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PAUL A. OLSON

Vaughan's *The World*: The Pattern of Meaning And the Tradition

V AUGHAN'S *The World* ends with an epigraph from I John 2:16-17 which appears to say little about the work which it is supposed to illuminate: "All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the Eys, and the pride of life, is not of the father but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lusts thereof, but he that doth the will of God abideth for ever."¹

Though the poem begins and ends with its brilliant perceptions of the sweep of eternity, its middle section seems to bog down in a random listing of sinners which is founded on no philosophic or literary principle. One does not know what the lover, the statesman, the miser, and the group of epicures and prodigals have in common, aside from sin; and one is not quite sure why one should think of just these sinners when one is viewing eternity. It is as if the poet, having lost his visionary powers, could only turn to the leaden talents of the versifier and the preacher.

If the poem is to be worth its reputation, it must have more to it than a half-dozen fine lines; it must be all of a piece, including the epigraph and the middle section. Even at first sight, the epigraph does appear to have some bearing on the poem, for both, in a sense, speak of two worlds: the epigraph mentions the perishing temporal world and the eternal world where the faithful abide forever; the poem gives us these in the form of the world of darkness and the

¹ *The Works of Henry Vaughan*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford, 1957), p. 467. All citations and references from this edition. This paper is indebted to Mr. Ross Garner; see his *Henry Vaughan: Experience and the Tradition* (Chicago, 1959).

world of "pure and endless light." Both speak of two loves appropriate to these two worlds. In the Bible, the verses quoted in Vaughan's epigraph are preceded by an injunction to the early church, warning it to shun the love of the world and seek the love of the Father;² the epigraph is then a kind of practical explanation that the love of the world consists in the "lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" and that the love of the Father is exhibited in the doing of His will. Vaughan also speaks of an eternal and a temporal love under the images of the Bridegroom and the Bride, on the one hand, and of the pining lover and his associates in the art of temporal desire, on the other hand. Finally, both poem and Biblical passage set forth a set of triads: the scriptural passage the triad of misdirected lusts, the poem the triad of citizens who dwell in darkness. But such shadowy similitudes neither justify the epigraph nor elucidate the artistic ordering of the poem. In order to understand the real significance of both poem and epigraph, we must look to Renaissance scriptural tradition.

Whereas John chooses to use the language of direct theological statement to describe the "love of the Father," Vaughan chooses to embody the same love in a scriptural emblem—in the full-bodied drama of the Cantic's love of the Bridegroom for the Bride, a marriage which Vaughan, and the whole tradition of exegesis, saw as dramatizing the love which exists between God and the church or God and the individual soul.³ If scriptural tradition provides the basis for the image of the Bride and the Bridegroom, it may also assist us in understanding the figures in the poem who embody the "love of the world": the mooning lover, the clutching statesman, and the miser and his associates. This triad is, as we have suggested, related to the triad of temporal desires listed in John's epistle, and in a pattern which would have been more evident to Renaissance audiences. Because John had asserted that "these three" are *all that is in the world*, a thousand-year-old exegetical tradition had sought in the passage an explanation of all of the basic drives which account for sin and encourage the love which moves away from God. Thus, the lust of the flesh came to refer to stimuli which come from the lower appetities, the lust of the eyes to temptations which come from society, and the pride of life to the suggestions of Satan and the cosmic powers of evil.

In mediaeval exegesis, the desires of the flesh, the eye, and the ego were identified with the temptations of luxury, avarice, and pride and

² Vaughan, *Works*, p. 311.

³ See Vaughan, *Works*, pp. 410, 404-405, 451-452 for poems which use the Canticum allegory.

