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# Thomas Traherne a Study of the Philosophy of His Poems and Centuries of Meditations

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Thomas Traherne: A Study  
of the Philosophy  
of His  
Poems and Centuries of Meditations

by  
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
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To Mother M. Stanislaus  
in appreciation

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## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Traherne, seventeenth century metaphysical poet, remained, through the loss of his manuscripts, an unknown literary figure for over two centuries. As soon as his poems and meditations were discovered and published by Bertram Dobell, early in this century, an avalanche of exaggerated praise and unweighed blame fell upon them.

This thesis will try to deal with Thomas Traherne honestly, avoiding the superlatives usually employed by those who have called him "the greatest metaphysical poet of his time"<sup>1</sup> or "a clergyman who put his thoughts into very uneven verse."<sup>2</sup> It will show how the philosophy of his writings, though instinct with his times, was transformed by him into a system of living much more vigorous, more spiritualized than that of his contemporaries.

Traherne is a poet who writes, not of mundane love nor transient joys, but of the beauty of the world, become precious to him because he has glimpsed the perfection and goodness of its Maker.

If he becomes halt, at times, it may well be because he has known "things that eyes have not seen, nor ears heard."

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<sup>1</sup>Bertram Dobell, "Thomas Traherne," introduction to The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne, edited by Gladys I. Wade, (London, 1932) p. lxxvii

<sup>2</sup>Geoffrey Grigson, "Transports of Thomas Traherne" in Bookman, vol. 82, Aug. 1932, p. 250.

It is because his poetic vocabulary is, by necessity, moored to matter; not because, as some have unfairly intimated, his thought is channeled or unfertile.

This essay does not intend to dwell on the life of the poet, a work which Gladys I. Wade<sup>3</sup> has carried out with admirable persistence. However, the introductory chapter will attempt to reconstruct those phases of his life which are intimately connected with the thought, feeling, and attitudes of his writings and without which they would stand incomplete.

It is strange that one who held so original an outlook on life should have remained so long unknown. Even today, after Bertram Dobell<sup>4</sup> has done much to make Traherne known, we can discern only vaguely those influences which shaped his peculiar genius.

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<sup>3</sup>Gladys I. Wade, The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne, (London, 1932) pref.  
See also her "Mrs. Susanne Hopton" in English Quarterly, Vol. 62, Jan., 1936. pp. 41-7.

<sup>4</sup>Poems of Thomas Traherne, edited by Bertram Dobell, 1903, relates in preface how Mr. W. T. Brooke picked up the manuscript of the poems in a second hand bookstall and sold them to the late Dr. Grosart. Grosart was preparing to include them (because anonymous) in an edition of Vaughan, the Silurist, when he died.

The manuscript passed into Mr. Dobell's hands. Through Mr. Brooke a likeness was traced to some poems in a volume ultimately found to be Thomas Traherne's. His Christian Ethicks, found among MSS, completed the evidence. Further search uncovered Anthony a Wood's statement in Athenae Oxonienses: Thomas Traherne, a shoemaker's son of Hereford, was entered a commoner of Brasen-nose College

Born in Herefordshire along the Marches of Wales, little better than twenty miles from the confluence of the Wye and the Severn--a country which Wordsworth was to immortalize in his "Tintern Abbey"--Traherne learned early to marvel at and to worship "nature as the garment of God." It was his destiny to be born into the seventeenth century--an age during which political and religious turmoil stifled the lyric outburst that had been Elizabethan. Here and there, as the era groped its way forward, little groups of thinkers in England cleft themselves from the brawls of their times and--secluded in the quietude of the universities--kept to that high philosophy which had everywhere resurged under the New Learning.

Of such were Dr. Henry More and the other Cambridge Platonists, who fought gallantly to justify their unswerving devotion of study. Of such, too, were Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan, men who consecrated their poetic art to the task of praising God.

In his reticence Traherne scarcely ever exposes anything of his early life. Small phrases, dropped into his poems casually, now and then, limn with delightful sharpness the

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on the first day of March, 1652; took one degree in attendance; left the House for a time, entered into the sacred function and in 1661 he was actually created Master of Arts. About this time he became Rector of Credenhill, commonly called Crednell, near the city of Hereford, and in 1660 Bachelor of Divinity.

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beauty of his childhood world. Autobiographic passages from his Centuries of Meditations trace his life to show us only his hunt for felicity. Hence, even here, the personal element is submerged. Did he as Wordsworth "like a roe bound o'er the mountains, by the sides of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams, wherever nature led?"<sup>5</sup>

Did he, like Wordsworth, know that love of nature which is, at once, bliss and an unutterable pain, so that he might say,

For nature then

To me was all in all--I cannot paint  
What then I was. The sounding cataract  
Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,  
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
Their colors and their forms, were then to me  
An appetite; a feeling and a love  
That had no need of a remoter charm,  
By thought supplied, nor any interest  
Unborrowed from the eye.<sup>6</sup>

As Wordsworth in his "Ode on Intimations of Immortality", Traherne mentions with bitterness the process by which he was coaxed away from this purity of childhood. His parents, evidently, did not understand the unusual mind of their son and hence tried to interest him in the ordinary occupations of their life. So galling was this to the young thinker that in the Centuries he devotes four meditations to the evil worldliness of education which would substitute

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<sup>5</sup>William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey", lines 67-70.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., lines 72-83.



baubles for the eternal glories of the divinity.

The first Light which shined in my Infancy in its primitive and innocent clarity was totally eclipsed: insomuch that I was fain to learn all again. If you ask me how it was eclipsed? Truly by the customs and manners of men, which like contrary winds blew it out: by an innumerable company of other objects, rude, vulgar, and worthless things, that like so many loads of earth and dung did overwhelm and bury it: by the impetuous torrent of wrong desires in all others whom I saw or knew that carried me away and alienated me from it: by a whole sea of other matters and concerns that covered and drowned it: finally by the evil influence of a bad education that did not foster and cherish it . . . All Men's thoughts and words were about other matters. They all prized new things which I did not dream of. I was a stranger and unacquainted with them; I was little and revered their authority; I was weak, and easily guided by their example; ambitious also, and desirous to apprise myself unto them. And finding no one syllably in any man's mouth of those things, by degrees they vanished, my thoughts (as indeed what is more fleeting than a thought,) were blotted out; and at last all the celestial, great, and stable treasures to which I was born, as wholly forgotten, as if they had never been.<sup>7</sup>

How precocious this son of a poor village shoemaker was we glean from his rehearsal of early doubts about God. Such doubts, however, were not unusual among Stuart children who early gained a maturity which startles us now. Its sincerity we cannot doubt:

"Once I remember (I think I was about

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<sup>7</sup>Thomas Traherne, "Century 3", in Centuries of Meditations, Meditation 7,

4 years old when) I thus reasoned with myself, sitting in a little obscure room in my father's poor house: If there be a God, certainly He must be infinite in Goodness and a perfect Being in Wisdom and Love, certainly He must do most glorious things, and give us infinite riches; how comes it to pass therefore that I am so poor, of so scanty and narrow a fortune, enjoying few and obscure comforts?"<sup>8</sup>

Meditative yet vitally alive to the world and all its expanses, his keen imagination reacted to tales of foreign ports and bygone times. In his fertile mind he recreated all the country, its inhabitants, its riches, and was delighted by this new find. So, too, he says "When the Bible was read, my spirit was present in other ages."<sup>9</sup>

Finally his soul, weaned from the vision celestial, tasted that spiritual penury which debases and shames the heart. In "Dissatisfied"<sup>10</sup> he confesses in stanza two his vain search after felicity in worldliness:

back dissatisfied  
To earth I came; among the trees,  
In Taverns, Houses, Feasts, and Palaces  
I sought it, but was still deny'd.

and in stanza four--

Their games, their Bowls, their cheating Dice  
Did not complete, but spoil, my Paradise.

Nor did he find any mental stimulus in the village

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., "Century 3," Meditation 16, .

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., "Century 3," Meditation 24, .

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Traherne, Op. Cit., p. 48

school; it rather bored him:

A comfortless wilderness full of thorns and troubles the world was, or worse: a waste place covered with idleness and play, and shops, and markets, and taverns. As for Churches, they were things I did not understand, and schools were a burden; so that there was nothing in the world worth the having, or enjoying, but my game and sport, which also was a dream, and being passed wholly forgotten.<sup>11</sup>

In 1653 he was sent down to Oxford where for the first time he met up with those philosophic studies which were to point the way for him to true felicity.

Having been at the University, and received there the taste and tincture of another education, I saw that there were things in this world of which I never dreamed; glorious secrets and glorious persons past imagination. There I saw that Logic, Ethics, Physics, Metaphysics, Geometry, Astronomy, Poesy, Medicine, Grammar, Music, Rhetoric, all kinds of Arts, Trades, and Mechanisms that adorned the world pertained to felicity; at least, there I saw those things which afterwards I knew to pertain unto it: and was delighted in it. There I saw into the nature of the Sea, the Heavens, the Sun, the Moon and Stars, the Elements, Minerals, and Vegetables. All which appeared like the King's Daughter, all glorious within; and those things which my nurses and parents should have talked of there were taught unto me.<sup>12</sup>

But, he adds, even there true felicity was not sought among these things. He must have studied the early church fathers avidly to be able to write a treatise such as his Roman Forgeries. Also in the preface to this controversial work he tells how he approached the Romish gentleman and offered

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., "Century 3," Meditation 14.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., "Century 3," Meditation 36.

to take him into the library to point out to him examples from the Fathers of the Church to substantiate his arguments. Nor was he well read only in church history, but he knew passages of Pico della Mirandola by heart, and held the Italian in the greatest veneration, referring to him as "master" in "Century 4." Whether he had read the Hermetical writings in the original or not is questionable; that he had read them and pondered over their teachings is evident. Plotinus, also, furnished him with many of the ideas embodied in his poems. That he was never influenced evidently by the more debased theories of the Platonists is a tribute to his common sense and strong faith. Whereas he held Pico in the highest esteem, he did not, like Pico, let his passion for unity draw him into the unchristian teaching of the Platonists on the Trinity. Nor did he speculate on the Hermetic teaching of the transmigration of souls. He is inclined to believe in prenatal existence, or at least in Plato's Ideal World.

His first charge after quitting the university was on December 30, 1657, to the Rectory of Crednell, alias Creddenhill, County Hereford; his patron, according to the Lambeth Manuscript, being Anabella, Countess Dowager of Kent. Here he was probably assistant until 1661, since his name does not appear prior to 1661 on the list of incumbents. At any rate, he spent close to ten years back

in the seclusion of his native Herefordshire until summoned to London, August 30, 1667, to become private chaplain to Sir Orlando Bridgman, who on August 30 had been created Lord Keeper of the Seals. Whether it was when he was back in his native Herefordshire or later, when he went into retirement with Sir Orlando, that he wrote the passage in the Centuries which tells of his determination to be a contemplative we do not know. He notes:

When I came into the country, and being seated among silent trees, and meads and hills, had all my time in mine own hands, I resolved to spend it all, whatever it cost me, in the search of happiness, and to satiate that burning thirst which Nature had enkindled in me from my youth. In which I was so resolute, that I chose rather to live upon ten pounds a year, and to go in leather clothes, and feed upon bread and water, so that I might have all my time clearly to myself, than to keep many thousands per annum in an estate of life where my time would be devoured in care and labour.<sup>13</sup>

But for the five years that Sir Orlando Bridgman was in favor and lived in London, certainly Traherne saw much of city life. He must have been familiar with the people who visited his patron; he must have tasted the pleasures of court life and found them, too, unquenching to his thirst after felicity. Gladys I. Wade is of the opinion that his works show he

Is indebted to all the Platonists: Plotinus, Hermes, Trismegistus up to Mirandola. His Platonism, however, is first of all christian like that of St. John or of the Pauline Epistles.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., "Century 3", Meditation 46.

His debt to them lies in the support which their philosophy afforded to his own experience. He maintained that religious life is a reasonable life, the reason functioning most perfectly when it ceases to be aware of itself as a distinct faculty of the personality; when it merges with all the rest into a mode of awareness for which language has no name. Probable influences were Smith's Discourses (nearest), H. More's works, Culverwell's Light of Nature. But unlike them, he was freed from the fetters of the past.

