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### The Preexistence of the Soul in the Early English Enlightenment: 1640-1740

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## Abstract

The Preexistence of the Soul in the Early English Enlightenment: 1640-1740

Clay Paul Greene

2021

This dissertation assesses the English revival of the metaphysical Platonic doctrine of the soul's preexistence against the backdrop of the philosophical, cultural, and religious changes that defined seventeenth-century intellectual life. The reemerged doctrine of preexistence was the last important gasp of strict metaphysical dualism, and through the writings of its defenders, the idea became incorporated into the primary philosophical innovations of modernity, scientific materialism, democratic equality, and what Charles Taylor calls exclusive humanism. But preexistence did not persist in seventeenth-century life only in philosophical argument, but in literary creations and ideas with practical human import. Between 1640 and 1740, Henry More, Anne Conway, Thomas Traherne, and the anonymous author of *Præexistence* (1714) express the idea of preexistence in poetry, philosophical and scientific prose, and even social polemic. This dissertation thus looks at the affective content of ideas, understanding William James's point that behind all philosophy are affects and feelings, not merely logical sequences.

Henry More (1614-1685), the Platonist author who introduced the doctrine of preexistence to England, in his texts negotiates the gap between Christian orthodoxy and his own belief in the soul as a spiritual entity equivalent to God. Chapter One "Henry More and the Possibility of Metaphysical Poetry" analyzes how this negotiation appears through More's strategic deployment of allegory modeled on Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and his explosive metaphor of the soul as a

“ray” of the divine sun. Lying between the sociopolitical poles of high and very low-church Protestantism, More’s metaphorical praxis promotes preexistence to convey the individual’s power to save herself without the intermediaries of church hierarchy and scripture, a radical position his most perceptive Calvinist contemporaries criticized and his most radical followers expanded and developed.

Indicative of the growing influence of materialism—promoted by Thomas Hobbes and Margaret Cavendish, More’s immediate student Anne Conway (1631-1679) departs from More’s strictly immaterialist version of preexistence and envisions a composite spirit-matter soul, most similar to the animist materialism of John Milton. Chapter Two “The Very World: Early Modern Metempsychosis as Proto-secularism” examines Conway’s semi-material soul and the complex process of soul transmigration that expands human identity from an individual and anthropocentric singularity to a composite non-human entity that shares a deep kinship with all physical nature, living and otherwise. In Conway’s account, the soul is not separate from but a part of physical nature.

At the same historical moment when preexistence theology incorporated materialism, the poet and Anglican divine Thomas Traherne (1636-1674) envisions a version of preexistence verging on philosophical idealism. Chapter Three “Visions of Eternal Being in Thomas Traherne’s Writing” examines the idealized conception of an eternally self-existing soul in Traherne’s *Centuries of Meditation*. Unlike the previous authors who define their terms with metaphysical precision, Traherne falls back on the appearance of eternity—the transcendence of time—that characterizes certain perceptive and meditative moments of consciousness. Patiently describing such moments when the soul becomes subject and object of mental experience simultaneously, Traherne displays a human soul incapable of non-existence, harm, or

distraction, a position that transcends individual interest and embodies aesthetic universality.

Immateriality confronts materiality in the works of the Deists who believe in preexistence, as shown in Chapter Four “Gnostic Deists: Preexistence after Milton.” The author of the Milton imitation, *Præexistence* (1714), paradoxically combines a metaphysical belief in the preexistent soul with hostility toward Christian theology. Displaying the shipwreck of spiritual humanism upon the shores of skeptical materialism, the author of this poem and other contemporary Deist authors present life as unredeemed suffering, emblemized by the preexistent soul as a hapless divine entity stuck inside a permanently suffering body. This paradox exemplifies the spiritual crisis of Enlightenment modernity, one that cannot justify the spiritual aspirations of human beings but simultaneously cannot abandon those aspirations.

Complexly expressed in literary images, metaphors, paradoxes, and new ideas and affects, this mythology draws human life to the absolute center of cosmic import and transforms the individual from a subject of the creator God into a semi-divine, self-authorizing figure, born in eternity and unlimited in scope and agency. Seen in historical perspective, the revival and dissemination of the doctrine of preexistence is thus both a refuge from Enlightenment and an espousal of Enlightenment principles. Preexistence theology inaugurates affects and ideas, such as materialism, individualism, nihilism, and pessimism, that are nevertheless anti-secular in the etymological sense, unlinking human experience and identity from the saeculum, the Christian age between Incarnation and Last Judgment. As an emergent theology without religious mediators, the preexistence theology of the seventeenth century anticipates similar spiritual revolts in Romanticism and the New Age movement.



**The Preexistence of the Soul in the Early English Enlightenment: 1640-1740**

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of

Yale University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Clay Paul Greene

Dissertation Director: John Rogers

June 2021

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	vii
Introduction: The Platonist World-Picture.....	1
Henry More and the Possibility of Metaphysical Poetry.....	19
The Very World: Early Modern Metempsychosis as Secular Theodicy....	73
Visions of Eternal Being in Thomas Traherne's Writing.....	111
Gnostic Deists: Preexistence after Milton.....	152
Conclusion.....	197
Bibliography.....	206



## Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, whose loving-kindness made possible whatever is achieved here.

Beyond them, it is dedicated to my advisors. Jonathan Kramnick contributed vital encouragement and suggestion, but most of all offered a model of good writing that is several courses of study in itself. With serious patience and attention, Lawrence Manley taught me to express an idea clearly, which I now believe the same as understanding an idea at all. My most important teacher and support, John Rogers saw the promise in “an unpromising topic” and trusted me even when I least trusted myself. Through sympathy, erudition, and great instruction, you three drew this dissertation from me like Socrates drawing wisdom out of the ignorant Athenians.

Other Yale faculty have spurred me to think harder, read more deeply, and see intellectual work as a crucial way of life: David Scott Kastan (whose belief in me has been a deeper encouragement than I can say), Catherine Nicholson, David Quint, David Bromwich, Michael Della Rocca, Stephen Darwall, Carlos Eire, Ian Cornelius, Ben Glaser, and Langdon Hammer.

Friends too many to name have given support, encouragement, and opportunity to learn. You are all the hidden authors of this work. Last, I thank my brother Adam: he knows why.

## Introduction

### The Platonist World-Picture

*“Philosophy is really homesickness. It is the urge to be at home everywhere.”*

—Novalis<sup>1</sup>

While their contemporaries looked through microscopes and measured the distances of the stars, Henry More, Anne Conway, Thomas Traherne, and the anonymous author of *Præexistence* began thinking of themselves as heavenly creatures. As the intellectual scene of seventeenth-century Europe changed around them, moving toward materialism, equality, and skepticism, these four thinkers, all philosophical poets of different kinds, came to believe in the stridently metaphysical Platonic theory of the preexistence of the soul. Their religious, not merely philosophical, worldview is epitomized in the idea that human beings come from and maintain a connection to a transcendent realm. This dissertation explores, critiques, and contextualizes this idea at the moment when it was beginning to become an impossibility for serious philosophers and engaged, ambitious poets. These last of the Platonists have something to teach us not because they created modernity, but because modernity uncreated them, and therefore they offer an alternative—perhaps an unavailable alternative—to our central assumptions and values, as well as the central beliefs of their own literary, religious, and philosophical culture.

Though this project focuses on the writings of these four thinkers, preexistence was a wider phenomenon in English intellectual culture. The revival of this viewpoint

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Georg Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel, A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, Boston, MA: MIT P, 1974, 1.

was the project of a specific era in early modern England. In Emmanuel College, Cambridge in the early 1640s, Charles Hotham delivered a series of sermons on the soul's preexistence at the same time Henry More composed his poems on the same, later published in the *Psychodia Platonica* in 1642 and the *Philosophical Poems* in 1647.<sup>2</sup> This revival occurred in the context of a larger set of theological discussions conducted by Benjamin Whichcote, the aforementioned More, George Rust, John Smith—all the authors, preachers, and teachers called by the name “the Cambridge Platonists” since John Tulloch’s 1872 *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth Century*.<sup>3</sup> Not all discussion of preexistence during the century flowed specifically from these actors and their sources; Jewish Kabbala and the alchemy of Jean-Baptiste van Helmont influenced the Christian Kabbalists of the 1670s and 80s, who had their own theologies of preexistence.<sup>4</sup> Yet the Cambridge

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Hotham, *An Introduction to the Teutonick philosophie being a determination concerning the original of the soul, viz. whether it be immediately created God and infus'd, or transmitted from the parent*, London, 1650.

Henry More, *Philosophical Poems*, New York, NY: Chadwyck-Healey, 1992.

*The Immortality of the Soul*, ed. A. Jacob, Dordrecht, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> John Tulloch, *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth Century*, v. 2 “The Cambridge Platonists,” William Blackwood and Sons: London, 1872.

[George Rust] *A Letter of Resolution Concerning Origen*, London, 1661.

Joseph Glanvill, *Lux Orientalis, or, An Enquiry into the Opinion of the Easter Sages concerning the Præexistence of Souls, being a Key to unlock the Grand Mysteries of Providence*, London, 1662.

<sup>4</sup> *Two Hundred Queries Moderately Propounded Concerning the Doctrine of the Revolution of Humane Souls: and its Conformity to the Truths of Christianity*. London, 1699.

