

# Vaughan's Living Waters: A Response to Jonathan Nauman

DONALD R. DICKSON

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## Abstract

This article extends Jonathan Nauman’s analysis of how Vaughan used the trope of the classical river poet to establish his poetic pedigree as the Swan of Usk. I try to show how Vaughan transforms this trope in “Regeneration” into biblical pastoralism, then uses sacred watercourses to bring closure to *Silex Scintillans*. The mysterious fountain in “Regeneration”—whose antecedents are in Eden, in the enclosed garden of the Canticles evoked in the poem’s coda, and in the restored pastoral paradise of the New Jerusalem—prepares us for a more involved journey in such poems as “The Search” and “Vanity of Spirit,” where the poet’s failure to read the mysteries in the flowing waters is significant. By contrast, one of the last poems in *Silex*, “The Water-fall,” demonstrates just how far the poet has come in his spiritual understanding.

As Jonathan Nauman has recently demonstrated in these pages, Henry Vaughan in his early work emulated the contemporary men of letters he admired and hoped to join—those devotees of Ben Jonson whose work he came to know during his early years at Oxford and London—who were themselves emulating their classical forbears. Nauman ably

shows how the pastoral poem “To the River *Isca*” that opens *Olor Iscanus* (first intended for publication in 1647) reworked tropes familiar to the river poet to establish a classical pedigree for his native land and himself as the swan of the river Usk. Furthermore, when Vaughan began to channel his poetic energy to sacred verse, he transformed this trope in the introductory lyric to *Silex Scintillans*, “Regeneration,” toward a biblical pastoralism. Nauman’s analysis rightly focuses on the beginnings of these two books to make his point about how Vaughan’s “conversion” (as it is usually styled) affected his poetry. I would like to carry the analysis further to show how Vaughan used this form of pastoralism featuring sacred watercourses as a way to bring closure to *Silex Scintillans*.

Nauman draws our attention to the importance of the opening poems in both *Olor* and *Silex* that introduce us to tropes, whose pedigree David Quint has traced from Virgil’s *Fourth Georgic* to Sannazaro, Tasso, and Milton. Even in antiquity, springs and rivers were understood to flow from a common source into the abyss in a grand confluence, with a verse in Ecclesiastes (1:7) confirming this science as I have shown in *The Fountain of Living Waters* (see 11-28). With its shockingly anamorphic landscape, “Regeneration”—the first poem in English that follows the Latin verses explaining the typology behind the emblematic title page’s *flashing flint stone*—Vaughan draws us into a world quite different from *Olor*’s festive celebration of the *genii* attendant upon his river. Absent is what Nauman calls “the literary ennoblement of the Usk valley” (51), and fully present is biblical allegory where the rebellious “Ward,” attempting to escape his bondage, quickly perceives his primrose path in “high-spring” to be

Meere stage, and show,  
My walke a monstrous, mountain’d thing  
Rough-cast with Rocks, and snow (*Works* 1: 57, ll. 10-12)

With the landscape being transformed around him, the pilgrim ascends a mountain hoping his “late paines” will be acknowledged to his credit, only to discover they are far outweighed by the “smoake, and pleasures” of his past (*Works* 1: 57, ll. 22-23). So, he flees eastward into yet

another emblematic tableau. As Jonathan Post noted in his seminal study of Vaughan's *conversion* to his new poetic master George Herbert, this poem contains "perhaps the most astonishing celebration of the early moments of faith in all the religious poetry" (196). The sixth stanza records this remarkable moment:

The unthrift Sunne shot vitall gold  
   A thousand peeces,  
 And heaven its azure did unfold  
   Checqu'r'd with snowie fleeces,  
   The aire was all in spice  
   And every bush  
 A garland wore; Thus fed my Eyes  
   But all the Eare lay hush. (*Works* 1: 58, ll. 41-48)

Yet this extraordinary moment leads him to the central mystery in the scene: the ward follows the sound of the water flowing from a fountain to the cistern into which it collects. Here he observes "divers stones, some bright, and round / Others ill-shap'd, and dull" (*Works* 1: 58, 55-56); similarly, he spies nearby a "banke of flowers" where some sleep and some are awake. The fear that strikes the ward is that his heart may not be a "lively stone" (1 Peter 2:5) or that he may be spiritually asleep. He then prays for the spirit to inspire him "[...] to blow upon [his] garden" so that he may live (*Works* 1: 59, 81-82). Notably, there is no indication that this gesture is heeded, or his prayer answered.

