
“Observe God in His works”*: *Mystical Via Media* in Henry Vaughan’s *Silex Scintillans*

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Abstract

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England were marked, among many other theological debates, by the religious controversy over human culpability in the matter of salvation. The Protestant reformers contested the Catholic veneration of exterior objects and practices such as indulgences and penance with the claim that one could attain God’s grace only by putting one’s faith in it. The seventeenth-century English poet Henry Vaughan (1621-1695) reacts to this controversy in his poetry collection entitled *Silex Scintillans* (1655) from an unprecedented perspective. Acknowledged both as a metaphysical poet and a proto-Romantic, Vaughan’s speakers in the collection observe nature as the sole mediator that can enable the pious believer to reach the eternal Truth or God. In this respect, they recognise the Protestant scepticism of any intermediaries while at the same time, they transform nature itself into a sacrament through which redemption becomes possible. That is, they posit themselves partly as Catholic believers who regard nature as a means to learn if they are saved by God and partly as Protestant believers who reject any ornamental medium between God and human beings. Through an elevated depiction of the natural world, the collection contributes to the early modern concept of *via media* employed by the Anglican bishop Joseph Hall to make peace between the opposing religious sects of the period. Thus, the major aim of this paper is to argue that in *Silex Scintillans* Henry Vaughan creates a discourse of mystical *via media* by mediating between Catholicism and Protestantism through an envisioning of nature as the only sacrament through which the collection’s speakers believe they could attain salvation.

Keywords: Henry Vaughan, *Silex Scintillans*, *via media*, nature, sacraments

* This line is taken from Henry Vaughan’s “Rules and Lessons,” another poem in *Silex Scintillans* (1896, p. 97).

1. Introduction

Henry Vaughan was a Welsh poet whose literary career resembles that of John Donne in terms of his religious conversion. Like Donne, whose first biographer informs us that the poet “wished [his secular poems] had been abortive, or so short lived, that his own eyes had witnessed their funerals” (Walton, 1796, p. 76), Vaughan lamented the existence of his secular poems found in *Olor Iscanus* [*The Swan of the Usk*]. In the preface to his devotional poetry collection entitled *Silex Scintillans* [*The Fiery Flint*], Vaughan confesses that “I myself have, for many years together, languished of this very sickness [of writing secular verses]; and it is no long time since I have recovered” (1896, p. 5). Later in the preface, he pleads with the reader for the suppression of his works that reflect his love for a human beloved: “if the world will be so charitable as to grant my request, I do here humbly and earnestly beg that none would read them” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 5). Although there is more than one reason for the poet’s religious transformation, including physical illnesses, political challenges, and the death of loved ones, George Herbert’s *The Temple* appears as the deepest influence on him: “The first, that with any effectual success attempted a diversion of this foul and overflowing stream, was the blessed man, Mr. George Herbert, whose holy life and verse gained many pious converts, of whom I am the least” (Vaughan, 1896, 7). As Vaughan’s remarks demonstrate, the poet underwent a religious transformation, which is also present in his poetical works.

Apart from his outlook as a religious poet, critics have discovered several recurring themes and literary techniques in Vaughan’s devotional poems, which enabled them to attribute many poetical titles to him. Wanamaker (1974), for example, argues that the poet belongs to the school of Donne, that is, he is a metaphysical poet, in that he makes excellent use of the concept of *discordia concors* in *Silex Scintillans*, whereby he detects the discord in the concord in his observations of nature (p. 465). Wanamaker’s observation of the poet’s attentiveness to nature makes it possible to view Vaughan as a nature poet, a contention put forward by several critics. Judson (1927) states that “in the poetry of Vaughan, ... one perceives the observant eye and the heart that is quickened by the charm of nature’s less familiar aspects and moods” (p. 148). However, Judson continues, Vaughan should not be perceived as a descriptive nature poet but one who meditates upon the natural world (1927, p. 149). Similarly, Martz (1963) suggests that the majority of poems in *Silex Scintillans* make it clear that “man, enlightened by Biblical revelation, can grasp the Vestiges, the ‘traces,’ of God in external nature; and from this knowledge he can then turn inward to find the Image of God within himself” (p. 45). Thus, Vaughan’s poetry can be said to ascribe a divine aspect to the external nature as it makes it possible for human beings to observe their own selves in it. In this respect, he can also be denominated as a mystic poet who believes that natural objects signify more than what can be seen in them.

