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# The Mystical Tradition in Anglicanism: Thoughts on Herbert and Vaughan\*

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George Herbert and Henry Vaughan are undoubtedly ‘iconic’ figures in the Anglican imagination—writers who express in some way an essential component of what has been and still is valued in the spiritual heritage of the Church of England. So it is easy to assimilate them rather carelessly to each other, and to sentimentalize the world we assume lies behind the poetry. But in fact Herbert and Vaughan are very different poets; and their worlds are full of conflict and uncertainty. It is more obvious in Vaughan’s case, Vaughan whose life was scarred by the Civil War; but Herbert lived and died not in some unclouded summer of social stability but in the increasingly confused atmosphere of James I’s last days and the political realignments that accompanied the beginning of Charles’s reign. In spite of Izaak Walton’s claims, it is not in fact very likely that Herbert enjoyed the patronage or favour of William Laud, given the none-too-cordial relations between Laud and the Earl of Pembroke, who prompted the new King to present Herbert to the parish of Bemerton. Herbert died before Laud had become Primate, and so experienced nothing of the fierce conflicts around Laud’s policies. We cannot know how he would have reacted; but it is certainly a mistake to see Herbert and Laud as part of some unified ‘Caroline’ Anglican ethos. And Vaughan’s passionate Royalist sympathies belong to a different world from that of the twenties and early thirties of the seventeenth century.

This is not to ignore or underestimate the real connections between Herbert and Vaughan. Apart from the distant but significant family links, Vaughan himself ascribes his religious conversion in 1648 largely to Herbert’s spiritual influence; and of course his poetry, in the two volumes of *Silex Scintillans*, is overflowing with reworkings and reminiscences of Herbert. To take only two examples out of many, compare Herbert’s ‘The Flower’ with Vaughan’s ‘Unprofitableness’

\* This is the text of a lecture which was presented to the Temenos Academy on 28 March 2007.

(SS I). Herbert's 'How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean/Are thy returns' is echoed by Vaughan's 'How rich, O Lord! how fresh thy visits are'; and the remainder of Vaughan's poem is in part a sort of digest of Herbert's. And Vaughan's 'Son-dayes' is a brilliant pastiche of Herbert's sonnet on 'Prayer', though it suffers from what is a frequent problem for Vaughan—not knowing quite where and how to stop. Both poets are daring and unconventional in their metaphors; both return compulsively to themes around the unevenness of the spiritual path and the recurrent 'darkness' in the disciple's understanding and motivation. Both celebrate the 'British Church' and its edifices and liturgy. And there is simply an elusive family likeness in the tone of so much of their work.

But what I want to suggest in this paper is that we can read them as offering complementary statements of the same persistent Anglican theme or trope. They are both interested in hiddenness—that is, in the disparities between what appears and what is true. It is not an exclusively Anglican idea, of course; but the history of Reformed thinking in the Church of England in the half-century or so before Herbert's birth had wrestled particularly hard with this issue. How was one to understand a Church that for centuries had appeared to be no Church? That is to say, how does the hidden reality of God's action and the hidden witness of God's Word somehow remain alive under the muffling and distorting wrappings of the papal Church of the Middle Ages? Richard Hooker made a good deal of trouble for himself by stressing the possibility of grace being at work within the 'old' Church, in spite of appearances. And for him and some of those who thought like him, there was another argument to be made in the opposite direction: despite the appearance of being a straightforwardly Reformed, not to say Calvinist body, the Church of England was in fact the rightful heir of patristic and even medieval faith, simply purifying away certain accretions. Hidden beneath the Calvinist surface was a Catholic substance.

But this was not only an issue about the church; it had to do also with the nature of faith and discipleship. Faced with a crude appeal by some extreme Calvinists to the clear visibility of God's approval and predestining grace in external prosperity or internal emotional assurance, more serious theologians felt obliged to work out how God's favour could be at work even in those whose personal experience was marked by feelings of doubt or self-despair. One of the central tenets of Reformed faith was that the action of God could not be tied or

mortgaged to states of affairs in the human world – to the accumulation of a record of good works or (as Luther himself had insisted) to feelings of spiritual security and intensity. And this necessarily opened up the theme of hiddenness in a concentrated way.