Traherne read romances, visited theatres, he was interested in rogues and criminals, he was a member of a great political household in London, he had cultured taste for music, pictures, jewels, enamels, embroideries. Moreover, his work had extraordinary energy of enjoyment.<sup>14</sup>

So that when he did go into retirement to Teddington, a small town in the southwest part of Middlesex, he was not a coward, fleeing a life he was afraid to live, but a man, who knowing life, found the quiet of contemplation and the quest after the "best part" more soul-satisfying. At no time is he supercilious of those others who preferred to remain in the turmoil that marked the world of his time. He is aloof, yet kindly and understanding. Neither in his poems nor in his prose works is there any mention of the strife that marked the times: the contentions between the King and Parliament; the bickerings between the Established Church and the hosts of Dissenters, especially the Puritans; there is no direct reflection against the greediness of landowners of the time, who under the new land system

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<sup>14</sup>Gladys I. Wade, "Traherne as Divine Philosopher", in Hibbert Journal, Vol. 32, 1934, pp. 400-8.

were crushing their tenants to bitter poverty. We might almost think he was careless of such problems. Yet the zeal with which he enunciates the dignity of man; his detestation of mere materialistic prosperity evidently are reactions to social conditions he sees. Knowing the corruption of his day, he may have believed it more important to hold out ideals of Christian life to his contemporaries than to write harangues on political and social evils. He has been accused of having only one theme "Felicity" and, indeed, it was the only theme he thought necessary. What were material disasters to the one who had true felicity? What were all the honors and riches of the times to one who lacked it? And so he preached, admonished, and sang the song of spiritual ascent to an age that was struggling between a desire to attain more personal holiness and a desire for material prosperity.

Against the greed of property rights he opposed the idea of the Fatherhood of God; the simplicity of the child who knows not mine and thine; the wealth of the real riches God has bestowed upon us in our body and in all nature as contrasted with the empty riches of man's invention, to which he anchors his heart to the forgetting of the things that count.

Living alone, absorbed in the love and contemplation of God, Traherne attained, by the time of his death in

1764, a philosophic independence and an intuitive knowledge of God which convinced him that felicity, as he knew it, was possible to every individual.

This work, then, will trace the sources of his philosophy; his efforts to reconcile neo-Platonism with Christianity, and the consequent originality of outlook on life he developed. It will also attempt to show that Traherne, though his works--lost for two centuries--had no part in shaping the thought of his literary successors, should engage our attention more than the other metaphysical poets because, as Beachcroft notes<sup>15</sup>, Traherne is more religious than Vaughan, more connected and sustained than Herbert, and more externalized in appeal than Crashaw.

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<sup>15</sup>T. O. Beachcroft, "Traherne and the Doctrine of Felicity" in Criterion, Vol. 9, January, 1930.



CHAPTER I  
 PLATONISM: ITS INFLUENCE ON THE THOUGHT  
 OF THOMAS TRAHERNE

The second half of the seventeenth century, into which Traherne was born, was intrinsically different from the Elizabethan Age. The exuberance of a newly integrated spirit of nationalism occasioned by territorial expansion and by the Tudor policy, the excited urge to creativeness evoked by the English Renaissance, were gone. The fanatisme of the Commonwealth, so long as it stood, with its emphasis on a theocratic economy, had imposed an external unity upon the nation. Wilde, in his article on Traherne, even asserts that the Commonwealth produced a real, a distinctive culture:

The Puritan will, with its intense insistence on a culture built up on religion alone, ruined, both from the standpoint of philosophy and religion, antiquity and Christianity, the synthesis of the English Renaissance, which had permeated the Faerie Queene's fantasy-filled mosaic down to the very slightest detail. Its entire plan of life demanded the impenetration of religion, filled with a semi-victorious under-current of faith, displayed in a godly exterior. The ideal of a community culture, of a national consciousness, and ideal which felt for itself an obligation to mankind, manifested itself in a powerful urge. What it created was a unified Puritan culture.<sup>1</sup>

But, whereas Puritanism frustrated the full flowering of the Renaissance in England, it could not make the effects

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<sup>1</sup>Hans-Oskar Wilde, Beitrag zur Englischen Literatur Geschichte des 17 Jahrhunderts, (Breslau, 1932) p. 7.

of the "new learning" jejune. For, Puritanism and the whole Protestant Revolt were peculiar fruits of the Renaissance, which, although destroying the force that gave them birth, still carried on its traditions of independence of thought, the search for an esoteric revelation from God, and interest in neo-Platonic teachings.

By 1600 English thought had completely veered away from scholasticism, which even so late as the end of the 16th century had been securely entrenched in the philosophic circles of Oxford and Cambridge, and had definitely stemmed off into two divergent schools: the neo-Platonic and the empirical. England had been slow to accept the "new learning" and the philosophic break which followed. As Greenslet notes:

English philosophy, before Locke, was not the purely speculative science which Continental philosophy had come to be; it was, rather, applied philosophy, and chiefly concerned itself with the more practical problems of aesthetics, ethics, politics, and education. It followed from this that English thought was conservative, and very suspicious of new systems.<sup>2</sup>

Characteristically, when the teachings of Ficinus, Mirandola and Pletho actually came to England, interest centered around the ethical implications of neo-Platonism, and philosophers immediately proceeded to amalgamate neo-Platonism with Christian teachings. Hence, neo-Platonism tended to

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<sup>2</sup>Ferris Greenslet, Joseph Glanvill (New York, 1900) p. 2f.

be concerned primarily with the intellectual task of affecting a direct and immediate union with God. In so doing, it became concerned with the less characteristic, highly speculative philosophy contained in the later writings of Plato, the Symposium and the Phaedrus, which were written after Plato had come under the influence of the Pythagoreans. Moreover, the Christian Platonists were concerned, not so much with Plato's teaching directly, but with Plato's teaching as interpreted by the second century Platonists--Plotinus and the Christians, Dionysius and Areopagite.

The devout life, the intellectual quest of ideal beauty, the search for felicity--these became the chief interests of the English Christian Platonists.

Against this current, rose the tide of Baconian empiricism. Though the Christian Platonists influenced the religious life of their times profoundly, their philosophy, divorced as it was from the common pursuits of life, was bound, by necessity, to provoke a counter system of thought. Moreover, though purporting to be philosophy, it strove for intuitive knowledge, a "divine sagacity", which would transcend reasoned knowledge.

Baconian empiricism, based on the inductive method by which conclusions are drawn from observation, comparison, and experiment, exalted the material and physical world. And, whereas Platonism distrusted the senses as being sus-

ceptible to error, the philosophy of Bacon glorified the knowledge gained through sense perceptions and expressed agnosticism for all intuitive thought. The Novum Organum, which led directly to a scientific positivism, a growingly rationalistic temper, paved the way for the deistic and empirical system of Locke.

Thomas Traherne, though a declared disciple of the neo-Platonists, actually welded together in an almost harmonious teaching, both systems. He sought union with God intuitively; yet he accepted with enthusiasm the knowledge his senses gave him of nature about him. He preached the joys of felicity; but his "felicity" was to be the full enjoyment of the visible world. He searched for the ideal beauty in contemplation; he found it in the vital and human joy of scientific progress around him.

. . . For when we are once acquainted with the world, you will find the goodness and wisdom of God so manifest therein, that it was impossible another, or better should be made. Which being made to be enjoyed, nothing can please or serve Him more, than the Soul that enjoys it. For that Soul doth accomplish the end of His desire in Creating it.<sup>3</sup>

But since in the main Traherne belongs to that long line of English Christian neo-Platonists which extends down to the very present, this chapter shall trace briefly the history of Platonic thought down to Traherne.

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas Traherne, "Century 1" in Centuries of Meditations, Meditation 10.

As a system of philosophy established in the second century, B.C., Platonism had set itself the task of attacking the divergent materialistic philosophies then popular. Outstanding were the schools of Epicurus and Epictetus. Both, setting the span of mortal life as the sole existence of man, attempted an escape from life--the Epicureans through sense pleasure; the Stoics, through resistance to pain.

Opposed to these were the Pythagoreans, who were "spiritualists", holding that the soul is immortal and that all are one in the One God, author of all--the Eleatic One. Their God, therefore, was a mere abstraction. Believing in a rigorous system of reward and punishment, they taught transmigration of the soul and the necessity of an esoteric as well as of an exoteric doctrine. Their whole teaching was based on arithmetic and geometry, but never attained the dignity of a philosophic system until united to Platonism in the second century, A.D.

The philosophic ideas that Plato enunciated in his Platonic discourses were really original although based on the teachings of Socrates. In attempting to explain how the intellect can have true knowledge although all that the senses can know is in a constant state of flux, Plato evolved his "World of Ideas" theory: the senses bring us no knowledge. The ideas which exist in the intellect are alone true, and it is only in so far as actualities partake of the nature of these

ideas that they can be said to possess any reality whatsoever.

This made it necessary to postulate a pre-natal existence for the soul, during which, since it had no corporal substance to distract it, it enjoyed a state of perfect contemplation.

Earthly life, since it deprives the soul of the perfect vision, is a state of punishment in which the soul regains the vision of God. This is contemplation. The last of the dialogues show that Plato had come under the influence of the Pythagoreans, for he incorporates the idea of transmigration in the "Phaedo" and also accepts the Pythagorean numbers for his ideal world.<sup>4</sup>

In the second century A.D. Platonism, which had become sterile under the Academicians, as the followers of Plato were called, experienced a marked revival under Atticus, Antiochus and Plutarch. Used as the last measure to save a decadent paganism from the ever growing inroads of Christianity, neo-Platonism was not original so much as religious. It was, to a marked degree, syncretist--incorporating tenets from the East, from Egypt, and from Christianity itself. It explained away the more revolting aspects of pagan mythology and advocated a life of union with "The One".

It was Plotinus, however, who gave to Platonic philosophy, the cast which was to be distinguishable in all subse-

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<sup>4</sup>Plato, "Republic" and "Phaedo" and "Phaedrus".

quent movements. Defining God as the ever-being, the over-mind, whose sole attributes are Goodness and Oneness he rebuilt the Platonic cosmos. From the Good and the One emanates Intelligence and from Intelligence, the World-Soul, which produces the human soul and is the sum of all souls and forces. From the forces proceed matter which is evil and dark, as opposed to God, the Light. Evil, he asserted, lacked reality. Referring back to Plato's idea of pre-existence, he predicated a dual principle in man--the Spirit or over-Soul guiding the intellect and the body which being of matter must be eliminated as much as possible.

Man's return to God is by way of knowledge and withdrawal from the world to effect a spiritual katharsis. The soul ascends to God by contemplating the indwelling "Intelligence" or "Spirit". From this it rises to a contemplation of the "One". This contemplation it can attain only through free revelation from God, Who sheds around the seeking soul the light of His own greatness. This intuition of the One so rapt the soul that all else is excluded, the mind is reduced to passivity.

The resulting condition of ecstasy is one of supreme happiness. Once the philosopher-saint has attained this spiritual elevation, he is confirmed in grace, he is a spiritual being--a prophet, a wonder-worker.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Taylor, The Five Books of Plotinus, (London, 1794.)

The soul is to strip off all its own lower nature, as well as to cleanse itself from external stains; what remains when this is done will be "the image of Spirit."<sup>6</sup>

The joy that comes from a perfect life, spiritually, is felicity--center of all neo-Platonism. The Platonist taught that virtue is happiness. Earth can neither make, nor mar, the real life of the soul. To the Platonist, "virtue is the way to heaven." He placed happiness in the vision of God, but he did not see it clearly, for he attempted to define God Himself, and so brought back the limitation.

Platonism is the mood of one who has a curious eye for the endless variety of this visible and temporal world, and a fine sense of its beauties, yet is haunted by the presence of an invisible and eternal world behind, or, when the mood is most pressing, within the visible and temporal world, and sustaining both it and himself--a world not perceived as external to himself, but inwardly lived by him as that with which in moments of ecstasy, or even habitually, he is become one. This is how personal Platonism, whether in a Plotinus or in a Wordsworth, may be described in outline.

Inge adds, 'Platonism, however, is more than a 'mood'; it is a sustained attitude towards life founded on deep conviction--a practical philosophy or religion.'<sup>7</sup>

"Moreover, the Platonists of the latter half of the first and the earlier half of the second century were not marked by striking originality of thought. Their interest was entirely

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<sup>6</sup>Wm. R. Inge, Philosophy of Plotinus, (London, 1918) vol. 2 p. 165.

<sup>7</sup>J. A. Stewart, The Myths of Plato (New York, 1905) p. 69.



religious. And the chief defect of Platonism is that it is aesthetic and intellectual rather than moral."<sup>8</sup>

With the rise of the scholastics in the Middle Ages, neo-Platonism fell into disrepute, because it had, more and more, mingled the true Platonic concepts with an erratic Egyptian mysticism.<sup>9</sup>

The renaissance, in Italy, however, brought a renewed interest in Platonism: the neo-Platonism of the syncretists --Plotinus, Dionysius the Areopagite and the compilers of the Trismegistic writings. Ficinus and Pico della Mirandola, especially, held up the spiritual tenets of the neo-Platonists: the simple, spiritual life, the active striving for ecstasy as a possible result of union with God.

With the coming of the "new learning" to Oxford and then to the other English schools, English scholars--disgusted with the often pointless wranglings and sophistries of the late Aristotelians--eagerly embraced the tenets of the simple devout life as set forth by Italian renaissance scholars of neo-Platonism.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Joseph Cochez, "Plotin Et Les Mystères D'Isis" dans Revue Neo-Scholastique de Philosophie (Louvain, 1911) p. 330f.

