Henry Vaughan's Poetic Identities: A Response to Jonathan Nauman

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This response is a contribution to the debate on "Henry Vaughan's Secular and Sacred Inaugurations" (http://www.connotations.de/debate/henry-vaughan-secular-and-sacred-inaugurations). Further contributions to this debate are welcome; contact editors@connotations.de.

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Abstract

Jonathan Nauman suggests that Henry Vaughan twice inaugurated himself as a poet in a new subgenre: first as a Welsh river poet in *Olor Iscanus* (1651) and then as a born-again Christian poet in the first part of *Silex Scintillans* (1650). He argues that Vaughan established the new identity in the first poem of each book, "To the River Isca" in *Olor* and "Regeneration" in *Silex.* He accounts for the reversed order of the two books' publication by suggesting that *Olor* was complete when its dedication was written in 1647 and that the "friend" who prepared it for the press did so without the author's approval. He develops the case that Vaughan eventually found the identity as a river poet untenable in the historical and personal contexts within which he wrote. In doing so, Nauman raises some questions that my response identifies. I also discuss the larger symbolism of the river and the fountain, which may connect readers to the very private mind from which the two signature poems emerged nearly four centuries ago.

Before reviewing this well-written essay and addressing questions it poses for readers,[1] we might notice a change in the way Henry Vaughan signed himself in his first two volumes of secular poems. In his *Poems* of 1646, he was "*Henry Vaughan*, Gent." on the title page; however, in

Olor Iscanus in 1651, he was "Henry Vaughan, *Silurist*" in the printed title page and "*Hen. Vaughan Silurist*" in the engraved frontispiece (*Works of Henry Vaughan* 1: 9, 1: 167 and 1: 165; hereafter *HVW*). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Vaughan was the first to use the noun "Silurist" in print, with reference to a "native of the district anciently inhabited by the Silures" (to whom we shall return) and specifically as the Vaughan's "distinguishing epithet" (*OED*, "Silurist"). The change from "gentleman" to "Silurist" was anticipated in the first part of Vaughan's sacred poetry in *Silex Scintillans* (1650; *HVW* 1: 55), and it continued in the second part of *Silex Scintillans* (1655; *HVW* 2: 553), as well as in dedicatory poems in the edited *Thalia Rediviva* (1678; *HVW* 2: 724-27). The same identity appeared in the Latin "Henricus Vaughan Siluris" on his tombstone in the churchyard of St. Bridget's, Llansanfraed, where Vaughan's twin brother Thomas was deacon and priest during England First Civil War (1642-1646).

Many scholars have noted Vaughan's decision after his *Poems* of 1646 to identify himself no longer with the "Gentlemen" he addressed in the preface (*HVW* 1: 11). To be sure, he had reason to take pride in his nobility, for it dated back nine generations to the Welsh warrior David Gam, who died at the Battle of Agincourt. Gam's daughter married a Vaughan and raised a family at the medieval Tretower Court, where the father of the Vaughan twins Henry and Thomas was born in the shadow of a Norman castle and was raised as the younger brother of its heir. Vaughan needed evidence of noble birth to be admitted to the Inns of Court under the rules then in effect. He probably studied law there and wrote poetry from 1640 until the First Civil War broke out in 1642. After serving with Thomas in the army of King Charles I in 1645 and then learning of the king's surrender in May 1646, Vaughan no doubt preferred to identify himself with the Welsh tribe of Silures which, as Jonathan Post (see 257) and others have observed, once controlled the area where Vaughan lived and which had defeated an invading Roman legion in 51 C.E.

Nauman does not really address the question whether the "friend" who "published" the 1651 *Olor Iscanus*—"published" in the word's

older sense of making a text public (*OED*)—did so with or without Vaughan's approval (49 and n 1). He cites the editors' introduction to *Olor* in the new edition of *The Works of Henry Vaughan* for evidence of Thomas's "unapproved publication" (see also 60; *HVW* 1: 149-53). The introduction first considers the long discussion of the friend's identity and his note to the reader, with summaries of relevant essays by Willard ("The Publisher of *Olor Iscanus*") and Nauman ("Toward a Herbertian Poetic"). The note to the reader recalls Virgil's dying request that his unfinished *Aeneid* be burned and the countermand by Caesar Augustus. The friend acknowledges that he is no Caesar, but states that he has the law on his side because it is illegal to burn one's own house. Even though Vaughan "*condemn'd*" the early poems and did not give the publisher his "Approbation" for the new book (*HVW* 1: 170), the poems well merited printing in the minds of later readers. The editors consider the numerous arguments for different degrees of Vaughan's involvement in the 1651 publication, advanced between 1847 and 2004 and ranging from outright rejection to full involvement with plausible denial.