I have argued elsewhere that Herbert's poetry of 'affliction' can be read as a sustained exploration of what it is to let go of any assumption that assurance of God's grace can be tied to positive feelings or a sense of spiritual at-homeness. In a sense, though we cannot simply call him a Calvinist and leave it at that, he pushes one aspect of Calvinism to its extreme: faith is the glorifying of God as God, not the glorifying of God as provider of attractive spiritual experience; salvation rests not on how we feel or what we understand but only on the radical willingness to go on standing in the presence of his judgement and mercy. The unforgettable poem, unpublished until the nineteenth century, on 'Perseverance' leaves us with the image of the soul, almost consumed with fear and uncertainty about its future, hanging obstinately on God's promises, almost as on Hopkins's 'cliffs of fall', 'With face and hands clinging vnto thy brest,/Clinging and crying, crying without cease,/Thou art my rock, thou art my rest.'

And with that in mind, I suggest that we read Herbert and Vaughan as articulating two strategies for speaking about the hiddenness of God, strategies which I shall call irony and mystery. By irony, I mean the careful subversion of language itself by trailing through your discourse the signs of questioning and incompleteness. The ironist says, 'Listen to what I say so carefully that you will hear what I mean and see that the words I speak are not simply the passive containers of meaning.' There are things you can only understand when you see them as the shadow cast by words; try to express them in direct and clear ways and you lose them. By mystery, I mean the creation of language that always suggests a pregnant depth, occasionally discernible but always under the surface of what is said. The difference between this and irony is that the language is not necessarily at odds with the underlying vision; it draws attention to its inadequacy, but does not subvert or contradict itself as ironical discourse does.

We might go even further (thinking back to an ancient division of intellectual labour) and say that irony is essentially the tool of the rhetorician – someone whose primary skill is to use language in such a way that a listener or reader is changed by it – and mystery is the preferred mode of the philosopher – someone who uses language to

excavate the topsoil of understanding and take us to a tangibly different intellectual or imaginative place. The ironist leaves us where we are but seeing everything with a new and suspicious or detached eye; the mystagogue takes us to another place, from which we can see the once familiar world differently.

It should be clear that the distinction is not watertight or absolute; the goals of both are to embed in the reader or hearer a habit of questioning towards the appearances of the world, and to renew or refresh perception. For Herbert and Vaughan alike, the purpose of their poetic articulation of faith is to hold others in faith by enabling them to look on their circumstances, inner and outer, as only ambiguous signs, not clear messages from God. To cleave to God in a world of material things, variable states of mind, suffering and so on, requires a skill in 'reading' all these; and both poets seek to educate such a reading. But to illustrate the difference I am suggesting, let me look at some specific poems and some specific themes in each.

Herbert was trained as a rhetorician, and his intellectual affinities are with the sceptical literary humanism of sixteenth-century Europe; one of his lesser-known literary labours was to annotate—critically but sympathetically—the *Considerations* of the Spanish Catholic humanist, Valdes. It is no surprise to find irony in a writer with such a concern. Of course, it would be wrong to read Herbert as consistently ironizing, and much of his work is cast in entirely straightforward form—as in the great poems of praise and celebration, 'Praise II' ('King of Glorie, King of Peace'), 'Antiphon' ('Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing'), or in the undemanding allegories on parts of the church building. But many of the longer and more personal poems begin from or lead us into the recognition that the poet cannot write what he intends. Take a not very well-known poem, 'To all Angels and Saints' and you may see what this means. This is a beautiful celebration of the heavenly court, including the Virgin Mary ('Thou art the holy mine, whence came the gold . . . Thou art the cabinet where the jewell lay'), which seems to be heading smoothly for harbour until, at line 16, it suddenly declares that the poet 'dare not' unfold his soul in prayer or praise to Our Lady or the heavenly company: there is no command from Christ to invoke saints or angels. We praise then at our peril, if such praise would be to take flowers from Christ's crown. What can we possibly lose if we fail to address the host of heaven? Leave that to others (Catholics). And the poem ends, tantalizingly, by protesting that 'we

are ever ready to disburse,/If any one our Masters hand can show.' This seems to mean that we (Reformed Christians) do not refuse honour to the saints and angels out of some kind of spiritual meanness; let them demonstrate the 'hand', the tangible power, of Christ and they will merit honour indeed.