Thomas More, himself, translated Pico della Mirandola's "Twelve Rules for the Devout Life". Colet, working on an interpretation of Pauline doctrines, made Dionysius the Areopagite popular at Oxford.

With the advent of Protestantism to England and the consequent complete decline of medieval philosophy, Oxford and Cambridge became centers of neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism, with its stress on direct communion between the soul and God, with its reliance on the personal human intellect in place of objective authority, with its advocacy of active rather than passive mysticism, fitted in well with Protestant individualism, and the chief protagonists of the neo-Platonic movement in England were the Cambridge Platonists.

They belong to that school not only of theology, but of philosophy, to which mystic and absolute conceptions beyond natural phenomena are the only reality: Hobbes to that other division holding that nothing can "be in itself either bad or good, ugly or beautiful."<sup>10</sup>

The genial Dr. Henry More, Culverwel, Whichcote, Norris, Glanvill, and Smith drew around themselves at Cambridge a number of young theological students, Puritan in their sympathies and eager for a philosophy which would give them a spiritual dynamic and satisfy their religious idealism. Outstanding among the doctrines taught by the Cambridge Platonists

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<sup>10</sup>T. O. Beachcroft, Art. 7, in Dublin Review (London, 1930.) Vol. 186, p. 281.

were: sin is not natural to man; his nature, when enlightened, tends toward God. Man's soul is really only an emanation of the spirit of God and all man's knowledge culminates in an understanding of the Mundus Archetypus,<sup>11</sup> which, since it exists in the mind of God, is in actuality eternal. The visible world merely represents the Divine Will moved to action by loving contemplation of the ideal forms. "The whole world, to him who can see it, is irradiated by spirit."<sup>12</sup>

Their general aim was to include within the body of Church doctrine that new spirit of scientific inquiry which, as the heritage of Bacon from the medieval nominalists, had up to that moment been occupied in establishing its existence as something uncomplimentary and even hostile to religious truth. Theirs was the first Protestant attempt truly to wed scientific knowledge to religious truth.<sup>13</sup>

According to these philosophers, moral obligation is not coercion brought to bear upon the unwilling by a system of reward and punishment, but it is the nisus of a nature eagerly seeking its place in the universe and experiencing, through its success, the joy of union, by anticipation, with the Divine Beauty. By these divine effluxes the soul recognizes that it is, in reality, become divine and through contemplation of soul, rises according to the Platonian teaching, to a contemplation directly--of God. Through this ascent to Divinity

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. J. A. Stewart, Op. Cit., (New York, 1905) p. 475.

<sup>12</sup>F. J. Powicke, The Cambridge Platonists, (London) p. 19.

<sup>13</sup>T. O. Beachcroft, Op. Cit., p. 280.

comes purity--sanctity. Intuition takes the place of intellect, and the soul is conscious of its immortality. Vision is clarified by the conquest of fleshly lusts, by steady concentration of the thought, will, and affections on things that are good and lovely. There are three avenues to the knowledge of God and of the world and of ourselves: purposive action, reasoning thought, and loving affection.

Widest known of the Cambridge Platonists or the so-called Latitudinarians, Doctor Henry More, in his Philosophical Poems, did little more than poetize in Spenserian stanzas the major tenets of neo-Platonism as expressed by Pico della Mirandola. Most truly speculative of his group, Dr. More was concerned with subtle but not original reasoning on the similarity of the Platonic triad with the Christian trinity, on the nature of the human soul and its immortality. The highly condensed quality of his thought and the complex quality of his imagery make his verse awkward and uneven.<sup>14</sup>

The Philosophical connexion of More, as that also of Cudworth, is rather with the development of vitalistic speculation than with either the idealism or the materialism of 17th century thought. . . He is intent on proving what he desires to believe.<sup>15</sup>

Though all of them were united by a love of intellectual beauty and by a rejection of the dualism of formal Platonism

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. E. T. Campagnac, The Cambridge Platonists, (Oxford, 1901).

<sup>15</sup>Flora Mackinnon, Philosophical Writings of Henry More, (New York, 1921, p. XXVII.) as quoted in Year's Work in English Studies, Chapter VIII, 1925.

in favor of a more Christian attitude, they were not agreed on all points. Culverwel rejected the Pythagorean teaching on innate ideas; John Smith taught both the theory of innate ideas and the doctrine of emanation.

Traherne dwells on the mystic nature of God in the manner of the Cambridge Platonists: the Deity is the fountain, means and end.<sup>16</sup>

If Thomas Traherne was directly influenced by any one of the Latitudinarians, probably he studied John Smith most. For Smith is the champion of that doctrine which Traherne was to develop in so individual a manner in his Poems of Felicity: the knowledge of spiritual things is clearest in infancy when the soul is less idly at ease in the earthly body. The soul is happiest when holiest.

Nathaniel Culverwel stressed another of Traherne's recurrent themes that nature is the reflexion of God--in knowing her we know God. Perhaps, too, it was Culverwel who acted as a control on Traherne keeping him from being influenced by the more oriental and spurious teachings of the other neo-Platonists.

"He (Traherne) combines the rational calm of Whichcote, the organized circumspection of Smith, the poetic mysticism of More, with a sheer power of writing that has in extraordinary turn of fortune, preserved him to be far the best spokesman

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<sup>16</sup>Gladys E. Willett, Traherne (An Essay) (Cambridge, 1919) p. 21.

at large for the whole group.<sup>17</sup>

The student of Traherne must not, however, too readily attribute his ideas to the Cambridge group. Traherne had access to the same books they had; his whole personality led him to select some of the neo-Platonic theories and reject others; his training in a Puritan college such as Brasenose would give the same religious bent to his conclusions as theirs.

As is evident from his biography, he probably never came into direct contact with the Cambridge Platonists. But the men under whom he pursued his philosophical studies at Oxford, the books from which he drew his ideas--all formed him in the tradition of Platonism. Traherne was an ardent admirer of Pico della Mirandola, quoted him freely in the *Centuries* and, from his notes, seems also to have read the *Hermetica*, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Plotinus.

Still another presumable influence in the shaping of his thought sequence was the German mystic Jacob Boehme. Since Boehme antedated Traherne by about fifty years, his writings, currently translated at the time when Traherne was building his scholarship, must have been read by the Englishman. Moreover, the ardent group of religious "Seekers", so conspicuous in the seventeenth century, had made Boehme's

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<sup>17</sup>T. O. Beachcroft, *Op. Cit.*, p. 290.

teachings accessible to anyone interested in a new spiritual way.

Although Traherne can never be said, properly, to belong to the "Seeker" group, yet there are striking similarities in the religious thought of Boehme and Traherne. Traherne's teachings on childhood innocence and on temporal possessions, which in the next chapter will be shown to differ from neo-Platonic ideas, coincide with Boehme's:

"Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." There is no shorter way than this; neither can there be a better way found. Verily, Jesus saith unto thee, Unless thou turn and become as a child, hanging upon him for all things, thou shalt not see the kingdom of God. This do, and nothing shall hurt thee; for thou shalt be at friendship with all the things that are, as thou dependest on the author and fountain of them, and becomest like him, by such dependence, and by the union of thy will with his will. But mark what I have further to say; and be not thou startled at it, though it may seem hard for thee at first to conceive. If thou wilt be like all things, thou must forsake all things; thou must turn thy desire away from them all, and not desire or hanker after any of them; thou must not extend thy will to possess that for thy own, or as thine own, which is something, whatsoever that something be. For as soon as ever thou takest something into thy desire, and receivest it into thee for thine own, or in propriety, then this very something (of what nature soever it is) is the same with thyself; and this worketh with thee in thy will, and thou art thence bound to protect it, and to take care of it, even as of thy own being. But if thou dost receive nothing into thy desire, then thou art free from all things, and rulest over all things at once, as a prince of God. 18

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<sup>18</sup>Jacob Boehme, The Signature of All Things with Other Writings (London, 1926) p. 230.

However, in Boehme's writings there is a preoccupation with the problem of good and evil that does not seem to trouble Traherne. Furthermore, Boehme is evidently a pantheist; Traherne is not. A study of Traherne's life and then a comparison of his teachings with those of Boehme, as set forth by Margaret Bailey in her book on Boehme's influence on English thought, shows Traherne, again, the individualist.

The practical and ethical character of Boehme's teachings is shown in what seems his attempt to harmonize the undeniable claim of pantheism that God is not to be known out of and apart from nature but in it and through it, with the equally undeniable fact of the evident opposition in this divine world of good and evil. He cannot make light of the fact of evil and explain it away as merely negative, as the unavoidable shadow to the light, for it is vastly more than that. For him the solution of the problem lies very deep and becomes only possible by looking upon the human soul not as a mode of divine substance, nor as the work of the creator merely, but rather as absolutely self-existent. In other words, good and evil, heaven and hell, are to be looked upon as opposed possibilities within the soul, in relation to which the soul possesses perfect liberty of choice and full independence from any external influence and from any predetermined inherent condition; for even this is the deep meaning of the word human will.<sup>19</sup>

If Traherne studied Boehme and was influenced by the German, he was not the slavish follower any more than he was of the Cambridge group. He had a remarkable faculty which guided him in his selection of the many conflicting facts,

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<sup>19</sup>Margaret L. Bailey, Milton and Jacob Boehme: A Study of German Mysticism in Seventeenth Century England, (New York, 1914) p. 28.



doctrines and theories of his day. And, whereas it is possible to trace Boehme's direct influence on Milton, as Margaret Bailey has done, it would be impossible to show, conclusively, any such influence on Traherne, in the light of present information.

How far, then, is Traherne the product of his age, the inheritor of a system of thought already probed and interpreted? From the University school of Platonism Traherne, first of all, did not gain new knowledge of a philosophical nature; he merely strengthened his conviction in the moral and religious concepts that, if we may accept his Centuries and Poems as accurate, were already peculiarly his from his very childhood.

Having been at the University, and received there the taste and tincture of another education, I saw that there were things in this world of which I never dreamed; glorious secrets, and glorious persons past imagination. There I saw that Logic, Ethics, Physics, Metaphysics, Geometry, Astronomy, Poesy, Medicine, Grammar, Music, Rhetoric, all kinds of Arts, Trades, and Mechanisms that adorned the world pertained to felicity; at least there I saw those things, which afterwards I knew to pertain unto it: and was delighted in it. There I saw into the nature of the Sea, the Heavens, the Sun, the Moon and Stars, the Elements, King's Daughter, all glorious within, and those things which my nurses, and parents, should have talked of there were taught unto me.<sup>20</sup>

But, nowhere is Traherne's independence of thought more clearly evidenced than in his teaching on the human body.

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<sup>20</sup>Thomas Traherne, Op. Cit., Century 3, Meditation 36, p.186.

Platonists might regard the body as a deteriorating influence on the soul, a prison house of clay; Traherne looks upon his body with surprised delight:

These little Limmes,  
These Eys and Hands which here I find,  
These rosie Cheeks wherwith my Life begins,  
Where have ye been? Behind  
What Curtain were ye from me hid so long?  
Where was? in what Abyss, my Speaking Tongue?<sup>21</sup>

So, too, he grasps in, eagerly, all sensations presented. His very description of things spiritual takes color from the richness of his sense impressions: "Like dangling Apples or like Golden Fruits and Grapes, Angelick Joys become."<sup>22</sup>

Again, throughout his poetry and the Centuries of Meditations there is vibrant life and love of humanity; none of the cold and subjective aloofness of Plotinus.

Chapter II will point out that Traherne's very originality derived from this deviation from accepted Platonism. Whereas Dr. Henry More found no incongruity in identifying the Platonic Triad with the Christian Trinity, Traherne found it an actual necessity to effect a harmony between Platonic teachings and the tenets of orthodox Christianity. So, with selective keenness and a rare psychological power--able to probe back into childhood and analyze the method by which first knowledge was attained--he set about formulating a mode of living which

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<sup>21</sup>Gladys I. Wade, Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne, (London, 1932) p. 1.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 48, Stanza 5.

he felt convincing.

Even then, doubts crept up. He puzzled how to reconcile the doctrine of innate ideas, Plotinus' teaching that the soul is naturally bent toward good, with the Christian doctrine of original sin. In no place does he admit defeat and leave his problems unanswered.

When, as a philosopher, he fails to reach a conclusion, his poetic nature, as if impatient at the slow processes by which the reason attains truth, immediately presents a solution which, if not objectively conclusive, satisfies Traherne's active mind and habitual optimism.

## CHAPTER II

ORIGINALITY OF TRAHERNE'S TREATMENT OF THE THEORY  
OF CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE

Traherne's genius has come to be identified with the pursuit of felicity.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a whole collection of poems in the Burney manuscript is titled "Poems of Felicity." But before taking up a study of Traherne's concept of felicity and his instruction on the means of acquiring it, the student must examine an evidently prior and more basic teaching, the theory of childhood innocence. For it is on his supposition that the child has a far keener apprehension of man's place in the universe than has the adult--engrossed in worldly matters--that Traherne builds up the whole teaching of felicity.