Though critics agree upon the representation of a divinised nature in Vaughan's religious poetry, whether the poet implements political discourse in his works or not is still a debatable question. Rudrum (1999) observes how scholarly perception of Vaughan has moved from the argument that the poet's best works are not affected by concomitant political references to that it is possible to detect Anglican propaganda in most of his famous works such as *Silex Scintillans*, *Olor Iscanus*, and *Mount of Olives* (pp. 351-353). This article contributes to the argument that Vaughan presents a political stance in his observations of and attitudes toward the external nature. It aims to bring 'Vaughan as a nature poet' and 'Vaughan as an Anglican propagandist' together by claiming that the poet creates a discourse of mystical *via media* or the midway between the extreme theological parties of the period during which he lived. The political dimensions of Vaughan's regard for nature are mentioned by critics. In fact, Whalen (2002) analyses *Silex Scintillans* in terms of its relation to the concept of moderation and suggests that "Vaughan quite deliberately assigns to the devotional, pre-ingestive reflection a sacramental status approaching if not equal to that which traditionally is derived from without" (p. 174). According to this contention, *Silex Scintillans* places the source of grace in the pious feelings of the believer. Still, it is argued in this article that Vaughan's depiction of nature as the only medium between God and human beings renders it a sacrament although his sole focus on nature rejects any other symbolic object's mediatory function. For this reason, the remaining part of the article first focuses on the meaning and functions of sacraments and how they became a topic of debate during the early modern period in England. Later, the article aims to reveal Vaughan's reaction to the extremist ideas on this ecclesiastical topic. Finally, it is contended that in the selected poems in *Silex Scintillans*, Vaughan, aligning with his contemporary Anglican theologians, mediates between opposing denominations of Catholicism and Puritanism by envisioning nature as a source of divine grace that stimulates the speakers' devotional feelings.

2. The English Reformation and The Sacraments

It seems important to note that Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans* was published in two volumes in 1650 and 1655 when England was under the rule of the Parliamentary regime. The Protestant Reformation that attacked Catholic practices and the Puritan insistence for a further reformation in the Church of England caused an extensional controversy that led the country to a civil war between the years 1642 and 1651. As Spraggon (2003) argues, the Puritan iconoclasm had not only moral and religious but also political implications:

The controversy was about not only the correct forms of liturgy, ritual and church decoration, but also about obedience to the crown, which for supporters of the king was equated with religious conformity. For the opposition, the fear of Catholicism was tied in with fear of political tyranny and absolute rule. ... [T]he dangers of idolatry were utilized to mobilise parliamentary support against Charles, and to justify the taking up of arms against the monarch. (p. xv)

To put it succinctly, the campaign against sacraments that started with the Reformation to attack the state of the papacy was intensified by the Puritans to challenge the authorial status of the Stuart kings. Thus, to understand the breaking of the English Civil War, it seems crucial to refer to the development of the Puritan hatred against ornamental religious objects during the early modern period.

In the early years of the Reformation, the official documents of the Church of England stated that the new theology rejects the ‘corrupted’ practices such as the adoration of certain sacraments and penance observed in the Catholic Church. For example, the tenth article of “The Ten Articles of 1536,” a document composed by learned churchmen of the Church of England, views it blasphemous to believe that “through the Bishop of Rome’s pardons souls might clearly be delivered out of purgatory and all the pains of it” (Fuller, 1845, pp. 158-159). Similarly, “The Book of Common Prayer” suggests that the main reason for the abolishment of certain conventions is that “they were so far abused, partly by the superstitious blindness of the rude and unlearned and partly by the insatiable avarice of such as sought more their own lucre than the glory of God” (Booty, 1976, p. 20). Later, “The Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563” puts forward in its sixth article the Protestant belief that if a religious practice does not exist in the Bible, it should not be viewed as “requisite or necessary to salvation” (Wilson, 1821, p. 29). It can be deduced from these historical documents that the possibility of mercy is placed wholly in the hands of God; human intervention, according to this view, cannot aid an individual in her/his way to grace.