*Seder Olam, or The order, series or succession of all the ages, periods, and times of the whole world is theologically, philosophically and chronologically explicated and*

Platonists opened the discussion, especially More, by arguing forcefully in print for the doctrine of preexistence and by being received by an audience, if not always a welcoming one, of Europe's leading intellectuals.<sup>5</sup>

This moment of debate expanded beyond Cambridge largely through More's publications. More was a person of some controversy almost entirely because of this belief, but he was nevertheless followed in it by his students, principally Anne Conway, the bedridden aristocrat and philosopher who entertained the leading radical intellectuals of Europe and converted to Quakerism in her last days. Her *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* argues for preexistence and metempsychosis, the periodic revolving of souls of all created things, from human beings to rocks.<sup>6</sup> The Herefordshire divine and poet Thomas Traherne flirted with the idea of preexistence in his metaphysically speculative poetry and visionary prose, all unpublished at his death.<sup>7</sup> Though different authors published defenses of preexistence in the years 1640-1680, it was More who drove the debate, and when the ideas fell out of all but underground form through the 1740s, it was almost certainly for lack of More's hand on the rudder of the conversation he effectively created.<sup>8</sup>

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*stated also the hypothesis of the pre-existensy and revolution of humane souls together with the thousand years reign of Christ on earth*, London, 1694.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Merchant, "The Vitalism of Anne Conway: Its Impact on Leibniz," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17.3 (1979): 255-269. Steven Schroeder, "Anne Conway's Place: A Map of Leibniz," *Pluralist* 2.3 (2007): 77-100.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Conway, *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Allison Coudert, Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1996

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Traherne, *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings*, 2 vol., Oxford, UK: Oxford U P, 1958.

<sup>8</sup> More's last publication on preexistence came in 1682, his commentary on the work of his students George Rust and Joseph Glanvil, the *Annotations upon the Foregoing Treatises, Lux Orientalis, or, An enquiry into the opinion of the Eastern sages concerning prae-existence of souls, and the Discourse of truth*, London, 1682. More

Ernst Cassirer called this phenomenon the “Platonic Renaissance in England,” an appellation indicative of the unusual, and also short-lived, nature of this moment of theological renewal and innovation.<sup>9</sup> While the history of philosophy has taken notice, the field of early modern literature has not significantly studied these authors, which is all the more important given the uniqueness of the Platonic theological mood in early modern religious writing. The great religious poets of the period are by and large the religious and philosophical opponents of the authors in this dissertation. John Donne is a fixed, almost absolutist Calvinist, George Herbert a soft Calvinist loyal to the Elizabethan Settlement emblemized by church writer Richard Hooker. Richard Crashaw is a high churchman tending toward Counter-Reformation iconic spiritualism. John Milton is an Arminian and Christian libertarian with an orthodox belief in the Fall. Against all of them, the writers examined in this dissertation believe in deification, the absolute free will of human beings, the extreme power of the human mind, and a moral revision of the doctrine of Original Sin, all pointing in radically different spiritual directions than these writers more familiar to students of early modern literature.

Despite the existence of this quiet tradition, there is no book on preexistence and literature during its period of flourishing in the late seventeenth century, and only one book in English on preexistence and literature at all. That book is Terryl Givens’s *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (2009). As its title suggests, Givens’s book is wide-ranging (covering roughly three thousand years).

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died five years later, and no further works on preexistence in More’s tradition were published until *Præexistence* (1714).

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettegrove, Edinburgh, UK: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1953.

While Givens's chapter "The Cambridge Platonists and the Miltonic Heritage" provides some introduction to the relevant issues of seventeenth-century life and thought that informed the revival of preexistence, those issues are too numerous, complex, and subtle to be clarified in his admirable chapter of thirty or so pages. This is understandable: Givens is not primarily a scholar of the seventeenth century, and despite its length and breadth, *When Souls Had Wings* is (no doubt intentionally) spare and forceful in its argument that preexistence has always featured significantly in Western thought. The book's limitations are however apparent in its treatment of the seventeenth-century context of preexistence and in the occasional lack of substantive analysis of primary texts.

The topic of seventeenth-century preexistence theology has been discussed more thoroughly in article form, especially by historians of philosophy. D.P. Walker, Allison Coudert, Sarah Hutton, Robert Crocker, Rhodri Lewis, and Christian Hengstermann have intelligently treated preexistence in its seventeenth-century context, but this analysis so far has not added up to a broader thesis explaining why the idea was revived and why it lasted in the forms it did.<sup>10</sup> D.P. Walker explains the rise of preexistence as a corollary of the rise of the belief in universal salvation, though More's defense of preexistence explicitly denies universal salvation. Historian

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<sup>10</sup> Allison Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont*, Leiden: Brill, 1999. Robert Crocker, "Henry More and the Preexistence of the Soul," from *Religion, Reason and Nature in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Robert Crocker, Springer Netherlands, 2001: 77-96. Christian Hengstermann "Pre-existence and Universal Salvation—the Origenian Renaissance in Early Modern England," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25.5 (2017): 971-989. Sarah Hutton, "Henry More and Anne Conway on Preexistence and Universal Salvation," from *Mind Senior to the World*, ed. M-L. Baldi, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1996. Rhodri Lewis, "Of 'Origenian Platonisme': Joseph Glanvill and the Pre-Existence of Souls", *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69 (2006): 267-300, and D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, Chicago, IL: U of Chicago Press, 1964.

Robert Crocker comes the closest to a satisfying account, though only for Henry More, explaining the important role anti-Calvinism played in More's formulations of preexistence. These studies focus mostly on mostly questions of abstract Christian theology, and while they play some part in the explanation for preexistence, they do not account for the spiritual, literary, and ideological factors that emerge in these authors' works.

First, it must be understood that preexistence is a religious belief, not only or primarily a philosophical position. Wherever it appears, the idea plays a major part in religious theodicy, or vindication of God's ways. Preexistence is, like karma, an explanation of the problem of evil, one that hews closely to an ideal of human freedom. Our life circumstances are the result of our actions, and if our current actions do not, then some past act of will explains our good and bad outcomes. This action must be ours, not God's. For God's vindication to be complete, human beings must own their actions, and nothing beyond acts of will may affect human character or destiny. Preexistence is therefore first a way of justifying God, of upholding the religious worldview.

This view is not the closet eccentricity of a theologian who read too much Plato, but an idea that has been believed by whole societies and rehearsed in public rituals. Scholars frequently speak as if the idea of preexistence began with Plato's Myth of Ur from the *Republic*, but in fact the idea originated in the ancient, perhaps prehistoric religious beliefs of Greece. Plato was not an innovator in this respect but a philosophical transmitter of a well-known belief, even if at his time that belief was approaching the status of a fable. In the classical age, Pythagoras was held to be the creator of the idea, but this attribution is mythical. Whoever first conceived the idea, it survived through late antiquity through Plato's dialogues, inspiring the Egyptian

philosopher Plotinus in the first century CE. Through Plotinus's influence, it came to be believed by many generations of Christians, pagans, Jews, and Muslims, and is believed today by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Church of Scientology, and the Nation of Islam. Plotinus created a school, called since the nineteenth-century by the unfortunate name "Neoplatonism," and through this school inspired the early Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, each of whom fitted the idea to Christian doctrine.<sup>11</sup>

Second, and this point needs much elaboration, the influence of Plotinus on the seventeenth-century Platonists has been underestimated. Immaterialist in worldview, hierarchical in his aesthetics and politics, Plotinus is the metaphysician whose impact on the spiritual and religious lives of Western Christians is, besides Saint Paul, perhaps the greatest. Through Plotinus's influence on the Church Fathers, particularly Augustine, his deeply metaphysical version of a "world picture" became the default source of religious and mystical orientations toward this world from his time to the present, so much so that theologians of the modern church are still battling his influence.<sup>12</sup> That worldview is dualistic, hierarchical, and governed by the mysticism, not to say the mystification, of an idea of spirit. The mystic aura about the

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<sup>11</sup> Since Friedrich Schleiermacher distinguished the thought of Plato himself from his later interpreters, scholars have used the term "Neoplatonism" as indicative of the chain of individuals who kept the ideas of Plotinus, as opposed to Plato, alive.

<sup>12</sup> The literature, old and new, on the Neoplatonic influence upon Christianity is vast. A modern trend in Christian theology has been the attempt to find the "Eastern" biblical perspective in contradistinction to the "Western" influence of Neoplatonism and Stoicism, a tendency that conjoins both Christian Fundamentalists and academic, social justice-minded theologians for different reasons.

W. R. Inge, "The Permanent Influence of Neoplatonism Upon Christianity," *The American Journal of Theology* 4.2 (1900): 328-344.

Ramelli, Ilaria. 2009. "Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism Re-Thinking the Christianization of Hellenism." *Vigiliae Christianae* 63 (3): 217-263.



Plotinian soul prompts a largely negative view toward the world as a whole. C. S. Lewis exemplifies how this view can be expressed in terms of the Christian afterlife when he writes that “If I find in myself a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>13</sup> Plotinus would add that we have already lived in that other world; the good transcending the badness of this world is already experienced and, perhaps, can be recalled.

