Morally outraged? He would rather be damned? Those are not feelings that have place in Heaven. Strier even suggests that the guest cannot look at Love because that would bring an uncomfortable mutual recognition (79). Yet Paul states of Heaven in I. Corinthians 13:12, “. . . then shall I know even as also I am known,” and John says in I John 3:2, “. . . we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” Strier’s argument defeats itself, for Strier also argues that this is a vision of Heaven; yet none of what he describes fits such a vision.

Further, one cannot help but think that perhaps Strier is a bit hard on the poor guest. When the Prodigal Son of Luke 15 returns to his father, and begs to be accepted back as a hired servant rather than a son, no one thinks this false humility; he is unworthy to be father’s son; to

take the youth back as servant would be an act of generosity on the part of the injured father. So it is that the shame of the guest at his own unworthiness is understandable. That does not make it correct and Love rebukes him, but He does so gently and with compassion, not with the sternness one would expect God to use when admonishing the self-absorbed. It is the complacency and self-satisfaction of the servant in “Love (III)” that causes the Master to take such drastic measures to correct his spiritual failings. The humility and awareness of sin that the guest brings to the feast is precisely the sort that leads to a right relationship with his Host; it is only the initial refusal of grace that is an offense.

The union of “Love (III)” consummates the transformation that is described in “Love Unknown.” The poet’s criticisms have vanished as introspection and the inward journey lead him to a better awareness of his own character. He is not the martyr he portrayed himself in “Affliction (I)” and “The Collar.” He is not a blameless victim; he is guilty, defiled, and sinful. What God has done to him has effected the transformation of “Love Unknown,” and made the sweetness of “Love (III)” possible. It is this transformation from the bitterness of death to the joy of life with God that seizes upon Henry Vaughan’s imagination and makes him desire such a journey of his own.

CHAPTER 4

VAUGHAN'S PARADOX

While mysticism in the writings of George Herbert has continued to be a topic for debate, there is little doubt that Henry Vaughan sought a mystical experience. As with Herbert, it would be inaccurate to assume that this mystical experience would follow in the tradition of the medieval mystics; Vaughan, like Herbert, claims neither visions nor miraculous manifestations. Rather, Vaughan sees God already present in nature and yearns to have the same kind of union with Him. When God seems too distant, the poet's distress is apparent in his verses. Biographer Stevie Davies says of Vaughan, "God's remoteness hurt him, and poem after poem records the baffled straining of his eyes towards a light intuited as shining just over the hill, a music just out of earshot" (16). Kenneth Friedenreich states,

The pattern of life in Silex Scintillans is both active and contemplative; it is not static. It shows the way God intends each man to cultivate the divine seed within himself. It shows how contemplation of nature can confirm and illuminate man's limited understanding of divinity. (121)

Friedenreich is not inclined to perceive Vaughan as mystical, but for all the reasons that R. A. Durr refutes as errors about mysticism, including Vaughan's loyalty to the Church of England. Friedenreich even goes so far as to suggest that the very fact that Vaughan wrote about his experiences should dispel the charge of mysticism. He states, "For a mystic, on the contrary, the actual experience in all its depth is sufficient. Nothing more has to be said. There

is no need to communicate the experience” (126). But this is an absurdity; many mystics have written about their experiences, including John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Bernard of Clairvaux, and the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Why should Vaughan be any different? The experiences of the mystic call for some form of verbal expression, and that Vaughan should have written it as poetry is perfectly appropriate.

There are several factors that contribute to the experience Vaughan describes in his poetry. Davies states of his fascination with nature, “Nature at once signaled the immanence of the Divine everywhere around him, flashing its light to him in reflections of his lost parent, and intimated the absence of that parent, for that reflected light was really only a form of shadow.” Like Herbert, Vaughan loved the ritual and ceremony of the Church of England and, unlike Herbert, had the Royalist misfortune of suffering through the days of Cromwell and the Protectorate (19). This national ordeal effectually slammed the doors of community churches in the faces Vaughan and those who shared his religious and political views; this forced the poet to take an even more inward and individualistic course than had Herbert who could always look to the public sacrament of Eucharist for reassurance of grace. Davies argues, “The temple for Vaughan had to be the house not built with hands, the invisible church of faith constructed in the inner space of the individual believer.” It had to be invisible and intangible because only such a church could be free from the depredations of Puritans who sought to destroy all the outwards symbols Vaughan considered to be most precious (21). To a very large extent, at least for the period during which he wrote *Silex Scintillans*, Vaughan was spiritually on his own. This led to one final major influence upon his writings. Without the guidance of the Church, Vaughan was

forced to rely solely on the guidance of the Scripture in the great Protestant tradition. Louis Martz would place him in the Augustinian tradition which he describes as follows:

The revelation given in the Bible shows man how to read, first nature, and then his own soul. That is to say, in Augustinian terms: man, enlightened by Biblical revelation, can grasp the Vestiges, the “traces,” of God in external nature; and from this knowledge he can then turn inward to find the Image of God within himself. (*The Paradise Within* 18)

Davies asserts that Vaughan “held the Book, as a personal message in his right hand,” and that it came to have for him “miraculous properties” (22). Forced thus to gaze only inward, with no direction but that given him by contemplation of the Bible, the excited awareness of natural beauty, and the second-hand experiences of Herbert, Vaughan begins his own quest for an experience of the Divine.

Upon opening Vaughan’s *Silex Scintillans*, the reader immediately discovers the emblem on the frontispiece. In this curious picture, the hand of God reaches out from storm clouds clutching arrows that look like lightning bolts and a sharp rock and, with these implements, strikes flames from a flint heart upon the surface of which the reader can just make out the lines of a weeping face. This illustration creates for the eyes what the words of Vaughan’s poems attempt to create within the heart -- the image of God as Vaughan had come to experience Him. It must be understood that the victory of Cromwell and the Puritans ended the world as Vaughan had known and loved it and brought him to the inevitable predicament of confronting the reality of earthly suffering; like Herbert in “Affliction (I),” he has been beset by troubles (political woes

are compounded in his own family by the death of his younger brother William), and he finds in Herbert's honest struggles the encouragement to find answers. Davies writes,

Like another better self, Herbert taught Vaughan to look into the spirit for his consolations, and to seek them in the midst of affliction. This is why I have linked the loss of William Vaughan so intimately with Vaughan's meeting with Herbert. The revelatory chamber of suffering is after all the centre of the Christian Gospel. Dying to rise, being humbled to aspire, losing to find were the paradox displayed by Jesus' arms splayed on the cross. The pure joy of that first discovery, through Scripture, through Herbert and through William, came like an inspiration; a being breathed upon by the spirit." (102)

Vaughan, like Herbert, has had his heart opened by misery. His poetry reflects a profound awareness of the hand of God being present in that misery and a determined sense of a purpose being Divinely orchestrated.

The emblem at the beginning of *Silex Scintillans*, the flint heart being struck into flame, has an accompanying introductory poem. These lines make clear to the reader exactly the direction in which the author is moving and how he intends for the reader to interpret the experiences he is recounting through his poetry. He claims that he is the unresponsive flint and describes the process by which God has sought to free him from his stony prison. At first, God called upon him gently with a "holy murmur." But the stubborn, flint heart would not respond to this quiet entreaty, so God determines to win him by force. The narrator describes this process as harsh and painful: "You draw nearer and break that mass which is my rocky heart, and that which

was formerly stone is now made flesh. See how it is torn, its fragments at last setting your heavens alight, and tears from the flint staining my cheeks” (137). This, the author asserts, is the same providential care of God that brought water from the rock in the wilderness.

That God’s care should be seen in the violent breaking of the poet’s heart is ironical enough, but Vaughan then states, in his own words, the paradox that stands at the center of the whole work, “By dying I live again, and amidst the wreck of my worldly resources, I am now more rich” (138). Vaughan could have warmly identified with the words that the Shepherd (Christ) speaks in Hannah Hurnard’s allegory; He explains why God, Who is love, can seem so fierce and relentless:

Love is a consuming fire. It is a burning, unquenchable passion for the blessedness and happiness, and, above all, for the perfection of the beloved object. The greater the love, the less it can tolerate the presence of anything that can hurt the beloved, and the less it can tolerate in the beloved anything that is unworthy or less than the best, or injurious to the happiness of the loved one. Therefore it is perfectly true that love, which is the most beautiful and the most gentle passion in the universe, can and must be at the same time the most terrible – terrible in what it is willing to endure itself in order to secure the blessing and happiness and perfection of the beloved, and, also, apparently terrible in what it will allow the beloved to endure if suffering is the only means by which the perfection or restoration to health of the beloved can be secured. (142)