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with the sins of the flesh, the world, and the devil.⁴ These temptations were thought to subsume all other temptations; before these archetypal enemies, Adam was thought to have fallen in the Garden; over them, Christ triumphed in the Wilderness. As Protestant exegesis developed in the Renaissance, the interpretations of the passage became superficially more varied, but, beneath the changes, the force of tradition is still evident. A sampling of Renaissance commentaries on the passage reveals the following patterns of explanation:⁵

ST. JOHN'S EPISTLE	COMMENTS: TYNDALE	LUTHER
(1) Lust of the Flesh	(1) Lechery	(1) Sensual pleasure
(2) Lust of the Eye	(2) Covetousness	(2) Avarice
(3) Pride of Life	(3) Pride	(3) Ambition
CALVIN	BRITCHES BIBLE	BISHOP WILSON
(1) Desires of the Flesh	(1) Pleasure	(1) Sensuality
(2) Pomp and Vain Bravery	(2) Wantonness	(2) Covetousness
(3) Arrogance or Pride	(3) Ambition and Pride	(3) Pride

The relationship of the triad to Christ's temptation and Adam's fall is sometimes ignored and sometimes shifted in Protestant exegesis, but even here the changes are more a matter of vocabulary than of basic philosophy. (The traditions of mediaeval exegesis did not die altogether in 1517, nor, indeed, in 1535.) Tyndale's commentary gives us a fairly clear definition of the central tradition insofar as it is relevant to Vaughan. Tyndale writes:

⁴ See Venerable Bede, "In Epistolam S. Joannis," *PL*, XCIII, 92-93 (also *Glossa Ordinaria* comment); St. Peter Damian, *PL*, CXLV, 903-904; St. Martin of Laon, *PL*, CCIX, 262-263; Pseudo-Innocent III, *PL*, CCXVII, 979; Pietro Alighieri, *Comentarium super Dantis Comoediam*, ed. Vernon (Florence, 1887), pp. 36-37; for variant versions, see Bede, *PL*, XCII, 370 (*Glossa* comment); St. Gregory, *PL*, LXXVI, 1135-1136; Bede, *PL*, XCII, 20; "Glossa Ordinaria," *PL*, CXIV, 85-86; Peter Cantor, *PL*, CCV, 72-73; Peter Lombard, *PL*, CXCI, 695-696. For the world, the flesh, and the devil, see Ludolphus of Saxony, *Vita Jesu Christi*, ed. L. M. Rigollot (Paris, 1870), I, 224-242; *Gesta Romanorum*, ed. Hermann Oesterly (Berlin, 1872), p. 331; Paul Meyer, "Le Roman des Trois Ennemis de l'Homme," *Romania*, XVI (1887), 4, 11-13.

⁵ William Tyndale, *Expositions and Notes*, ed. Henry Walter (Cambridge, 1849), p. 177; *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, 1948), XIV, 337; *The Commentaries of M. Jhon Calvin vpon the first Epistle of Sainct Jhon* (London, 1580), sig. E5-E5^v; *The Breeches Bible* (n. p., 1578), sig. Ss2; Thomas Wilson, *Works* (Oxford, 1859), VI, 689-690. For the pattern in the temptations of Christ and Adam, see Lancelot Andrews, *Sermons* (Oxford, 1843), V, 496; Roger Hutchinson, *The Works*, ed. John Bruce (Cambridge, 1842), p. 152; see Vaughan's other poem entitled "The World" for a further association of riches, pleasure, and honor (*Works*, p. 670); and for a mention of the world, the devil, and "my own inclinations," see his "Solitary Devotions" (*Works*, p. 146).

By the lust of the flesh is undersood lechery, which maketh a man altogether a swine; and by the lust of the eyes is understood covetousness, which is the root of all evil, and maketh to err from the faith. And then followeth pride: which three are the world, and captains over all other vices, and occasions of all mischief.⁶

Here is the basic order which undergirds the central section of Vaughan's poem. The "doting Lover" caught in the "snares of pleasure," with his "quaint music" and pensive sentimentality, is perhaps better captured by Luther's sensual pleasure than by Tyndale's lechery; but the statesman, pursued by clouds of witnesses, working above and below ground, both tyrant and demagogue, is certainly Pride or Ambition; and the miser and his associates, the epicures and prodigals (who also regard temporalia as the ultimately important) are Avarice and the other sins which spring from the lust of the eyes. The passage is thus not based on any random desire to sermonize, but on a rationally ordered theological tradition; the technique and artistic tradition of the poem remain to be investigated.