Though the English Reformation expressed negative opinions on the Catholic perception of sacraments and salvation, the reformed religion was still attacked by the Puritan leaders for containing the remnants of Catholicism in its church. “A View of Popish Abuses Yet Remaining in The English Church” was presented in the Parliament in 1572 by the Puritan clergyman John Field (1545 – 1588) with the aim of abolishing all the remaining Catholic practices in the Church of England. In the admonition, Field calls on the Parliament “for the removing away and utter abolishing of all suche corruptions and abuses” as communion, baptism and kneeling (Frere and Douglas, 1907, p. 20). He states that the Book of Common Prayer “is an unperfected book, culled & picked out of that popishe dunghill, the Masse booke full of all abominations.” (Frere and Douglas, 1907, p. 83). The reason why he rejects the inclusion of any kind of Catholic rituals in the English Church is that they prevent the congregation from hearing and taking to their hearts the word of God: “When Jesus is named, then of goth the cappe, and downe goeth the knees, with suche a scraping on the ground, that they cannot heare a good while after, so that the word is hindred, but when any other names of God are mentioned, they make no curtesie at all, as though the names of God were not equall, or as thoughe all reverence oughte to be given to the syllables” (Frere and Douglas, 1907, p.

29). So, according to Field, such rituals performed during masses pervade the whole process making the word of God conveyed inferior to them.

As can be seen, the question of salvation, predestination, and the worth of sacraments and other religious practices were among the topics of debate during the early modern period in England. In a sense, all these topics are related to each other. Sacraments are understood to be the signs through which one can comprehend the divine secrets of God. Etymologically, the word ‘sacramentum’ derives from the Greek ‘mysterion’ which “came to be applied to many kinds of secrets or unexplained phenomena” (Ferguson, 2015, p. 126). In the Catholic sense, “[t]he hidden mystery of God’s plan of salvation is ... made manifest and brought to completion in Christ. This mystery is extended through history in the Church, in which Christ’s members are joined to his saving mystery through the sacraments” (Nutt, 2017, p. 54). In other words, they enable devout people to comprehend God’s plan concerning who is saved and who is going to be eternally punished. However, it should be noted that the Catholic perception accepts that they “do not merely dispose their recipients to grace, they actually make them holy” (Nutt, 2017, p. 63). Therefore, they are viewed as intermediary objects and practices that accompany the believers in the comprehension of their eternal fate.

3. *Via Media*

While the Puritan theologians of the early modern period argued that sacraments led believers to idolatry and that the Church of England still contains some remnants of them, there were attempts to find a midway between the two opposite poles of the debate. One of those attempts was made by the Anglican bishop Joseph Hall (1574-1656) in his *Via Media, The Way of Peace* (1619). Hall argues in his treatise that the disputations around the five articles of faith, which are predestination, Christ’s death, man’s corruption and free-will, conversion, and perseverance, may lead the Church and the country to a dangerous future if the notion of golden mean would not be acknowledged by theologians and believers. He claims that when “scholastic disquisitions” are removed from the debates around the articles of faith, it becomes obvious that both Protestantism (and its subsects) and Catholicism are more or less on the same page. For example, on the matter of salvation, both sides argue the same thing, according to Hall (1808), with little nuances on both sides: “the one part holds, that God’s decree looks at faith and infidelity, as conditions in those, who are to be chosen or refused: the other easily grants, that no man is elect but the believer, no man reprobate but the rebellious and unbeliever” (p. 828). For Hall, then, both theological sides accept that faith is the arbiter of divine grace; however, they dissent on the question of the provider of faith. Both sides, according to Hall, believe that faith is “the gift of God” (p. 830). However, whether God gives this gift to the elect or to those whom He knew would perform good deeds is a matter of debate. Still, Hall argues, this question should not create social trouble when both sides agree upon the