This is a wonderfully teasing poem. I think it is a mistake to read it, as Lucy Beckett does in her excellent recent book on Christian poetics, as the sad or wistful expression of a rather shrunken Protestant spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Herbert is defining, ironically, how a Reformed Christian can rightly utter the praises of the saints and angels. He begins with a wholly uncritical outpouring of celebration; then he tells the angels that he is not going to talk to them because he would rather talk to Our Lady (so his silence towards them is 'Not out of envie or maliciousnesse'). But then he pulls himself up and reminds himself that he 'dare not' pray to her for fear of diminishing what is owed to her Son—whom she praises and prays to along with all of us. Finally, there is no appeal from Christ to a lesser power, so we have no right to pray to any such power. We have nothing to lose by this. But, faced with a beggar asking us to 'disburse', we may be ready to do so if they can show that it is the Master's will that we do so.

The overall result is as constructively confusing as anything Herbert wrote. He is—as a modern critic might put it—playing 'transgressively'. He is deliberately courting the forbidden, celebrating it by saying he cannot, and then rather impudently suggesting at the end that he might yet 'disburse'—as of course he has just done in the poem. It is a poem about being faithful to the command of Christ, who does not command us to honour the heavenly host or turn to them for aid as if he cannot give it. But what if we can, after all, find words for their honour precisely in expounding why we're not supposed to? In thus honouring the 'Masters hand', we can boldly identify our desire to give praise with his will, almost defying him to find fault.

Take another 'impudent' poem, 'Hope'. Here the relation between God and the poet is figured as a frustrating courtship, advancing by the exchange of ill-matched gifts. The poet gives a watch—as if hinting at a timetable—and receives an anchor, a sign of unchanging stability and therefore indefinite deferral. Then the poet offers 'an old prayer-

1. *In the Light of Christ: Writings in the Western Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), p. 290.

book' and is rewarded with an 'optick', a telescope fixed on unattainable distances. The poet's tears receive in response 'a few green ears', immature sproutings of what has been sown, signs of a long time till harvest. Then comes the petulant denouement, when the poet complains, in effect, that his affections are being trifled with: it's time for an engagement, the flirtation has gone on long enough.

God is addressed as 'Loyterer'; he is hanging around without bringing anything visibly to closure. And the irony is that this is precisely why he is the focus of hope: he is not constrained by what we bring to the relationship or by our timetables. To express frustration with his delay is precisely to celebrate why he is to be trusted without consideration of time or success. His response is not conditioned by what we give. We try to bargain our way towards receiving the ring of commitment, but fail to see that his steady returning to us of signs of patience is already the form of divine commitment and divine freedom. The poem itself enacts the reality of the 'ring' that is given and not given.

One more example, 'The Forerunners'. It begins with a fine bit of comic anticlimax: the poet has noticed the first white hairs. Is his brain ageing too, declining into 'dulnesse'? The poet's 'I' is still there, and abides simply because it is true that 'Thou art still my God'. If what he writes embodies that confidence, what he writes will still be 'fine and wittie'. Yet what if lyrical skill and beauty are fading away ('Lovely enchanting language, sugar-cane,/Hony of roses, whither wilt thou flie?')? What if the only things that promise any liveliness in the poet's rhetoric are the things that he has turned away from, the celebration of coarse sensual pleasures? Let it go: linguistic beauty is only a nightlight to guide us to lasting beauty, which is beauty of the moral and praying self. 'Beautie and beauteous words should go together', he says, in a deliberately ambiguous line. If there were really beauty in the soul, the words would follow (even if they were not necessarily beautiful by conventional rhetorical standards), they would 'go together'. But also this suggests that for the poet, outward beauties and the beauty of words can both be dispensed with, they can 'go together' in another sense. The next and final stanza begins, 'Yet, if you go . . . '.

But the end point is essentially the same. 'If you go, I passe not'. God is 'still my God', and so there is a subject that endures, even when earthly beauties are no more. And the lasting 'I' can have nothing

more substantial to say than that: if rhetorical excellence fades away, remember that all it could ever do was to say the same thing 'Perhaps with more embellishment'. The outward bleakness of an aesthetically stripped language is not a problem if 'all within be livelier than before', if what had been (dangerously) a matter of outward attraction has now become an inner clarity and conviction of where the self gets its stability and continuity from.

