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Pre-Visions of the Restoration: The Poetry of Henry Vaughan

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Michael R. Collings

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have become increasingly aware that the restoration of the gospel did not occur in a vacuum inhabited only by Joseph Smith. Numerous individuals were involved, both as forerunners and as disseminators of newly restored or revealed principles. And not all of those involved were members of the Church. Many enlightened theologians, reformers, philosophers, and poets participated in the restoration which culminated in the reestablishment of the church of Jesus Christ in 1830.

A literary contribution that is well known to members of the Church is the following stanza from William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." It is a beautiful evocation of the doctrine of premortal existence.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.¹ [58–65]

Another example is Milton's grand defense of man's free agency in *Paradise Lost* as well as his other (then heretical) views, though largely unknown and unrealized until after the restoration of the Church.²

It is not necessary, however, to rely exclusively on the "great minds," the strongest voices, to find elements in strong parallel with LDS doctrine. Other poets, often less well known, less widely accepted critically, were equally convinced of such doctrinal points as a preexistence and of an apostasy and the need for a restoration. One of the most fascinating is the "minor" poet Henry Vaughan

Vaughan (ca. 1621–95), a contemporary of Milton, was a private person whose poetry attracted little notice in his own time or in the centuries following his death. A recent editor of Vaughan's poetry notes that the "critical attention directed to the poetry of Henry Vaughan over the past twenty-five years far exceeds that of the preceding three hundred."³ This is not because Vaughan was unworthy of attention, but rather because of his historical context. A royalist during the English Civil War (the losing side),

he abandoned the larger circle of English literature and letters in 1642, leaving London to return to Wales. At a time when the English temperament enjoyed the wit and unpredictable brilliance of men like Donne and Jonson, Vaughan was too conventional, too meditative, withdrawing from the world into “an inner realm of peace and light and unity.”⁴

However, the lack of critical attention in his own time does not lessen his poetic excellence. Vaughan, says literary critic French Fogle, “now seems to be firmly established as one of the finest of the pure lyric voices of the seventeenth century.”⁵ Neither does the lack of critical acclaim obscure the fact that Vaughan’s attitudes toward man and religion closely resemble Joseph Smith’s teachings more than a century and a half later. This is not, of course, to argue that Vaughan had any direct influence on Joseph Smith’s thinking, an influence highly unlikely in light of Vaughan’s obscurity—he is rarely even mentioned in English criticism until 1848 when his poetry was reedited. It is, however, to suggest that Vaughan’s voice was among the many voices alluded to by Elder Mark E. Petersen in *The Great Prologue* as contributing to the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the Restoration in the early nineteenth century. Elder Petersen notes that the forerunners of the Restoration had been working several hundred years before the birth of Joseph Smith, subtly altering political, social, philosophical, and theological attitudes, and deepening the sense of individual worth and liberty essential for any attempt at restoration. Vaughan contributed to that movement by expressing ideas which, however narrow their audience, closely paralleled those later developed more fully and authoritatively by the early leaders of the Church. His poetry helped in at least some degree to create an atmosphere for man to accept Joseph Smith’s proclamation of a general apostasy and need for a restoration.

For me, there is no better introduction to Vaughan’s mystical vision or his concern with the state of man and of the visible church than in his most famous poem “The World,”⁶ a poem I first encountered in a freshman literature course. We had dutifully plodded through the high points of English poetry from Chaucer to Donne and Milton, pragmatically memorizing authors and titles for an objective test; we memorized an occasional line or two from each poet for the same end. Many of the poems were interesting; some even invited a second or third reading. But “The World” echoed in me, both as a young man enlarging his awareness of other, greater minds and as an LDS student who too often felt estranged from the interests and purposes of much of the literature. “The World” belonged to me. Its opening lines captured the essence of immortality as we understand the word in the Church, more than any other poem I had read:

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light,
All calm as it was bright. [1–2]

At the time, though I was unaware of Joseph Smith's ring metaphor for eternity,⁷ Vaughan's lines struck me forcefully. There was something oddly, stirringly familiar in the imagery: the Ring, the "pure and endless light," the unearthly, ethereal calmness.

