

## Vaughan and Divine Inspiration: A Reply to Donald Dickson\*

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Donald Dickson's recent examination of agency in Henry Vaughan's sacred poetry attempts with unusual straightforwardness to explore what Vaughan meant when he claimed to have "copied" his verses under the force of divine inspiration. The preface and the poetry of the enlarged *Silex Scintillans* (1655), issued when this theory of Vaughan's reached its highest development, certainly deserve further attention along such lines. One might wonder what happened to Vaughan's poetic technique when he attempted to ground his verses in authentic spiritual experience, and how this vatic conception of the poet's role related to his strong endorsement of Anglican form and tradition.

Dickson suggests that Vaughan at first embraced the Jonsonian and classical convention of describing poems as a poet's offspring, and then rejected the trope to claim God as the agent who produced *Silex Scintillans*. There is certainly evidence that the regime of Vaughan's religious rigorism included a change in how he perceived the relations between himself and his poems. In the 1654 Preface to *Silex Scintillans*, the poet speaks of "idle books" as "another *body*, in which [the author] always *lives*, and *sins* (after *death*) as *fast* and as *foul*, as ever he did in his *life*."<sup>1</sup> Vaughan did not endorse such a stringent view of authorial responsibility when he attacked the anti-literary biases of the Puritans in "Upon Mr. *Fletchers* Playes" (54-55), and scruples of this sort seem far away when we read "*In amicum fœneratorem*" (43-44) and "To his retired friend, an Invitation to *Brecknock*" (46-48). The differentiation between physical life and literary fame in Vaughan's Latin poem to

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\*Reference: Donald R. Dickson, "Agency in Vaughan's Sacred Poetry: Creative Acts or Divine Gifts," *Connotations* 9.2 (1999/2000): 174-89.

Matthew Herbert (93), apparently an early poem, is not as clearly to me "a paean to the poet's *two bodies*" as it seems to Dickson; but the "*posthuma vita*" is close enough to "another *body*" to make me wonder whether Vaughan's tutor could have experienced some unease while reading the 1654 Preface. Vaughan's rigorism seems to have been little more to the tastes of worldly and temporizing seventeenth-century Royalists than it has been to nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars in English; and I suspect that Anthony Wood did not mean to compliment Vaughan when he neglected to mention *Silex Scintillans* in the *Athenæ Oxonienses* and called him by the name of his unapproved verse collection.<sup>2</sup>

A couple of biographical points might be made in response to Donald Dickson's account of the onset of Vaughan's rigorism and Herbertian poetic. First, there is really no evidence that Vaughan experienced any illness "shortly after finishing"<sup>3</sup> the 1647 version of *Olor Iscanus*, although the idea has been repeated many times. Vaughan's first modern editors, Henry Lyte and Alexander Grosart, disagreed with Vaughan's moralistic repudiation of his earlier verse, and attempted to ameliorate the poet's action by characterizing it as an utterance under crisis. One of the ways they accomplished this was to lengthen backward a severe illness that Vaughan did indeed experience during the mid-1650s. So far as I know, the only chronologically established event that can safely be recognized as pivotal for the poet's redirection toward sacred verse is the death of his younger brother William in 1648. For my second point, Vaughan's "one-stanza dedicatory poem used in the first edition of *Silex*" (177) was not headed "To My Most Merciful, My Most Loving, and Dearly Loved Redeemer," but bore rather the terse title "The Dedication," an introductory strategy lifted directly from Herbert's *The Temple*. Neither of these details compromises Dickson's arguments; but since the confusions over Vaughan's biography and over the differences between the two issues of *Silex Scintillans* have been so persistent historically, it can't hurt to mention them again.

Donald Dickson does not think that Vaughan's ascription of *Silex Scintillans* to God implies a denial of real writerly agency on the part of the poet. Such an interpretation, Dickson says, would ally Vaughan with distinctively Presbyterian positions on man's freedom, thus associating the poet with a theological faction he repudiated. I agree, and think the emblematic metaphor epitomizing Vaughan's collection certainly supports our placing of him in the scholastic and patristic mainstream on such questions. The poems are sparks specifically from Vaughan's flinty heart, and are thus produced by a divinely-initiated synergy—or, as Dickson puts it, a supernatural "sufficiency" as described by St. Paul in II Corinthians. This implicit account of divine-human relations differs in emphasis from the doctrine of the Divine Decree typically associated with Puritanism.

However, there are further consequences of this theory of divinely-initiated synergy that have raised even more doubts and comments about Vaughan's theology. The poet's remarkable conviction that any catering to the literary motive would necessarily frustrate the proper ends of sacred poetry (391-92), his claims that his newly-written poems depict and enable immediate experience of "heavenly refreshments" (392), his urging of his fellow poets to leave off "*vain and vitious subjects, for divine Themes and Celestial praise*" (391), strike many contemporary readers as "more characteristic of radical forms of Puritanism than of the Anglo-Catholic tradition which [Vaughan] inherited"<sup>4</sup>—indeed, not merely as curiously Puritan, but as downright nonconformist in their implications that one can "unite with God personally"<sup>5</sup> outside of traditionally developed religious form. I rather think that much of this puzzlement emanates from the post-industrial tendency to array liturgical and hierarchical Christianity in simple opposition to cultural innovation and individualism, and from the related tendency to classify Vaughan's episcopal Anglican faction as the party of essentially mediated religion. A helpful colleague once suggested to me that Vaughan's oeuvre had (in addition to its significant literary value) the virtue of helping us to question our usual historical and theoretical categories. Vaughan makes us remember, for

instance, that however many or few sacramental “helps” are employed, serious Christianity invariably aims toward a personal, irreducibly individual uniting with God. I agree with Donald Dickson’s refusal to accept Jonathan Goldberg’s recent denial of individual poetic voice in Herbert, and would even question whether the poet who wrote