It may be contended that this doctrine is not totally original with Traherne, that John Smith, the Cambridge Platonist, held it when he stated:

Divine things are to be understood by a spiritual sensation rather than be a verbal reasoning or by speculation; this knowledge is furthered by purity of life, and..is the clearest in infancy when the soul is less idly at ease in the earthly body.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>H. C. White, The Metaphysical Poets, New York, 1936, Chapter 12.

<sup>2</sup>John Smith, "Of the True Way and Method of Attaining to Divine Knowledge" in Greenslet, Joseph Glanvill, A Study in English Thought and Letters of the 17th Century, (New York, 1900.)

But, Smith's teaching on "childhood innocence" is based, evidently, on the Plotinian theory of emanation as the words, "the soul is less idly at ease in the earthly body" indicate. Traherne, on the other hand, holds the child up as the truly happy being just because he is most actively aware of that earthly body he possesses and of the beauty of the universe around him. Both in the Centuries of Meditations and in the Poems of Felicity, Traherne reiterates this theme incessantly. At the end of "The Person" his insistence becomes almost a challenge:

Thy Gifts O God alone Ile prize,  
                   My Tongue, my Eys,  
 My cheeks, my Lips, my Ears, my Hands, my Feet;  
                   Their Harmony is far more Sweet;  
 Their Beauty true. And these in all my Ways  
 Shall Themes becom, and Organs of thy Praise.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, whereas the idea of childhood superiority is merely an extraneous teaching to the Cambridge Platonists, with Traherne it is an integral part of his "spiritual way."

Again, although Vaughan closely resembles Traherne in his accent on the greatness of childhood, he, too, stresses the Hermetical ideas of transmigration, emanation and innate ideas. All these are evident in Vaughan's much quoted poem, "The Retreat." For him his childhood was blessed because he did not yet understand "this place appointed for my second race." Traherne praised the child because of its

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas Traherne, Poetical Works, edited by Gladys I. Wade, (London, 1932) p. 44.

awed joy at the beauties of nature and of its body, which God had given it. On the other hand, Vaughan says his child soul was happy because it had not learned "to fancy ought but a white, celestial thought." He further intimates at least a poetic acceptance of the theory of pre-existence, for he adds:

When yet I had not walked above  
A mile or two from my first love.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, another difference, as Miss Illick notes, is the fact that Vaughan looks back upon childhood innocence as something lost, never to be regained. Traherne, contrarily, has an underlying comprehension of the child mind. What he possessed through intuition as a child, he now possesses through reason.<sup>5</sup>

Bertram Dobell, who discovered Traherne to modern scholarship, comments:

The praise of the beauty and innocence of childhood is familiar enough to us now and has, perhaps, in some instances been carried to a rather ridiculous extreme, that certainly was not the case in Traherne's time. So far as I know, he was the first who dwelt upon those ideas in any other than an incidental and allusive manner. It is true that we find in Vaughan some passages of a similar tendency, but they are slight in comparison with those which we find in Traherne.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Henry Vaughan, "The Retreat" in Poems, (London: 1896) p. 87

<sup>5</sup>Martha Elda Illick, A Comparison of the Poetry of Vaughan and Traherne, (Chicago, 1918.) (Thesis)

<sup>6</sup>Bertram Dobell, intro., Gladys I. Wade, Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne, p. LXXVII, f.

How thoroughly original Traherne's concept of childhood innocence is, is best realized when placed in its religio-historical setting. Calvinism, with its confining teaching on predestination, was the motivating force of all Puritan cults.

In Puritanism there was an overwhelming energy, but at the same time, a narrowness, a rigorous one-sidedness, an inexplicable sharpness on religious issues. It would govern all of life under the guise of religion and would force into the bitterest antimonies through its rationalistic demands. And, whenever a uniform Puritan culture prevailed, an inner spiritual cleavage resulted.<sup>7</sup>

Against Puritanism, therefore, had arisen the mild teaching of Jan Arminius, a Dutch Calvinist preacher. Arminianism contended that God had not destined some men, irrevocably, to hell and others to eternal happiness, regardless of their individual efforts. It insisted that through the voluntary sacrifice of Christ all men received the grace to be saved.

By the middle of the seventeenth century in England, Arminianism had become prominent enough to influence whole groups of leaders in Puritan thought. Outstanding among those influenced were the Cambridge Platonists who became known derisively as the "Latitude Men" because they would extend salvation to all. But, despite Arminianism and some individual revolts against the harshness of the traditional

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<sup>7</sup>Hans-Oscar Wilde, Beiträge zur englischen Literaturgeschichte des 17. Jahrhunderts, (Breslau, 1932) p. 31.

teaching on predestination, Calvinism continued to hold the supremacy and to stigmatize man as a corrupt creature.

Consequently, all of seventeenth century religious writing is permeated with a deep and convinced sense of man's sinfulness. The whole school of religious poets, beginning with Donne, express a distressed, almost at times despairing, sense of guilt. The redemptive act had become the center of glowing religious thought, yet the conception of the God-Man, who by taking human flesh, glorified mankind in His living, was almost unknown. The melancholy strain of Calvinistic teaching still pulled, like a heavy undertow, in almost all records of religious experience.

Consequently, Traherne with his optimistic assertion that all men are good until corrupted by evil habit, that

it is not our parents' loins, so much  
as our parents' lives, that enthrals  
and blind us<sup>8</sup>

is stating a doctrine which must have been almost startling in its divergence from contemporary teaching. Traherne, himself, felt that his position was somewhat unorthodox, for after asserting in "Innocence"

But that which most I wonder at, which most  
I did esteem my Bliss, which most I Boast,  
And ever shall Enjoy, is that within

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<sup>8</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, Century IV, Med. 8, p. 164.



I felt no Stain, nor Spot of Sin<sup>9</sup>

he continues, in an attempt to justify an experience which he recognizes contradicts all teaching on original sin and man's fallen nature,

Whether it be that Nature is so pure,  
And Custom only vicious; or that sure  
God did by Miracle the Guilt remov,  
And make my Soul to feel his Lov,

So Early: Or that 'twas one Day,  
Wher in this Happiness I found;  
Whose Strength and Brightness so do Ray,  
That still it seems me to Surround.

This theory of childhood innocence, however, is part of Traherne's intuitive knowledge. So, with the absolute trust in the validity of his spiritual experience that characterizes all mystics, Traherne swings back to a re-assertion of his original statement:

What ere it is, it is a Light  
So Endless unto me  
That I a World of true Delight  
Did then and to this Day do see.<sup>10</sup>

He proceeds to point out, in Meditation 5, that his teaching on childhood innocence is really not new nor heterodox, but is merely the result of his enlightened study of the scriptures. In substantiation he quotes our Lord, when He said, "He must be born again and become a little child that will

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<sup>9</sup>Thomas Traherne, "Innocence" in Poetical Works, Section I, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>ibid., Section 4.

enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." Then Traherne, eulogizing the child beautifully, concludes:

We must disrobe ourselves of all false colours, and unclothe our souls of evil habits; all our thoughts must be infant-like and clear; the powers of this world, and disentangled from men's conceits and customs...Ambitions, trades, luxuries, inordinate affections, casual and accidental riches invented since the fall, would be gone, and only those things appear, which did to Adam in Paradise, in the same light and in the same colours: God in His works, Glory in the light, Love in our parents, men, ourselves, and the face of Heaven: Every man naturally seeing those things, to the enjoyment of which he is naturally born.<sup>11</sup>

A study of Traherne's Poems of Felicity and "Century III" shows that he attributes blessedness to the child for three reasons: the child has an insatiable curiosity which makes him eager to discover every new creature in God's universe and, upon discovery, a simplicity which makes him rejoice in God's handiwork; the child does not feel the need of personal possession; hence, envy and injustice are foreign to him; he places the beauties of God's creation above the fabrications of man's ingenuity.

This wondering admiration of the child is perhaps best expressed in "Wonder", the second stanza of which reads:

The Skies in their Magnificence,  
The Lively, Lovely Air:  
Oh how Divine, how Soft, how Sweet, how fair!

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<sup>11</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, Century III, Med. 5, p. 161.

The Stars did entertain my Sence  
 And all the Works of God so Bright and pure,  
 So Rich and Great did seem,  
 As if they ever must endure,  
 In my Esteem.<sup>12</sup>

Here Traherne captures the almost ecstatic joy of the child. The same wonderment appears in that "classic" example which every student of Traherne has quoted. In this passage he invests the ordinary countryside with an aura of such startling beauty that the beholder is struck, at once, with the recognition of inherent truth in the picture and with the same fresh delight he might have felt as a child:

The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold: the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal Cherubims! And young men glittering and sparkling Angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls tumbling in the street, and playing, were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die; but all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places. Eternity was manifest in the Light of the Day, and something infinite behind everything appeared: which talked with my expectation and moved my desire.<sup>13</sup>

Traherne's teaching on possessions was a challenge to his age, which placed more stress on lands and titles than

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<sup>12</sup>Gladys I. Wade, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, p. 157 f.

on the poor and the laborer. His child's attitude on property might be considered "communism" today, for he termed "proprieties" cursed and fraught with envy, fraud, and avarice. As a child, he says, he knew nothing of hedges, ditches, and limits as means of circumscribing possessions. He had even thought that hedges and coffers were ornaments for his special enjoyment. Clothing, too, and jewels he could enjoy equally whether he possessed them or saw that others wore them.<sup>14</sup>

For him, the greatest possession is the universe. He declares emphatically that enjoyment of the world is never right until the world is esteemed as a treasure greater than a King's exchequer full of gold and silver. Almost rhapsodically he has declared:

Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every morning you awake in Heaven; see yourself in your Father's Palace; and look upon the skies, the earth, and the air as Celestial Joys: having such a reverend esteem of all, as if you were among the Angels. The bride of a monarch, in her husband's chamber, hath no such causes of delight as you.

You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and Kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Thomas Traherne, "Wonder" in Poetical Works, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, "Century 1", Meds. 28, 29, p. 20.

Wealth, then, for Traherne lies in enjoyment and not in possession.

In these theories on the child and on nature, Traherne antedates the Romanticists by a whole century. Wordsworth's famous "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" is more closely allied to Traherne's than to Vaughan's poems on childhood. For Traherne, like Wordsworth, is optimistic in his assertion that childhood happiness and the contemplative life can be recaptured through wisdom.

The major tenet of Romanticism, as enunciated in Rousseau's Social Contract, is definitely and completely stated in Meditation 12, when Traherne reflects:

. . . There is no savage nation under the cope of Heaven, that is more absurdly barbarous than the Christian World. They that go naked and drink water and live upon roots are like Adam, or Angels in comparison of us. But they indeed that call beads and glass buttons jewels, and dress themselves with feather, and buy pieces of brass and broken hafts or knives of our merchants are somewhat like us. But we pass them in barbarous opinions, and monstrous apprehensions, which we nick-name civility and the mode, amongst us. I am sure those barbarous people that go naked, come nearer to Adam, God, and Angels in the simplicity of their wealth, though not in knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

Traherne's concept of the child is, throughout his work, tied up with his idea of nature. The child comprehends nature for what it is, the garment of God, because he is still innocent and close to God. Here Traherne is

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<sup>16</sup>ibid., "Century 3", Med. 12, p. 167.

adapting the Hermetical teaching that "God is hidden from sight and yet is most manifest in nature." Moreover, he injects Hermetical teachings into his whole explanation of the purpose of creation when he infers, as in "Circulation" that God, man, and the universe are mutually necessary to each other to keep up a continued "flow" of divine power through all things.

So attractive is the doctrine of childhood innocence, which Traherne teaches, that Hobhouse has named him the "Poet of Childhood." In substantiation of his characterization, he points out that Traherne has the incurable optimism, the careless sense of universal possession, and the lovely gaiety of a happy child.<sup>17</sup>

This stress on the child is intimately bound up with Traherne's concept of felicity, he says, has for its object: God. In Him, the Fountain, in Him the End, in Him the Light, the Life, the Way.

The child is intimately aware of these stupendous facts. So, as Miss White notes,

The distinctive thing in what Traherne has to say of the child is his florification of the child's undistracted and uncorrupted vision into the heart of things. The child sees because he is still in his innocence in touch with God and his activity in nature and the commonplaces of life. The beauty of the sun, the

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<sup>17</sup>Stephen Hobhouse, "Poet's Resurrection" in Spectator, vol. 157, p. 804.

liveliness of the wind, the majesty of the sea, the comeliness of the earth, are not fictions for the child but the whole and immediate realities. In such matters there is no process of inquiry, no laborious business of learning, for him.

. . . These things burst in upon him, because he has no walls between them and himself. His infant eye is still clear as God intended it to be. He sees what is there. And being still in the state of innocence, his response to what he sees is the natural and unspoiled one of delight in its wonder and its beauty. Therefore, he appropriates it in the only way in which the wonder of the world can be appropriated, in spontaneous and immediate delight.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>H. C. White, op. cit., p. 334.