Vaughan unquestionably embraces this stern view of God’s redemptive work. While Herbert

seems to begin by questioning why God allows him to suffer and works toward a resolution (death to self in “Love Unknown” and final union in “Love (III)”), Vaughan begins with Herbert’s conclusion. God is breaking his heart in order to bring about ultimate spiritual perfection. The question of *Silex Scintillans* is not “why?”, because Herbert has already addressed that dilemma for him, but rather “how?”. How will God bring about this final state of union with Himself? In *Silex Scintillans*, he pursues the answer, not by resolving a paradox, but by embracing it.

Of all Vaughan’s poems, “The World” is perhaps the most famous. In the poem, Vaughan demonstrates how the pursuit of worldly advantage always comes to nothing in the end. He begins, in the first few lines, by showing the contrast between Time and Eternity. Eternity is portrayed as “a great Ring of pure and endless light” (2), and Time as a huge moving shadow into which the Earth has been hurled (6-7). The author’s point is transparent: Eternity offers that which is lasting and true, while the things of Earth are temporary and bound up in the darkness of time which limits our ability to see and understand.

In this darkness, the soul can be deceived into believing that the short-lived gains of earthly life are worth pursuing. The lover devotes his time to gazing at a flower; the flower has always been considered symbolic of erotic love, yet Vaughan is most likely thinking of Biblical passages that use flowers as symbols of the brevity and temporariness of life. In Matthew 6, Jesus speaks of flowers as “the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven.” Isaiah 40 is more direct in comparing the short duration of flowers to the brief life of an individual:

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever.

The politician, or statesman, fares even worse than the deluded lover. One smiles to think that Vaughan most likely had those pestilential Puritans in mind when he wrote this verse, for the Puritan was a “statesman” and not a courtier. In the poem, he is a thoroughly despicable figure who, in spite of “clouds of crying witnesses,” manages to perjure, profit, and prey upon the innocent. He does not ignore the blood and tears of the people; he *drinks* them and moves in a fog or darkness that arises from a condemned conscience. Vaughan is very careful to point out that this corrupt and pathetic figure has profited from the church, for he says that “churches and altars fed him” (27). If the poem were a cartoon, the statesman would be an enormous leech (with Cromwell’s face, one would humorously like to think) clinging to the political and religious body of the people, greedily sucking out the life’s blood of the innocent in order to satiate his loathsome craving for power. Vaughan is remarkably blunt with the miser as well; he sits fearfully on a pile of rust in accordance with Christ’s warning in Matthew 6:19 that earthly treasures are prone to rust and corruption, and that they may be stolen. The miser fears thieves (36) and so holds even tighter to the treasure that he is unable to enjoy because he scarcely even trusts himself with it (34-35). He is truly miserable because all his devotion is pinned to that which may lose its value or be taken from him.

In the last stanza of the poem, Vaughan offers a picture of what is really available to humanity that is worth having. It is possible, Vaughan argues, through tears and song to ascend into eternity (46-47). He does not describe the joys of those who thus transcend the temporal, and indeed they do not seem to be a very jolly company, but he leaves no question that what they obtain is worth infinitely more than what the greedy and powerful obtain in this life. He describes the misery of this worldliness in the most degrading terms, "O fools (said I,) thus to prefer dark night/ Before true light,/ To live in grots, and caves, and hate the day/ Because it shows the way" (49-52). In the heat of their infatuations, the worldly have fled from the revelatory light of eternity to wallow in the darkness and pits of lust; he concludes the poem by quoting I John 2:16-17: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life are entirely of the world, not God, and all that pertains to them is fleeting and will finally disappear altogether. Only those who do God's will can have assurance that their gains are of lasting value.

