

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

'The Retreat' is a perfectly balanced, controlled poem, concise in a way not always achieved by Vaughan, and revealing many aspects of thought which are typical of his writing. Human existence is seen as being in three parts- the before birth stage in heaven, angelic in quality and marked by a close communion with Christ; human life on earth, marked by an increasing distance from Christ, and damaged by sin; life after death, eternal life, sharing through grace the heavenly state of the first stage. William Wordsworth's ode: **'Intimations of Immortality'** has often been noted as similar: both poets see childhood as not far removed from the glories of life before birth, but the glory slowly fades in all the complexities and evils of the world.

The poem divides into two parts. The poet first looks back at his early life, using for it many of the words often associated with the symbolism of his writing: shine, white (symbol of innocence and purity), bright (repeated). Typical also of Vaughan is the relationship of nature to faith. Nature is the creation of God and reveals God in beauty, light and praise, for nature is not damaged by the worldliness of man. So, the cloud, golden perhaps at sunrise or sunset, and the flower are to Vaughan **'weaker glories'** which echo the glories of heaven. Man learns from Nature to look towards God and to enjoy the beauty around him. Henry Vaughan's twin brother Thomas was a famous Hermetic philosopher, and Henry translated some Hermetic writings from Latin. The ideas taught by this philosophy, that the soul is formed of the union of light and life, and that nothing is destructible, influenced the poet and probably help to explain the stress on eternal life and the number of "light" images in his work.

Vaughan was also something of a mystic, and in this he is very different from his great poetic influence, George Herbert, and from Wordsworth. At times, Vaughan's whole poem is made radiant by a single line which it is difficult to explain fully in literal prose. The reader may or may not understand the line, but beyond intellectual understanding there is a spiritual illumination which comes of suggestion and overtone rather than precise definition. In the best of his work, such lines can move the reader beyond the power of thought, and in "The Retreat" there is a particularly beautiful example, striking in its natural image of the "buds" of eternity which the still holds, and superb in its total effect: "Bright shootes of everlastingnesse".

The second part of the poem records the second stage of the poet's existence. It is possible for man to glimpse "Jericho" (Biblical home of God's elect), but his soul is too drunk to know where it is going. The sudden transition to down-to-earth, very human image echoes the change from the "shadows of eternity" state to that of humanity out of control, lacking in vision, simply drunk. Vaughan takes up the idea of inebriated man staggering backwards and forwards, to end his poem with a metaphysical paradox worthy of Donne. He wants to go backwards on his forward journey through life in order to arrive at the state in which he started. The language is now realistic (dust, urn) and emphatic: the break in the normally regular rhyme which occurs in the last line gives great stress to "in that state" and a heavy emphasis to the whole line, linking it in thought to the beginning of the poem. Vaughan does not often compress so much meaning, imagery and quiet drama into so short a piece. In spite of the couplet form, the rhymes are not intrusive, perhaps because the lines so often run on, and the rhythmical pattern has enough slight variation to bring it closer to ordinary speech (one of

Herbert's gifts to his follower) while still preserving the movement and flow of the whole.