contention that God is the provider of faith: “Doubtless, to make men capable of salvation, there is faith, repentance, good works, perseverance in good, actually required of God. ... Why should we be scrupulous in what place they come into the holy purposes of God, which we grant cannot be missing in our way to heaven?” (p. 832). Thus, for Hall, the English Church followed a midway between the two extreme sides of the theological debates on deliverance. In a way that attests to Hall’s argument, Holtzen (2019) claims that “The English Church reformed the excesses of Roman Catholicism and avoided the deficiencies of more strident Protestant reforms. The Articles of Religion functioned neither like the canons of Trent nor as the Protestant confessions” (p. 61).

4. Henry Vaughan’s Mystical *Via Media* in *Silex Scintillans*

As a royalist poet who supported the political decisions of his country, Henry Vaughan also followed the English Church’s policy of moderation. Moreover, he reflects the same theological stance in his *Silex Scintillans* from an unprecedented perspective. He posits the external nature as a sacrament that reveals the divine plan of salvation to human beings. In this respect, he appropriates the Catholic stance on the possibility of observing God’s plan in an external entity. However, he also elucidates that any object or practice other than nature cannot be viewed as an intermediary between human beings and God’s forgiveness. As Mackenzie (1999) suggests, during a period when devotional poetry mainly incorporates the question of the divine presence “in nature and in man,” Vaughan undertakes a mission of “integrating” the Protestant and Puritan responses to the debate with the Catholic ones (p. 98). In this respect, the collection can be read as the literary extension of Hall’s concept of *via media* in that the speakers of the poems seem to situate themselves between the opposing theological factions of the Reformation period by regarding nature as a sacrament.

For example, “Religion” is worthy of attention with regard to understanding nature as the sole medium through which one can comprehend how God diffuses his grace. In general, the poem depicts a person in nature who holds an account of the Christian religion throughout history; that is, the speaker recounts how religion has been tainted by human beings. In the first four quatrains, the speaker imagines biblical times while walking in nature:

My God, when I walk in those groves
And leaves, Thy Spirit doth still fan,
I see in each shade that there grows
An angel talking with a man.

Under a juniper some house,
Or the cool myrtle's canopy;
Others beneath an oak's green boughs,
Or at some fountain's bubbling eye.

Here Jacob dreams, and wrestles;

there Elias by a raven is fed;
Another time by th' angel, where
He brings him water with his bread.

In Abr'ham's tent the wingèd guests
– O how familiar then was heaven! –
Eat, drink, discourse, sit down, and rest,
Until the cool and shady even. (Vaughan, 1896, p. 30).

Here, the speaker depicts a period almost like the prelapsarian time when only holy biblical figures recognise the power of God. Biblical allusions to Jacob's wrestling with God, Elijah's being fed by ravens, and Abraham's communion with angels refer to God's mighty and merciful nature. Both the speaker of the poem and the biblical characters he imagines are present in nature. It is only through his observations of nature that the speaker can comprehend God's mentioned qualities. In this respect, he can be called a nature mystic for whom the external nature signifies more than it showcases.

After depicting this Edenic scene which the speaker spots in the external nature, he almost immediately moves forward to the present time when human or institutional intervention has tainted religion and thus caused the loss of the prelapsarian joys. He claims in the fifth quatrain that "We have no conference in these days" (Vaughan, 1986, p. 30). The given line is of importance since although the speaker laments the loss of Edenic times, he still refers to those days as "these days," which indicates that he still feels close to those times when he is in nature.