In the mid-seventeenth century, More, Traherne, Conway and others enjoyed fresh editions of the *Enneads* and through the study of Greek, either their own or in translation, they came to know Plotinus deeply. This new availability led naturally to deeper study and capacity for comparison with the other philosophical-religious texts they possessed. Henry More (1614-1687) is perhaps best understood as early modern England’s best and most lasting source for the worldview of Plotinus. With the exception of John Colet in the previous century, More and his compatriots were the first English philosophers to dedicate themselves to the exposition of Plotinus’s philosophy, mostly from Marsilio Ficino’s Latin translations. They sought carefully to understand how Plotinus’s thought had been interpreted by pagans like Proclus, Porphyry, Julian, and Iamblichus. More and his compatriots came to know the Neoplatonic Plotinus, a figure long hidden by Augustine’s Plotinus, and this fact allowed them to inhabit the original Neoplatonic worldview from the inside and see the world freshly through its lens. Naturally enough, they focused on his version of the preexistent soul, or rather they focused *through* the imagistic point of view created by Plotinus’s writings on it. They took on the lens of Plotinus’s metaphysical protagonist and considered the world from its point of view.

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<sup>13</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, London, UK: Geoffrey Bles, 1952, 75.

They latched onto the soul's fall to darkness as his foundational philosophical myth. For Plotinus—the ascetic who disliked to eat in front of others because of the gross materiality implied by consumption and digestion—the simultaneously literary and philosophical image of a transcendent soul orphaned in a thoughtless materiality is the anchoring point of view of ethics, religious practice, and philosophical thought. Seen from this view of a stranger in this world, the world achieves the shape of a “vale of tears” to be transcended. This story is heartbreaking, as a poor soul is jolted from its perfect experience in heaven and thrust into darkness. It is also isolating, for it leaves the soul alone and naked in this world, without compatriots or family.

“Stranger to this world” means also stranger to everyone in it. The best description of this Neoplatonic viewpoint comes from the nineteenth-century Unitarian minister and Neo-Kantian theologian William R. Alger in his massive intellectual history, *The Destiny of the Soul, A Critical History of the Doctrine of Future Life*, (1880). Alger describes the protagonist souls of Neoplatonic preexistence as “pathetic waifs drifted to these intellectual shores over the surge of feeling from the wrecked orb of an anterior existence.”<sup>14</sup> With Romantic exaggeration, Alger expresses the pathos of Plotinus's vision of what it means to be a person in the world. For Plotinus, the soul is “a partial thing, isolated, weakened, full of care.” Once a member in good standing of the cosmic unity, the soul in the modern world is “severed from the whole,” but in its confusion, becomes a fragment “intent upon a fragment,” missing the cosmic wholeness for the many broken particles that should lead back to unity, of which the soul itself is one. The poor soul “nestles in one form of being; for this, it abandons

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<sup>14</sup> William Rounseville Alger, *The Destiny of the Soul: A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life*, Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1880, 9.

everything else.”<sup>15</sup> Isolation, lack of connection, and alienation are the entailments of this cosmic worldview, which can be transcended only for instants when the soul comes into alignment with its sublime subjects, the One and God. For Plotinus, these moments of transcendence are moments of recall, an idea from Plato’s dialogues to which he gives a richer aesthetic rendition. While for Plato this recollection was the ordinary experience of thinking, for Plotinus it is a state of psychological unity experienced alongside the emotions of sublime furor but also spiritual contentment. In this state of experience called contemplation, the soul achieves a state of recall, experiencing for a brief instant the life it lived in the heavenly realm. “[O]ur human soul has not sunk entire,” he writes, but “something of it is continuously in the Intellectual realm.”<sup>16</sup> This is the abundant recompense of Plotinus’s metaphysics, the escape from a miserable cosmos, when the protagonist soul reconnects with its past and future as a sempiternal, bright spirit, achieving the moment of glory and knowledge. Gnosticism’s complete hatred of the physical world lies close at hand, despite Plotinus’s energetic visions of sublime contemplation and temporary realization of intellectual truth. In fact, the very sublimity of this earlier world is dualistically opposed to this place we are “thrown.” The beauty of the imagined world casts a shadow over this one.

The story of these two elements, gross materiality and sublime transcendence, achieves in Plotinus the character of a struggle between higher and lower elements of the soul, a psychomachy. Plotinus adds in the *Enneads* that “if that part, which is [the]sphere of sense, holds the mastery...it keeps us blind to what the upper phase

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<sup>15</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Stephen Mackenna, 4.8.4.  
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.mb.txt>

<sup>16</sup> *Enneads*, 4.8.8.

holds in contemplation.”<sup>17</sup> Though his soul drops down the ladder of being, a piece of it remains intact, and thus he tells how in transcendent moments “beholding a marvellous beauty” he became “assured of community with the loftiest order,” and finally “acquir[ed] identity with the divine.”<sup>18</sup> Plotinus’s thought dramatizes a conflict between a strongly negative, almost Gnostic, view of the material world and a Platonic optimism about God’s creation. This internal conflict between optimism and gnosticism is the dialectic of preexistence, with each trading places as the dominant or recessive gene in a thinker’s work. This dialectic emerges inside literary texts as a struggle between conflicting affects—optimism and pessimism, hatred of the physical world and exultant expectation for a world to come. These affects are not merely feelings, nor simply propositions of philosophical logic, but conjoined feelings and meanings. Like Raymond Williams’s idea of “structures of feeling,” the worldview of preexistence functions as a system of thought that produces explanations on both emotional and rational or at least semi-rational terms.<sup>19</sup>

Alongside philosophical argument, an aura follows the doctrine of the soul’s preexistence, a spirit and mindset combining ancient reverence—which the Greeks associated with the piety of ancient Egypt—with violent, enthusiastic inspiration. This aura is altogether distant from the primary affects of most Christian religious poems of the seventeenth century. Where Puritans savor the “sweetness of grace” and contemplate the bitter tears of Christ at the cross, the Platonic philosopher follows Socrates up the soul’s instant flight to the upper heavens, redolent of the rush of

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<sup>17</sup> *Enneads*, 4.8.8.

<sup>18</sup> *Enneads*, 4.8.1.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford U P, 1977.

insight and the mind widening. Shakespeare captures this mood in a short speech that begins “the poet’s eye in a fine frenzy rolling.”<sup>20</sup> This mood, evinced first in Plato’s logical disquisitions, comes more to the surface in the writings of Plotinus and the theurgists Iamblichus and the emperor Julian. In these authors, the soul can rise above itself in moments of contemplation, as in Plotinus, or perform magical acts, as in Iamblichus and Julian.

The combined feelings and meanings characteristic of preexistence derive from the conceptual landscape of Plotinus’s worldview. Neoplatonism is always also a theory about itself, how its knowledge came to be, how it relates to cosmic unity, who the philosopher is and why. It locates itself in a particular point of view, that of the “philosopher,” whose clarity of mind and objectivity are trusted upon metaphysical grounds. This internal wholeness, to say nothing of the wholeness of the cosmos it imagines, locates human beings as protagonists of an immortal story and sole perceivers of the entire universe. For this reason, it comprises an internal “affective structure;” as it strives to hew to its truth, its answers are prewritten, as are the emotions it conjures forth: grief at a fall, the pathos of a broken and blinded world, the singularity of the self, the blinding rush of truth, the satisfaction and glory of perfect recall, and the bliss of a return to God. Moreover, under the Platonist dispensation, cosmic inequality—both the metaphysical inequality of higher and lower forms of being but also the social and political inequality of human civilizations—constitutes a universal work of art. Plotinus announces that when we complain about the existence of high and low,

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<sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Act V, Scene 1, 18, 1841.

We are like people ignorant of painting who complain that the colours are not beautiful everywhere in the picture: but the Artist has laid on the appropriate tint to every spot. Or we are censuring a drama because the persons are not all heroes but include a servant and a rustic and some scurrilous clown; yet take away the low characters and the power of the drama is gone; these are part and parcel of it.<sup>21</sup>

Like God making a new world, the human maker sketches the world of her own mind, searching for proportion, harmony, and beauty. Ernst Curtius call this figure the *theologus poetus*, the arch-Platonic sight and voice of God.<sup>22</sup> The handiwork of the theological poet is the world-picture. The very metaphysics of that world-picture announce the conclusion of moral questions before they are asked. Aesthetic questions, too, can be answered in moral-political terms. A moral aesthetics applies here not to individuals but the world as a whole, a whole created with intention by the artist-God, or by God the artist. The key term of that aesthetics is theodicy. The success or failure of the cosmic artwork depends upon the justice of the system undergirding it, but even justice is subordinate to the higher principle of beauty. Justice is what a beautiful world would look like. Theodicy then is not so much an argument on behalf of God's justice, but the ability to occupy a point of view that sees the world as beautiful, just or unjust. Once the suffering and death of the world-picture can be accepted, even loved, the theodicy is complete.

My dissertation reflects the challenges to this world picture put forward by the seventeenth-century thinkers and responded to by them. Some, like Anne Conway and

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<sup>21</sup> *Enneads*, 6.2.11.