Nauman sees a clear divide between the poems in *Olor* and those in the first part of *Silex.* He dates it to July 1648, when Vaughan's youngest brother, William, died at home after being sent back from his royalist brigade with either battle wounds or camp fever (usually typhus). This raises a real question. Could not the writing of poems in the two books have overlapped? Vaughan did not stop writing royalist poetry after the death of his brother. He wrote "An Elegie on the death of Mr. *R. Hall*, slain at Pontefract 1648." He did so after learning of Hall's heroic death in October of that same year (*HVW* 1: 193-95, and headnote). Hall had died defending Pontefract Castle in Yorkshire against attack by parliamentary troops, and William had been heading there if he served in the same Welsh brigade as his brothers had done. The editors' note states that further writing of poems in *Olor* continued into 1651 (*HVW* 1: 149). Nor does it seem likely that Vaughan wrote all the six dozen poems in Part 1 of *Silex* during the eighteen months between William's

death and the book's registration. To be sure, he wrote the untitled elegies on William and his own sense of loss and disorientation after the young man's death, which he probably witnessed. However, Vaughan's preface to the completed, two-part *Silex* gives two additional and more important reasons for its composition. First, he stated that he was but one of the "many pious *Converts*" influenced by the "holy *life* and *verse*" of George Herbert (*HVW* 2: 558). Second, and more importantly, Vaughan told of his personal encounter with God during what he thought would be a terminal illness. When he was "prepared for a *message* of *death*," God "*answer[ed]* me with *life*" (*HVW* 2: 559). This was the "*Moriendo, revixi*" ("by dying, I live again") of the opening poem in part 1, "Authoris (de se) Emblema" (*HVW* 1: 53).

After these two blows to his ways of thinking, which could have occurred before or after the death of his brother, Vaughan conceived his own book of poems and verse meditations after the model of Herbert's book, *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*. He later called the sacred poems "Hymns" in the preface to the completed *Silex* (*HVW* 2: 555), and he mingled the private poems with them, as Herbert had done, and with no distinctions made. Vaughan nevertheless had reason to distinguish the public and private aspects of Christian faith. For between 1643 and 1649, a committee of protestant ministers known as the Westminster Assembly created a series of "Standards" which, with the support of Parliament, tried to normalize religious practice throughout England, Scotland, and Wales.

Parliament effectively banned the Anglican Book of Common Prayer from use in churches in 1645, having replaced it with the Westminster Assembly's "Directory of Public Worship" (1644). This Standard called for more extensive and personal preaching of the Gospel, with prayer limited to the preacher's prayers before and after the sermon. It then seemed that spontaneous or "ejaculatory" ("thrown-off") prayer was the proper form of private worship. Though Anglican priests like Jeremy Taylor detested the extempore prayers of preachers mandated in the "Directions" (Taylor, title page), Vaughan made spontaneous poetic

statements resembling those in puritan poetry of the time without becoming puritanical himself (see Smith 267-73).

Nauman fully reproduces the two signature poems. With "To the River Isca," he first quotes Vaughan's recognition of older poets who took inspiration from the banks and streams of their local rivers, poets from Orpheus in Greek mythology to Sir Philip Sidney in the previous century (*HVW* 1: 173-74, ll. 1-34). Then he quotes and discusses passages from Vaughan's "valediction" (53), including the hope that future poets will take inspiration from the Usk and other rivers (ll. 35-50), the wish that the Usk remain unpolluted (51-70), and a final desire that it become a symbol of "*Freedome, safety*, *Joy* and *blisse*" with no resumption of warfare despite what happens elsewhere (ll. 77-82). Based on this last passage, Nauman dates the poem to the Interregnum between the First and Second Civil Wars, that is, to the period between May 1646 and February 1648. He does not speculate whether Vaughan would have revised the ending if he approved the later publication of *Olor*. Nor does he consider whether Vaughan might have created longer topographical poems in the manner of the 1643 "Cooper's Hill" by the royalist playwright and poet John Denham, had he not turned to religious poetry.