While the given lines in "Religion" give an account of the defilement of religion over time, the first two of the remaining eight quatrains first attempt to find the reason for the loss of Edenic times that the speaker can spot only in nature and then find an answer to the questions raised:

Is the truce broke? Or 'cause we have
A Mediator now with Thee,
Dost Thou therefore old treaties wave,
An by appeals from Him decree?

Or is't so, as some green heads say,
That now all miracles must cease?
Though Thou hast promis'd they should stay
The tokens of the Church, and peace. (Vaughan, 1896, p. 31)

These are the lines in which the political and theological debates of early modern England find a place. The speaker thinks of several reasons for human beings' loss of direct connection with God and Heaven. First, he infers that Jesus Christ functions as the 'mediator' between God and human beings and thus the latter has been removed from enjoying past Edenic joys. Secondly, he voices the Puritan view that ornamental icons in churches should be abandoned.

In these lines, he articulates the mediatory function of sacraments. While they used to enable believers to experience the same joys described in the first five quatrains, their rejection has caused the loss of direct connection with those times. Therefore, neither the Protestant nor Puritan theologies are responsive to the speaker's search for the bygone unspoiled times.

After recognising the inadequacy of his contemporary religious factions' attempts to restore the idyllic past, the poetic persona continues to explain how religion has been tarnished by institutional and human interruption:

No, no; Religion is a spring,
That from some secret, golden mine
Derives her birth, and thence doth bring
Cordials in every drop, and wine. (Vaughan, 1896, p. 31)

Here, the pure unstained religion is depicted as a flower that sprouts from a secret place, and it has a recuperative aspect to itself that heals the fallen creatures. Maintaining the image of the flower, the speaker claims that this untainted religion "[g]rows still from better unto worse" in the material world. This pure flower is infected by subterranean "sulphur" and becomes so "poison'd" that it turns out to be "stead of physic, a disease" (Vaughan, 1896, p. 31).

As can be observed, it is nature itself that enables the speaker to detect religion in its purest form and to discover how it has been contaminated through ecclesiastical debates. It is the act of wandering in nature that reveals the blissful image of Eden to him, and it is the thought of a flower that makes him observe how this image has been shattered. Therefore, nature functions as a sacrament for the speaker, which reveals more than it presents to the eye. In this respect, the speaker first articulates the superfluousness of what Joseph Hall calls "scholastic disquisitions". Secondly, he mediates between the Catholic adoration of mediatory items, the Protestant maintenance of religious symbolic objects, and the Puritan antipathy towards them.

It is important to mention "Religion" as a poem that negotiates the mystical aspect of the external nature since it brings in the early modern theological debates to the subject. On the other hand, the mediatory aspect of nature is not only mentioned in "Religion" but scattered throughout the collection. For example, the same idea that human beings can get closer to Heaven or God through nature is also given in "Corruption" whose speaker argues that "[n]or 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" (Vaughan, 1896, p. 101). Therefore, the two poems make clear that nature acquires a sacramental meaning for the speakers since it makes God's mysteries obvious, and that contemporary time has lost its connection with the purity of religion by tainting it. In the same way, "Regeneration" is a record of a spiritual pilgrimage

made possible by the physical act of observing the external nature. The sight of a primrose, a symbol of renewal, with shades on it, reveals to the poetic persona that his turn to the right path is just “[m]ere stage and show,” that is, it is insincere (Vaughan, 1896, p. 19). Recognising that his sins weigh more than his repentance (Vaughan, 1896, p. 19), he continues his spiritual journey in nature and detects a grove of magnificent trees that unveils “a new Spring,” which indicates a sincere religious conversion (Vaughan, 1896, p. 20). The reason behind this opportunity is again found in nature which contains elements both in their perfect and deficient forms. Some of the stones around a fountain that the speaker observes are “bright and round,” implying perfection, while others are “ill-shap’d and dull” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 21). As Lessenich (1972) states, “The fountain and the stones form a stage in the pilgrimage of the poet’s soul, admonishing him not to become slack, or, ... to maintain a lively hope to an inheritance incorruptible and undefined, reserved for him in heaven” (p. 85). Also, at a bank of flowers, he inspects that “[s]ome fast asleep, others broad-eyed / And taking in the ray” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 22). Therefore, he understands from his observations of nature that salvation is possible if he prays for the regeneration of his soul. Through images from nature, the speaker understands his fallen nature and the possibility of being forgiven, and this belief makes the speaker pray at the end of the poem as such: “‘Lord,’ then said I, ‘on me one breath, / And let me die before my death!’” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 22).