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, "Poetry and Theology," Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 2013, 214-227.

the author of *Præexistence*, press forward a critique against Platonism itself. Henry More responds to such critiques by reformulating Plotinus's moral aesthetics of high and low through poetic images, while Traherne repurposes preexistence for his private theory of poetic vision. It is not enough, therefore, to note one or another nicety of the theological struggles in which each of these authors engage, but to see how their own world pictures collide with those of others. For each author, new considerations and philosophical challenges entail that the world must be weighed and measured, not just with the rational calculation of desert, justice, or mechanical coherence, but with "the instinctive human reaction of satisfaction and dislike" as William James describes the subterranean affective springs of all philosophy. Philosophy, as put forward by these authors, is a reflection on "the total character of the universe as [they] feel it," a speculation about and judgment upon on all life and the whole world across its every dimension.<sup>23</sup>

In my first chapter, I argue that More encounters a political challenge in Calvinist theology, one that he struggled to overcome in his long poem *The Præexistency of the Soul*. The French reformer preached both the depravity and equality of all souls, a theological regime antithetical to the optimistic Pelagianism of the Platonic viewpoint. Against this equality, More indulges in a fantasy of being one of Plotinus's superior souls. While describing the soul in metaphor, More's poetry unexpectedly grasps the idea that the soul is an aristocratic "babe," left to the care of a "sorry salvage wight."<sup>24</sup> On his philosophical scheme, all human beings have souls with divine lineages, and More struggles to reconcile the Plotinian hierarchy of souls

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<sup>23</sup> William James, *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, Chapter One, p41.

<sup>24</sup> More, *The Præexistency of the Soul*, 5.5-9.

with the strict theology of Calvinist equality. This struggle, strangely, resulted not in More being appropriated by the theological conservatives, but in his being criticized by them, and then favorably invoked later by the radical Unitarian Richard Roach.<sup>25</sup> The singularity of More's soul, its self-authorization as possessing a divine nature, makes possible a connection between More's enthusiasm and religiopolitical radicalism.

My second chapter, "The Very World: Early Modern Metempsychosis as Secular Theodicy," examines how Anne Conway's version of theodicy critiques the Plotinian version of her teacher, More. Under the growing influence of materialism—promoted by Thomas Hobbes and Margaret Cavendish—More's student Conway departs from More's strictly immaterialist version of preexistence and envisions a composite spirit-matter soul, most similar to the animist materialism of John Milton.<sup>26</sup> Conway's semi-material soul transcends individual identity and anthropocentric singularity. This soul is a composite non-human entity sharing kinship with all physical nature, living and otherwise. A leveling Quaker and a believer in the politically freighted doctrine of monist materialism, she also believed that metempsychosis liberated human beings from unnatural beliefs in human inequality and offered the true religion that would unite Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Who can believe in spiritual inequality when we have all been everyone? In Conway, a proto-democratic politics, a regard for the immanent world rather than the transcendent one,

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<sup>25</sup> Jeremiah White, *The Restoration of All Things*, "Introduction" by Richard Roach.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Fallon carefully measures the extent of this similarity in *Milton among the Philosophers*, chapter four "Milton and Anne Conway," Ithaca, NY: Cornell U P, 1991, 111-136.



and a materialist ontology emerge *from*, not in spite of, the metaphysical doctrines of preexistence and transmigration.

My third chapter, “Visions of Eternal Being in Thomas Traherne’s Writing,” shows how Traherne uses his visionary writings on the subject of preexistence in order to challenge the metaphysical solidity of the Platonic world-picture. Traherne invokes another explanation for his higher states of consciousness—those moments of recall that enthused Plotinus—that does not recreate the logic of high and low, or the need of special inspiration for the individual. For Traherne, the appearances of objects in themselves present themselves as the highest form of being. Thus, for Traherne, the world, merely existing on its own terms, occupies the privileged place in an ontology that can no longer be called metaphysical. Patiently describing such moments when the soul—what that is Traherne does not say—becomes subject and object of mental experience simultaneously, Traherne reaches toward an ontology of immanence and a view toward reality that can best be called aesthetic.

In Chapter Four “Gnostic Deists: Preexistence after Milton,” we shall see that the author of the Milton imitation, *Præexistence* (1714), combines a metaphysical belief in the preexistent soul with hostility toward Christian theology. The author of *Præexistence* takes up the Deist conclusion that Christianity is a myth, but he does not therefore abandon his Platonic metaphysics. Confronted with the Deist challenge to authority, the author reformulates his own theology based upon the poetry of John Milton. By challenging Milton in his search for a more just theology, the author also applies skepticism toward the most basic Christian claim about the resurrection of Christ, on which the whole Church is based. By presenting life as unredeemed suffering, emblemized by the preexistent soul stuck in a body, the author approaches something like the Gnostic critique of the Platonic world-picture. Ancient critics of

the Christian Church, the Gnostics offered an alternative theology that, without changing the metaphysical architecture, flips the Platonic world-picture and looks at the “high ones” from below. After Milton, and after Deism, preexistence becomes a form of Gnosticism, a challenge and not a ballast to the Christian worldview.

An archaic survivor of pagan and early Christian theology, preexistence represents the worldview of the old metaphysics par excellence—upholding a strict dualism, belief in supernature and the spiritual transcendence of historicity. But in the work of the thinkers studied in this dissertation, it can be seen struggling with and against a large array of successors, including the worldview of materialistic natural science and a theory and practice of poetry from which the possibility of divine inspiration is excluded. The metaphysical defenders of preexistence are by no means the engine of these intellectual changes, but they attempt to reconcile the old metaphysical dualism with the cutting-edge of scientific and philosophical thought. In the process, they demonstrate both the possibilities and limitations of dualistic spirituality in a world driving increasingly toward materialism. Moreover, through the image of a semi-divine spirit orphaned in a dark material world, these authors articulate in nascent form a reckoning with the disenchantment of the human world, the sense that the world has no respect for human meanings. In this respect, preexistence approaches something like modern existentialism, the goalless and perhaps hopeless striving of a creature that has no choice but to create its own meaning in a meaningless world. Preexistence is the last ember of the philosophical and literary dispensation of Platonism, and by the early eighteenth century, that light was finally squelched, but not before leaving a subterranean mark upon what became the secular theological imaginary. Metaphysical though they are, these ideas are deeply human means of contextualizing our lives into narratives of cosmic importance

that do not require us to abandon human freedom in favor of divine authority. The stories we tell light our ways into the future; these authors lit themselves a bright candle.

## Chapter One

### Henry More and the Possibility of Metaphysical Poetry

*The Mind, then, is not separated off from God's essentiality, but is united unto it, as*

*Light to Sun.*

*This Mind in men is God, and for this cause some of mankind are gods, and their  
humanity is nigh unto divinity.*

*-The Divine Pymander<sup>1</sup>*

#### Introduction

Philosopher Henry More (1608-1674) introduced the doctrine of the soul's preexistence to England during the latter half of the Civil Wars, a time when Calvinist religious leaders set the theological tone for More's native Cambridge and the country at large. More's commitment to preexistence has been read as an attempt, in Robert Crocker's words, to offer a challenge to the doctrinaire Calvinism of his period. Built with assumptions about the goodness of God, the free will of the human soul, More's theology of preexistence challenges much of what seemed frightening and oppressive about Calvinist theology to the young philosopher.<sup>2</sup> Yet More's resistance to the orthodox Calvinism of his period is not a clerical disagreement about God's essential

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<sup>1</sup> John Everard, *Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus his Divine Pymander in Seventeen books*, London, 1657, 159-160.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Crocker, "Henry More and the Preexistence of the Soul," from *Religion, Reason and Nature in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Robert Crocker, Springer Netherlands, 2001: 77-96.

attributes or even about controversial points of theology like predestination. More's heterodoxy of preexistence is stranger and more radical than scholars have yet realized. It is also more textured, since More presented the idea not in abstract treatises but in poems and literary dialogues, genres that display, beneath their relatively orthodox surface, more complex, compelling, and even blasphemous messages that reached their audience of religious enthusiasts and radicals. More's theology of preexistence indeed challenges Calvinism, but moreover contains a deeper resistance to Christian principles of salvation by Christ and the created, limited nature of the human soul. Behind the veneer of a clerical quibble about the attributes of God, More expresses a spirituality of human apotheosis, in which the soul of the philosopher is the equal of God himself.

More's enormous collection of poetry called the *Psychodia Platonica*, or *The Platonick Song of the Soul*, is almost unknown to literary scholars and for good reason. It is a dense, careful, slightly eccentric exposition of the metaphysics of soul recounted in Plotinus's *Enneads*, comparable to Marsilio Ficino's *Platonic Theology of the Immortality of the Soul* and to the much earlier work of the same title by Proclus. One comprehensive treatment of this work exists, together with a critical apparatus. This work's author, Alexander Jacob, is almost as good a student of Plotinus as More, and his exposition of More's poem is itself towering and difficult for the student of literature.<sup>3</sup> For the interested reader, More's poems, while difficult, reward reflection on their several memorable moments of energy and spontaneity. When More pauses from exact explanation and draws an image or invokes a muse, the writing concentrates close to its subject. William B. Hunter first drew attention to

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Jacob, *A Platonick Song of the Soul*, "Introduction," Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell U P, 1998.

More's best image in *The Præxistency of the Soul*. At this moment in the poem, More has been arguing the soul's preexistence on the basis of the soul's indivisibility; making one soul out of two, he explains, requires a little piece of each breaking off, which is impossible. He writes that "who thinks from souls new souls to bring / Should grasp the sun and squeeze out drops of light."<sup>4</sup> This image is no doubt memorable, but more than that, behind it presses the need for metaphysical exactitude that governs all More's thought in his explicitly philosophical statements. Somehow the image is meant to link to the thought.