With "Regeneration," Nauman quotes the entire poem, with ten stanzas of eight lines each, a closing couplet, and a Bible verse. He breaks off quoting the text after the third and sixth stanzas, thus dividing the poem into what seems its beginning, middle, and end. Rightly, I think, he recognizes the whole poem of personal rebirth as an allegorical vision. Though the poem's speaker sets out on a primrose path in "high-spring," he soon finds himself amid "Rocks, and snow" (*HVW* 1: 57-59, ll. 3, 12). And this happens, not because he is climbing a peak in the Brecon Beacons across the Usk from the Vaughans' farmhouse, but because he is moving inward from the external pleasures of the world to his experience of his life as "Meere stage, and show" (l. 10). Nauman ends his quotation of the first three stanzas after the poet has weighed his pleasures and pains on twin scales and has found that the pains are heavier. He sees the next portion of the poem, from the fourth to sixth

stanzas, as a turning point, and he observes that they "much exceed in splendor" (57) the descriptions of the Usk.

When Nauman comes to the "little Fountain" in the poem's "East" and to "The Musick of her teares" that catches the speaker's attention (ll. 27, 49, 52), he wonders about the crying (see 58). He does not discuss the dark and light stones in the fountain's cistern (stanza 8), which may be akin to the sleeping and wakeful flowers in stanza 9. Instead, he explicates the "rushing wind" (l. 70) that whispers the closing words of stanza 10, and he offers good biblical precedents for the speaker's closing wish, expressed in the final couplet: to die before his death (58–59 with notes 14, 15; *HVW* 1: 70, 81-82). He concludes that "Regeneration" provides "a warrant and a blessing" (59) for the sacred poems that follow.

Nauman strengthens his treatment of the two signature poems by pairing each of them with what immediately follows: "The Charnel-house" in *Olor,* and the body-soul dialogues "Death" and "Resurrection and Immortality" in *Silex.* In the interest of brevity, he defers to scholarship cited in the most recent edition of Vaughan's works. He sees "The Charnel-house" as "undermining" the poem on the River Usk (54), whereas "Death" prepares for a reunion of the mortal body and the immortal soul and "Resurrection and Immortality" awaits the "everlasting *Saboth*" after the Last Judgement (55; see *HVW* 1: 61-62, l. 69).

Nauman cites a biblical source for the "*Away!*" of line 25 in "Regeneration": John 1:51 about the continuance of the Old Testament's visionary tradition in the allusion there to Jacob's dream in Genesis 28 (61n13). We may note a significant parallel in the Synoptic Gospels with Jesus's statement that his words will "not pass away" (Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 21:33). I also think of an older scholar than Nauman cites. It may have been Edmund Blunden, the former Great War poet and future Oxford don (see Webb), who first recognized the word "*Away!*" as being pivotal in the poem. In a book based on essays in a popular journal, Blunden remarked that "these sudden guides [who speak the word "*Away*"] led him [the poem's speaker] East, to Bethel and the regions of the Old Testament vision—his own poetic field"

(Blunden 20-21).[2] His discussion of "Regeneration" continues in a long paragraph and includes a suggestion that might interest Nauman as a careful scholar of Vaughan's relation to Herbert. When the poem's speaker gets to the "dancing stones" in a cistern connected to the sacred fountain, Blunden asks, "George Herbert's poems?" (21).

Blunden's students at Merton College, Oxford, where he was elected Fellow in 1931, included the Rhodes Scholar Northrop Frye. In later years, Frye regularly included "Regeneration" among the poems assigned for his graduate course on the Principles of Literary Symbolism (Willard, "Frye's Principles"). He made passing reference to Vaughan in many books, but he only devoted a full paragraph to him in one of the last. Here the influence of his old tutor seems quite clear:

> A very beautiful English example of a religious poem based on the Song of Songs is Henry Vaughan's "Regeneration," the poem that stands first in his book *Silex Scintillans.* Here the narrator begins by ascending the wrong mountain, at the top of which he sees a scale measuring pleasures and pains. Then he is transported to a garden, "a virgin soil" or "Jacob's bed," where there is a large company of people, some awake and some asleep, awaiting the spirit or wind in the garden. Song of Songs 4:16 is quoted at the end. (*Words with Power* 206)

This was in keeping with Frye's contested approach to "literature as a whole" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 111, 116)—a strategy that some contemporaries considered a grandiose conception without literary periods or genres (see Wellek 257-59). However, his students understood that it also referred to one's own reading experience, including non-canonical material of all sorts. Frye's interest in symbolism could help to explain a question raised by the title of Nauman's essay.