Comprehension of the human being’s fallen nature and the possibility of redemption through images from the external nature such as trees and flowers are also observed in “Man’s Fall and Recovery”. The speaker presents himself as a “sullied flower” whose fallen nature has been redeemed by Christ’s “saving wound” or sacrifice on the Cross (Vaughan, 1896, pp. 42-43). In “The Relapse,” the poetic persona contrasts himself with God. While he presents himself as a sinful creature, God is depicted as a redeemer to whom he needs to express his gratitude:

A darting conscience full of stabs, and fears;
 No shade but yew,
 Sullen, and sad eclipses, cloudy spheres,
 These are my due.

...

Sweet, downy thoughts, soft lily-shades, calm streams,
 Joys full, and true,
 Fresh, spicy mornings, and eternal beams,—
 These are His due. (Vaughan, 1896, p. 89)

Here, God eases the pains of the sinner through the sights of lilacs, rivers, and sunlight. Therefore, natural objects become functional in the way the speakers of these poems approach salvation.

Apart from trees and flowers, stars also acquire significance in terms of revealing the opportunity of divine grace. The hope that creatures in nature might contain the solution to the question of redemption of mankind is voiced in “Midnight” whose speaker, observing stars while everyone else sleeps, “wish[es] each beam / My soul doth stream” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 63). Similarly, in “Joy of my life while left me here!”, the speaker appears as a human subject who has been banished from Heaven and thus God’s company. Still, he feels the presence of his creator in the natural world. He understands that “in thy absence thou dost steer / Me from above” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 67). The reason for this feeling of connectedness becomes obvious when the poetic persona contemplates stars as guiding spirits:

Stars are of mighty use; the night
 Is dark, and long;
 The road foul; and where one goes right,
 Six may go wrong.
 One twinkling ray,
 Shot o'er some cloud,
 May clear much way,
 And guide a crowd. (Vaughan, 1896, p. 67)

On the opposite side of the stars, the poem puts the “swordlike gleam” that caused human beings’ banishment from Heaven. However, the speaker believes, “this beam [stars] / Will guide him *in*” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 68). Stars as guides are also mentioned in “The Star” from the second volume of *Silex Scintillans*. The poem’s speaker scrutinises stars to understand the human condition on earth. Addressing the celestial body, he says, “I will see / What man may learn from thee” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 191). First, he recognises that the human body is so depraved that it is impossible for human beings to observe the hidden mystery behind stars (“... for bodies, once infected, / Depraved, or dead, can have with thee / No hold, nor sympathy” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 191)). Later, he remembers that his body contains a soul in it, which has a “pure desire / And longing for thy bright and vital fire” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 191). The reason why the speaker longs for the stars is explained in the next two stanzas; they are believed to “[c]ommand and guide the eye” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 192), and they thus awaken the spirit and divine desire of the human subject. For the people who have converted to the right path after being accompanied by the stars, “God a commerce states, and sheds / His secret on their heads” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 192).

As the lines from the given poems make clear, natural objects such as trees, flowers, and stars guide the believers on their path to salvation by making God’s mysteries obvious to them. In this respect, the speakers of these poems perceive natural elements to be sacraments. The poetic personae never utter the belief that these natural objects have a direct impact on the probability of acquiring God’s mercy. Rather, they enable the speakers to recognise their fallen nature and thus make them believe that they cannot be saved without repenting and praying.

In other words, natural objects observed in the poems do not function as direct saviours but as converters of the soul that help the speakers turn themselves into devout believers.