The best comparison for More regarding the relation of philosophical and poetic practice is Lucretius, a philosopher he quotes in the addendum to his long poem.<sup>5</sup> Like More, Lucretius makes a poem out of an argument—incidentally the opposite argument, for materialism rather than dualism—but the poetry emerges in the examples, analogies, and images of his great poem. It is no less a philosophical argument for that. The weight of metaphysical reality accompanies Lucretius's statements, poetry as both argument and example of his materialist ontology. Though More's poems are much more uneven than Lucretius's, comparable images burst forth, like the sunlight image. Moreover, images link together, because More again conceived of the entities involved as metaphysically real. What is "like" is mysteriously close to its ideal. Fire is like the soul, and neither is more or less real, nor from the proper standpoint, more or less tangible. More believed he could capture

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<sup>4</sup> William B. Hunter, *The English Spenserians: The Poetry of Giles Fletcher, George Wither, Michael Drayton, Phineas Fletcher and Henry More*, Salt Lake City, UT: U of Utah P, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> "Propter egestatem linguae, & rerum novitatem," *Philosophical Poems*, 421.

the soul in Robert Boyle's vacuum tube, and when he writes about the soul, his words crawl with a sense of its nearness and presence.<sup>6</sup>

The internal landscape of his poetry reflects a complete metaphysical worldview, largely that of Plotinus, and this consistency is an explicit and obvious goal of his writing. The assumptions behind the ideas and images remain stable, even "static," as Ryan Netzley has called Neoplatonism.<sup>7</sup> More misses no important Neoplatonic principle.<sup>8</sup> This stability and cohesiveness make every deviation from the worldview of Plotinus of crucial importance. The moments of interruption break this explanatory frame and make an image that should be an example into a counter-example, even a wild aberration. These moments require literary analysis to break the images from their static framework and turn this internal Neoplatonic furniture on its ends. Such moments of excess become in More a secret, something kept away from the main argument, even violently excluded from it, or repressed.

Gerard Passannante believes in a repressed element in More's philosophical poetry, but he thinks the repressed element is a secret inclination toward Lucretius's materialist metaphysics, which More believed atheistic.<sup>9</sup> There is support for this view in his quotation from Claudian recalled from his time as an adolescent full of doubt

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<sup>6</sup> John Henry, "Henry More versus Robert Boyle: The Spirit of Nature and the Nature of Providence," from *Henry More (1614-1687) Tercentenary Studies* ed. Sarah Hutton, Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Ryan Netzley, Learning from Anniversaries: Progress, Particularity, and Radical Empiricism in John Donne's *The Second Anniversarie*, *Connotations* 25.1 (2015):

<sup>8</sup> The soul has three vehicles, for each of the three cosmic realm it travels. Soul is indivisible, and the many flows from the one, the primordial unity of the first realm of being.

<sup>9</sup> Gerard Passannante, *The Lucretian Renaissance: Philology and the Afterlife of Tradition*, Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2011.

Oft hath my anxious Mind divided stood;  
 Whether the Gods did mind this lower World;  
 Or whether no such Ruler (Wise and Good)  
 We had; and all things here by Chance were hurld.<sup>10</sup>

The very presence of this quotation, however, indicates that More believed Lucretius's materialism to be a depressing likelihood. While Lucretius is what More feared becoming, there was also something he repressed because he knew he wanted it too much. That something could have many names, prophet, seer, even magus. The most precise name for this desire is "enthusiast." More wanted to be filled with God and to speak with the divine voice. An indication of his prophetic intentions is his report of smelling sweetly at all times, a sign of medieval saintliness. More was always pushing the boundary of prophecy, pressing ever further toward the possibility of being an agent of the supernatural. In later life, he admitted to having "a touch of enthusiasm," an admission that would have seemed mild to his polemical opponents.<sup>11</sup> Hovering at the edge of the gothic Plotinian cosmic architecture of his poems is a spirit of deliberate madness, the chanting prophet filled up by God. This ambitious, wild spirit takes the form of the soul's preexistence and crystallizes in exactly the chain of images that disrupt the stability of the internal landscape of his poems.

More based all of his *Philosophical Poems* on the model of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. In *The Præexistency of the Soul*, More borrows Spenser's narrative of

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<sup>10</sup> Saepe mihi dubiam traxit sententia mentem;

Curarent Superi terras; an nullus inesset

Rector, & incerto fluerent Mortalia casu.

Richard Ward, *The Life of the Learned and pious Dr. Henry More*, London, 1710, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *The Life of the Learned and pious Dr. Henry More*, 43.



romance *entrelacement*, and this narrative enriches the story of the soul More found in Plotinus. In this enriched version, More populates the poem with metaphors and images drawn in Spenserian style, and these literary devices in turn express the ideas and tendencies of Hermes Trismegistus's *Divine Pymander*. While Plotinus's *Enneads* provides the poem's explicit content, the *Faerie Queene* provides the poem's literary style, and More's borrowings from the *Faerie Queene* cloak his deeper borrowings from the *Divine Pymander*. By a set of metaphorical alignments, More coordinates the soul's nature with the "very essence" of God. Contrary to the sense maintained by scholars, and contrary to More's own explanations, More's belief in preexistence testifies to his unformed inkling that the soul is indeed a divine agent, that it communes eternally with divine truths, and that in its proper aspect it needs no intermediaries furnished from the social or religious order. While the poem presents itself as a rational account of the soul's preexistence and descent into matter, its exuberant and sexualized "imaginings" betray More as having sympathies with an enthusiastic interpretation of the soul as a divine agent. *The Præxistency of the Soul* shows that More maintains sympathy with the Hermetic doctrine of the soul's divine nature, a doctrine that drew More near to enthusiasm. More's special relationship with enthusiasm—defined in the period as self-authorization through direct divine inspiration—emerges from this belief in a divine soul. The soul of the philosopher, like the soul of the enthusiast, is touched with divine fire to speak the highest truths. This extravagant role for the philosopher culminates in what More's contemporaries called "Philosophical Enthusiasm."

#### I. More's Enthusiasm and the Nature of the Soul

Henry More distinguished himself from so-called “philosophical enthusiasm” partly because his own philosophy, an esoteric syncretic Neoplatonism, invited unflattering comparison with it. With its image of the solitary philosopher communing with divine truths, Platonic theology appeared to bypass hierarchy and orthodoxy and focus on a deified personal soul, an implication More sought to deny by attacking other Platonists whose philosophical interests bordered on the occult. In the 1650s, More found himself in a polemical debate with Thomas Vaughan (1621-1666), brother of poet Henry Vaughan and a Platonic philosopher with magical aspirations. More criticized Vaughan for sullyng the name of Platonism by confusing his “*intemperies of blood and spirit*” with a genuine Platonic inspiration, thereby encouraging the belief that Platonism and enthusiasm meant the same thing. For More, Vaughan is an enthusiast, a magician, and one who flirts with enthusiasm by his extreme claims to personal divine knowledge and his acknowledgment of no legitimate authority except God himself.<sup>12</sup> More later bound his two polemics against Vaughan into his *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus* (1656), a work that synthesizes More’s distinction between his own philosophical art, grounded in reason and a purified mind, and the mystical, supposedly inspired thinkers whom More criticized as enthusiasts and mystics.

“Philosophical enthusiasm” was an explicit concern of More throughout his career. In his *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*, More defined “Philosophical enthusiasm” as the result “Melancholy” and “Philosophical complexion” leading to a personal

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<sup>12</sup> Henry More, *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus, or, A discourse of the nature, causes, kinds, and cure, of enthusiasm; written by Philophilus Parresiastes, and prefixed to Alazonomatstix his observations and reply: whereunto is added a letter to his private friend, wherein certain passages in his reply are vindicated, and several matters related to enthusiasm more fully cleared*. London, J. Flesher, 1656, 175.

belief on the philosopher's part that he or she has "so special an assistance and guidance" from God "that every fine thought or fancy that steals into their mind, they may look upon as a pledge of the Divine favor, and a singular illumination from God."<sup>13</sup> Though More carefully tried to disentangle his own philosophical Platonism from Vaughan's, to Meric Causabon Platonism seemed almost synonymous with "philosophical," or as Causabon called it, "*Contemplative enthusiasm*." Causabon's *A Treatise concerning Enthusiasm* (1655) critiques the entire "*Mystical Theology*," Platonic in origin, as "the invention of Heathen Philosophers" and incompatible with Christian theology.<sup>14</sup> Causabon further describes "Philosophical Contemplation," by which he means "intellectual pleasures and contentments, proceeding from the elevation of the mind above ordinary worldly objects" toward contemplation of things natural, and supernatural" as a kind of enthusiasm.<sup>15</sup> His critique, however, is mild, and he suggests that the feeling of rapture comes from the powers of philosophical writers, especially Plato, who possesses "some excesse of natural wit and vigor, beyond ordinary men." At its worst, contemplative enthusiasm leads to the propagation of "the abortive fruits of [] depraved phansies, unto others."<sup>16</sup> To Causabon, Platonic contemplative enthusiasm consists in a tendency to trust one's own fancy, though it is naturally inspired by the beauties and sublimity of Plato's language and thought.

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<sup>13</sup> More, *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus* 40.

<sup>14</sup> Meric Causabon, *A Treatise Concerning Enthusiasm, as it is an effect of nature, but is mistaken for either divine inspiration, or diabolical possession*. London, 1655, 51.

<sup>15</sup> *A Treatise Concerning Enthusiasm*, 54-55.

<sup>16</sup> *A Treatise Concerning Enthusiasm*, 53, 54.