Clearly, Vaughan had Herbert's own allegorical poem "The Pilgrimage" in mind when he penned "Regeneration," though he extends the allegory considerably. Usually when we encounter a natural landscape in *Silex*, we should recognize its biblical analogue. This can be readily seen in his poem "The Search," where his speaker spends all night in a "roving Extasie / To find my Saviour" (*Works* 1: 66, 4-5) that takes him from Bethlehem to Calvary, only to be told that this earthly pursuit is futile:

Search well another world; who studies this,  
 Travels in Clouds, seekes *Manna*, where none is. (*Works* 1: 68, ll. 95-96)

The mystery presented in the fountain in this sacred space in “Regeneration”—whose antecedents are Eden with its central watercourse, the enclosed garden of the Canticles with its “well of living waters” evoked in the poem’s coda, the restored pastoral paradise of the New Jerusalem—prepares us for a more involved journey whose biblical analogues are not as easily recognizable as in “The Search.” The opening poem is only the beginning of a long and troubled path towards salvation, which is heralded by the emblematic title with its emblem of the *flashing flint stone*, the obdurate heart that must be shaped through affliction (see *The Fountain of Living Waters*, 125-30). The difficulties of this journey are chronicled in the poems that follow.

In his Preface to the second part of *Silex*, Vaughan explains that one of his intentions in changing poetic modes from secular to devotional was for the practice of piety: “to give up our thoughts to pious *Themes* and *Contemplations* (if it be done for pieties sake) is a great *step* towards *perfection*; because it will *refine*, and *dispose* to devotion and sanctity” (*Works* 2: 558, ll. 134-37). The progress in this process of the ward introduced in the opening poem can be charted by certain moments alongside of watercourses. In “Vanity of Spirit,” an early meditative poem at a spring, Vaughan addresses the presumption that his speaker is a *mystic* capable of probing the hidden secrets of nature.

Quite spent with thoughts I left my Cell, and lay  
 Where a shrill spring tun’d to the early day.  
     I beg’d here long, and gron’d to know  
     Who gave the Clouds so brave a bow,  
     Who bent the spheres, and circled in  
     Corruption with this glorious Ring,  
     What is his name, and how I might  
     Descry some part of his great light.  
 I summon’d nature: peirc’d through all her store,  
 Broke up some seales, which none had touch’d before,  
     Her wombe, her bosome, and her head  
     Where all her secrets lay a bed  
     I rifled quite, and having past  
     Through all the Creatures, came at last  
     To search my selfe, where I did find  
     Traces, and sounds of a strange kind.

Here of this mighty spring, I found some drills,  
With Echoes beaten from th' eternall hills... (*Works* 1: 80-81, ll. 1-18)

At this “mighty spring” the poet tries to read the mysteries of an ancient monument nearby—perhaps one of the many cromlechs found in Brecknockshire—but “That little light” he had fails him completely.

Weake beames, and fires flash'd to my sight,  
Like a young East, or Moone-shine night,  
Which shew'd me in a nook cast by  
A peece of much antiquity,  
With Hyeroglyphicks quite dismembred,  
And broken letters scarce remembred.  
I tooke them up, and (much Joy'd,) went about  
T' unite those peeces, hoping to find out  
The mystery; but this neer done,  
That little light I had was gone:  
It griev'd me much. (*Works* 1: 81, ll. 19-29)

“Vanity of Spirit” is an often-overlooked poem, but, in my judgment, an important marker of his lack of spiritual progress, for he fails to understand anything meaningful in this meditation. The *light* of his reason is insufficient to illuminate the hieroglyphics of this monument or even of himself.