This poem reflects a resignation that has occurred in the poet in the course of his own spiritual journey. With the collapse of the monarchy and the rise of the Puritans, Vaughan had seen the foundations of his world disappear and had been made to feel the brevity of life. Davies states, "Vaughan was struck to the heart by the death of his brother William in 1648 at the age of about twenty; and by the execution of his King in 1649" (78). His reading of Herbert offered him a whole other perspective of the world in which a man (Herbert) could seem to lose everything that the world valued, such as fame, fortune, and friends, and yet gain something of infinite worth – an intimate relationship with God and a knowledge of the Divine. Davies argues that Vaughan never really found mystical fulfillment and that he was too honest to claim what he

had not received, yet here is one more critic who expects a Protestant to have a Catholic experience. She states, “He follows the meditation exercises of the devotional tradition inaugurated by Ignatius Loyola, and moves on the mystic’s path to ecstasy – but he never reaches such ecstasy. There is a peculiar integrity about Vaughan’s refusal to claim a consummation he never experienced, only longed for” (79). Davies appears to have read and adopted the views of Louis Martz and assumes that because the Counter-Reformation had embraced a certain type of mysticism once again, that mystics in the Reformation tradition must also be embracing that same sort of mysticism. Yet all the solid evidence suggests otherwise. Is there anywhere in *Silex Scintillans* where Vaughan pleads for an ecstatic experience? Vaughan was not seeking the stigmata or a vision of the Mother of God any more than his model, Herbert. Vaughan is pleading for more light! Why else does he fill his poems with imagery of light and darkness? He cries out for a certain awareness of God and an experience of Him that will not merely give him pleasure but which will remake him completely. Ross Garner places Vaughan firmly in the tradition of the *via negativa*, “. . . we have defined the nature of Vaughan’s religious experience as that of a longing for incorporation into the dark night of the soul as it grows out of Christian dogma assented to as experience” (153). And in the “Author’s Emblem,” at the very beginning of the book, he speaks as if he has achieved that consummation, “By dying, *I live again*, and amidst the wreck of my worldly resources, *I am now* more rich” [italics mine]. The whole purpose of this introductory poem is to present a valid experience in which he assures the reader that, though God’s hand has been heavy, the poet has received what was needed. In that sense, it almost does not matter what Vaughan sought in the first place so long as what he found in the

end provided satisfaction. Like Herbert's pilgrim in "The Pilgrimage," what one pursues is very often not the thing one needs, or even really wants.

If anyone doubts the nature of Vaughan's quest, "The Night" offers a paradoxical view of his purpose. The story is based, as he himself indicates at the beginning, on the passage in John 3 where Nicodemus visits Jesus at night to ask him questions. The contrast between the darkness of night and the presence of Jesus, the Light of the world, provides the primary imagery of the poem. He states, "Wise Nicodemus saw such light/ As made him know his God by night" (5-6). This is, of course, all that any great mystic has ever sought. The medieval author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* urges the reader to use love's darts to pierce the dark clouds around God's throne until He reveals Himself at the proper time. The waiting soul, while in those clouds, remains in doubt and longing unfulfilled, and so Vaughan speaks in terms of quiet frustration: Nicodemus' midnight vision of the Divine "can never more be done" (11), but if that is so, why does he continue to long for it. True longing is always based on some hope of fulfillment. Vaughan continues to ask where Nicodemus found Christ so that he may also go there to look for him, "O who will tell me, where/ He found thee at that dead and silent hour!"(13-14).

Vaughan then goes on to offer an explanation as to why the Lord must be sought at night. At night, the world is defeated (25) because the ultimate goal of worldly things is to distract the soul from seeking after God; at night, the world itself is forgotten. Those who are too "busy" to seek God must cease their work at night (26), and those who rest find temporary release from the anxieties of living (26). Vaughan also notes that Christ frequently chose the night as a time for prayer (29). The next lines describe Christ as having hair wet with dew, "the clear drops of

night”, and Vaughan claims that it is at night that He knocks and gives his “still, soft call” (32-35). This imagery comes almost verbatim from Song of Solomon 5:2, “I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night.” The lover knocks on the door of his beloved’s bedchamber inviting her to intimacy, and so Christ chooses the quiet darkness to call out to the soul.

In the next two verses, the poet offers his vision of heaven on earth,

Were all my loud, evil days
Calm and unhaunted as is thy dark Tent,
Whose peace but by some Angel’s wing or voice
Is seldom rent;
Then I in Heaven all the long year
Would keep, and never wander here.

But living where the sun
Doth all things wake, and where all mix and tire
Themselves and others, I consent and run
To every mire,
And by this world’s ill-guiding light,
Err more than I can do by night.