Thus this poem too enacts a kind of transgression. It expresses its deep nostalgia for beauty of language in language that is itself sensual and evocative; and then starkly relativizes all metaphor and linguistic sweetness with that casual 'perhaps'. What can poetic skill do? Nothing except to bring us to the point of seeing what it cannot do and to point up its own arbitrariness. Perhaps it will say the single basic truth of the self, only with some unnecessary decoration. It is rather like the rhetoric of 'Grief', in which the poet heaps up extravagant imagery (of the sort Crashaw excels at) to express sorrow for sin, and finally admits that a grief which allows musicality cannot be authentic; and the poem ends with a short apostrophe ('Alas, my God!') with no metrical relation to anything that has gone before.

There is a complex debate in the background about the role of rhetoric and the 'plain style' in Christian literature, a debate with roots in the patristic period but revived with some energy in the sixteenth century; Herbert is well aware of this. But what he is doing is not arguing for or demonstrating an option for the 'plain style': he is suggesting that any simply stylistic option, a calculation of suitable language, is in some degree arbitrary and inadequate. The 'necessity' (the non-arbitrariness) of beautiful and rhetorically apt language is not to do with its adequacy directly to embody or convey an inner truth, but is bound up with its capacity to detach us from itself, to understand that the fluid processes of well-formed speech are best used to teach us that well-formed speech itself is dangerous if it leads us to settle complacently with our perceptions of self and world.

Now when I call Vaughan, by contrast, an exponent of mystery rather than irony, I mean to suggest that Vaughan is not primarily interested in rhetoric. He is, of course, a man deeply familiar with and preoccupied by that other side of Renaissance 'wisdom' that has its roots in the hermetic and occult traditions, and (at its most respectable) in a certain sort of Neoplatonism. While he does not have his brother Thomas's passionate obsession with hermetism and gnosis,

we cannot begin to understand his intellectual hinterland without being aware of this world. Hence it is not surprising that so much of his poetry turns upon the loss of vision. Most famously in 'The Retreate', he writes of an 'Angell-infancy', in which it was impossible to look on the things of the world without seeing 'shadows of eternity'. And what is true for the individual self is true of the history of the race. 'Corruption' translates the pathos of 'The Retreate' into communal terms, the descent of man: 'Sure, It was so. Man in those early days/Was not all stone, and Earth,/he shin'd a little, and by those weak rays/Had some glimpse of his birth.' Not only did unfallen humanity have the ability to see its divine origin, like the young child looking back to 'see a glimpse of his bright face'; it was also in regular communication with the angels, who were visible at every turn. And, to narrow the reference a little more, in 'Religion', Vaughan evokes the early days of biblical history in the same terms, angels conversing with human beings: 'O how familiar then was heaven!' The original fount of revelation has gone underground since then; and when it breaks through the earth or rock, it has a superficial attraction which conceals the fact that it has picked up subterranean poisons in its journey and needs radical purifying by God: 'turn once more our Water into Wine!' The metaphorical argument here is unusually complex, not to say confused; but the main line is plain enough. We have lost our habitual vision of the eternal; what we see, in ourselves, in the natural order, even in the practice of our religion, is a corrupted image or a hollow surface. To use one of Vaughan's favourite metaphors, the sky is clouded over.

For such a critical situation, irony is inappropriate, Vaughan might say (it is also undeniably true that, as Stevie Davies's superb essay on Vaughan notes, he is not temperamentally blessed with much humour).<sup>2</sup> where Herbert seeks to strip us radically of any kind of reliable perception, so as to throw us on to the cliff-face of faith, Vaughan seeks to strip us of what he would see as a false 'adulthood', in ourselves and in our religious culture, so as to restore something once really and effectively possessed, an original righteousness or *integra natura*, as a medieval scholastic might have named it. Poetry does not, for Vaughan, turn on its own flesh; it gives voice to a fundamental desire for a vision that once was instinctive. In so far as it

2. Henry Vaughan (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), p. 97.

echoes any of Herbert's strategy, it uses sophisticated methods to undermine sophistication.