This high-flown rhetorical style certainly appears in More's writing, but moreover More's philosophical theology redefined the nature of the soul, on the definition of which associations with enthusiasm turned. For More and his contemporaries, the nature of the soul was the nature of the human person, and defining that nature meant scoping out the soul's goodness or evil, its capacity or incapacity, and its reliance on mediators such as church and state. Key and contested philosophical texts opened the question of whether the soul is of the very same nature as God or is a subsidiary, created being an infinite distance below its creator. The influential French reformer Jean Calvin called the soul "an immortal *though created* essence," carefully distinguishing the nature of the soul from the nature of the God who created it. The soul is made in the image of God, but has no relationship to God in essence: "To lacerate the essence of the Creator, in order to assign a portion to each individual, is the height of madness." For Calvin, the soul is not a "piece" of the divinity, but a created, limited essence.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the soul could be "depraved" and require, as much as the body, the salvific power of Christ through the sacraments. Through Calvin's influence on the English Church, this idea formed the orthodoxy against which writers like More responded.

By contrast, the ideas found in the Hermetic corpus, especially the *Divine Pymander*, acclaimed the soul in terms that for Calvin and his followers would have bordered on blasphemy. The legendary divine philosopher Hermes Trismegistes declared the soul to be "of the very essence of God, if yet there be any essence of God...not cut off or divided from the essentiality of God, but united as the light of the

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, 2005, 167.

Sun.”<sup>18</sup> In this influential image, Hermes appropriates the language of emanation—the idea that creation flows naturally from the creator’s nature—to the idea of God’s essence as sunlight. As philosophers of the period realized, sunlight is not “an image” of the sun, but the sun’s very essence extended through space. Thus, for Hermes, the soul was divine. Hermes’s claim, which could hardly have been put in stronger terms, generated a negative response from Presbyterian preacher John Flavel in 1685: “An high-born creature [the soul] is, but no particle of the deity.”<sup>19</sup> Though many philosophers in the period borrowed freely from the Hermetic corpus, they often tempered or diluted his extravagant claim about the soul’s divine nature. The philosopher Nathaniel Culverwell saves Hermes from blasphemy by maintaining that the great philosopher only meant for the soul to be a “dilation and diffusion” of God’s essence, not the divine essence itself.<sup>20</sup> Unusual among seventeenth-century interpreters of Hermes, Agricola Carpenter, in his appropriately named *Pseuchographia anthropomagia: or, a Magicall description of the Soul* (1652), shows willingness to follow Hermes’s metaphor to its conclusion: since Hermes “conceives the Soul a drop of Gods essence and an invisible Ray of the first Luminarie,” he “thereby imagin[es] a divine soul, since a drop of the infinite divine essence must itself be infinite.”<sup>21</sup> Such forthright declarations of the soul’s divinity were daring, scarce, and controversial.

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<sup>18</sup> John Everard, *Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus his Divine Pymander in seventeen books: with his second book called Asclepius, containing fifteen chapters with a commentary*, London, Printed by J.S. for Thomas Brewster, 1657, 160.

<sup>19</sup> John Flavel, *Pneumatologia: A Treatise of the Soul of Man*, London, 1685, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Nathaniel Culverwel, *An Elegant and Learned Discourse on the Light of Nature*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> Agricola Carpenter, *Pseuchographia Anthropomagia: or, A magicall description of the soul*, London, 1652, 5.

This Hermetic encomium for the soul's divine nature resembled the enthusiasm of More's polemical enemies. If the soul is "of the very essence of God...not cut off or divided" from the divine nature, then it is unclear why the soul should need the salvific help of Christ, the institutions of the church, or even the external Scriptures to live a full or holy life. The soul need only commune with its own nature, which is "of the very essence" of the God before which Christian theology demands the soul must humble itself. Mediators of all kinds, social, political, and religious, become unnecessary, and the soul resembles a kind of surrogate God. Admirers of Hermes defused his provocative image of the soul's nature precisely because it strayed into the realms of enthusiasm where, if the text were not handled carefully, one's orthodoxy and submission to authority became suspect. Unsurprisingly, the magician Vaughan showed no compunction about claiming and elaborating this divine nature of the soul. In his *Anthroposophia Theomagica* he extravagantly describes the soul's progress from premortal birth into the world: "I look on this life as the Progresse of an Essence Royall: the Soul but quits her court to see the cuntry. Heaven hath in it a Scene of Earth; and had she been contented with Ideas, she had not travelled beyond the map."<sup>22</sup> In this metaphor borrowed from Donne's *First Anniversarie*, Vaughan depicts the soul as a sovereign who ventures to the earth not because of punishment but to better know the lands already under its dominion.<sup>23</sup> With his aspirations to magic, Vaughan envisages a soul with a monarchical lineage, "royal blood," and a substantial divine knowledge from its preexistent birth in heaven. Vaughan's concept of the soul needed no accommodation

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Vaughan, *Anthroposophia Theomagica*, "Preface."

<sup>23</sup> John Donne, *First Anniversarie* 8-9: "When that queen ended here her progress time, / And, as to her standing house, to heaven did climb."

from priest or text, and he acknowledged as his spiritual authorities only Cornelius Agrippa and God, a bold claim in the polemical, heretic-seeking environment of mid-century theological debate.<sup>24</sup>

Though he shared Vaughan's belief in the soul's preexistence, Henry More did not explicitly claim this divine lineage of the soul, likely for the inevitable associations with enthusiasm it would provoke. His arguments for the soul's preexistence avoid the Hermetic, "royal" language, with its associations with blasphemy and enthusiasm, and instead focus on the nature of God and his motivations in creating human beings. More consistently couches his argument for the soul's preexistence not primarily in the soul's nature, but in the nature of God. Since God always does what is best for his creatures, he must have created them first in the most perfect imaginable state, which for the Platonist More meant as pure spirit. More rehearsed this argument for preexistence in several works throughout his life, starting with *The Præexistency of the Soul*. Existence being better than non-existence, a perfectly good God must have created humans at the earliest possible date. "If it be good for the Souls of men to be at all, the *sooner* they are the better," More writes in his magnum opus, *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659), "[w]herefore the *Præexistence* of Souls is a necessary result of the Wisdome and Goodness of God, who can no more fail to *doe* that which is *best*, then he can to *understand* it."<sup>25</sup> Unlike Vaughan, More presented this argument without further implications about the soul's powers or

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<sup>24</sup> About his authorities, Thomas Vaughan wrote that Agrippa was his "Author, and next to God I owe all that I have unto him," (*Anthroposophia theomagica or A discourse of the nature of man and his state after death; grounded on his creators proto-chimistry, and verifi'd by a practicall examination of principles in the great world*. London: T.W. for H. Blunden at the Castle in Corn-Hill, 1650, 51).

<sup>25</sup> Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul, so farre forth as it is demonstrable from the knowledge of nature and the light of reason*, London, 1659, 243.

lineage; in so doing, he erred on the side of caution and attempted to establish his own border between heterodoxy and heresy.

Scholars discussing More's doctrine of preexistence have suggested other explanations for More's strange belief.<sup>26</sup> Most of these reasons are nevertheless compatible with the argument offered by More himself. Cassandra Gorman has said that More's early poetry reflects a desire "to reconcile oneself...to human and cosmic conditions."<sup>27</sup> The phrase "to reconcile" is telling, for the poetry has been read as emerging directly from More's own "skeptical crisis."<sup>28</sup> In his biography of More, Robert Crocker has argued that More's "conversion" to Platonism came from this crisis of knowledge and the fear of annihilation at death that More described later in his general introduction to his complete works.<sup>29</sup> In Crocker's account, this conversion to Platonism is really a conversion to the religio-philosophical thought of Plotinus, whose influential metaphysics assumed Christian orthodox coloring by the writings of Saint Augustine. These interpretations fix More's thought in relation to relatively orthodox figures and common trends in mid-century philosophical thought,

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<sup>26</sup> Beyond acknowledging More's mysticism, his philosophical admirers have largely dispensed with it as a key ingredient in his thought, probably to sharpen the points of his legitimately undervalued critiques of Descartes and Hobbes. Recent, insightful philosophical studies of More are many, especially Jasper Reid, *The Metaphysics of Henry More*, New York: Springer, 2012, David Leech, *The Hammer of the Cartesians: Henry More's Philosophy of Spirit and the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Leuven: Peeters, 2013, and Robert Crocker *Henry More, 1614–1687: A biography of the Cambridge Platonist*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Cassandra Gorman, "Allegorical Analogies: Henry More's *Poetical Cosmology*," *Studies in Philology* 114. 1 (2017), 151.

<sup>28</sup> On the relationship between the skeptical crisis of Europe and More's own intellectual development, see Gerarde Passanante, *The Lucretian Renaissance: Philology and the Afterlife of Tradition*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Crocker, *Henry More, 1614–1687: A biography of the Cambridge Platonist*, Chapter One.



and while they play down his most important influence, they also defang his esoteric blasphemy.