Two things are particularly significant about the way he portrays earthly existence. He presents

first the anxiety and alarm that characterize earthly existence; Heaven is desirable because Heaven is a place of peace where nothing disrupts but the occasional brush of angel-wings. The second flaw he finds in his earthly life is the tendency to wallow in mires and err from the truth; in other words, his human propensity to sinfulness. If he is requesting that God deliver him from these things, then one could say that Vaughan really wants peace and holiness. The use of darkness and light in the poem is paradoxical; darkness is a positive thing here because it obscures the world, it causes the soul to lay aside the worries of life, and, in the last two lines, it renders Self completely invisible. It is a “dazzling darkness”, however, because God may be seen in it, just as He was seen by Nicodemus.

Some critics have seen this ambiguous conclusion as evidence that Vaughan never really arrived at the point he desired in his mystical journey. Friedenreich states that Vaughan is crying out for illumination (134). According to Durr, the poem concludes with the desire to enter the “dazzling darkness,” that is the dark night of the soul, the final death to self that leads to the earthly consummation of union with God. Durr states, “Vaughan heard the still, soft voice, the knocking in the night, and he sought to open fully to Him; he had made his hard nocturnal pilgrimage, but we do not know that he arrived home” (122). But, as Durr argues, success is not required of a mystic, but only that he or she attempt the journey (xiii). One does not need to prove that Vaughan achieved a mystical consummation in order to accept his mysticism. Some critics have speculated that Vaughan gave up writing because his poetry was not received well or because, with prosperity, he had “gotten over” his mystical phase. Edmund Blundered refutes this:

One is inclined to believe that Vaughan had found himself on such sudden heights

of vision that afterwards he knew his day had come and gone. The inmost leaf . . . had unfolded and the flower quietly fell to the ground. And indeed, a man cannot expect to go on saying, 'I saw Eternity the other night'; after that, it is healthy for him to do as Vaughan did, and dig the garden or go fishing. (39)

The paradox that was begun by Herbert, that of the experience of evil for those who serve a perfect God, is answered by the paradox in the writings of Vaughan. The soul experiences death as a transformation that allows the person to experience new life and an intimate relationship with God. The darkness of loss has become the dazzling awareness of God and the poet cries out, "Moriendo, revixi!" – "through dying, I live."

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THE INFLUENCE OF HERBERT

While a great deal has been said about the imitation of George Herbert in Henry Vaughan's poetry, not many critics address the profound inward change that took place when Vaughan first read *The Temple*. Perhaps this is because much of the evidence for such a discussion would have to be circumstantial, but the evidence is present nonetheless. There are three ways in which Herbert's influence can be seen in Vaughan's writing: in the conscious rejection of erotic verse for sacred verse, in the recurring use of Herbert's material, and in the spiritual journey that Vaughan portrays in *Silex Scintillans*.

While no one seems to be quite as indebted to Herbert as Vaughan, it may be helpful here to point out the enormous influence exerted by Herbert over other poets of the same era. Elizabeth Clarke echoes the suggestion of Stanley Stewart that perhaps there is even a recognizable School of Herbert that would include such writers as Vaughan and Richard Crashaw. Crashaw, like Vaughan, even chose to identify himself with Herbert through his title, *The Steps to the Temple* (8). In *The Paradise Within*, Louis Martz places Crashaw and Herbert in the same school of poets as Southwell, Donne, and Alabaster (3).

While Crashaw, who came from a Puritan family and converted to Catholicism, has a very different theology from Herbert's, there is good reason to believe that this difference lies mainly in the extremes to which Crashaw took his own experience. According to George Williamson, Crashaw was more High Church than Herbert and more ascetic (120). Williamson

states, “In the Laudian movement, Crashaw went beyond Herbert, toward Rome. He also went beyond Herbert in devotional life, by way of Little Gidding, the ‘Arminian Nunnery’ of Nicholas Ferrar” (123). This allusion to Herbert’s friend Ferrar, who ran his house as a sort of religious order with rigorous devotion and constant prayer vigils, connects Crashaw still more deeply to Herbert’s heritage. While Herbert’s mysticism is debated, Williamson argues that Crashaw is definitely a follower of the *via negativa*. He states, “In the negative way to God the initiate ‘must leave behind all things both in the sensible and in the intelligible world, till he enters into the darkness of nescience that is truly mystical,’ a nothingness beyond sense and reason. Hence darkness becomes the way to true light in the poem . . .” (136). This sounds remarkably like Vaughan’s “The Night” in which the wandering soul is less likely to be lost in the darkness than in the blinding light of day.