### Chapter III

#### TRAHERNE'S TREATMENT OF ASCETICISM

#### HIS DOCTRINE OF FELICITY

The narrow compass of Traherne's muse, his reiterated insistence upon the superiority of childhood simplicity to adult preoccupation with transitory values, and his seemingly effortless sweep upward to felicity are apt to leave his reader with the impression that he is a singularly simple personality. Whereas, he is one of the most complex personalities of the metaphysical school; for he is, at once, poet, mystic, prophet, and philosopher. Moreover, it is the very interplay of these four divergent abilities which makes difficult any evaluation of Traherne.

His character of mystic circumscribes his muse, yet lends it the only rapt moments it possesses. Again, his direct intuitive approach to God is impeded by the restless analytic quality of the philosophic mind. The unself-consciousness of the perfect mystic is thwarted by his continual necessity, as a seer, to interpret, to analyze, to rationalize his vision for others. This instructional urge slows down the movement of his poetry, leads to his habit of catagorizing, and frequently destroys the suggestive quality inherent in all great poetry. Added to these difficulties there is the philosophic aptitude to generalize and make abstract, images which



poetic art demands must be concrete.

The natural result of the concurrence of four such divergent tendencies in one personality would be, ordinarily, a continual pull among them to exert supremacy and a consequent disturbed emotional state. Yet, strangely enough, Traherne always impresses his reader by his calm, his poise. It is this very poise which argues most convincingly for Traherne's teaching on Felicity.

In this many-sidedness of his personality Traherne experienced no struggle; rather he considered it the normal condition of man. Hence he records his highly complex spiritual experiences without, apparently, any realization that they were individual. The problem which Chapter IV will discuss is whether his art suffered from this quaternity of nature or not. This chapter will discuss the validity of his attitude on asceticism and the veracity of his claim to felicity.

Thomas Traherne, in both his Centuries of Meditations and his Poems of Felicity affirms that he has attained to perfect felicity. As he defines it, felicity is the joy of realized infinite possession. God has created the whole universe for me.

For Me the World created was by Lov;  
For Me the Skies, the Seas, the Sun, do mov;  
The Earth for Me doth stable stand;  
For Me each fruitful Land  
For Me the very Angels God made His

And my Companions in Bliss:

His Laws command all Men  
That they lov Me,  
Under a Penalty  
Severe, in case they Miss:  
His Laws require His Creatures all to prais  
His Name, and when they do't be most my Joys.<sup>1</sup>

Without me, the Center, to admire, God's work would be incomplete without purpose. In a sense, then, God needs me. He covers the unorthodoxy of this position by asserting that God, in his goodness, has deigned to need me. This dogma, which he reiterates exuberantly in all his work is one of the intuitive concepts that he cherishes without attempting to analyze clearly. For, if God needs me, desires me, then Traherne should have realized that his master, Pico della Mirandola's statement, applied, would immediately negative the very definition of God.

The nature of the desired is in some manner in the desirer; otherwise there would be no similitude betwixt them; yet, imperfectly, else it were vain for it to seek what it entirely possesseth.<sup>2</sup>

Of felicity, Plotinus has said, "The joy that comes from a perfect life spiritually is felicity." In explaining this statement more fully, he elaborates:

Every being is then happy when it acquires the proper perfection of its nature; and consequently all vital beings are capable of arriving at the perfection of their nature. Hence, as the nature or being of everything consists in that

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Traherne, "Hosanna" in The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne, edited by Gladys I. Wade, (London, 1932) p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Pico della Mirandola, Platonic Discourse (Boston, 1914) Bk. 2 Section 3.

part of the thing which is most excellent; for that which is nothing can have a more principal subsistence than being--as this is the case, human felicity consists in a perfect intellectual energy; for intellect is our principal part.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that both these definitions of felicity are intellectual in nature. Though Traherne's concept of felicity is vigorously original, yet it evidently stems from his neo-Platonic background and is colored by his reading of Plotinus and Pico della Mirandola.

Critics of Traherne have repeatedly classified him as a "mystic" basing their assertion on Traherne's claim to felicity. Now the mystic, H. C. White affirms, is distinguished by three qualities: an intense and immediate consciousness of spiritual reality; an extraordinary faculty of spiritual concentration; great ethical strenuousness. He will have nothing short of perfect felicity.<sup>4</sup>

Perfect felicity is, then, the concomitant state of the mystic. Dom Knowles defines mysticism as "the way of approach to God consequent upon a conviction that an immediate union between God and the soul is possible in this life."<sup>5</sup>

Sharpe states that mysticism is the direct union of human soul with Divinity through contemplation and love, and

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas Taylor, Five Books of Plotinus, (London, 1794) Bk. 1.

<sup>4</sup>H. C. White, The Mysticism of William Blake, University of Wisconsin Studies, no. 23, (Madison, 1927) p. 57.

<sup>5</sup>Dom David Knowles, The English Mystics, (London, 1927) p. 16.

it attempts to determine processes and means of realizing this end. It is not a mere analogical knowledge of the Infinite but a direct and immediate intuition of the Infinite. It may be speculative or practical.<sup>6</sup>

But, Traherne in his writings on felicity delights in and rejoices over "nature". It is true, his love for nature at no time becomes the sentimental, half-pantheistic nature worship of some of the romanticists. It is, instead, a speculative wonder on the glories of creation as "the garment of God."

Since, therefore, the most beautiful thing that is possible, being always continued, would grow into contempt; how do we know, but the world is that body which the Deity hath assumed to manifest His beauty and by which He maketh Himself as visible, as it is possible He should?<sup>7</sup>

. . . Whom if you love with all the endless powers of your Soul, you will love Him in Himself, in His attributes, in His Counsels, in all His works, in all His ways; and in every kind of thing wherein He appeareth, you will prize Him, you will know Him. You will delight in Him, you will ever wish to be with Him and to please Him, for to love Him includeth all this. You will feed with pleasure upon everything that is His. So that the world shall be a grand jewel of Delight unto you a very Paradise and the Gate of Heaven. It is indeed the beautiful frontispiece of Eternity; the Temple of God; and Palace of His children.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, if Traherne is a true mystic and really experienced perfect felicity, as he so sincerely felt he had, it is strange that he did not penetrate more intimately beyond the "garment"

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<sup>6</sup>A. B. Sharpe, Mysticism: Its True Nature and Value (London, 1910) p. 88.

<sup>7</sup>Op. cit. Centuries of Meditations, II, Meditation 20

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., I, Meditation 20

to the eternal Verity behind it. His knowledge of God, though intimate, always leaves the impression of reasoned knowledge, not experienced.

Even the Egyptian mystics, by whom Traherne was indirectly influenced through Plotinus, contended that

those who have seen the faces of the gods no longer dream of the beauty of other forms, that one who is captivated by love through the vision of the sovereign beauty disdains all which, before, had attracted him.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the true mystic--immersed in the divine-- while seeing worldly things with new vision, yet loses a consciousness of his own processes. Traherne, on the other hand, has a self-centered preoccupation with the workings of his own mind which characterize the rationalist and would have seemed petty, doubtless, to the mystic, contemplating the Divine.

If Traherne was a mystic, he was a mere natural mystic at best; all his reasoning processes indicate that he knew God, not so much in His Nature as through the wonderful order of the universe, which is a participation of the Divine ideas.

Again, Traherne teaches that felicity is exclusively the attainment of the child, the natural mystic, or of the learned; that it can be attained by the soul that strives consciously to embrace a direct union with God. But every true mystic

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<sup>9</sup>M. Franz Cumont, "Le Culte Egyptien Et Le Mysticisme de Plotin" dans Monuments Et Memoires, vol. 25, (Paris, 1921-22) p. 86.

knows that

God is not discovered by the mystic; indeed this special manifestation of Him may not, strictly speaking, be even sought. He makes Himself known "experimentally", and the person so favored contributes nothing, at least directly, to the result.<sup>10</sup>

There is a marked similarity, already noted by critics, between Thomas Traherne and Richard Rolle, the fourteenth century ascetic. Both of them have a personal message, a revelation; both express their religious experience in poetry and prose; both pre-suppose a Christian scheme of things, yet are not Christocentric in their piety, both insist on the unity of body and soul in working and spiritual destiny:

God forbid that I should separate what God hath coupled, the body and the spirit. For God would be served with body and with soul, hath together, as seemly is, and reward man his meed in bliss both in body and soul,<sup>11</sup>

both looked upon the time prior to their conversion to the contemplative life as passed in sin, yet show in their life that their early years were rather years of ignorance than of actual transgression. Both identify themselves, mystically, with God;

For he is thy being, and in him thou art what thou art, not only by cause and by being, but also he is in thee both thy cause and thy being. And therefore think of God in thy work as thou dost on thyself, and on thyself as thou dost on God: . . .

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<sup>10</sup>A. B. Sharpe, Op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Rolle, Cloud of Unknowing, p. 18.

so that thy thought be not scattered nor separated,  
but oned in him that is all; ever more saving this  
difference betwixt him and thee, that he is thy  
being and thou not his.<sup>12</sup>

This is strikingly similar to Traherne's passage,

To sit in the Throne of God is to inhabit Eternity. To reign there is to be pleased with all things in Heaven and Earth from everlasting to everlasting, as if we had the sovereign disposal of them. For He is to dwell in us, and we in Him, because He liveth in our knowledge and we in His. His will is to be in our will, and our will is to be in His will, so that both being joined and becoming one, we are pleased in all His works as He is; and herein the Image of God perfectly consisteth.<sup>13</sup>

and is reminiscent of neo-Pythagorean teachings:

The entire soul is immersed in God: then she can see Him and see herself, as much as it is permitted her. She sees herself resplendent . . . she becomes God, or better, she is God.<sup>14</sup>

Whether mystic, in the strict sense or not, Traherne carries in his writings a vital message:

All Blisse  
Consists in this,  
To do as Adam did:  
And not to know those Superficial Toys  
Which in the Garden once were hid.  
Those little new Invented Things.  
Cups, Saddles, Crowns are Childish Joys  
So Ribbans are and Rings.  
Which all our Happiness destroys.<sup>15</sup>

Though he ignores in this work any need for a sacramental system he feels that his hold on felicity is so strong, so close his union with God, that there is no possibility of his

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<sup>13</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations.

<sup>14</sup>Cumont, Op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>15</sup>Gladys I. Wade, Op. cit., p. 69.

fall from grace. Although this may at first thought seem self-sufficient and un-Christian, we have almost an identical statement in Rolle's Incendio Amoris:

Nevertheless I trow that there is a degree of perfect love, the which whosoever attains he shall never afterwards lose. For truly it is one thing to be able to lose, and another always to hold, what he will not leave although he can.<sup>16</sup>

Here the problem of a fall is, evidently, concerned with actual, not potential, impossibility.

Since Traherne places felicity in an intellectual act, a grasping of the stupendous love of God for His creature man and since his own life has been so consistently on a high plane and free of a brooding sense of guilt such as Donne's, he gives very little place to any ascetical principles in his Centuries. Here he definitely parts company with the neo-Platonists, who following Pythagoras, taught that the body is essentially an evil principle and that the "soul must detach itself from the physical, empty itself of all sensation."<sup>17</sup>

His ascetical outlook, as stated in the Centuries, conformed rather with the mystic Father Baker's definition of mortification that

its essence for contemplative souls is to be found in its necessity; that is, mortification lies in suffering God's will to be done in all things, not

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<sup>16</sup>Richard Rolle, Incendio Amoris, Bk. 1, Chap. 19.

<sup>17</sup>Charles Moeller, "Melanges d'histoire" dans Revue neo-scholastique, Vol. 18, 1911, p. 88.



in devising of one's own choice a scheme of external austerities . . . The inevitable happenings of life--sorrows, sufferings, irritations, humiliations--are the great purifiers of the soul, not the accidental austerities which may well give some secret satisfaction.<sup>18</sup>

A possible explanation for the omission of any pronounced ascetical emphasis in Traherne's writings may be based on the fact that, writing as he was for souls far advanced in the spiritual life, he took ascetics for granted, or that, tinctured as he was by neo-Platonism, especially in his neglect of any sacramental system and in his teaching of immediate union with God, his mysticism was largely Platonic, hence concerned with the intellect. If man sins, he contended, it is because his intellect needs enlightenment. For him, as for most of the neo-Platonists, holiness is a state of soul in which wisdom and truth can be seen and loved in and for its beauty.<sup>19</sup>

As Dom Knowles judiciously states, the neo-Platonist was firmly convinced he can rise of his own powers and with assured success to union. He contends, differently from the great Catholic mystics, that the vision is attained, not given. And the means of attainment is the mind in abstraction, not the pure and loving heart. Such a concept of union with God excludes the body; hence, there is no need

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<sup>18</sup>Knowles, Op. cit., p. 168

<sup>19</sup>J.S. Harrison, Platonism in English Poetry of the 16th and 17th Centuries, (London, 1903)

of Christian asceticism to discipline for the mystic experience. It is aristocratic, seen by the philosopher, not by the simple Christian. In its insistence on direct attainment of God, it disregards Christ and the necessity of grace! It is in a way almost a secret, almost a trick, not the spontaneous work of the whole personality.<sup>20</sup>

Again, the absence of positive teaching on the ascetical ascent to God may show that in Traherne there was an unvoiced conflict over the place of positive mortification in the spiritual life. That he acknowledged the necessity of mortification to curb the sensual appetites and to maintain the superiority of the soul over the body is evident from Meditation 48:

But inward lusts do oft assail,  
Temptations work us much annoy:  
We'll therefore weep, and to prevail  
Shall be a more celestial joy.