Contrary to other scholars' suggestions, More's belief in preexistence flowed from his investment in the conception of the divine soul by Hermes Trismegistus, the great magician and prophet of his esoteric sect. More's Platonic turn of the late 1630s should equally be seen as a conversion to Hermes. One simple proof of this lies in More's regular list of famous believers in preexistence throughout history, which notably features Hermes and the other apocryphal Egyptian sages: "In *Egypt*, that ancient Nurse of all hidden Sciences," he writes in his *Immortality of the Soul*, "that this Opinion was in vogue amongst the wise men there, those fragments of *Trismegist* doe sufficiently bear witness...of which Opinion not onely the *Gymnosophists* and other wise men of *Egypt* were, but also the *Brachmans* of *India* and the *Magi* of *Babylon* and *Persia*."<sup>30</sup> More was an admirer of Hermes, even after the latter's exposure as a composite of several 1<sup>st</sup> century writers rather than an authority older than Moses. As seen in the above quotation, More's appreciation for Hermes was part and parcel of his unique, and unfashionably late, belief in a *prisca theologia*. *Prisca theologia* is the belief in a long tradition of philosophers, poets, and religious writers that together pass down a set of beliefs common to Judaism, Christianity, and paganism. For More, as for others, Hermes sat at the head of this tradition, along with Moses and Zoroaster, and in his writings More frequently borrows Hermetic ideas and images.

The *Divine Pymander* is a particularly important piece of the Hermetic Corpus for More. Believed to be the work of Hermes Trismegistus, a mythic philosopher-

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<sup>30</sup> Henry More, *Immortality of the Soul* 247.

king, it was really a production of first-century Platonists, as the polymath Isaac Causabon exposed by philological research in the early seventeenth century.<sup>31</sup> In 1650, John Everard offered the most important translation in early modern England, but More knew the *Pymander* in the larger Latin corpus translated first by Marsilio Ficino. Like several of the other Hermetic works, the *Pymander* is an oration, presumably from Thrice-Great Hermes himself, to his son Tat, who occupies a place with Socrates's interlocutors as one of the great yes-men of philosophical dialogues. In this work, the author lays out the Hermetic philosophy, especially the nature of the soul, or mind, and its relation to God. It is better to say, its identity with God, for as Hermes expresses

The Mind, O Tat, is of God's very essence—and what that is, it and it only knows precisely.

The Mind, then, is not separated off from God's essentiality, but is united unto it, as Light to Sun.

This Mind in men is God, and for this cause some of mankind are gods, and their humanity is nigh unto divinity.<sup>32</sup>

“Some of mankind are gods,” because “the mind...is united” to God's essence, as “Light to Sun.” This metaphor of a ray of light striking out from a sun directly connects the essence of the human soul to the essence of the divine creator—unites them, in fact. Exposing the logic of this metaphor, More's contemporary philosopher Nathaniel Culverwell writes “[H]e that thus termes [the soul] a ray of

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<sup>31</sup> See Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1991.

<sup>32</sup> John Everard, *Divine Pymander* 159-160.

Divinity may as well call it a Sun, for there are no particles in essentials.”<sup>33</sup> In *The Præxistency of the Soul*, More exactly reproduces this Hermetic metaphor about the soul. After asking the “Divine Plotinus” what we are, More responds, “A spark or ray of the divinity.” The reproduction of the Hermetic metaphor indicates More’s debt to the long tradition and his adherence to Hermes’s most extravagant claim about the soul’s divine nature. In his poem on preexistence, More takes up exactly that image that marked his enthusiastic enemies as beyond the pale, and in the process, he ambiguously commits his philosophy to a version of their philosophical enthusiasm.

While the *Divine Pymander* influences the imagery of the *Præxistency of the Soul*, Plotinus’s *Enneads* IV. 8 “On the Descent of the Soul” provides the narrative More follows.<sup>34</sup> Plotinus’s narrative of incarnation is simultaneously a metaphysical and moral account, a story of the soul’s descent to matter simultaneous with a narrowing of its moral focus and capacity. In heaven all the created souls remain with “the universal soul” and “share in its government, like those who live with a universal monarch and share in the government of his empire.” When the souls begin to slip off

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<sup>33</sup> Culverwell, *An Elegant and Learned Discourse on the Light of Nature* 88.

<sup>34</sup> William B. Hunter writes that “More’s *Præxistency of the Soul* is based not upon a narrative structure but upon a logical one, that the soul may be separated from the body and that the existence of witches proves the case, a theory which orders his interesting excursions into Satanic lore.” *The English Spenserians: The Poetry of Giles Fletcher, George Wither, Michael Drayton, Phineas Fletcher, and Henry More*, Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1977, 9.

It is better to say the poem is a “philosophical narrative,” which describes the physical journey of the soul along with the philosophical reasons why it must be possible. As P.C. Almond points out, “For the seventeenth-century Platonists, the journey of the soul was a temporal one: for van Helmont and Lady Conway, from eternity to eternity; for More, Glanvill, and Rust, from the time of the creation until eternity. But it was also a spatial one. For souls had been, and always would be located in this spatio-temporal realm whether in its aethereal, aerial or terrestrial parts.” (*Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* New York: Cambridge U P, 1994, 29-30)

from their original created state, “they change from the whole to being a part and belonging to themselves, and, as if they were tired of being together, they each go to their own.” The souls separate and narrow their intellectual focus on merely their own experience, their own pleasure; thus, as he says famously, the soul “has become a part and is isolated and weak and fusses and looks towards a part and in its separation from the whole it embarks on one single thing from everything else.” The soul becomes a fragment looking at a fragment, rather than a whole sharing in a whole. A moral fall becomes a physical fall, as the soul acquires corporeality as a result of its focus on the individual. Even so, “our soul does not altogether come down, but there is always something of it in the intelligible; but if the part which is in the world of sense-perception gets control...it prevents us from perceiving the things which the upper part of the soul contemplates.” Interestingly, Plotinus’s conception of a soul descending to matter corresponds to the descent from intellectual contemplation when the philosopher saw “a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to my better part,” such that he came “to identify with the divine.” From this height, Plotinus felt himself to descend from “Intellect to discursive reasoning,” a practice that images in microcosm the soul’s original journey from bright creation in heaven to material existence.<sup>35</sup>

*The Præxistancy of the Soul* fleshes out the narrative given by *Enneads IV.8*.

In Spenserian stanzas, the poem narrates the cosmic journey of the soul from heavenly creation to corporeal life, followed by a considerable digression on the nature of immaterial substances and magic, before offering a series of arguments on behalf of a

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<sup>35</sup> Plato’s cave, for Plotinus, “means...this universe, where [Plato] says that the soul’s journey to the intelligible world is a ‘release from fetters’ and an ‘ascent from the cave.’” (*Enneads*, 2.8.6.)

belief in the preexistence of souls. As in Plotinus's narrative, the souls of human beings are created as pure spirit, but as they become both more interested in the created world and themselves, they become increasingly corporeal until they find themselves born into a life on earth. More than half the poem is spent on More's descriptions of the magical spirits that inhabit the air. As Hunter points out, this seeming digression has an argumentative thrust. Through the poem's first half, More has traced the soul from its earliest origins to the present world, and the digression on magical spirits shows that the soul can indeed survive without a body, another argument for the soul's preexistence.<sup>36</sup> The final portion of the poem contains abstract arguments for More's position, and in these arguments, just as in the narrative of fall to corporeal life, More borrows characteristically Hermetic imagery that points to More's belief in the divine soul. These metaphorical images are drawn not merely from Hermes himself but from the *Faerie Queene*, a text that helped More interpret and combine the rival depictions of the soul he found in the *Enneads* and the *Divine Pymander*.

## II. Romance and the Soul

Fellow Platonist Peter Sterry remarked that More's theory of the preexistence of the soul involved human life in a narrative of birth, exile, and renewal much like those depicted in the epics of Homer or Virgil, or in the romance epics of Tasso, Ariosto, and Spenser, where "persons and things be carried to the utmost extremity, into a state where they seem altogether incapable of any return to Beauty or Bliss: That then by just degrees of harmonious proportions, they be raised again to a state of

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<sup>36</sup> Hunter, *The English Spenserians*, 9.

highest joy and Glory.”<sup>37</sup> Sterry’s comment is acute, for Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* played an important part in More’s conversion to Platonism and Hermeticism.<sup>38</sup>

Spenser’s poetic genre, the romance epic, provides a narrative model that enriched the narrative of the soul’s origin that More read in Plotinus. The narrative of fall from original state of family connection into estrangement resembles the many plots of Spenser’s poems, drawing out that special narrative Freud called the “family romance.” In stories of transitions to adulthood, the child fantasizes that their biological parents actually adopted them, while their true parent is the king, the emperor, or one of the gods. “Men are more what they are used to, than what they are born to; for custom is a second nature,” writes More’s contemporary and mentor Benjamin Whichcote.<sup>39</sup> The fantasy of the preexistent soul allows More to imagine the opposite: birthright alone matters and all the customs and nurture of parents and community distract the soul from recognizing its true, sublime ancestry. In a magnificent atomistic world, the soul has an umbilical connection to the birth of the universe, even to God himself. The tragedy of life is that “we as stranger Infants elsewhere born / Cannot divine from what spring we did flow, / Ne dare these base alliances to scorn.”<sup>40</sup> In More’s poem, the soul is impelled to recognize not just its creation by an omnipotent God, but its familial relation to that God, a relation that implies genetic similarity and that greatly ennobles the created soul.

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Sterry, *A Discourse on the Freedom of the Will*, London, John Starkey, 1675, 180.

<sup>38</sup> More, *Life of Dr. Henry More*, trans. Richard Ward, 4-16.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin Whichcote, *Works of the learned Benjamin Whichcote*, Aberdeen, 1751.

<sup>40</sup> *Præexistency* 6.1-3.

