Scottish Sonneteer and Welsh Metaphysical: A Study of Religious Poetry of Sir William Mure and Henry Vaughan

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Scottish Sonneteer and Welsh Metaphysical:
A Study of the Religious Poetry of
Sir William Mure and Henry Vaughan

Sir William Mure presents one of the greatest paradoxes in Scottish literature. The son of Alexander Montgomerie's sister Elizabeth, he was in the seventeenth century celebrated as one of the leading members of the Anglo-Scottish band of sonneteers, who took over the mantle from the "master-poet" himself. Since then little has been heard of him, despite the publishing in 1898 of an excellent edition of his works. This neglect of a competent poet may in part be due to a false view of his place in literary history. Tough, his first editor, takes the usual stand-
point when he remarks—

He was apparently well read in the English poets of the Eliza-

berian period, and much of his work is modelled on their
writings. The later Scottish sonneteers may have owed a great deal to the past, but in their work they were also looking forward, and anticipating the Metaphysical influences, which were soon to sweep the country. There are definite links between Donne and Ayron for example, while

1 Captain Alexander Montgomerie, younger son of the Laird of Hazelhead is universally acknowledged to have been the most proficient of the Casatian band of sonneteers, which also included James VI, Stewart of Baldrineis and William Fowler. The title 'Maister Poet' was first applied to him by the King in "Ane admonition to the Master poet to be war of great bragging." Poems of James VI of Scotland, Scottish Text Society, 2 vols., ed. James Craige (Edinburgh and London, 1938), II, 120.


3 Useful comparisons may be noted between Ayton STS 17 and the opening stanza of "Twicknam Garden"; STS 18 and the final stanza of "The Canonization"; STS 33 and "The Will" (for parallels between lover and gambler); STS 42 and Elegie V. The Ayton references refer to the numbering adopted by Charles B. Gullans in The English and Latin Poems of Sir Robert Ayton, Scottish Text Society (Edinburgh and London, 1963).
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Mure in his religious poetry shows marked connections with Henry Vaughan the Silurist.

A comparison between Vaughan's "Silex Scintillans" and Mure's "Spiritual Sonnets" betrays at once a similarity in imagery and in the generally mystical approach to the divinity. Each bases his creed on the belief that life can be lived fully and purely only when the soiling properties of the body have been purified. Once this state has been reached, complete fusion with the Maker becomes possible. As a result they both begin with a desire to transcend worldly life and attain complete spiritual freedom. Mure's second "Spiritual Sonnet" thus begins—

But while my Sprite abode the spheres aspyres,
And from the World would separation make,
Myne Eyes repining at my Soules desyres,
With Lot's fond Wife, relenting looks cast backe.

Man cannot reach a state of complete fusion with his Maker until he is entirely cleansed of earthly longings, a position underlined by Vaughan in his "Ascension Hymn":

Souls sojourn here, but may not rest;
Who will ascend, must be undrest.

"Cock-Crowing" further emphasises the point, this time making use of the veil image so popular with both poets. Earthly vision of God is not possible until the veil of worldliness is finally broken and until such a happy solution is forthcoming it remains—

the cloke
And cloud which shadows thee from me.

Around this fundamental problem both poets establish the body of their religious works. Not only in the posing of the question but in the solutions offered as well do they betray similarity of outlook. In SS 1 Mure proposes a process of spiritual purification, declaring that true joy is not possible till man's nature is closer to God's perfect model.

Pittie my folyes past: with Sprite refynd
So shall I praise Thee, who my paths repaird.

The actual process of purification however is described by Vaughan

* Henceforth abbreviated to SS. The other main sonnet sequence Fancies Farewell is referred to as FP.

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in "The Staree," where the soul of man is seen as being refined through the flame of God—

Next, there's in it a restless, pure desire
And longing for thy bright and vital fire,
Desire that never will be quench'd,
Nor can he writh'd, nor wrench'd.

Both too describe the ecstasies of the final moment of fusion, Vaughan in "Cock Crowing":

Brush me with thy light, that I
May shine unto a perfect day,
And warme me at thy glorious Eye,

Mure in FF 1, when,

Mounted on wings of immortalitie,
I feele my breast warme'd with a wountless fire.

The two poets therefore move from a position of dissatisfaction with their earthly condition to a desire for spiritual purification by fire, that fire being the product of God's all-prevailing brightness and the fury of man's divine longings.