His essay's title, "From Rivers to Fountains," suggests there will be reference to more than the two signature poems. There certainly could be reference to other poems with rivers and fountains (see, e.g., Dickson; and "The Water-fall," ll. 13-28, in *HVW* 2: 626-27). As we have seen, however, Nauman comments on the riverbanks and streams that Vaughan associates with other poets in the poem on the River Usk, and he hints at the "fountain sealed" in the enclosed garden of the Song of

Songs (4:12), while commenting on Vaughan's fountain and cistern as being on virgin soil far from any human architecture. In Frye's term, he reads the poems "centripetally," moving inward from the printed text to imagery in Vaughan's poetic and biblical traditions. Were a previously unknown letter to surface, telling of Vaughan's visits to any of the numerous saints' wells in Wales, there could be cause for "centrifugal" (73) reading.

Meanwhile, the symbolic quality of a fountain or river as an ever-recycling stream of water, life, and even consciousness may give poets and readers the awareness of belonging to something much larger than themselves (see Ronnberg and Martin). Whether that heightened awareness is mystical or natural is theirs to decide. I have known devotees of Vaughan's poetry who, when pressed, have answered one way or the other about the poet's possible experience or their own. I respect the answers equally. I also understand why others cannot decide one way or the other.

Jonathan Nauman has good reason to begin by placing Vaughan with "[l]iterary figures conscious of residing on the margins of society" (48). Both Vaughan twins must have felt profoundly out of sorts in the late 1640s. Henry was probably working on his father's farm, having lost his position as clerk in the Court of Great Sessions for Brecknockshire after the court's chief justice was captured, tried, and forced into exile for fighting in support of the king. Thomas was back in Oxford, having been ejected from his rectory by a parliamentary committee charged to improve preaching of the Gospel in Wales. With no prospect of employment in the professions for which they had trained, both twins chose to work in medical fields, where a good knowledge of Latin was the primary requirement. Henry served as a country doctor, while Thomas worked as a chemist, producing and dispensing medicines outside the city walls of London and occasionally giving lessons in chemistry and alchemy.

Thomas had the easier job of finding a new identity for himself as a writer, for he almost always wrote under the pen name Eugenius Philalethes ("well born lover of truth"). Henry had the harder time as he

moved from being a gentleman poet to the swan (Latin "olor") of the River Usk and the devout Christian of flint, fire, and tears in *Silex Scintillans* (which Blunden translated as "the flashing flint"). Nauman nicely accounts for the efforts Vaughan made in the inaugural poem in *Olor*, but even more effectively he compares that poem with its counterpart in *Silex* (see 55-57). In all likelihood, the question of Vaughan's involvement in the 1651 publication will remain moot until further external evidence surfaces. Whatever such biographical or bibliographical evidence suggests, I think Nauman's analysis of the two signature poems stands on its own merits.

Given my own penchant for the writings of Thomas Vaughan and the Hermetic Philosophy that both Vaughan twins promoted (Willard, *Thomas Vaughan*), I am pleased to see that the editors of the new edition of Vaughan's works refer frequently to Thomas and his tradition in their notes on *Silex Scintillans*. With all due regard for the superior edition of *The Works of Thomas Vaughan* prepared by the late Alan Rudrum, I suggest that future commentators on those sacred poems check the fifteen references to the word "regeneration" indexed in the earlier edition of Thomas's texts prepared by his first modern editor, Arthur Edward Waite—references to two passages each in five of the eight discourses or essays included there and to five more in the introduction (see Waite 497). (There are many more unindexed references to fountains and rivers in those essays.) Commentators might also find use for a chapter on "Alchemy in the Poetry of Vaughan and Milton" in a book by Alan's colleague and mine Stanton J. Linden (224-59).[3] Meanwhile, the case for "To the River Isca" and "Regeneration" as signature poems that create a poetic identity and introduce a whole volume of poetry seems well worth the making and well made too.

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NOTES

[1]Nauman, "From Rivers to Fountains." Unless otherwise noted, all references to Nauman are to this essay.

[2]The reference to Bethel is to Hosea 12:2-5 and the prophet's retelling of Jacob's encounter with an angel there as told in Genesis 32:22-32. The place is called Bethel in Hosea (v. 4), but Peniel (King James Version) or Phanuel (Vulgate) in Genesis (32:30), which probably took its final Hebrew form later than Hosea. Also see the note on "Regeneration," l. 27, in *HVW*, which begins by recalling that Jacob journeyed south from Bethel to the site of his vision (Genesis 35).

[3]In Linden, see especially 228-29 for discussion of "Resurrection and Immortality."

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