And now in age I bud again,  
After so many deaths I live and write;  
I once more smell the dew and rain,  
And relish versing:<sup>6</sup>

is done sufficient justice by Dickson’s own claims about surrendering one’s personal story to typology.<sup>7</sup> Much of Herbert is about giving up worldly ambition and personal pride, but personal pleasure and individual accomplishment seem in this passage to be “more ours for being” Christ’s.

When Vaughan advocated the emulation of “*Hierotheus* and holy *Herbert*” (392), he was implying that the liturgical “helps” he respected had their basis in inspired experience, and that those who accepted the authority of such experience could participate in it and, if God allowed, add to it. In *The Divine Names* of Dionysius the Areopagite, Vaughan had found the following episode in the life of the vatic poet Hierotheus:

As you know, we and he and many of our holy brothers met together for a vision of that mortal body, that source of life, which bore God.<sup>8</sup> James, the brother of God, was there. So too was Peter, that summit, that chief of all those who speak of God. After the vision, all these hierarchs chose, each as he was able, to praise the omnipotent goodness of that divine frailty. But next to the sacred writers themselves was my teacher [Hierotheus]. He surpassed all the divinely rapt hierarchs, all the other sacred initiators. Yes indeed. He was so caught up, so taken out of himself, experiencing communion with the things praised, that everyone who heard him, everyone who knew him (or, rather, did not know him) considered him to be inspired, to be speaking with divine praises.<sup>9</sup>

One can see why Vaughan saw such a radical divide between his secular versifying with eye toward Donne, Jonson, and Randolph, and his sacred emulations of Herbert, whom he believed to have recorded moments of “true, practick piety” (391), inspired experience along Hierotheus’s lines. For Vaughan as a sacred poet, a good poem was measured by remarkably different standards from those he had recognized as a would-be Son of Ben<sup>10</sup>, and despite his claim in the 1654 Preface that holy “*performance is easie*” (391), Vaughan seems also to have experienced some difficulties with it. I do not think that previous secular work was troubling Vaughan when he pleaded for “true, unfeigned verse” in his poem “Anguish” (526), an explication that Dickson seems to infer. “Anguish” rather admits the danger of sacred writing becoming a literary exercise when it ought to result from what John Henry Newman called “real assent,”<sup>11</sup> from Hierotheus’s experienced “communion with the things praised.” Vaughan’s best poems, the highlight selections from *Silex Scintillans* that have kept him an audience since the mid-1800s, act precisely within this ideal, communicating remarkable spiritual authenticity through “astounding, if erratic, visionary and aural powers.”<sup>12</sup>

Donald Dickson’s willingness to take Vaughan’s claims about *Silex Scintillans* seriously includes, I’m glad to say, clear recognition of the connections between the poet’s commitment to inspired Christian poetry, his endorsement of Welsh bardic traditions, and his involvement with the Platonic supernaturalisms of the hermetica. Work on Vaughan that can unify these aspects of the poet’s thinking promises an accurately contextualized and helpfully appreciative aid to our enjoyment of Vaughan’s poetry.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>L. C. Martin, ed., *The Works of Henry Vaughan*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1957) 390. Citations below from Vaughan's poetry and prose are by page and/or line from this edition.

<sup>2</sup>See F. E. Hutchinson, *Henry Vaughan: A Life and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1947) 207-10 for Wood's reaction to Vaughan in correspondence.

<sup>3</sup>Donald Dickson, "Agency in Vaughan's Sacred Poetry: Creative Acts or Divine Gifts?" *Connotations* 9 (1999/2000): 177. Citations from Dickson below are from this article.

<sup>4</sup>James D. Simmonds, *Masques of God: Form and Theme in the Poetry of Henry Vaughan* (Pittsburgh, PA: U of Pittsburgh P, 1972) 209.

<sup>5</sup>Ronald Hutton, *The British Republic, 1649-1660* (London: Macmillan, 1990) 11, quoted in Alan Rudrum, "Paradoxical Persona: Vaughan's Self-Fashioning," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 62 (2000): 366.

<sup>6</sup>F. E. Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1941) 166 ("The Flower," ll. 36-39).

<sup>7</sup>"Herbert struggled to reconcile himself to the fact that true representation was possible only when he surrendered his personal story for the typological one that represented his true life's story. What he struggled to understand was that his own story had already been laid out for him" (180).

<sup>8</sup>That is, for the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

<sup>9</sup>Colin Luibheid, tr., *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987) 70.

<sup>10</sup>But there can be no doubt that Vaughan's secular poetic apprenticeship stood him in good stead when he turned to the sacred.

<sup>11</sup>Ross Garner, *Henry Vaughan: Experience and the Tradition* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago, 1959) 146.

<sup>12</sup>Joseph H. Summers, *The Heirs of Donne and Jonson* (New York: OUP, 1970) 121.