The depiction of natural elements as sacraments is not limited to trees, flowers, and stars in *Silex Scintillans* but is extended to animals. “The Morning-Watch,” for example, expresses the speaker’s wish that he can pray to and praise God even in his sleep (“O let me climb / When I lie down!” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 71)). His yearning for night-time worship has been awakened by his observations of nature where he sees that not only naturally occurring events such as winds and spring but also animals “[a]dore [God] in their kinds. / Thus all is hurl’d / In sacred hymns and order; the great chime / And symphony of Nature” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 71). The divine order that the speaker detects in the external nature leads him to a pious path in his life, which might assure him of his salvation. In the same way, the wish to convert to a pious path is voiced in “And do they so? Have they a sense” after the speaker’s contemplation upon natural elements and birds’ flawless nature. He compares his fallen nature to the devout qualities of natural objects and articulates his wish to transform into inanimate objects and animals:

I would I were a stone, or tree,
Or flower by pedigree,
Or some poor highway herb, or spring
To flow, or bird to sing!
Then should I—tied to one sure state—
All day expect my date;
But I am sadly loose, and stray
A giddy blast each way; (Vaughan, 1896, p. 87)

Birds, in this poem, are examples of God’s perfect creations that praise their creator. However, as with the stones and flowers of “Regeneration”, there are also avian creatures in nature that represent the fallen nature of humankind. As Pursglove (2004) states in his analysis of bird symbolism in “The Bird,” Vaughan makes use of these avian creatures “as emblems of the range of human spiritual states” (p. 254). Still, such poems as “Cock-Crowing” reveal that the exemplary devout birds point the way to salvation. In this poem, the depiction of the rooster at sunrise as a pious creature leads the speaker to think that this creature might know the way to redemption: “So shines and sings, as if it knew / The path unto the house of light.” (Vaughan, 1896, p. 189). From his perception of the rooster, he concludes that humans can also think of salvation as possible:

If such a tincture, such a touch,
So firm a longing can impour,
Shall Thy Own image think it much
To watch for Thy appearing hour?
If a mere blast so fill the sail,
Shall not the breath of God prevail? (Vaughan, 1896, p. 189)

Although the speaker imagines animals as inferior creatures here, it is obvious that a rooster's daily actions lead him to pious thinking. Thus, contemplation upon the way animals and natural objects praise their creator provides the speaker with the idea that he is not worthy of God's mercy, and thus leads him to a pious path, which is expressed in his wish to become more like the animate and inanimate creatures he admiringly depicts. Therefore, not only flowers, winds, stars, and trees but also animals, especially birds, function as sacraments for the speakers of the poems who learn from these creatures and natural occurrences the divine mysteries.

Although the belief that nature operates as a mediatory between God's mercy and human beings is repeatedly emphasised in the collection, it should be reminded that Vaughan never indulges in the traditional sacramental theology embraced by Catholicism. As Post (2004) puts forward, especially the second part of the collection "expose[s] the decorative and artful for harboring the dangerous and demonic" (p. 31). The recurring theme of purification through discarding the body and language makes it obvious that the Catholic acknowledgement of ornaments is not regarded by the poet of *Silex Scintillans*. For example, the speaker of "Vanity of Spirit" observes nature to spot traces of God and his own condition as a fallen creature. His examination of natural elements leads him "[t]o search myself" (Vaughan, 1896, p. 57), and his self-inspection enables him to detect symbolic "hieroglyphics" and "broken letters" out of which he cannot make anything meaningful (Vaughan, 1896, p. 57). It is obvious that the speaker aims to find the answer to the question of whether he is saved or going to be punished eternally. However, it would be a mistake to assume that nature does not provide the speaker of "Vanity of Spirit" with the answer to the mysteries of God's plan concerning salvation. Quite contrarily, nature teaches him "to disapparel, and to buy / But one-half glance, most gladly die" (Vaughan, 1896, p. 58). He learns from nature the importance of seclusion, which reveals to him that the affairs of the world should be avoided to be sure of his inclusion in the group of people who are saved by God.