It is not accidental that in the first and last lines of the poem, Vaughan sounds a little like Dante, that in the middle section he sounds like Ben Jonson; for in both sections he is choosing modes of expression which are appropriate to the worlds they express. For the spikenard and saffron marriage of the Canticle, Vaughan creates a ring which is perhaps his most exquisite image:

I saw eternity the other night
Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light . . .
This Ring the Bridegroom did for none provide
But for his Bride.

(Lines 1-2, 59-60.)

The image of the ring of eternity as a wedding ring, like the imagery of the Canticle itself, is sublimely indifferent to decorum at the literal level and perfectly appropriate allegorically—visually impossible and connotatively exact. When Vaughan speaks of the supersensuous world, his symbols, the Bride and the Bridegroom, are necessarily analogous to what they embody; when he speaks of the immediate, sensuous world, his symbols *are* what they mean. Analogy is no longer needed. The important thing about all three symbols of worldly love—lecher, statesman, and miser—is that they only desire; they do not fulfill: the lover has no beloved, the statesman no honor beyond mob honor, and the miser no possessions which he can really possess. Theirs is a love which, by the temporal nature of its ends and the cumulative nature of its desire, cannot but remain unfulfilled. In contrast to these

⁶ Tyndale, *Expositions and Notes*, p. 177.

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images of weariness and mere complexity stands the single unitive image which figures "the love of the Father"—the image of the Bride and her Bridegroom.

The last stanza synthesizes the two worlds and their two sets of images by calling attention to those who weep and sing and those who only grope. Those who weep and sing and who are drawn into the world of light, one may suggest, weep because they regard the seen world as a world which passes, and yet they sing because they see that world as also a shadow, a sacramental emblem of the world of light into which they are drawn. Those who grope live in a kind of Platonic cave where the temporal is the ultimately real. The psychology of the last stanza is very subtle; for, while the poet attempts to coerce the prisoners in the cave into turning toward the light, the voice reminds him that the regeneration of man's love is not finally a coercive matter but a matter depending on God's initiation and God's grace:

But as I did their madness so discusse
One whisper'd thus,
*This Ring the Bridegroom did for none provide
But for his Bride.*

(Lines 57-60)

The concept of grace dramatized here is a personalist concept, neither predestinarian nor mechanical.

Vaughan is here, I think, writing near the end of a tradition so far as poetry worthy of the name is concerned. For five centuries, poets had found in the triad of I John 2:16 an important pattern for the aesthetic ordering of the subject matter of poems or parts of poems. In the early thirteenth century, we have *Le Roman des Trois Ennemis* with its picture of the Devil, the World, and the Flesh bringing man to indulge his pride, his passion for riches and power, and his love of luxury.⁷ Dante's fourteenth-century commentators saw in the beasts which the poet meets in the wilderness of the dark wood the same three temptations, the temptations which Satan offered to Christ in a similar wilderness—the leopard was seen as luxury, the lion as pride, and the wolf as avarice.⁸ In his "lost" and timorous condition, Dante needs the ministering angels, Virgil, and Beatrice indirectly, to escape the power

⁷ Meyer, "Le Roman des Trois Ennemis," pp. 1-24.

⁸ Jacopo Alighieri, *Chiose alla cantica dell'Inferno de Dante Alighieri*, ed. Lord Vernon (Florence, 1848), pp. 5-6; *Commento di Francesco da Buti*, ed. Crescentino Giannini (Pisa, 1858), I, 33-35; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il commento alla Divina Comedia*, ed. Domenico Guerri (Bari, 1918), I, 177-186; *Il codice cassinese della Divina Commedia* (Monte Cassino, 1865), p. 6; Benvenuto da Imola, *Comentum super Dantis Aldigherij Comoediam*, ed. J. P. Lacaïta (Florence, 1887), I, 36-37 ff.; Pietro Alighieri, *Commentarium super Dantis Comoediam*, pp. 32-34.

of these three and to rise among those who weep and sing. Chaucer's Melibee is dispossessed by the same three enemies;⁹ and, somewhat earlier in the fourteenth century, these three enter the enormously popular *Gesta Romanorum* variously as three kings, three men, three attackers, three soldiers, a river, a lion, a wolf, etc.¹⁰

