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CHRISTIAN NATURE MYSTICISM

in the Poetry

of

VAUGHAN, TRAHERNE, HOPKINS, and FRANCIS THOMPSON

by

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A THESIS

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CONTENTS

Summary	iii
Statement	v
Acknowledgments	vi
Preface	vii
Introduction	2
SECTION I EXPERIENCE	
Chapter 1 Attitudes and Feelings towards Nature	11
Chapter 2 Steps towards Christian Nature Mysticism	36
Chapter 3 Childhood and Eden	61
SECTION II SYMBOLISM	
Chapter 4 Light: Exterior Illumination	91
Chapter 5 Light: Interior Illumination	111
Chapter 6 Water	126
Chapter 7 Plant and Garden	141
SECTION III EXPRESSION	
Chapter 8 Imagery	159
Chapter 9 Style	184
Chapter 10 Structure	200
Conclusion	219
Bibliography	229

SUMMARY

In all mystical nature poetry, the Absolute is perceived in natural objects or scenes; but in specifically Christian mystical nature poetry, it is the transcendent triune God who is perceived in the visible creation. The vision of God transcendent yet immanent is the main feature which distinguishes Christian nature mysticism from Romantic nature mysticism, and of the four poets of this study, Vaughan is perhaps the most successful in attaining a balanced vision of the transcendence and the immanence of God. The general pattern which is revealed in their poetry is that Hopkins and Vaughan apprehend God as primarily transcendent, whereas Traherne and Thompson apprehend him as primarily immanent.

In the first section, Experience, it is found that all four poets feel a tension between the sensuous and the spiritual which is resolved only when there is a right relationship between God and the self; unlike the Romantics, they cannot find spiritual satisfaction in nature apart from the transcendent God. When this relationship has been established, they can attain a deeper knowledge and love of God through an appreciation of nature, and in their poetry one can trace stages in their journey towards a mystical vision of his presence in the created world. Closely related to their attitudes to nature are their attitudes to childhood, for regained childlikeness is for them an important facet of Christian nature mysticism. Vaughan and Hopkins are not as optimistic about the purity of children and nature and

about the possibility of attaining childlikeness in adult life as are Traherne and Thompson.

Common to all mystical writers is the problem of attempting to express the inexpressible, and symbolism is an inevitable outcome of this struggle. In the second section, Symbolism, it is shown that the four poets' use of nature symbols—of light, of water, and of plant and garden—points up the problem of how to celebrate God's immanence without disregarding his transcendence. In some of Thompson's poetry, Christianity and pantheism appear to exist side by side as separate strands, while at times Traherne, particularly in his use of sun symbolism, concentrates on the Light within him to the point of virtually disregarding the transcendence of that Light.

The last section, Expression, deals with the relationships between the kinds of spiritual awareness experienced by the four poets and the more literary aspects of their expression—imagery, style, and structure. There seems to be a link between the degree to which their vision emphasizes God's immanence in nature, and the degree of generality or vagueness and of structural looseness in their poems. Perhaps the reason for this link is that a desire for freedom from restraint, for personal expansion, is more fully satisfied by divine immanence than by divine transcendence. Thus the liberty in Traherne and Thompson is in marked contrast with the strict control in Hopkins, who feels strongly a need for restriction. The restrained freedom in Vaughan is consistent with his more balanced vision of the transcendence and the immanence of God.

STATEMENT

To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I have at times referred to my book, Mystical Symbolism in the poetry of Thomas Traherne (St. Lucia, Queensland, 1970), which was originally my Master of Arts thesis. The Board of Research Studies of the University of Adelaide granted me written permission to use material from this previous work, provided that I acknowledged such contributions from it.

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PREFACE

In my study of Christian nature mysticism in the poetry of Vaughan, Traherne, Hopkins, and Francis Thompson, I have had to quote so frequently from their poems that it would have been cumbersome to mention on each occasion the edition from which the quotation is taken. The following are the editions from which I have quoted:

Martin, L.C. (ed.). Henry Vaughan: Poetry and Selected Prose. Oxford Standard Authors. London, 1963.

Margoliouth, H.M. (ed.). Thomas Traherne: Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings. 2 vols. Oxford, 1958.

Gardner, W.H. and MacKenzie, N.H. (eds). The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, 4th ed. rev. London, 1967.

Meynell, Wilfred (ed.). Francis Thompson: Poetical Works. Oxford Standard Authors. London, 1937.

When Philip Traherne's version of a poem is printed in Margoliouth's edition as well as Thomas Traherne's original, I have considered only the original version.

Within each chapter, a page reference to one of the above editions is given only when a poem is being mentioned for the first time. If the page reference is to the page on which the poem begins, as it most often is, it is bracketed thus: All Flesh (p.347), 1.36. In Meynell's edition of Thompson's poems, however, the lines of poetry are not numbered, and therefore, when quoting from one of his long poems, it sometimes seemed preferable to refer to the page from which the quotation comes. Such references are in the following form: From the Night of Forebeing, p.210, 11.17-20.

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are from the Authorized Version. Whenever the exact wording

of a Bible passage seemed important, I have quoted from the version which the particular poet would probably have used.

In the following pages I have at times referred to my book, Mystical Symbolism in the poetry of Thomas Traherne (St. Lucia, Queensland, 1970), which was originally my Master of Arts thesis. The University of Adelaide specifies that a thesis should not contain any material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma; but because the topic approved for my doctoral thesis was related to the topic of my previous thesis, the Board of Research Studies granted me written permission to use material from this previous work, provided that I acknowledged such contributions from it. Self-reference was therefore unavoidable in this thesis.

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