



**Gems  
uncommented on**

**A FAREWELL TO HENRY VAUGHAN  
No 8**

**A** lifetime could be spent with Henry Vaughan's poetry, but few of us could afford to do that. Before leaving him, though, we will look briefly at just a few more of his memorable poems, quotes from here and there, which we may well have met before, ideas that were especially his.

It can come as a surprise to some that William Wordsworth was not the first English poet to idealise childhood and to see our birth into *this* world as a '*sleep and a forgetting*' ie a being thrust out of a pre-earthly paradise into the chaos of life as we come to experience it in our adult years. People like Thomas Traherne AND Henry Vaughan were there before him. Here is perhaps the best known example from Vaughan, though it is not unique in his writings:



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*Happy those early days, when I  
Shined in my angel-infancy!  
Before I understood this place  
Appointed for my second race*

...

*When I had not walked above  
A mile or two from my first love,  
And looking back, at that short space,  
Could see a glimpse of His bright face.*

...

*O how I long to travel back  
And tread again that ancient track!*

...

*Some men a forward motion love,  
But I by backward steps would move;  
And when this dust falls to the urn,  
In that state I came return.*

(From: 'The Retreat' – *Silex Scintillans* part 1)

Thought-provoking ideas for a post-modern age disillusioned by the failure of so-called ongoing and upwardly-mobile **progress** to deliver the goods; an age frantically searching for the God, the 'some-one' supposedly dead?

Vaughan, moreover, as a poet of acute sensitivity, could write with vivid awareness about the enigma of life, of human restlessness and searching. Little has changed in the intervening three centuries and more:

*Man hath still either toys or care;  
He hath no root, nor to one place is tied,  
But ever restless and irregular  
About this earth doth run and ride.  
He knows he hath a home, but scarce knows where;  
He says it is so far,*

*Sweet peace sits crowned with smiles,  
And One born in a manger  
Commands the beauteous files.  
He is thy gracious friend  
And (O my soul awake!)  
Did in pure love descend  
To die here for thy sake.  
If thou canst get but thither,  
There grows the flower of peace,  
The rose that cannot wither,  
Thy fortress, and thy ease.  
Leave then thy foolish ranges;  
For none can thee secure,  
But One, who never changes,  
Thy God, thy Life, thy Cure.*

(‘Peace’ from *Silex Scintillans* part 1)

One day it **will** be alright. We shall **all** be there, together with Henry Vaughan, to whom be thanks for his help to us on the way, for his inspiration.

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Not many of us in our day and age can look death so squarely in the face. At a time when sudden and horrific mass-destruction could be a very real possibility for any of us we prefer to run away and forget. Vaughan, by contrast, actually prays for death, so that he may have his yearning-longing fulfilled, to know as he is known:

*O Father of eternal life, and all  
Created glories under thee!  
Resume thy spirit [ie Vaughan himself] from this world  
of thrall  
Into true liberty!  
Either disperse these mists, which blot and fill  
My perspective still as they pass;  
Or else remove me hence unto that hill,  
Where I shall need no glass,*

(From 'They are all gone'. . . *Silex Scintillans* part 2)

God alone can make life possible for us in this world of increasing foreboding. He alone can give us a vision of his will and purpose for the redemption of the world and for ourselves within and of it. Fear is not thereby taken away but, under God can be transcended. This is the gospel we are called on to share with one another.

By way of epilogue we turn to the well-loved and familiar verses which are found in some of our older hymn books. The title given is 'Peace'. This, surely, more than anything else is what we pray for. Ultimately it lies beyond time but as we look towards it in hope then most certainly traces of it will be given even now to sustain us:

*My Soul, [Vaughan says] there is a country  
Afar beyond the stars,  
Where stands a wing-ed sentry  
All skilful in the wars. [St. Michael ?]  
There above noise and danger,*

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*That he hath quite forgot how to go there.  
He knocks at all doors, strays and roams;  
Nay hath not so much wit as some stones have*

...

*Man is the shuttle to whose winding quest  
And passage through these looms  
God ordered motion, but ordained no rest.*

(From 'Man' – *Silex Scintillans* part 1)

Few would deny that restlessness and unrootedness have increased immeasurably in our modern western society. Is it, as it were, God's fault? St. Augustine gives us part of the answer when, addressing God he says on behalf of us all: 'Our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee'. Without God we *can* have no anchor.

Vaughan, however, knew his God, was found by Him, and so was granted glimpses of glory. Thus, though still confined to this world he looked in faith and hope beyond it – to the paradise once known, yes, but supremely to that which lay ahead beyond the grave. This is a constant theme in his poetry. One of the best-known examples is to be found in a poem written in mourning for the death of those he loved:

*They are all gone into the world of light!  
And I alone sit lingering here!  
Their very memory is fair and bright  
And my sad thoughts doth clear.*

This prompts Vaughan to thank God for showing him something of the joys of heaven to kindle his hope and love, and then, St. Francis-like, he eulogises death:

*Dear beauteous death; the jewel of the just!  
Shining nowhere but in the dark;  
What mysteries do lie beyond the dust,  
Could man outlook that mark!*