Escape from the imprisoning surroundings of earth usually is achieved through flight, this being the obvious metaphor for the transcending of human problems—

When thy least breath sustaines my wing!
I shine and move,

exclaims Vaughan in "Chearfulness," thus envisaging a state of God-aided spirituality. Being a more complete and successful mystic than Mure he has actually experienced those rare moments of fusion for which Mure can only hope and pray—

All Lest, my flight which doe empeach, remove:
Wing my affecction that in word, in act,
From Earth sequestred I may upwars move, (SS 2)
or
On wings mee raise. (SS 5)

Escape then for both poets is achievable in two distinct fashions, either through purification, expressed in a flame metaphor or transcendent flight, involving wing imagery. Gradually the similarities between the two viewpoints are becoming too frequent to be merely accidental. On the other hand, Vaughan always shows more ingenuity in the expression of the conceits involved, not being content to leave the wing imagery in its conventional form. In "The World," for example, he
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views, by way of antithesis, those who use no wings and so after death, drift into damnation—

Yet some, who all this while did weep and sing, 
And sing and weep, soot'd up into the Ring, 
But most would use no wing. 
O fools (said I,) thus to prefer dark night 
Before true light.

While Mure and Vaughan share similarities of imagery and theme, it is important to remember that the latter had a poetic superiority and had advanced further as a mystic. Just how far, deeper mystical insight determines superior or more variegated use of imagery is a question which admits of no positive answer. On the other hand Vaughan can distinguish between the various phases of spiritual enlightenment, while Mure can only hope and guess.

This enlightenment is a gradual process and to express the fact, they need imagery which can embody the necessary growth in intensity. The image of dawn breaking is ideal for this purpose. Once more Mure takes the obvious approach and likens the presence of God to the awakening of light out of darkness, while Vaughan is concerned with the further dimension of time. How much more thought-provoking is his version in "The Dawning":

Ah! what time wilt thou come? when shall that crie 
The Bridegroom's Comming! fil the sky? 
Shall it in the Evening run 
When our words and works are done? 
Or wilt thy all-surprizing light 
Break at midnight?

than the more conventional utterance of SS 4

O Three times happie, if the day of grace 
In my dark soule did, (though but dimly), dawne.

More and more it would appear that Vaughan's superiority as a religious poet is largely due to his greater advances in mystical experience. A man who has felt complete fusion with God is liable to express the sensation more accurately and forcefully than a poor sinner longing for forgiveness. While Mure and Vaughan both adopt images of Dawn, Fire and Wing then, it should not be forgotten that one is using these images to express a state partially achieved and the other to delineate his longing for participation in such joys.

More popular than this last image as a symbol of spiritual enlightenment is that of the seed, reminiscent as it is of the parable of
the Sower. Mure as a sinner longs "that the seed of true Repentance may be sawne" (SS 4), and having taken root may flourish in his once barren soul—

Grant what Thou addst unto my years of growth
Good seed may prove, cast on more fertile plains. (SS 5)

In "Fancies Farewell" however he is in pessimistic mood, remembering the past years of folly and so laments that the seed planted in him has not had a very profitable life—

Lost seede on furrowes of a fruitlesse soile,
Which doth thy travels but with Tares acquite.

From the sinner's viewpoint there is little more to be said. Fear and hope have spoken eloquently, using the various nuances of the parable to express their varied outlooks. Vaughan is left to expound the joys of a seed grown to fullness—

Dear secret greenness! nurst below
Tempests and windes, and winter nights,
Vex not, that but one sees thee grow,
That One made all these lesser lights. 

This is a state of mind with which Mure has little or no concern, not as yet having attained to it in the imperfection of his soul. While both therefore employ the image of the seed, one is more concerned with its being wasted on barren ground, the other with the extent to which the seed can flourish and illumine one's view of God.

As an extension of this opposition, Vaughan's knowledge of that moment when all sensations melt into one, has two further implications. Poetically this state may be expressed through mixed metaphor as in "Cock-Crowing"—

Their little grain expelling night
So shines and sings as if it knew
The path unto the house of light.

By so doing he suggests a state of fusion in which active and passive, beholder and beheld become as one. Such a close interrelationship between Man and God is quite foreign to Mure and so his imagery retains its clearcut lines throughout. In humility he may ask his Maker

My sprit with thine inspire, (SS 5)

but the distinction between pleader and Divinity is clearly drawn, just


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as imagery of sight is kept separate from imagery of taste and smell. With Vaughan however, there is the additional complication of complete fusion—

Seeing thy seed abides in me,
Dwell thou in it, and I in thee."

the mingling of active and passive this time being expressed through a chiasmatic formation. States of soul which can only be intuitively apprehended demand new devices of imagery and style, not necessary in poetry such as Mure's.

Both mystic and sinner on the other hand experience the dissatisfaction of imperfect communion, a state usually described through the image of the veil. This is particularly apposite as it suggests a covering which reveals the contours of the object hidden. It does not conceal so much as prevent perfect viewing and so represents the last possible barrier between man and his Maker—

Only this Veyle which thou hast broke,
And must be broken yet in me,
This veyle, I say, is all the cloke
And cloud which shadows thee from me."