But this is not just a proto-Wordsorthian celebration of innocence or latency. The hidden centre and energy of human existence is, for Vaughan, a fiercely imagined intensity that is regularly metaphorized as light and fire. One of Vaughan's most frequently recurring images is of the soul as a fallen or buried star. Holy lives are lives in which the light is made visible, to act as a guide for those still wrapped in clouds or shadows; as in 'Joy of my life!', where 'Gods Saints are shining lights; who stays/Here long must passe/O're dark hills, swift streames, and steep ways/As smooth as glass;/But these all night/Like Candles, shed/Their beams and light/Us into Bed.' The sharp homeliness of that final phrase only accentuates the intensity of the line that follows: 'They are (indeed,) our Pillar-fires'. And in 'Midnight', the entire poem evokes a starry heaven literally blazing with activity: 'What Emanations,/Quick vibrations/And bright stirs are there?' The medium in which the stars exist is 'a firie-liquid light'; so if God will make his light penetrate my darkness, my own blood and water will kindle in the same kind of liquid fire. In 'The Starre' this is elaborated further, with reference to the hermetic idea that the light and heat of the stars is drawn towards earth by the magnetism of natural physical attunement and 'buried desire in souls here below ('These are the Magnets which so strongly move/And work all night upon thy light and love').

'Disorder and frailty' echoes the prayer for God to 'give wings to my fire', recognizing that our spiritual life is subject to rapid alternations of rising and falling: we rise with the heat of morning and almost immediately are dragged down by evening damp ('Poor, falling Star!'); unless kept going by an inner fire, we shall go on in this cycle of aspiration and disappointment. 'Silence, and light, and watchfulness' characterize the stars; they represent 'Obedience, Order, Light' to us ('The Constellation'). The harmony of the stars is as potent an image for us as is their fiery intensity. So the hidden reality that must be uncovered anew in us and for us is not only an individual spark of light, but a disposition for harmony. This Platonic theme is given its most memorable expression in 'The World'. Vaughan is as remarkable for his arresting opening lines as Herbert is for his concluding ones, but 'I saw Eternity the other night' must be one of his finest. The image—evoking Dante as well as Plato, though I doubt whether

Vaughan had heard of Dante—of the endless circling of ordered life in the light of eternity provides the perspective in which the small worlds of eros, ambition, power and greed are shown for what they are, self-constructed prisons.

Vaughan is often at his best in handling the paradoxical relation of darkness and light in the metaphorical repertoire of Christian reflection. ‘The Night’, which many would consider his greatest single poem, picks up a rich tradition of understanding darkness in the spiritual life as a merciful veil that enables us to look Godwards without being consumed by the fierceness of divine light; or as the blinding effect of unimaginably intense brightness (Milton’s ‘dark with excess of light’). But it also picks up the erotic register of the Song of Songs, which Vaughan so often alludes to, directly and indirectly, and manages to locate it all in a real and recognizable night in the Usk Valley with owls flying:

Gods silent, searching flight;  
When my Lords head is fill’d with dew, and all  
His locks are wet with the clear drops of night;  
His still, soft call;  
His knocking time; The souls dumb watch,  
When spirits their fair kinred catch.

(Do we catch a foreshadowing of R. S. Thomas’s ‘Raptor’, in *No Truce with the Furies*?—though Thomas’s divine owl in flight is, predictably, a more overt carnivore than Vaughan’s, ‘brushing me sometimes/with his wing so the blood/in my veins freezes . . . I have heard him/him scream, too, fastening/his talons in his great/adversary, or in some lesser/denizen, maybe, like you or me.’)

The silence and light of the starry world impacts upon us at night; darkness shot through with the multiple illumination of the stars speaks to us of both elements in our knowledge of eternal truth—the ‘firie-liquid’ passion that at some buried level still runs in our veins or at least is still capable of so doing, and the stillness of the dark which interrupts and defeats the world’s preoccupations. If we say we cannot see, it is because we are like people whose vision is for some reason obscured and imagine it is growing dark:

There is in God (some say)  
 A deep, but dazzling darkness; As men here  
 Say it is late and dusky, because they  
 See not all clear;  
 O for that night! where I in him  
 Might live invisible and dim.