The rest of the poem descends rapidly from the heights evoked in those opening lines, both spatially and spiritually, to define the world. The realms of light are displaced by darkness:

And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years
 Driv'n by the spheres,
 Like a vast shadow mov'd, in which the world
 And all her train were hurl'd. [4–7]

In the darkened world, Vaughan defines the mortal state of the "doting love," the "darksome States-man," the "fearful miser," those souls whose interests center too much on the things of this world and who are caught in the corruption and apostasy of the historical churches:

Yet dig'd the Mole, and lest his ways be found
 Workt underground,
 Where he did Clutch his prey, but one did see
 That policie,
 Churches and altars fed him, Perjuries
 Were gnats and flies,
 It rain'd about him bloud and tears, but he
 Drank them as free. [23–30]

Despite temptations that strive to pinion man's interests—and his spirit—to the earth,

Yet some, who all this while did weep and sing,
 And sing, and weep, soar'd up into the *Ring*,
 But most would use no wing. [46–48]

A few can see beyond mortal barriers, but most refuse even to look.

Vaughan's awareness of an apostasy and his vision of the reality of eternity unite to create an intensely moving poem, urging men to listen to their inner convictions rather than to the empty preachings of others. The individual willing to trust the workings of the spirit within him returns to that visionary eternity of the opening lines:

O fools (said I,) thus to prefer dark night
 Before true light,
 To live in grots, and caves, and hate the day
 Because it shews the way,
 The way which from this dead and dark abode
 Leads up to God,
 A way where you might tread the Sun, and be
 More bright than he.
 But as I did their madnes so discusse,
 One whisper'd thus,

*This Ring the Bride-groome did for none provide
But for his bride. [49–60]*

Vaughan's references to an apostasy become even more overt in other poems. In "Religion" he defines the loss of authority in the historical churches by concentrating on the lack of miracles among his contemporaries. After several initial stanzas which refer to biblical Revelation—Jacob's dream, Elias and the ravens—he continues:

In *Abr'ham's* Tent the winged guests
(O how familiar then was heaven!)
Eate, drinke, discourse, sit downe, and rest
Untill the Coole, and shady *Even*;
Nay thou thy selfe, my God, in *fire*,
Whirle-winds, and *Clouds*, and that *soft voice*
Speak'st there so much, that I admire⁸
We have no Conf'rence in these daies. [13–20]

Since God's voice is conspicuously absent in Vaughan's world, the remainder of "Religion" is devoted to defining the need for continual revelation, which revelation had ceased not because God no longer wished to commune with man but because man had divorced himself from God:

But in her [religion's] long, and hidden Course
Passing through the Earths darke veines,
Growes still from better unto worse, . . .
So poison'd, breaks forth in some Clime,
And at first sight doth many please,
But drunk, is puddle, or meere slime
And 'stead of Phisick, a disease;
Just such a tainted sink we have
Like that *Samaritans* dead *Well*,
Nor must we for the Kernell crave
Because most voices like the *shell*.
Heal then these waters, Lord; or bring the flock,
Since these are troubled, to the springing rock,
Looke downe great Master of the feast; O shine,
And turn once more our *Water* into *Wine!* [33–35, 41–52]

The churches of his day,⁹ Vaughan felt, had transformed wine into poison, bringing not salvation but eternal sickness and, ultimately, eternal death.¹⁰ Vaughan, like Joseph Smith, realized the confusion of churches around him; unlike Joseph Smith, he did not receive the revelations he apparently desired. Instead, he perceived only the sickness and watched the symptoms grow and spread while he could only hope and pray.

Vaughan does not concentrate exclusively on the sorrows and sins occasioned by man's loss of Christ's true church. His finest poems are, in contrast, uplifting and constructive. They concentrate not so much on man's loss through apostasy as on man's essential nature, on the innocence

man once knew—the state he no longer clearly perceives but might once again attain.

