Vaughan’s “The Water-fall” and Protestant Meditation

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The critical approach to the meditative poetry of the Renaissance has long been under the influence of Louis L. Martz's The Poetry of Meditation; thus, scholarly readings of Vaughan's “The Water-fall” have usually interpreted the poem as a dramatic meditation in the Ignatian fashion. In a close reading of the poem, Wulf Datow, for example, charts the speaker's discovery of deeper biblical meanings that suggest themselves because of imagistic similarities with the waterfall.¹ As a result of his meditation, Datow argues that the speaker learns to perceive the waterfall in a transparent, symbolic way.² As I shall attempt to demonstrate, the poem does not involve dramatic discovery on the speaker's part; it is rather a typical Protestant meditation on the creatures that reveals to the reader truths he already understands at the outset. Though the difference may seem at first slight, it helps us appreciate the art of Vaughan's poem. The speaker uses the occasion offered by the circulating waters at the falls to articulate the Christian paradigm for salvation. Because he uses familiar biblical water-imagery to do so, readers have discussed the poem in general terms, without considering how it creates its meaning. Since its precise mode of signifying—typology as Vaughan practices it elsewhere in Silex Scintillans—has not been fully acknowledged, critics have not discussed the artistry of Vaughan's arrangement of these traditional images.³ My contention is that Vaughan, following a distinctly Protestant meditative mode in “The Water-fall,” has arranged his symbolic landscape typologically to express the notion of divine circularity in order to establish the metaphoric and emotional closure of Silex Scintillans.

Renaissance devotional poetry is currently undergoing a reappraisal in the light of recent scholarship on the emerging Protestant religious practices, especially meditation. For as U. Milo Kaufmann asserts, Protestants were suspicious of Jesuit meditative practices because of their reliance on the senses and the imagination.⁴ At the heart of the matter is the issue of authority: the reformers were uneasy with any practice that gave credence to the independent interpretation of a text—either from the Book of Scripture or the Book of the Creatures—that the imagination alone might produce. Protestants gradually developed a method for controlling meditations that proceeded from a biblical text or a religious topic grounded in Scripture to an explication of that topic. In this way the meaning of the medita-
tion could be regulated by commonly agreed on principles of interpretation. So far as possible, Scripture was to be used as its own interpreter by collating text with text to recover the symbolic or non-literal levels of signification. Thus fanciful or imaginative allegories only loosely related to Scripture, Christ’s life, or the Last Things could be avoided. As Barbara K. Lewalski explains, the sermon method and the Protestant meditation were essentially the same: each began with the presentation and explication of a text, was followed by the exposition of the doctrine derived from that text, and concluded with the forceful application of these materials to the self. The sermon and the meditation were virtually identical practices in the Renaissance; both were intended to instruct and stimulate the affections of an audience or the practitioner.

Joseph Hall in The Arte of Divine Meditation (1606), the most influential of the English meditative treatises, stated that meditation “begins in the understanding, endeth in the affection; it begins in the brain, descends to the heart.” This procedure, as Lewalski notes, is the reverse of the Jesuit practice of immersing oneself in the compositio loci. “Instead of the application of the self to the subject, the Protestant theory in regard to both sermons and deliberate meditation calls for the application of the subject to the self, indeed for the location of the subject in the self.” In practice this meant that the meditator tried to bend his will to accommodate the spiritual message under consideration. We see, for example, Hall in one of his meditations, “Upon the Rain and Waters,” beginning with an analysis of the phenomenon of the circularity of waters, proceeding to an application of that divine principle to himself, and ending in prayer. Since this meditation bears a decided resemblance to Vaughan’s poem, I will quote it in full:

What a sensible interchange there is in nature betwixt union and division! Many vapors rising from the sea meet together in one cloud; that cloud falls down divided into several drops; those drops run together and in many rills of water meet in the same channels; those channels run into the brook, those brooks into rivers, those rivers into the sea. One receptacle is for all, though a large one, and all make back to their first and main original. So it either is or should be with spiritual gifts. O God, Thou distillest Thy graces upon us not for our reservation but conveyance. Those manifold faculties Thou lettest fall upon several men Thou wouldst not have drenched up where they light but wouldest have derived, through the channels of their special vocations, into the common streams of public use for Church or Commonwealth. Take back, O Lord, those few drops Thou hast rained upon my soul and return them into that great ocean of the glory of Thine own bounty, from whence they had their beginning.

Though it may not be immediately apparent to modern readers, Hall’s meditation is probably based on a familiar verse from