In Dunbar's *Twa Mariit Wemen and a Wedo*, the same temptations appear in a fabliau guise as the husbands of three wives who meet in the ancient garden to discuss their love problems; one wife is married to a whoremaster whose talent is for fleshliness, the second is married to a jealous and rich old dolt whose virtues lie in the possessive vices, and the third, the widow, is "married" only to herself, and she expresses her self-love, her "pride of life," by pluming herself like a peacock and surrounding herself with a hosts of gallants as admirers.¹¹

One wonders if the same triad does not undergird the central episodes of Spenser's second book; Acrasia certainly suggests the temptations of concupiscence of the flesh, Mammon, his cave, and its surroundings seem to present multifoliate stimuli to the lust of the eyes, and Maleger (bringer of evil?), as the leader of the vices, would be an apt representative of the pride of life.¹² Giles Fletcher gives us the emblems of the triad in a Bacchanalian orgy, a miser's storeroom, and the court of Ambition.¹³ Vaughan, I suspect, is at or near the end of the tradition, and in him the temptations are embodied simply and economically.

⁹ Chaucer, *Works*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), I, 178.

¹⁰ *Gesta Romanorum*, pp. 322, 331, 344, 371, 380, 392, 424, 443, 451, 463, 482, 486, 591, 632, 636-637, 670-671, 685.

¹¹ William Dunbar, *Poems*, ed. John Small (Edinburgh, 1893), II, 30-47. The jealousy of the rich Senex is probably a symbol for avarice as is also his old age. See *Confessio Amantis*, V, 595-610; Paul Olson, "Le Roman de Flamenca: History and Literary Convention," *SP*, LV (1958), 11 and note 14; George R. Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer: Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea," *Speculum*, IX (1934), 249-277. The tradition begins in the high Middle Ages, but traces of it are to be found in Spenser's Malbecco, Shakespeare's Iago, and Jonson's jealous husbands. The "wedo's" pride is also dramatized in her concern for class distinctions, fancy clothes, displaying herself on pilgrimages, etc. Dunbar's *demande* at the end of the poem (lines 527-530) is not the artistic anticlimax which Mackenzie makes it (Dunbar, *Poems*, London, 1951, p. xxxii). The question concerning which of the three wives the reader has married makes it evident that these are emblematic wives; their "husbands" are all those who follow the dictates of luxury, avarice, or pride. The iconological pattern requires the *demande*.

¹² "Maleger" may be constructed on the analogy of "armiger" (bearer of arms). Arthur's susceptibility to pride may be indicated by his love for *Prays-desire* (II, ix, 37-39), a lady to whom he is attracted just before his battle with Maleger. Spenser, *Works*, *Book Two*, ed. Greenlaw et al. (Baltimore, 1933), pp. 410-412, 433.

¹³ Giles Fletcher, "Christs Victorie on Earth," *The Poetical Works of Giles and Phineas Fletcher*, ed. F. S. Boas (Cambridge, 1908), I, 52-54.

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Dunbar and Fletcher are sophisticates; Vaughan gives us the thing itself.

This analysis is intended as a kind of sample exploration of the relationship between tradition and the individual talent in the emblematic poetry of the Renaissance. Properly to understand that poetry one must see it as traditional—traditional in its theological patterns and perhaps even in the emblems which it chooses to embody those patterns. But to say that poets who use devices such as the triad of temptations are traditional is but to say half. For the poetry comes with the seeing of the theological pattern in experience and the experiencing of theology as immediate and personal. Dunbar's whoremaster and Fletcher's Bacchanalia and Vaughan's lover are all emblems of the "lust of the flesh"; but, precisely because the lust is seen in each case in terms of a different emblem and a different pattern of experience, it is at once the same lust and a different one, different because in the first case it is simply bawdy, in the second pagan, and in the third romantic, and yet the same because governed by the same appetites and part of the same grouping of temptations. Properly the explanation of meaning in Renaissance emblematic poetry must explore neither the surface nor the depths exclusively, neither the pattern nor the varying symbols of that pattern, but the interaction between these two where the poem's meaning is at once ancient and new, simple and complex.

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