Critics frequently have difficulty explaining precisely what Vaughan means when he refers to a pre-existence. L. C. Martin, perhaps the best twentieth-century editor of Vaughan's poetry, says in relation to Vaughan's use of the preexistence metaphor that it was very easy for Vaughan "to proceed from thoughts of immortality to thoughts of pre-existence, to hold acquaintance with a transcendent world."¹¹ Of the poems which define Vaughan's conception of a preexistence, the most direct is "The Retreat":

Happy those early dayes! when I
 Shin'd in my Angell-infancy.
 Before I understood this place
 Appointed for my second race,
 Or taught my soul to fancy ought
 But a white, Celestiall thought,
 When yet I had not walkt above
 A mile, or two, from my first love,
 And looking back (at that short space,)
 Could see a glimpse of his bright-face;
 When on some *gilded Cloud*, or *flowre*
 My gazing soul would dwell an houre,
 And in those weaker glories spy
 Some shadows of eternity;
 Before I taught my tongue to wound
 My Conscience with a sinfull sound,
 Or had the black art to dispense
 A sev'rall sin to every sence,
 But felt through all this fleshly dresse
 Bright *shootes* of everlastingnesse.

O how I long to travell back
 And tread again that ancient track!
 That I once more reach that plaine,
 Where first I left my glorious traine,
 From whence th'Inlighted spirit sees
 That shady City of Palme trees;
 But (ah!) my soul with to much stay
 Is drunk, and staggers in the way.
 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. [1–32]

In addition to references closely resembling LDS doctrines—this life as a "second estate" ("second race") and the implicit sense the child is somehow closer to God—Vaughan's poem is strongly reminiscent of Wordsworth's vision of man's progressing from a preexistence through mortality and into eternity. Like Wordsworth, Vaughan intuits rather than perceives a preexistence, thus suggesting that only the child, untainted by this earth, can fully respond to such intuition. For Vaughan, childhood is a time of

closeness to God—in every earth image the child may see beyond shadows to the solid reality of eternity. But as the child grows and learns (unfortunately through the mediation of false teachers and false guides), he loses his sense of otherness and alienates himself from the heaven he *knows* exists but cannot see.

This loss of awareness is coupled in another of Vaughan's poems with the Apostasy itself. Because man is separated from God, even through the teaching of the church (or, perhaps, *because* of the teachings of the church), he quickly loses his innate ability to see spiritual things through a child's eyes. In "Corruption," Vaughan consciously connects these two losses. Speaking initially of Eden, he says:

Sure, It was so. Man in those early lays
 Was not all stone, and Earth,
 He shin'd a little, and by those weak Rays
 Had some glimpse of his birth.
 He saw Heaven o'r his head, and knew from whence
 He came (condemned,) hither,
 And, as first Love draws strongest, so from hence
 His mind sure progress'd thither. [1–8]

Unfortunately, the Fall dissipates this early link with the heavens: "He sigh'd for *Eden*, and would often say / *Ah! what bright days were those?*" [19–20]. But, the poem adds, even then man is not entirely cut off from heavenly influence. Thrust out of the Garden, man in his infancy could at least perceive an occasional evidence for the eternal in the scenes of daily life:

Nor was Heav'n cold unto him; for each day
 The valley, or the Mountain
 Afforded visits, and still *Paradise* lay
 In some green shade, or fountain.
 Angels lay *Leiger*¹² here; Each Bush, and Cel,
 Each Oke, and high-way knew them,
 Walk but the fields, or sit down at some wel,
 And he was sure to view them. [21–28]

By Vaughan's time, however, the process of loss has progressed until there is little light, little hope, "and man is sunk below/ The Center, and his shroud" [35–36]. Much of the bitterness and despair so evident in the poems relating to the Apostasy is here linked with loss of that innocent vision of preexistence. Yet Vaughan does not remain in despair. Human life might be dark, sunk from its destined heights, divorced from heaven and heaven's light (significantly, however, through man's own choices), but man will not remain in darkness. In a final burst of affirmation, Vaughan looks forward to a renewal of that intimate intercourse between man and God which characterized human existence in Eden. Eventually—and soon—he proclaims the heavens will open again and darkness will vanish:

All's in deep sleep, and night; Thick darknes lyes
 And hatcheth o'r the people;
 But hark! What trumpets that? what Angel cries
Arise! Thrust in the Sickle. [37–40]