Mystery is articulated here as something that emerges when ordinary perception and activity are drastically checked, when routine seeing is impaired. It feels like nightfall; but nightfall itself is in fact not a negation of daylight but an entry into a far more complex and wonderful world. For me to enter into what is actually my natural heritage, the 'firie-liquid' realm of the heavens, I must become invisible to the rest of the world. 'The Night', which begins with Nicodemus going to visit Jesus at night (so that he 'Did at mid-night speak with the Sun!'), shows us the path we must follow if we are to let ourselves be 'defeated' in our routine life: we must be silent, 'face the Moon' and see in it the reflected beams of the invisible Sun, hide ourselves from the business and competition of the daytime, and so become able to hear the 'still, soft call'. It is no contradiction that Vaughan elsewhere so often associates prayer and awareness of God with the dawn ('The Morning-Watch' is the best example), since the dawn, as it were, makes explicit what has been going on through the night, when we have been silently drinking in the reality that bursts through at first light. The unspoiled day is precisely the reality that stands at odds with the corrupted vision of human routine, the false adulthood mentioned earlier.

Vaughan's poetic voice oscillates between the serene register of 'The Night', where the paratactic accumulation of images and phrases ('Gods silent searching flight . . . His knocking time; The souls dumb watch')—typical, as Stevie Davies and Anne Cluysenaar have stressed, of the Welsh poetic style Vaughan often echoes<sup>3</sup>—gives a level and quiet intensity to the lines, and the more abrupt, hectic style of other poems in which the awareness of loss is articulated by insistent questions and exclamation. Over against 'The Night' we might put 'Childehood', with its poignant opening, 'I cannot reach it; and my striving

3. Davies, op. cit., pp. 119, 126; Anne Cluysenaar, 'Rereading Vaughan's "Distraction"', *Scintilla* 1 (1997) 93–108: pp. 96–7.

eye/Dazles at it, as at eternity.' Here, the dazzling radiance becomes an alienating thing, emphasizing not the steady invitation of the eternal but its inaccessibility. But this is inevitable in what I have been characterizing as a poetics of 'mystery'. If the goal of sacred poetry is to open our eyes to the hidden glory that always accompanies 'ordinary' seeing, there is bound to be an element of working around the 'exceptional' moment, at the expense of the diurnal. Yet there is also, as in 'The Night', a dimension of growing into a habitual orientation towards the dark and hidden which does not necessarily look for a constant succession of special illuminations. The tension between these, deeply rooted in Vaughan's own complex and troubled personality, is part of what gives such density to his poetry.

Herbert, as we have seen, can use angels as a serious but also teasing bit of apparatus in making a far broader point; he is otherwise not very interested in them. And as for stars—apart from 'The Starre', a fairly simple movement from the fixed heavenly body to the unstable earthly one that needs grace to give it a 'standing' in heaven—we have 'Employment II' reading like an advance riposte to Vaughan: 'Man is no starre, but a quick coal/Of mortal fire'. The natural radiance of the stars is quite unlike the human spirit, which needs constant stimulating into virtue. It would be nice to be naturally productive ('Oh that I were an Orenge-tree,/That busie plant!'), but we are not made that way, and are thus more gravely at risk because of our ignorant failure to discern the right time for right action.

Once again, it is the humanist spirit in evidence, articulated with wry humour, focused on both our innate weakness of will and intellect and the need for grace-inspired good judgement—not vision. Herbert does not look for Vaughan's sort of vision, nor does he suffer from Vaughan's despairing sense of what is lost in growing older ('I cannot reach it'). His fundamentally very pessimistic view of human motivation and capacity for perseverance paradoxically gives him more serenity about the unevenness of experience: if there is little to hope for in terms of clear 'natural' guidance from God in inner experience or in the world, what remains is that sceptical, God-dependent candour which surfaces so constantly in his poetry. When Herbert voices passionate protest ('I struck the board, and cry'd, No more'), it is almost as if he is deliberately overstating; there is a tongue-in-cheek quality about this reportage of his rebellion, a conscious theatricality that is just a little satirical in regard to his own miseries. It should not

need saying that this is not in the least to suggest that the generative emotion is not real; but it is dealt with in his distinctively quizzical and self-aware manner, the manner most movingly, devastatingly, exhibited in 'Love III', which is both a gently absurd dialogue and an almost unbearably intimate and searching encounter with absolute judgement.