Mure is faced with a heavier veil of sin, resulting from a life devoted to worldly pleasures. Still he longs earnestly for a sight of God, connecting the image of the veil with that of the darkness hovering over his soul—

If from mine eyes the vaile of darknesse drawne;

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . O then how happie were my cace! (SS 4)

No matter how firmly the Seed has been planted, no matter how intense the purifying Flame, no matter how powerful the transcendent Wings, this Veil always hangs over man's divine aspirations as viewed by both Mure and Vaughan. It is a solemn reminder of imperfection and varies from the thin texture of the mystic's fabric to the heavy cloth of darkness masking the sinner's eyes.

Imagery of storm with God as the eventual haven can be traced in Vaughan's "The Storm" and Mure's SS 10, while imagery of natural order appears in the "Reulis and Lessons" as well as in SS 8 and 9. For both poets then the world is ideally a comfortable, well-ordered system, which man in his imperfection can turn into a thing of chaos and

Undue emphasis cannot be laid on these parallels however as they are both as old as Boethius and very common in 17th century religious verse. On the other hand, Vaughan and Mure are especially concerned with man's lack of harmony with the rest of creation. In "Cock-Crowing" Vaughan stresses the "sunnie seed" of divine communion residing in the cock, but only to contrast it with men living, where "shades of death dwell and disorder." This is exactly the note on which Mure concluded SS 9, using a couplet reminiscent of Pope—

Man to the Angels whom Thou didst preferre,
From his Creation's end doth only erre.*

Man may be out of tune with his Maker, but this is not his only problem. He has little time in which to regain the lost harmony, little time to regain on earth that Grace which will grant him a passport to the peace of eternity. This problem troubles Mure more than Vaughan, for he still lists himself among the damned, becoming increasingly anxious as each day of worldliness flits by—

As wave doth wave, so day doth day displace;  
Time's clock goes quickly: Moments swiftly slyde:  
The longest Age scarce doth a minut's space,  
If with eternity compaired, abide.  (SS 7)

The Welsh poet too faces up to the paradox existing between clock time on Earth and eternal time in Heaven, but at once more dispassionately and more ingeniously. He abandons the logical, over-explicit approach which threatens to convert Mure's image into that of a pompous watchmaker and instead uses colloquial, ingenious imagery. The following quotation from "The World" may be taken as typifying his attitude—

I saw Eternity the other night  
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light,  
All calm, as it was bright,  
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years  
Driv'n by the spheres.

Man's life compared to the eternity of the universe is like one grain of sand in the vastness of the desert, although in this case the Welsh poet

*Compare Pope's "Essay on Man":

Men would be angels, Angels would be Gods.  
Aspiring to be Gods if Angels fell,  
Aspiring to be Angels, men rebel:  
And who but wishes to invert the laws  
Of order, sins against the eternal cause.  (I, 126-130)
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uses a further dimension, that of space in which to visualise the problem.

Mure and Vaughan are thus first of all concerned with the basic problem of man's need for fusion with his Maker, viewed largely in mystical terms and with the shortness of his sojourn on "Earth's sad vaile." To aid them in the resolution of such problems they use the images of Fire and Wing respectively to express the need for purification and transcendence, while the gradual growth in spiritual enlightenment is embodied either in Dawn imagery or makes use of the parable of the Sower. Complete fusion is seldom attained and man's soul remains at one remove from God's, being hidden by the clouds of darkness or obscured by a veil. Indeed in a world of apparently complete harmony, both Vaughan and Mure see man as alone being out of tune, spoiling the "wondrous method" of God by alone erring from "his Creation's end." On the other hand they approach every problem from different angles. Mure is the sinner, longing for redemption, Vaughan the mystic waiting for that final step which will bring complete communion. One is the pleader, the other the preacher; one the damned, the other the saved and to this extent their poetry represents yet another example of "variations on a single theme." Poetically both attitudes have their advantages and their drawbacks. Vaughan's greater depth of mysticism produces more ingenious imagery and frees him from the confines of separate sense compartments. On the other hand Mure's problems are those with which the reader can more readily identify himself, while the conflict between flesh and spirit provides a dramatic intensity, lacking in Vaughan's work.

Yet in their common interests and above all in their similar use of imagery they transcend all such barriers, so that without doubt one can say a greater kinship exists between Mure and Vaughan than between Mure and Ayton, or Vaughan and Traherne. Blinded by the facile definitions of Scottish Sonneteer and Welsh Metaphysical, critics have until now failed to notice these interrelationships.

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