It seems appropriate to conclude an investigation into Vaughan's vision of man with a short passage from the poem titled simply "Man." After briefly considering the "steadfastness and state" of many of earth's creatures—the bird in its flight, the bee in its unending activity—Vaughan continues:

I would (said I) my God would give
 The staidness of these things to man! for these
 To his divine appointments ever cleave,
 And no new business breaks their peace. [8–11]

In the natural world—where everything develops and acts according to the measure of its creation—Vaughan sees an analogy for the ideal relationship between man and God. Yet man and his interests are conspicuous more for their restlessness and irregularity than for their steadfastness. In all he does, man incessantly works against his better nature rather than with it. The reason is quite simple: Man recognizes, at some level below consciousness, that he is part of a larger process beyond mortality:

He knows he hath a home, but scarce knows where,
 He sayes it is so far
 That he hath quite forgot how to go there. [19–21]

It is an essential part of man's purpose to divine the pathway he must follow to return to that home:

He knocks at all doors, strays and roams,
 Nay hath not so much wit as some stones have
 Which in the darkest nights point to their homes,
 By some hid sense their Maker gave;
 Man is the shuttle, to whose winding quest
 And passage through these looms
 God order'd motion, but ordain'd no rest. [22–28]

In Vaughan's poetry is an insistence that man inherently belongs to the sphere of God but, largely through his own volition, is cut off from it. The Fall initiated man's sense of loneliness but was at least ameliorated by Adam's unconscious awareness of eternity around him, of angels resident in every "Bush and Cel." Through the ages, however, even that intuitive awareness has been stifled and deadened until only the child retains any sense at all of being the literal offspring of God, or of having come from God to this earth, or of eventually returning to God. The struggle to maintain spiritual intuition is compounded because the single entity—the church—whose sole purpose is to guide man toward the pathway the child alone remembers has become corrupted and "lost." Man, for Vaughan, is

thus alone. He has no true guide through the darkness surrounding him, only hesitant and partial memories of his own “intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood.”

Yet Vaughan is a poet of assurance and hope. A time will come when heaven will open itself again to man or, rather, when man will open himself fully to heaven. Vaughan himself did not see that time, but it did come. Through the restoration of the gospel it is now possible for all to see clearly those dim, shadowy truths that Vaughan struggled to express, that Milton worked into nearly every line of *Paradise Lost*, that Wordsworth molded to his purpose in the Immortality Ode. Poets often use the metaphor of divine inspiration to support their individual visions of man and man’s destiny, but just as often that metaphor ultimately reveals more truth than the poets themselves ever realize.

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1. Jack Stillinger, ed., *William Wordsworth, Selected Poems and Prefaces* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 187. All references are to lines from this edition; italics in all quoted material are in original.

2. For a thorough discussion of Milton’s claims to inspiration, from a Latter-day Saint viewpoint, see Marilyn Arnold, “John Milton: An Inspired Man,” *The New Era* 6 (January 1976): 42–47. Milton’s concern for the absolute free agency of man is developed in Michael Collings, “The Boundaries of Choice: Moral Freedom in Milton’s Poetic University” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Riverside, 1977).

3. French Fogle, ed., *The Complete Poetry of Henry Vaughan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), xi.

4. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

5. *Ibid.*, p. xi.

6. Citations are from Fogle’s edition of Vaughan’s poetry.

7. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., and comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), p. 181.

8. *Admire* is here used in its older sense of “to be amazed” rather than in the modern sense “to look at approvingly.”

9. “The British Church” clearly restates the theme of apostasy:

Ah! he is fled!
And while these here their *mists*, and *shadows* hatch,
My glorious head
Doth of thoses hills of Mirrhe, and Incense watch.
Haste, haste my dear
The souldiers here
Cast in their lots again,
The seamlesse coat [the church]
The Jews touch’d not,
These dare divide, and stain.

10. Vaughan's attitude toward the British church might usefully be compared with Milton's in *Lycidas* and, much later, with Swift's in *A Tale of a Tub*.

11. L. C. Martin, ed., *Henry Vaughan Poetry and Selected Prose* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. xvii.

12. *Leiger*: resident as ambassador.