I suspect that all good poetry, and especially all good religious poetry, moves between irony and mystery. I am not proposing that one or other of our authors has it 'right'. Herbertian irony alone can yield a poetry of indirection, relativity, emotional evasion and distance or bodilessness. The poetics of mystagogy can privilege uncriticized intuition and feeling, an impatience with the morally substantial but prosaic dimensions of humanity, a confusion of intensity or violence of expression with insight. Religiously speaking, the temptation of a Herbert is one or another form of stoicism; that of a Vaughan, one or another form of gnosticism. In fact, Herbert is a great enough poet to evoke depths of feeling precisely through indirection, by the enactment of a very subtle rhetorical humility which refuses to insist on its own achievement and so focuses the reader on what is at the centre of the poem's energy, the act of trust in God that the poem embodies. The poet's inability to speak or write the truth becomes simply an opening for the unanswerable truth of God's mercy. Perhaps this explains something of Herbert's characteristic monosyllabic or near monosyllabic endings—'So I did sit and eat', 'Ah! No more: thou break'st my heart', 'Who straight, Your suit is granted, said, and died', and so on; he moves towards the least decorated or musical conclusion possible, so as to demonstrate the stumbling halt of human speech. And Vaughan, despite his intensities of apostrophe and extravagance of imagery, none the less looks to a final state of listening, and so implicitly exhorts us to silence. His skill at abrupt beginnings (partly, I admit, shared by Herbert)—'And did they so?' 'Peace, peace! I blush to hear thee', 'Twas so, I saw thy birth'—enacts an interruption, an emphatic and surprised arrest of discourse that prepares us for the interruption of a vision that displaces ordinary speech. But his poetry moves on, at its best, to at least the aspiration for a habit of quiet, of a peace restored beyond interruption at a higher level of awareness.

Both poets are saying something about the hiddenness of the soul as well as of God. And on the face of it, Vaughan seems to have a stronger commitment to a substantial soul, probably pre-existent (as

'The Retreate' clearly suggests), while Herbert more obviously sees the soul as a reality existing with no foundation except the address of God to it. Yet it is Vaughan who finds, in a poem from *Silex II*, the image that might well embody Herbert's sense: 'Quickness' ends with the famous lines, 'Life is what none can express,/A quickness, which my God hath kis't'. The hiddenness of the transcendent is not to be reduced to some sort of substantial object buried under the layers of everyday reality, the star locked up in the box, as Vaughan has it elsewhere, in a potent but problematic metaphor. His own hermetic image of the star drawn earthwards to kindle the fading stuff of earthly beauty and desire is closer to the language of 'Quickness'. Like Herbert's poetry, this is about the presence of an active infusion of divine life, which has seized upon the stuff of the material world and opened it to different, dangerous and unmanageably richer dimensions. This poetry evokes and celebrates a reality that subsists simply because it is eternally spoken to, engaged with, loved, not because it has a solid and fixed existence in its own right. For Herbert and Vaughan alike, the poetry of faith was irresistibly drawn to this articulation of a grace that speaks the human other into life. For Herbert, it is precisely in speech that it happens, and his poems are extraordinary enactments of this event of abrupt 'birthing'. For Vaughan, the words look for and gesture to moments of wordless filling out of some eternal well of warmth and meaning. But both see their poetic task as an interruption of ordinary meanings, in Herbert by the sometimes brusque, always transforming demands of the speech of God, in Vaughan by the insistent pushing of the vision beyond surface appearance towards a 'supercharged' state of transparency, plenitude and peace – although 'I cannot reach it' in the words themselves.

Celebrations of hiddenness; and as such articulations of at least one highly significant facet of the Anglican sensibility of the period. And in so far as Herbert and Vaughan alike tell us that hiddenness can only be celebrated in the non-standard and subversive register of poetry, they may help us perhaps to understand why, in our own day, Anglicans and others are so often paralysed in their debates and conflicts as they work only with the impassioned manipulation of surface perceptions. 'Quickness' has been buried as surely as Vaughan's falling stars.