By contrast, one of the last poems in *Silex* 1655, “The Water-fall,” demonstrates just how far the poet has come in his spiritual understanding and, as one of the final poems, helps create closure for the volume. Unlike “Regeneration” where the fountain is presented as part of the shockingly anamorphic landscape, or “Vanity of Spirit” where the meditation at the spring was essentially frustrating, the meditative experience at the waterfall is enlightening. As I have argued in “Vaughan’s ‘The Water-fall’ and Protestant Meditation,” the poet can now *read* the truths of this powerful watercourse where before they were shrouded in mystery. What guides the speaker through his meditation, and what becomes the real source of his joy, is his understanding that these confluent waters express a more profound circulation: “All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place

from whence the rivers come, thither they return again" (Ecclesiastes 1:7). All life streams from its divine source, but ultimately returns if cleansed and reborn. In the water flowing endlessly through the falls, the speaker can fathom the "sublime truths, and wholesome themes" lodged in these "mystical, deep streams":

The Water-fall.

With what deep murmurs through times silent stealth  
Doth thy transparent, cool and watry wealth

Here flowing fall,  
And chide, and call,

As if his liquid, loose Retinue staid 5

Lingring, and were of this steep place afraid,

The common pass  
Where, clear as glass,  
All must descend

Not to an end: 10

But quickned by this deep and rocky grave,  
Rise to a longer course more bright and brave.

Dear stream! dear bank, where often I  
Have sate, and pleas'd my pensive eye, 15  
Why, since each drop of thy quick store

Runs thither, whence it flow'd before,  
Should poor souls fear a shade or night,  
Who came (sure) from a sea of light?

Or since those drops are all sent back 20  
So sure to thee, that none doth lack,

Why should frail flesh doubt any more  
That what God takes, hee'l not restore?

O useful Element and clear!

My sacred wash and cleanser here,  
My first consigner unto those 25

Fountains of life, where the Lamb goes?  
What sublime truths, and wholesome themes,  
Lodge in thy mystical, deep streams!

Such as dull man can never finde  
Unless that Spirit lead his minde, 30

Which first upon thy face did move,  
And hatch'd all with his quickning love.

As this loud brooks incessant fall  
 In streaming rings restagnates all,  
 Which reach by course the bank, and then                    35  
 Are no more seen, just so pass men.  
 O my invisible estate,  
 My glorious liberty, still late!  
 Thou art the Channel my soul seeks,  
 Not this with Cataracts and Creeks.                                40 (*Works 2: 626-27*)

The occasion offered by the circulating waters at the falls affirms his hope for salvation through traditional Christian sacraments. The waters flowing incessantly from “this deep and rocky grave” (l. 11) offer an obvious parallel to the sacramental waters of baptism, which plunge one into a watery grave only to restore to eternal life: these waters are the “sacred wash and cleanser here” (l. 24) and also the “consigner unto those / Fountains of life, where the Lamb goes” (l. 25). That is, baptismal waters will make it possible to partake of the waters of paradise restored. Moreover, the poet links the waters of baptism and those of the New Jerusalem with the waters of the deep of Genesis, the material out of which the universe was created. He understands these “mystical, deep streams” (l. 28) were those upon which the “Spirit” first moved and “And hatch’d all with his quickning love” at the Creation. The poet, in other words, understands the waterfall in terms of a pattern of biblical events that links his own life to the course of sacred history that is progressing “through times silent stealth” from creation, to redemption, and inexorably to the new age.

As Nauman has shown, Vaughan turns from a classical trope in *Olor* in which the poet seeks to immortalize his native Usk to biblical tropes in *Silex* as his aspirations matured. The sacred fountain in “Regeneration,” as we have seen, is the harbinger of other watercourses that help us chart the progress of the ward whose anxiety and confusion are replaced with hope and belief. While some readers once trekked through the Brecon Beacons across from the Newton or the hills near Llangors Lake for the waterfall that inspired him, Vaughan’s landscapes are at

heart biblical. The symbolic landscape of “The Water-fall” expresses typologically the notion of divine circularity in order to establish the metaphoric and emotional closure of *Silex Scintillans*.

Texas A&M University  
College Station, TX

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