For he that all his lusts doth quell,  
Shall find this life to be his prime,  
And vanquish Sin, and conquer Hell.  
The next shall be his double joy;  
And that which here seemed to destroy,  
Shall in the other life appear  
A root of bliss; a pearl each tear.<sup>21</sup>

But there is nothing of Oriental self-abasement in Traherne.<sup>22</sup> Whereas Plato taught that the body is the principle

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<sup>20</sup> Knowles, Op. cit., p. 92

<sup>21</sup> Thomas, Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, (London, 1908) III, Meditation 48.

<sup>22</sup> cf. S. T. H. Parker, "Riches of Thomas Traherne" in Living Age, Vol. 314, pp. 223-5.

of evil and that the soul is only perfect when finally freed from matter, Traherne glories in his body as the handiwork of God. He exults in all his senses, the gifts of God:

When silent I  
So many thousand, thousand years  
Beneath the dust did in a chaos lie,  
How could I smiles or tears,  
Or lips or hands or eyes or ears perceive?  
Welcome, ye treasures which I now receive.

I that so long  
Was nothing, from eternity,  
Did little think such joys as ear or tongue  
To celebrate or see;  
Such sounds to hear, such hands to feel, such feet  
Beneath the skies on such a ground to meet.

New burnisht joys,  
Which yellow gold and pearls excel!  
Such sacred treasures are the limbs in boys,  
In which a soul doth dwell;  
Their organized joint and azure veins  
More wealth include than all the world contains.

From dust I rise,  
And out of nothing now awake:  
These brighter regions which salute mine eyes,  
A gift from God I take.<sup>23</sup>

That Traherne's experience of felicity is vital, sincere, and poetic, his work shows clearly. That the type of felicity he holds up as the ultimate in human attainment conflicts with Christian ideas of mysticism is scarcely a valid statement. His teaching on the devout life cannot be condemned as unorthodox, yet it can scarcely be compared in intensity and in scope with that of Gerard de Groote in the Imita-

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<sup>23</sup>Thomas Traherne, Poetical Works, (London, 1932) p. 5

tation of Christ.

Nowhere does Traherne indicate that the "obscure night of the senses" ever came to him. His concept of felicity, as voiced in the Centuries of Meditations, impresses the reader as sincere but almost childish when compared with that of the great mystics. There is intuitive light, but the light emanates merely from the fringe of the mystical experience.

The strong renunciation of a mystic such as John of the Cross who declared:

There is but one way to win to God. That way is this: to free the fettered spirit, to make void the cumbered heart; to force the faculties to renounce their normal overlordship and their natural functioning, that they may give place to the infused illumination of the supernatural."<sup>24</sup>

was, if his writings are a complete revelation of his spiritual experience, unknown to him. Beside the sublime heights of John of the Cross, Traherne's mysticism pales into the same relationship as mediocrity beside genius. There is no evidence that he ever dreamed of the giant soul-struggle of the Spanish mystic, who longed

To make complete the nothingness of creature comfort, the nothingness of heart's consolation, the nothingness of intellect's knowledge, the nothingness of individual will by adding to them all this last nothingness--the nothingness of the soul's spiritual wealth. To be brief: first he dug this great pit; then with his shaking hands he sought to constrain

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<sup>24</sup>Rodolphe Hoornaert, The Burning Soul of St. John of the Cross (London, 1931) p. 33.

to hold something of God's Infinite.

For it was with him as with those great figures whose passion makes them notable in history. As they, so he, would feel all things, have all things, know all things, and, in the grip of tempestuous self-obliteration, would be lifted up to knowledge of all things; yea! would be lifted up to the outstretched arms of Utter-Beauty, of Utter-Light, of Utter-Essence, of Utter-Love.<sup>25</sup>

Traherne remains too decidedly intellectual, places too little emphasis on the training of the will, is too wrapped up in an almost ego-centric concept of the universe to be much concerned with the Christian virtues of contrition, humility, and self-immolation.

That this conflict of ideas was apparent to Traherne is not at all probable. The Centuries, on the contrary, indicate that he felt no limitations in his system. Living in an age that amalgamated thought systems and saw conflict in the Established Church itself without any diminution of loyalty, it is not suprising that Traherne should find nothing incompatible among the tenets he held on felicity. In him, if the quaternity of his personality brought limitations, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, it also offered huge compensations. For whenever as philosopher he met with contradictions in his tenets, the poet was there to harmonize and reconcile; the mystic, to clarify, satisfactorily enough for Traherne himself, and intuitively to weld into a subjective unity.

<sup>25</sup> Randolphe Hoornaert, The Burning Soul of St. John of the Cross (London, 1931) p. 37.

## CHAPTER IV

### TRAHERNE'S ART

Traherne, the writer, worked in two media: prose and lyric poetry. And honest study of his craftsmanship will, of necessity, discuss him both as poet and prose writer. The difficulty of such a procedure, however, becomes evident when even a somewhat cursory study of his writings is undertaken. For, as a poet, he is frequently prosy; as a writer of prose he soars up into some of the most rhythmic and beautiful "prose poetry" anywhere attainable.

A discussion of his art, moreover, which lets itself get tangled up in an analysis of his craftsmanship, will fail to penetrate to the qualities which make Traherne great; for he is great, despite the limping quality of his verse. He has been criticized, too, as hampered in subject matter. This is an unfair criticism; because he has comprehended in his work all the subject matter native to the metaphysical poet:

Metaphysical poetry is a paradoxical inquiry, imaginative and intellectual, which exhausts, by its use of antithesis and contradiction and unusual imagery, all the possibilities in a given idea. This idea will predominantly be a physiological probing of love, death, or religion as the more important matters of experience in the life of the poet, and will be embodied in striking metaphorical utterance or in the use of

the common or the scientific word.<sup>1</sup>

That he identifies love with the divine in place of the human should not cause those who have, perhaps, not experienced so profound a knowledge of the divinity to cry out that he is too constrained, that he knew nothing of life. The love of the Divine is, in fact, more fundamental than the love of a creature. If the one is less sensible than the other, it does not become, necessarily, so abstract that it is un-understandable. In the heart of every right thinking man there is the primal search for contact with the divinity, and even those who have not reached a fruition of this soul-hunger can recognize the universality and transcendence of Traherne's theme. That he can make his readers share his exalted experiences, vitally, is the best proof of his poetic faculty.

One is tempted to wonder whether critics who condemn roundly the "narrowness" of his muse<sup>2</sup> apply similar expressions when dealing with a poet such as Swinburne? Surely, if Traherne has too much of a sameness of theme in his poetry because he has an exuberant optimism founded on his trust in God, Swinburne must be similarly labeled because of the languid and despairing paganism that his

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<sup>1</sup>W. Bradford Smith, "What is Metaphysical Poetry?" in Sewanee Review, vol. 42, p. 263.

<sup>2</sup>Geoffrey Grigson, "Transports of Thomas Traherne" in Bookman, vol. 82, p. 250.

poetry too clearly displays.

The reader has a right to like or dislike a poet's works, but, if he does not like metaphysical poets, he should not criticize them because they are not romanticists, nor should he dub a poet's theme narrow in a derogatory manner, unless the theme is such that it evidently has no universality.

A truer criticism would be that, as a poet, he has not much variety in his approach to his theme. This limitation is the result of his attitude toward poetry. He probably never considered himself a poet. His poems were evidently written for his own personal pleasure without any intention of securing literary merit, and were prepared for publication by his brother Phillip only after the author's death.

The patterns of his verses, adopted without much success from Cowley and Herbert, show that although he was free and original in his thought, he was decidedly curbed in by the formalism of his times. The metaphysical stress on "governed measures" was in reality an outgrowth of two forces: the metaphysical dictum that intellect must control poetry<sup>3</sup> and the Puritan element of self-limitation, "self-control", which finds place in art itself.<sup>4</sup> Traherne is never able

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<sup>3</sup>W. Bradford Smith, op. cit., p. 262.

<sup>4</sup>Hans Oskar Wilde, op. cit., p. 34.



to clear the hurdle that these restraints place on him. "Wherever he constrains his art into 'governed measures', his poetry is, for the most part, rationalistic--deductive, moralistic, rigid--sunk down to the grossest flatness."<sup>5</sup> Iredale, reaching the rather surprising deduction to explain Traherne's employment of the poetic medium when it so evidently confined him, states that perhaps Traherne purposely chose poetry when his excitement overflowed the bounds of prose, because he needed the restraint of verse to control it:

. . . but having chosen some complicated stanza form, he lacked the perfect mastery of his medium or else sufficient care, to complete his poem without lapsing into infelicitous phrases, rudely forced to fit the patterns.<sup>6</sup>

The apparently labored quality of much of his poetry, the frustrated resort to cataloguing because of his inability to create sensory images, his "too measured" cadences, and his incessant use of the same rhyme patterns pronounce him alien to poetry.

In verse he is always something of an amateur. He fills out his metre with "do" and "did". He twists sentences the wrong way round: he is too fond of exclamatory phrases and strings of nouns; he uses the rhymes "treasure" and "pleasure" until they begin to irritate the reader. His genuinely imaginative temper is fettered, because he has no real command of his medium.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Queenie Iredale, Thomas Traherne, (Oxford, 1935) p. 66.

<sup>7</sup>Gladys E. Willett, Traherne (An Essay), (Cambridge, 1919) p. 24.

Although Bertram Dobell, in the fervor of his discovery of Traherne, suggested that in many ways Traherne is superior, as a poet, to any of the other metaphysicists,<sup>8</sup> yet, a cool examination of his work will show his limitations. Miss Helen C. White points out, among other things, that although many passages of his poetry are exquisite, he lacks a "sustained emotional glow of sound and movement that is the peculiar life of poetry . . . Too often the reader is conscious of prose motives in his verse."<sup>9</sup>

But, even with these palpable limitations, Traherne stands out as a real poet; furthermore, he immediately impresses his reader by his spontaneity his simplicity and originality, his joyousness. No seventeenth century poet other than Traherne exhibits that fresh, almost awestruck wonder at the glories of the human body, which has caused his poetry to be compared with Walt Whitman's. Both poets are preoccupied by the splendor and beauty of the universe. Both emphasize the sanctity of the human body; both have the cataloguing habit.<sup>10</sup>

One is aware, however, that Traherne's theme is sublimated by his close union of body with the spiritualizing

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<sup>8</sup>Bertram Dobell, "Introduction to Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne, edited by Gladys I. Wade, (London, 1932), p. lxi.

<sup>9</sup>Helen C. White, op. cit., p. 364.

<sup>10</sup>cf. "Traherne: A Precursor of Whitman" in North American Review, vol. 185, pp. 463-4.

principle of the soul. This union of the two recurs again and again in his work:

My Naked Simple Life was I.  
 That Act so Strongly Shind  
 Upon the Earth, the Sea, the Skie  
 It was the Substance of My Mind.  
 The Sence itself was I.  
 I felt no Dross nor Matter in my Soul,  
 No Brims nor Borders, such as in a Bowl  
 We see, My Essence was Capacitie.  
 That felt all Things,  
 The Thought that Springs  
 Therfrom's it self. It hath no other Wings  
 To Spread abroad, nor Eys to see,  
 Nor Hands Distinct to feel,  
 Nor Knees to Kneel:  
 But being Simple like the Deitie  
 In its own Centre is a Sphere  
 Not shut up here, but evry Where.<sup>11</sup>

Traherne never falls into the sometimes ludicrous conceits of the other metaphysicists. Genuinely imaginative thought he was, yet the philosopher in him knew how to rein and curb his imagination from excess. Though he avoids the far-fetched metaphor, he employs figures of speech with truly poetic art when he feels necessity. The reader has a satisfied assurance that, whenever a simile or metaphor appears, it will be vitally connotative and not contorted as sometimes in Donne and Crashaw.

Speaking of a "secret Self not bounded with my Cloaths or Skim," he says it

. . . did rather, like the Subtile Light,  
 Securd from rough and raging Storms by Night,  
 Break through the Lanthorns sides, and freely ray  
 Dispersing and Dilating evry Way:

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<sup>11</sup>Gladys I. Wade, op. cit., p. 28, stanza 1.