While no one has ever placed Herbert within the *via negativa*, there are ideas in his poetry that could have prompted such passionate readers as Crashaw and Vaughan to choose that path. In Herbert’s “Pilgrimage,” the pilgrim clearly experiences something similar to the dark night of the soul; he must experience loss and be disillusioned to the point of despair before he can realize that what he really wants is farther off and that his spiritual journey is not complete. In “Affliction (I),” Herbert makes his complaints to God in a manner that would do justice to a character from the Old Testament, demanding to know what on earth God is doing and what He expects to accomplish by it. In “Love (III),” he describes a union with God that seems to be one of the profoundest expressions of mystical joy in English literature. Love (nothing is more mystical than to address God as Love, as though it were His proper name) has invited him to eat;

he is unworthy and, in his shame and confusion, pleads that unworthiness; Love insists that he sit down and eat anyway, for the reproach of his sins has been taken by Another. He has been freed to participate in the kind of fellowship and intimacy that eating represents. In spite of Paul A. Parrish's claim that Crashaw's work owes no debt to Herbert other than what might be seen in two of his poems specifically ("Charitas Nimia. Or the Dear Bargain," and "Office of the Holy Crosse"), it seems that Herbert's contribution to Crashaw and his most important and most ignored contribution to Vaughan, is this seed of an idea. The elements of mysticism in Herbert seem to germinate in his readers and to bring about a full-blown desire for the tangible awareness of the divine.

For Herbert and Vaughan, the theme of the poetry was everything. Clarke points out that there are several poems, including "Jordan (I)" and "The Forerunners," in which Herbert makes a clear choice to write religious verse exclusively. She states, "Herbert is articulating his conscious choice of the role of Christian lyric poet in opposition to the secular love poet" (6). This view is adopted by Vaughan, who, upon reading *The Temple*, renounced the amorous verses of his youth and committed himself to writing sacred poems. Prior to *Silex Scintillans*, Vaughan had devoted his time to writing love poetry, even creating two fictional personas, Amoret and Etesia, in the spirit of Herrick's Julia, one presumes (Davies 63). In his preface to *Silex Scintillans*, Vaughan describes the evils of erotic verse and the pitfalls they provide for both the author and the reader. He then asserts that he has been delivered from writing such destructive poetry (which he pleads with the reader not to read) through the writings of George Herbert:

The first, that with any effectual success attempted a diversion of this foul and

overflowing stream, was the blessed man, Mr. George Herbert, whose 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)

For Vaughan, Herbert had redirected the force of his poetic energy and demonstrated how this art could be sanctified for God's use.

Vaughan sought not only to follow Herbert's vocation but also to emulate his poetic voice. Harold Skulsky maintains that Vaughan's poetry is profoundly social because he engages Herbert in a dialogue in which he echoes Herbert's own terminology and gives it new meaning (89). Not only does he fill his poetry with allusions to Herbert and to the Bible, but his verses invite the reader to become involved in the conversation (90).

The legacy of Herbert in Vaughan can be seen in "The Pilgrimage" and "Regeneration." Martz states, ". . . This joining of hands and hearts between Vaughan and Herbert is almost equally evident in the opening poem of the volume proper: 'Regeneration'" (8). Like the narrator of "The Pilgrimage," the speaker in "Regeneration" begins a journey that will lead up into the mountains. This narrator also reaches the peak only to discover that he has gained nothing there; warned by the voice to continue on, he leaves. In "The Pilgrimage," Herbert's narrator is warned that death is on the road that he has chosen to follow; in Vaughan's poem, the speaker follows a road where ". . . only go/ Prophets, and friends of God" (31-32). Here Herbert's poem ends with the pilgrim's grim resolve and his assertion that death cannot be more miserable than life. Vaughan's poem continues, however, and this speaker catches a glimpse of the garden where his true expectation resides. Here in this garden of spices, which corresponds

to the garden of Song of Solomon 4:16 (Vaughan himself gives the reference at the end of the poem), Vaughan sees light and beauty but states that his “restless eye” still desires something (63-64). That something is described in the next verse as “a rushing wind.” This phrase immediately reminds the reader of Acts and “the rushing mighty wind” that symbolized the anointing of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. In the last verse, as the narrator turns in every direction to find where this wind is, it whispers back to him, “Where I please” (80) – an allusion to Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, in which he describes the Holy Spirit as a wind that “blows where it listeth.”