In addition to the purification of the body, the speakers of several poems in *Silex Scintillans* underscore the need to use unadorned language in poetry. For example, "Isaac's Marriage" praises the biblical figure Isaac's prayers in plain style concerning his marriage to Rebekah. While doing this, the poem contrasts Isaac's style with that of the speaker's contemporary poets in order to criticise the ornamental language employed by the latter:

... hadst thou but the art
Of these our days, thou couldst have coin'd thee twenty
New sev'ral oaths, and compliments too plenty.
O sad and wild excess! and happy those
White days, that durst no impious mirth expose! (Vaughan, 1896, p. 37)

The criticism made against the ornamental style of certain poets, arguably the Elizabethan sonneteers, through a biblical narrative is also foregrounded in “Mount of Olives” where the speaker understands that the use of decorative language in poetry only covers the truth. Addressing the mountain ridge where Jesus’s ascension to heaven occurred, the poetic persona seeks the proper way of describing such a holy site:

My saviour sate, shall I allow
Language to love,
And idolize some shade, or grove,
Neglecting thee? such ill-plac’d wit,
Conceit, or call it what you please,
Is the brain’s fit
And mere disease. (Vaughan, 1896, p. 49)

The given lines from both poems indicate that poetic language should be plain in religious poetry so that it can depict the One Truth, or God, properly. The purification of poetic language through plain style can be said to represent Vaughan’s unwillingness to participate in the Catholic espousal of adorned objects and ceremonies.

Though the Catholic embracement of sacramental theology is not completely followed by the speakers of the poems in *Silex Scintillans*, this should not lead to the idea that Vaughan, or the poetic personae of the collection, shares the Puritan iconoclasm. As the analysed poems reveal, the speakers still believe in the mediatory function of the external nature in the matter of salvation. Furthermore, they repeatedly underline the futility of looking for a divine sign pointing to redemption in any other object than nature.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Henry Vaughan’s *Silex Scintillans* is a collection of devotional poems that are informed by the theological debates over the subject of salvation during the Reformation period in England. The Puritan theologians of the era argued for the remnants, in the Church of England, of the Catholic conviction concerning the wish to acquire God’s grace through ornamental objects. The debates over the utility of sacraments in working out one’s redemption led the country to a violent civil war. Amidst such discussions, such analysed poems as “Religion,” “Corruption,” “Regeneration,” “Man’s Fall and Recovery,” “The Relapse,” “Midnight,” “Joy of my life while left me here!,” “The Star,” “The Morning-Watch,” “And do they so? Have they a sense,” “The Bird,” and “Cock-Crowing” offer nature as the only tool for people to raise themselves from being a corrupted creature to the point of worthiness. Through the observation of flowers, stars, and animals, the speakers seem to restore their faith in the possibility of procuring divine forgiveness. In this respect, they might be said to epitomise the Catholic faith in the probability of salvation. However, the poetic personae of the analysed poems also deliberately underline the futility of viewing any object other than nature as a

mediatory entity between themselves and God's grace. Poems such as "Vanity of Spirit," "Isaac's Marriage," and "Mount of Olives" foreground the theme of purifying the body, language, and the Church of adorations, a theme underlined by Protestantism and Puritanism. In this respect, the speakers follow neither the Catholic veneration of traditional sacraments nor the Puritan iconoclastic views on the same subject matter. Thus, during the years of theological debates, the collection, as the idea of moderation put forward by Joseph Hall, might be suggested to offer a mid-path for the oppositional factions to apply. The theme of the golden medium is observed in Vaughan's poems that ascribe mystical qualities to nature and nature only. Hence, in *Silex Scintillans*, Vaughan creates a discourse of mystical *via media* in the sense that natural objects and creatures lead the speakers of the poems to profess a politics of mediation between the opposing sectarian views on the utility of sacraments and religious practices.

Disclosures

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