Whose Steddy Beams too Subtile for the Wind,  
Are such, that we their Bounds can scarcely find.<sup>12</sup>

This ability to pick the appropriate comparison captures the imagination unexpectedly in the middle of otherwise ordinary verse. In the rather didactic "Right Apprehension" he compares the "Owner" to his sterile gold:

But being, like his loved Gold,  
Stiff, barren, and impen'trable; tho told  
He should be otherwise: He is  
Uncapable of any Hev'nly Bliss.  
His Gold and he  
Do well agree;  
For he's a formal Hypocrite.  
Like that Unfruitful, yet on the 'outside bright.<sup>13</sup>

This characteristic originality of expression exhibits itself in two earlier lines of the same poem:

Custome; that must a Trophy be  
Whem Wisdom shall compleat her Victory.<sup>14</sup>

In "Shadows in the Water" he unites delicate whimsy with a rare perception of the child mind. The poem is almost unique among Traherne's poems in preserving an unbroken poetic mood:

In unexperienc'd Infancy  
Many a sweet Mistake doth ly:  
Mistake tho false, intending tru;  
A Seeming somewhat more than View;  
That doth instruct the Mind  
In Things that ly behind,  
And many Secrets to us show  
Which afterwards we com to know.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 169

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 169

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 167

Thus did I by the Water's brink  
 Another World beneath me think;  
 And while the lofty spacious Skies  
 Reversed there abus'd mine Eys,  
     I fancy'd other Feet  
     Came mine to touch or meet;  
 As by som Puddle I did play  
 Another World within it lay.

Beneath the Water Peeple drown'd,  
 Yet with another Hev'n crown'd,  
 In spacious Regions seem'd to go  
 As freely moving to and fro:  
     In bright and open Space  
     I saw their very face;  
 Eys, Hands, and Feet they had like mine;  
 Another Sun did with them shine.

'Twas strange that Peeple there should walk,  
 And yet I could not hear them talk:  
 That throu a little watry Chink,  
 Which one dry Ox or Horse might drink,  
     We other Worlds should see,  
     Yet not admitted be;  
 And other Confines there behold  
 Of Light and Darkness, Heat and Cold.

I call'd them oft, but call'd invain;  
 No Speeches we could entertain:  
 Yet did I there expect to find  
 Som other World, to pleas my Mind.  
     I plainly saw by these  
     A new Antipodes,  
 Whom, tho they wer so plainly seen,  
 A Film kept off that stood between.

( . . . . . )

Of all the Play-mates which I knew  
 That here I do the Image view  
 In other Selves; what can it mean?  
 But that below the purling Stream  
     Some unknown Joys there be  
     Laid up in Store for me;  
 To which I shall, when that then Skin  
 Is broken, be admitted in.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 181 ff.

The poem has a further charm in this that Traherne has here evaded the faults for which most of his poems are stigmatized. One has a sense of real enjoyment in reading this childish fancy.

Another poem, which carries out the water fantasy not quite so felicitously yet with the same effect, is "On Leaping Over the Moon." The third and fourth stanzas give his brother's experience:

As he went tripping o'r the King's high-way,  
 A little pearly River lay  
     O'r which, without a Wing  
     Or Oar, he dar'd to swim,  
         Swim throu the Air  
         On Body fair;  
 He would not use nor trust Icarian Wings  
     Lest they should prov deceitful things;  
 For had he faln, it had been wondrous high,  
     Not from, but from abov, the Sky:  
 He might hav dropt throu that thin Element  
     Into a fathomless Descent;  
         Unto the nether Sky  
         That did beneath him ly,  
         And there might tell  
         What Wonders dwell  
 On Earth abov. Yet doth he briskly run,  
     And bold the Danger overcom;  
 Who, as he leapt, with Joy related soon  
     How happy he o'r-leapt the Moon.<sup>16</sup>

One of Traherne's outstanding deficiencies--a deficiency that almost derogates his poetic ability--is his lack of sensuousness. Throughout his work, the philosopher, the prophet, cut and restrain any tendency to appeal through sense stimulation. Everywhere in his work there is intensity

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

of feeling, a glow that transforms, but little specification. He speaks of "trees", "birds", "beasts", but scarcely ever particularizes. One's first surprise is that a poet who loved nature so sincerely never sees the symbolism of variety, never grasps the beauty of the common manifestations of nature. In one place, only, has he taken on, somewhat, that rich suggestiveness of the romanticists:

What's Cinnamon, compar'd to thee?  
Thy Body is than Cedars better far:  
Those Fruits and Flowers which in Fields I see,  
With thine, can not compare.  
When thou hast mov'd aright, the Scent I find  
Of fragrant Myrrh and Aloes left behind.<sup>17</sup>

Even here, though the appeal is to definite odors, the stanza suggests passages from old testament poets rather than from the poem of an English writer acquainted with an English scene. Except for a few such passages, Traherne is almost never specific in his sense impressions. He is a lover of nature, but rather nature in the stars, and "purling streams", in the very ground itself, fertile and yet valued little by man. His delight is in "Azure Veins" and "Rosie Cheeks." It is the immensity of the force that permeates nature, the beauty of rotating seasons, the grandeur of the sky and light that he praises.

It is surprising in one who so sincerely loved nature to find so little apprehension of delicate nuances of texture, of form, and of size. That delighted observation of

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

the countryside that made Chaucer love pink and white bearded daisies, that stirred a Puritanic Milton to mention tanned haycocks, is absent. No fennel, gorse, nor eglantine bring the Welsh marshes into his works. For jewels alone he seems to have a special attraction. Again and again in his poetry he mentions the beauty of jewels: diamonds, pearls, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. He has an acute sense of joy in color, but again, his colors are those of a medieval stained glass window or of heraldry--the clear, full-valued colors of the spectrum. One critic has asserted that, although his poems are modeled in form on Herbert's Temple, they have none of Herbert's fancy, seldom any images or analogies.<sup>18</sup> The poetic temper of Traherne's art, however, becomes apparent even on slight analysis. There is the poem "Dumnesse" with its especially beautiful lines:

The Heavens were an Orakle, and spake  
Divinity: The Earth did undertake  
The office of a Priest.<sup>19</sup>

or the splendid opening of "The Choice":

When first Eternity Stooped down to Nought,  
And in the Earth its Likeness sought,  
When first it out of Nothing framed the Skies,  
And formed the Moon and Sun.<sup>20</sup>

Here is majesty, almost like the "Creation" in Genesis.

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<sup>18</sup>Unsigned article, "A Rediscovered Poet" in Athenaeum, Vol. 2, p. 276.

<sup>19</sup>Gladys I. Wade, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 40.



Then there is the exhilliration of those fine lines from  
 "Wonder":

. . . . . I within did flow  
 With Seas of Life, like Wine,  
 I nothing in the World did know  
 But 'twas Divine.<sup>21</sup>

Surely there is a powerful image in the opening lines of  
 stanza five in "The Estate":

We plough the very Skies, as well  
 As Earth; the Spacious Seas  
 Are ours;<sup>22</sup>

It is true, there is nothing of Herbert's fancy in him. As  
 Gladys E. Willett has observed, "Traherne may imitate  
 himself but never anyone else."<sup>23</sup> But there is something  
 very near to fancy, to say the least, in:

Thoughts are the Angels which we send abroad,  
 To visit all the Parts of Gods Abode.  
 Thoughts are the Things wherin we all confess  
 The Quintessence of Sin and Holiness  
 Is laid.<sup>24</sup>

Traherne's poetry may not be great; it may suffer  
 from prose motives and colorless phrasing, yet

His best poems, though not distinguished by verbal  
 felicity, have a gentle radiance, a candour and an  
 innocence, that is all their own, as in 'The Salu-  
 tation', the poem which opens the collection pre-  
 pared by his brother.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., P. 46.

<sup>23</sup>Gladys E. Willett, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup>Gladys I. Wade, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>25</sup>F. B. Leishman, Metaphysical Poets, (Oxford) p. 223.

As every student of his work asserts, it is his prose, however, with its sonorous lines, reminiscential of the Scriptures, that gives the index to his best art. In prose, unconstrained by the exigencies of verse form, Traherne wrote "carefully balanced sentences, interspersed with eloquent rhapsodies."<sup>26</sup>

Hans-Oskar Wilde emphasizes the fact that it is not Traherne's doctrine, but the individual art and manner, the outlook on life, which has invested his works with immortality.<sup>27</sup> F. Towers has enthusiastically praised Traherne: "Harps of heaven are in his prose; thoughts luminous with star dust."<sup>28</sup> S. T. H. Parker is of the opinion that Traherne's prose matches that of Browne, Taylor, and Milton.<sup>29</sup>

This much is sure that Traherne--who wrote before Dryden, the "father of the modern prose style," had become a literary lion--combines in his prose qualities which are generally termed modern: directness, colorfulness, a sense of climax. In the second half of Meditation 3, Century 3, already quoted on page 22, these qualities are conspicuous together with a rapid movement:

The city seemed to stand in Eden, or to be built in Heaven. The streets were mine, the

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<sup>26</sup>Queenie Iredale, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>27</sup>Hans-Oskar Wilde, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>28</sup>F. Towers "Thomas Traherne: His Outlook on Life" in Nineteenth Century and After, vol. 87, p. 1026.

<sup>29</sup>S. T. H. Parker, "Riches of Thomas Traherne" in Living Age, vol. 314, p. 224.

temple was mine, the people were mine, their clothes and gold and silver were mine, as much as their sparkling eyes, fair skins and ruddy faces. The skies were mine, and so were the sun and moon and stars, and all the World was mine; and I the only spectator and enjoyer of it. I knew no churlish proprieties nor bounds, nor divisions: but all proprieties and divisions were mine: all treasures and the possessors of them. So that with much ado I was corrupted, and made to learn the dirty devices of this world. Which now I unlearn, and become, as it were, a little child again that I may enter into the Kingdom of God.<sup>30</sup>

The straightforwardness and vitality of the incident related in Meditation 22 holds the attention although nothing is remarkable in it except the conclusion:

I remember the first time I came into a magnificent or noble dining room, and was left there alone, I rejoiced to see the gold and state and carved imagery, but when all was dead, and there was no motion, I was weary of it, and departed dissatisfied. But afterwards, when I saw it full of lords and ladies, and music and dancing, the place which once seemed not to differ from a solitary den, had now entertainment, and nothing of tediousness but pleasure in it. By which I perceived (upon a reflection made long after) that men and women are when well understood a principal part of our true felicity.<sup>31</sup>

The recreation of personal experience in an almost expressionistic manner exhibits the same strongly imaginative quality that is in Jeremy Taylor's prose:

Another time in a lowering and sad evening, being alone in the field, when all things were dead and quiet, a certain want and horror fell upon me, beyond imagination. The unprofitableness and silence of the place dissatisfied me: its wideness terrified me; from the utmost ends of the earth

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<sup>30</sup>Thomas Traherne, Op. Cit., p. 158.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 174.

fears surrounded me. How did I know but dangers might suddenly arise from the East, and invade me from the unknown regions beyond the seas? I was a weak and little child, and had forgotten there was a man alive in the earth.<sup>32</sup>

Traherne's prose has all the good qualities of his poetry without its deficiencies. Conspicuous for vigor and lucidity, it reflects the thought of a strongly philosophic mind, tempered by a poetic temper.

The Centuries of Meditations was written for a Mrs. Susanna Hopton<sup>33</sup>, for whom he writes this inscription on the first leaf:

This book unto the friend of my best friend  
As of the wisest Love a mark I send,  
That she may write my Maker's praise therin  
And make herself therby a Cherubim.

This book is made up of four complete "centuries" or groups of one hundred brief reflections on the devout life. The first explains the entrance into the spiritual way, as being an appreciation of the beauties of nature; the third, which has an eager economy of expression as Traherne relates his personal religious experience, records his search for lost felicity and winning of it through "divine sagacity"; the fourth shifts the accent from faith to reason in the attainment of felicity.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>33</sup>Gladys I. Wade, "Mrs. Susanna Hopton" in English Quarterly, January, 1936, Vol. 62, pp. 41-7.

The entire Centuries of Meditations is strongly metaphysical, shows a mastery of the short concise sentence and of a rhythm modeled on the psalms, and reveals the unconscious oscillation of a strong mind between Calvinism and Platonic rationalism. Queenie Iredale contends that Traherne, with his preference for synthesis to analysis, generalizes whereas the artist desires separate and particular beauty and that, although he has the mind of a poet in many ways, he subdues his poetry to the discovery of God alone. This is partially true, for Traherne rejects "art for art's sake" with the same ardor as Herbert.

That there is a quiet beauty in his work, a quality that makes it unforgettable, needs no proof. Both Hans-Oskar Wilde<sup>34</sup> and Gladys E. Willett<sup>35</sup> find in his prose rhythms a similarity to Rabindranath Tagore. Perhaps it would be better to say that Traherne's art has the luminous calm of the sky he loved, the vital pulse of humanity, and the surge of the world about which he wrote as the "garment of God."

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<sup>34</sup>Hans-Oskar Wilde, Op. Cit., p. 34.