In “Regeneration,” Vaughan has taken Herbert’s experience as a foundation for his own. Herbert’s ideas become the starting place for his own meditations. What is it that Herbert’s pilgrim really seeks though he does not know it? According to Vaughan, it is the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit that blows upon the garden so that spices can flow from it. Vaughan clearly asserts that this is the promised result of the death that Herbert’s pilgrim has been warned will lie ahead; where Herbert’s pilgrim continues with stern, almost despairing, resolution, Vaughan’s speaker understands the spiritual rewards that come from the sacrifice of self. He states, “Lord, then said I, *On me one breath,/ And let me die before my death!*” (81-81). This insight can only be possible from one who has already read “Love (III)” as well as “Affliction (I)” and “The Pilgrimage.” Vaughan has read the entire scope of Herbert’s poetry and has already learned, through Herbert, the purpose of his suffering.

Perhaps Vaughan’s greatest debt to Herbert lies in the intangible rather than such tangible things as lines and verses. By emphasizing Vaughan’s spiritual and emotional crisis at the time

he first read *The Temple*, Davies credits Herbert as a profound, even Christ-like, benefactor. She states,

He was empty and Herbert filled him; exhausted and Herbert refreshed him and relieved his spiritual poverty. Herbert put words in Vaughan's mouth, in a literal sense. He studied and mirrored Herbert; became for span a latter-day twin of his relative. Herbert taught him not just a poetic manner, the power of virtuoso verse-forms, piety and a confessional art, but anew language of the heart and a means of communicating with his own innermost self. (94)

One cannot help but wonder if Herbert himself might not have found this assertion almost blasphemous; he would have maintained that if Vaughan was spiritually filled through reading *The Temple*, it was because God had graciously chosen to work through the verses. But perhaps, for Davies this is the needless splitting of hairs. Vaughan had a radical spiritual encounter that came about through reading Herbert's poems. E. L. Marilla plays down the idea of a sudden conversion, stating that Vaughan was never a prodigal and seemed always inclined to piety. The worst thing known about Vaughan's early life, according to Marilla, is that he wrote secular poetry which he later came to view as profane (164-165). This reasoning has two main flaws, the first and most obvious being that it relies solely on what is known about Vaughan's early life which is, in fact, very little. Davies maintains that Vaughan spent his early life trying to be wicked and not quite succeeding. She states, "We have the impression that Henry Vaughan would rather have liked to be a rip-roaring rake but that the requisite salaciousness and violence were not in his temperament" (65). Edmund Blunden seems to agree,

He is constantly rebuking his younger self for presumed sowing of wild oats, but when he comes to details, we find that it is a few games of bowls, or a scarf or a pair of gloves, perhaps an occasional half-pint of sack which he so strongly condemns. (32)

The degree of Vaughan's wickedness is beside the point, however. The attempt at being evil, for one as religious as Vaughan, would have been sinful enough. The second flaw in Marilla's reasoning is that he completely forgets the Christian law of the conscience in which an action that might not be sinful for one becomes a sin against conscience for another. If Vaughan's conscience condemned him, then that was condemnation indeed, and to find mercy and regeneration spelled out for him through Herbert's poetry must have been an unspeakable joy.

This has profound implications for the debate over mysticism in Herbert. If Herbert did not embrace some aspects of mysticism, how could he inspire the pursuit in others such as Crashaw and Vaughan? One easy answer is that both his successors had very different temperaments from Herbert himself and, in Crashaw's case, different religious convictions altogether. Yet there is no denying that the mystical experiences they both sought were journeys that began in the pages of *The Temple*. Did Vaughan ever attain the mystical experience he desired? Either way, he would never have come to desire it had he not been moved to spiritual passion by the experiences Herbert described for him. Would Crashaw have so entitled his own volume of poetry after Herbert's out of mere courtesy? It is more credible to believe that he saw parallels between Herbert's spiritual ambition and his own. While there may never be a scholarly consensus on the nature of mysticism in either Herbert or Vaughan, there can be no doubt that

elements of mysticism are present in the poetry of George Herbert and that they flowered into the spiritual quest of Henry Vaughan.

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