<sup>35</sup>Gladys E. Willett, Op. Cit. p. 28.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION: TRAHERNE'S PLACE IN HIS AGE

To speak of Traherne's place in his age when even his published works created so little stir among his contemporaries and when the very works that make him of interest today lay dormant up to the middle of the nineteenth century is, perhaps, paradoxical. In so speaking, however, the emphasis is on the honor that should be accorded him today relative to his times. That Traherne is being recognized more and more as a significant figure of his age is discernible in the increasing importance being given to his work in recent compilations of seventeenth century prose and poetry. For, even though Traherne's limitations are conspicuous, his vigorous originality demands this appreciation.

His gift of utterance has been called inferior to that of Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan.<sup>1</sup> But, an impartial study of all four poets will reveal that Traherne is not deficient so much in the quality of his poetic expression when juxtaposed next to any one of them as he is poor in the frequency of his poetic utterance. His best poetry surpasses Vaughan's in its emotional profundity; transcends Crashaw's in the lucidity of its religious experience; penetrates, better than Herbert's the intricacies of metaphysical thought. At his worst,

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<sup>1</sup>Unsigned article, "A Student of Felicity", in Spectator, Vol. 97, p. 157

Traherne is amateurish, verging at times on prose. For this he should not be too roundly condemned as if he alone were at fault. Everyone of the metaphysical poets was unequal in his poetic expression. Not one of them, even their master John Donne, showed an ability to distinguish the good from the bad among their writings. Donne contorts and twists analogies; Crashaw unites the sublime and the ludicrous; Vaughan grows emotionally flat. Traherne, even more noticeably, is inclined to a monotony of expression, and lacks Herbert's perfect sense of form.<sup>2</sup> When he is reasoning rather than feeling, his inspiration deserts him<sup>3</sup> and the descent into a prose style with long lists of nouns, which in themselves are right and suggestive to Traherne, but deaden the reader's imagination instead of firing it to a realization of the poetic truth of facts previously accepted through habit or custom, is exasperating.

Gladys E. Willett notes the resemblance between Traherne and Vaughan but asserts that it means little:

We can trace Donne in Herbert, and Herbert in Vaughan: we cannot trace any of the three definitely in Traherne. He is less typical and more philosophical than the rest of the school of Donne; and his thought was probably influenced by the Cambridge Platonists.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>3</sup>Gladys E. Willett, Op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 8

Vaughan is the poet of restrained emotion which, in its utterance, creates an impression of effort. The movement of the verse is slow; Traherne exhibits emotion in full flood, expressed in lively and energetic diction.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, he lacks Vaughan's profound simplicity.<sup>6</sup>

Martha Illick points out still further how Traherne differs from Vaughan. Traherne diverges from self-analysis and the introspection of his age by his interest in the world outside of himself. All his work shows an artless unself-consciousness; Vaughan carries an undercurrent of brooding and self-probing melancholy throughout his poems. Traherne's love of nature, though real, is subordinated to a higher love; Vaughan's love of nature is close to pantheism. Traherne is a lover of men, movement, the sights of cities; he delights in religious joy. Vaughan seems to be scandalized by it.<sup>7</sup>

Any comparison among the metaphysical poets must take into consideration the rapidly shifting panorama of English life during the seventeenth century. There is a long cry from Donne at the opening of the era to Traherne at the end. Donne repudiated Elizabethan customs and conventionalized literature; Traherne, who saw how the complete rejection of

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<sup>5</sup>Louise C. Willcox, "A Joyous Mystic," in North American Review, Vol. 193, p. 897.

<sup>6</sup>Unsigned article, Op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>7</sup>Martha Illick,



Elizabethan ideals in favor of Puritanism has led but to gloominess and the hedged in predestination of Calvinism, set himself up as a prophet-teacher to instruct his age on "felicity." Yet these two, so far apart in purpose and in time, are more closely allied in intellectual temper than any of the others. As with Donne

Fancy and insight are the masters of Traherne's imagination. From a well-stored mind, and an experience of men and things beyond that of his cloistered contemporaries, and equally remote from the jarring contentions of school and camp, from controversies about predestination or militia, and he looks upon the hidden things of the soul, and, in them, he sees the image of the glory and love of God.<sup>8</sup>

But, in Traherne there is not that abiding sense of sin and guilt so integrally bound up with Donne's whole soul-experience.

Traherne was handicapped in coming at the end of his age; for, already the empiricism of Hobbes had leaped over into literature, demanding scientific precision and the formalism which later developed into eighteenth century classicism. This preoccupation with form was the element that most hampered Traherne in his poetic expression.

But with all that, Queenie Iredale has stated:

To meet one of Traherne's poems unexpectedly

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<sup>8</sup>Rev. W. H. Hutton, "Caroline Divines" in Cambridge History of English Literature, Vol. 7, p. 164.

anthology of Restoration verse is astonishing; his profundity combined with naturalness stands out the more clearly against so much barren sentiment couched in elegant phraseology.<sup>9</sup>

Like Crashaw in his rapturous enthusiasm for the body, he is, however, more externalized in his appeal than Crashaw is in his mystic poetry. Furthermore, Crashaw, as Edmund Gosse has pointed out, evidences a shrill and frantic falsetto that jars on modern ears, coupled with a sweetness of diction and purity of fancy that redeems a hundred faults. Crashaw forged the perfect short line in poetry, rapid and brilliant in its scope. Traherne set the example with his short sentences in prose. Crashaw, the stylist, carried English prosody to a higher refinement, a more glittering felicity than it had ever achieved.<sup>10</sup> But Traherne's Poems of Felicity are broader if not deeper than both Herbert's Temple or Crashaw's Carmen Deo Nostro.<sup>11</sup>

In prose, Traherne is markedly a product of his age. He rivals Jeremy Taylor in the richness of his imagery<sup>12</sup> and equals Browne in the delightful cadences of his prose. His vocabulary, always perfectly fitted to his thought, is less consciously scholarly than Browne's and, therefore,

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<sup>9</sup>Queenie Iredale, Op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>10</sup>Edmund Gosse, Seventeenth Century Studies, (London, 1883) p. 161.

<sup>11</sup>Beachcroft, Op. cit.

<sup>12</sup>Rev. W. H. Hutton, Op. cit., p. 164.

not so obscuring. Where Browne succeeds with full and sonorous periods<sup>13</sup>, Traherne excels in the use of the short, concise sentence interspersed with effectively employed balanced sentences and interjections.

All of the metaphysical poets are of interest to scholars today, perhaps because of the challenge they hold out to the imaginations through their style of writing, perhaps because of the similarity of their problems to those of today, perhaps because they present to intriguing a puzzle as personalities. Regardless, all of them possess qualities which bind them together and give them unity:

Certain tendencies were in the air,  
and poets in various provinces sounded  
the same note simultaneously and with  
unconscious unanimity.<sup>14</sup>

Traherne, then as a poet does not offer too much to the modern student in search of sheer poetry. His inequalities always stand out too pronouncedly; yet, his poems contain thoughts, moods, feelings, and observations will always make them a delightful surprise to the reader who places them in their proper historico-social background.

But it is Traherne, the philosopher, the prophet, the mystic--as disclosed both in his poems and in his prose--who stands out above his fellow metaphysicists and invites

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<sup>13</sup>C. W. Eliot, "Introductory Note" to Thomas Browne's "Religio Medici" in the Harvard Classics, vol. 3, p. 262.

<sup>14</sup>Edmund Gosse, Op. cit., p. 162.

study. This work has attempted to show how vital a philosophic pattern of life his writings afford. If rightly read, they contain a solution to modern problems. Basic theory of his system is the dignity of man, the most exalted of God's creatures. Against the selfish interests of present-day capitalism that would subordinate the laborer to machinery and production, Traherne's principle opposes an impregnable wall: man is divine, for God has made him the temple of divinity. From man alone does God receive praise and love.

Hinging on this doctrine is a second, no less important for the modern world. Earthly riches, though not wrong in themselves, are but "baubles and toys", gaudy means of distracting the mind from its true felicity. Traherne stresses, too, that real riches are the things all men possess in common; their bodies, the heavens, the stars of heaven, and the fecundity of the earth. Further, he points out that we "never know the world aright" until we place these common possessions above jewels, silks, money, and renown. The wise man envies not, for he thinks all men made for his enjoyment and counts their pleasure, their wealth, their talent, his own. Penetratingly, he points out that the inquiring and admiring contemplation of the world outside self is the most perfect act man can perform, for it alone was planned for man by God in Eden. All the

rest came about through Adam's fall. "Divine sagacity," the habit of simple living and reasoned ordering of life according to the highest principles begets the happy life.

In putting forth these philosophic conclusions, Traherne feels himself a prophet with a mission to fulfill. He must make men, engrossed in petty struggles for earthly gain, grow conscious of the revelation he feels he has received. Hence, in the Centuries of Meditations, as pointed out in Chapter II, Traherne sings the praises of the child, as Wordsworth was later to write, is nature's high priest. Unestranged from God, he values rightly the glorious mysteries of God's handiwork.

From this doctrine, Traherne counsels a sustained and courageous trust in God, Who prizes man thus highly, and warns that a system of education which does not fit the child for this enjoyment of the spiritual--an apprehension of divinity--but, instead, strives to wean him from his primal vision to a preoccupation with temporal interests is corrupting. On the contrary, education should make "felicity" its greatest concern, for, stresses Traherne, education is the only means of regaining "felicity" after it has been lost through contact with sin and the contamination of worldliness.

Traherne as a teacher should attract the modern "searcher of a way" because his whole system of personal holiness is positive. He iterates the joy of living, the

great freedom that comes from the realization of life's first raison d'être. As mentioned in Chapter III, Traherne subordinates the place of asceticism in his "spiritual way." Asceticism is presupposed as a necessity, for he would have man lop off all self-centered narrowness, all covetousness, all solicitude for the events of life. No one can follow out injunctions, as given autobiographically in his Centuries of Meditations, without a realization that they require self-renunciation. But renunciation is made easy by "reason", which counsels the sloughing off of taudry things for the riches of the universe. Accent is always on the positive traits of character to be developed, the benefits to be received, the triumph of self-conquest.

This approach first made Traherne, as religious counsellor, agreeable to his discoverer Bertram Dobell, who quite goes out of his way to contrast Traherne's work with the Imitation of Christ.<sup>15</sup> Superimposed on this spiritual system is the assurance of an esoteric union with God. Traherne, the mystic, holds up the intuitive approach to God, directly through personal action and desire, as the final desideratum of all his teachings. As noted in Chapter III, this insistence on the possibility of attaining mystic union with God is not Christian but Plotinian. Because of this, Dom Knowles has questioned whether Traherne may be called

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<sup>15</sup>Bertram Dobell, Op. cit., p.lxix

a mystic in the proper use of the word.<sup>16</sup>

This work has essayed to present Thomas Traherne for what he was: a beautiful personality; a master of simple, straightforward and colorful prose; an unequal but inspiring poet; a thinker with a set of theories that should recommend him to the modern student; and a religious teacher with a somewhat original concept of the child and of "felicity." It has pointed out conflicting facets of his art to show the unfairness of judging him merely as a writer of halting verse. It has compared him with his contemporaries and concluded that in vitality, originality, and directness, he surpasses them all. In his thought system he presents ideas worthy of study and appreciation. For his fine tempering of conflicting philosophies of life and for his welding to the better teachings of Puritanism into the Anglican faith he stands out above the other seventeenth century divines in wisdom and understanding.

In him, a transitional figure between the Puritan and the Restoration eras, are epitomized all the weaknesses and the grandeurs of an intensively individual group of writers, the metaphysical poets, and in him--though made sterile through neglect and the loss of his writings--are all those seeds of thought which were to crop out in the romantic

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<sup>16</sup>Dom Knowles, Op. cit.

generation.

In his writings are evidenced all those struggles between Puritanism and a larger world vision that became the warp and woof of Milton's and Bunyan's genius, as Hans-Oskar Wilde concludes:

Traherne presents a solipsistic art--but not as Byron, whom the condemnation of Goethe struck by reason of his unrestrained subjectivism because of which he did not know how to restrain himself in an always self-conceited morality, passionately experienced at random. Traherne was governed by an inner compulsion to win serenity over his soul, to mould it endlessly, according to his inner illumination. His gaze is directed to a new age, to a synthetic viewpoint of the world, which was to find fulfillment, for the first time, in Romanticism.<sup>17</sup>

Traherne will never be recognized as a major thinker whose writings will change the course of man's mode of living, nor did he hope to be, but knowledge of his work may well lead to increased admiration for the high character of his teaching. May not this time be that toward which his vision was directed? May not the world today, which needs his teachings, find in his solution to the problems of his times a lesson for the better understanding of its own?

<sup>17</sup>Hans-Oskar Wilde, Op. cit., p. 34.



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written by Sister Mary Gregory Perkins, O.S.F., has  
been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to  
form, and by the readers whose names appear below,  
with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts.

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April 13, 1939

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April 16, 1939