More carefully pursues this family metaphor. While Thomas Vaughan imagines the soul's descent to earth as a royal progress—"I look on this life as the *Progresse of an Essence Royall*"—More imagines the same process as the loss of a foundling raised by "foster parents" that represent the material world. Vaughan's explicitly royalist imagery stands in contrast to More's Spenserian and psychologically freighted fantasy of a family romance. In More's cosmology, the soul does not voluntarily leave heaven but is permitted by God to depart so that it may return with more admiration at a later point. Nevertheless, something of Vaughan's extravagance animates More's sense that the soul's lineage is illustrious. Like the heroic wanderers of epic and romance, the soul in More's cosmology receives a glorious, aristocratic pedigree, the seal of its destiny. More depicts the soul's descent to earth in dynastic or patrilineal terms:

Like noble babe by fate or friends neglect  
 Left to the care of sorry salvage wight,  
 Grown up to many years cannot conject  
 His own true parentage, nor read aright  
 What Father him begot, what womb him brought to light.<sup>41</sup>

Like Spenser's Arthur, a knight of unknown parentage who discovers his royal lineage, the soul in More's cosmology does not know the eminent lineage from which it descends: "So we as stranger Infants elsewhere born / Can not divine from what spring we did flow."<sup>42</sup> The soul becomes involved in its new physical surroundings, a process that More casts as an unwitting aristocrat's choice of marriage

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<sup>41</sup> *Præexistency* 5.5-9.

<sup>42</sup> *Præexistency* 6.1-2.

with someone beneath his station; the soul does not “dare these base alliances to scorn.”<sup>43</sup> The term “alliance” implies a marriage of convenience or political advantage. In the physical world, the migrant soul, a native aristocrat born to better things, has no choice but to protect itself by entanglement with the physical, a “base alliance” beneath the dignity of its blood. More indulges here in two separate fantasies, a dream of being born without a mother, begot by a single Father in a womb outside the world, while at the same imagining this material world as an intermediary zone, a wilderness that the noble soul would and should spurn, marked as the place of “base alliances” with unworthy mates.

There is an oedipal component in the imagery of rejecting one’s earthly parents in favor of a divine Father. More’s allegory of mistaken parents resonates in his own life. More’s own parents felt strange to him in some ways. Devout Calvinists, they were distant from him in temperament as well as religious and political inclination. To defend his belief in innate ideas, More would later assume that he received them not from his parents but from God who had planted them there. He added against the deniers of innate ideas, “if these cunning Sophisters shall here reply; that I drew this Sense of mine ex Traduce, or by way of Propagation, as being born of Parents exceedingly Pious and Religious, I demand, how it came to pass that I drew not Calvinism also in along with it?”<sup>44</sup> The choice of “ex Traduce” aligns More’s rejection of traduction with his rejection of his parents’ religious faith and temperament. In oedipal fashion, like the protagonist of Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, who describes himself as a “nursling” of God, More’s soul rejects his earthly parents

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<sup>43</sup> *Præexistency* 6.3.

<sup>44</sup> Henry More, *An Antidote Against Atheism, or, An appeal to the natural faculties of the minde of man, whether there be not a God*, London, 1653, “Preface.”



in favor of a divine parentage.<sup>45</sup> More describes the soul's foster state under Rhea and Pan, each allegorically aligned to the physical world and Pan to the cosmos through the folk etymology of his name's derivation from the Greek "all." Against these false parents, the soul should recognize its status as "the Of-spring of all-seeing *Jove*."<sup>46</sup>

The soul's recognition of its divine parentage prompts reflection on its own nature. As the offspring of God, the preexistent soul is the expression of God's own desire. The soul shoots forth from God as from a light. The soul is the first created thing in the universe, and when Moses describes the creation of light on the first day, he means the soul's creation: "By Heaven or Light, you are to understand *The whole comprehension of Intellectual Spirits*, souls of men and beasts, and the seminal forms of all things which you may call, if you please, *The world of Life*."<sup>47</sup> In a striking image, More dares his philosophical opponents, those who believe in the propagation of souls by traduction, to imagine themselves capable of that first creative action of God: "who thinks from souls new souls to bring / The same let presse the Sunne beams in his fist / And squeez out drops of light."<sup>48</sup> More's dare is not the utter contradiction it appears, for he suggests that God himself emitted human souls as "drops of light," for the human being is "A spark or ray of the Divinity...spilt on the ground, or rather sunk away."<sup>49</sup> Vitality is conceived as male sexual emission in the

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<sup>45</sup> John Milton, *Samson Agonistes* 633, from *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon, New York, NY: Modern Library, 2007.

<sup>46</sup> *Præexistency* 7.2. The line echoes Milton's *Lycidas* 82, "All-judging Jove." *Lycidas* was locally published when More was a student at Christ's.

<sup>47</sup> Henry More, *Conjectura Cabbalistica or, a conjectural essay of interpreting the minde of Moses, according to a threefold cabbala*. London, 1653, 24.

<sup>48</sup> *Præexistency* 87.1-3.

<sup>49</sup> *Præexistency* 4.1, 4.

form of light. Following the imagistic network of the poem, the human soul is God's discharge, a tightly squeezed ball of light spilt on the ground like seed in masturbation. God's seed does not impregnate anything; living beings have no mother, only a foster-mother "upon [whose] knees we grow."<sup>50</sup> We are dropped onto the world of nature in a creative act of masturbation. Yet this seminal discharge of light is only efficacious when performed by the supreme God: "no such use / There is of humane Sperm. For our free sprite / Is not the kindled seed."<sup>51</sup> We can try to procreate, but when we try to grasp the sun and "squeez out drops of light," we produce a mere nothing, a seed unkindled by the sacred fire. From "that eternall store / Of Lives and souls ycleep'd the World of Life...all bodies vital fire derive / And matter never lost catch life and still revive."<sup>52</sup> Life is a pure force metaphorized as light and fire, and by being like that first fire, God, the soul participates in the only being conceived as truly alive: the fire and light of God's creative emission. The poem's imagery blurs those qualities identifiable as the being of God alone and those of its fiery offspring, the human soul.

Everything good comes from that World of Life, or heaven, which More imagines as a seedbed. Rather than being a zone of impregnation, heaven is capable of self-sufficient male propagation, discharging semen as living persons, trillions of Athenas shot from the mind of Zeus.<sup>53</sup> God is a "spring," the soul a jet of water, but

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<sup>50</sup> *Præexistency* 6.7.

<sup>51</sup> *Præexistency* 89.3-5.

<sup>52</sup> *Præexistency* 95.5-6, 8-9.

<sup>53</sup> Sir John Davies,  
As Minerva is in Fables said,  
From Jove, without a Mother, to proceed;  
So our true Jove, without a Mother's Aid,

also a “spray,” meaning shoot, of God’s “ancient tree.”<sup>54</sup> Human life extends in a single line from this first creation. The image of the “ray” evokes the phallus and seminal discharge, but also an umbilical connection to God himself. More’s attempt to imagine a purely patrilineal creation results in a father hermaphroditically conceived as pregnant and nurturing, a father-mother hybrid.<sup>55</sup>

the sportful love

Of our great Maker, (like as mothers dear  
In pleasance from them do their children shove  
That back again they may recoil more near).<sup>56</sup>

In the comparison, the “pleasance” of the mother who shoves away her darling child becomes the love of a Father who sends the souls of human beings into the darkness, suffering, and finally death of a mortal life. The comparison allows More to imagine the soul—perhaps even his own soul—exiled because of paternal/maternal *love* rather than anger. Distance from God, therefore, indicates not divine disfavor but divine trust; God sends farthest those whom he most loves and hopes to test. The comparison between God and a mother evokes biological parents, here explicitly feminized, transcended by recourse to the divine Father, who also assumes the traits of a mother in the role of child-rearer rather than progenetrix. The creator/heaven is a woman’s bosom, the warm space of the original birthplace aligned with maternity. The poet’s actual mother is transcended in favor of a heavenly father. The warmth

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Doth daily Millions of Minerva’s breed. (*The Original, Nature and Immortality of the Soul: A Poem, With an Introduction concerning human knowledge*, London, 1714, 33)

<sup>54</sup> *Præexistency* 6.2, 96.2, 4.

<sup>55</sup> See Deborah Shuger on the trope of nursing fathers in “Nursing Fathers: Patriarchy as a Cultural Ideal,” from *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.

<sup>56</sup> *Præexistency* 7.5-8.

imagined is only the feeling of the mother; it has none of the mother's associations with materiality and corporeality. More's reading of Hermes Trismegistus exposed him to this gendered strand of Platonic imagery, "What womb...is fit to bear a soul?...what breast is able to nourish a soul? who can make sufficient provision for a soul, but onely that pure and invisible Spirit that *shoots them*, and *darts them* into bodies by his own Almighty power?"<sup>57</sup> In the poem God's unique act of propagation is a spontaneous and almost violent pseudosexual release.

On the journey through the heavens, the soul is repeatedly attracted to improper mates. The star-filled cosmos attracts the newly created souls to contemplate itself rather than the creator whose echoes and glimpses permeate the creation. Human souls pursue these orbs of light "Like evening flies that busily conspire / Following a Jade that travail long doth tire, / To seize his nodding head and suck his sweat."<sup>58</sup> One of More's attempts at the epic simile, the comparison expresses evident disgust at the natural world, both for the fly who foolishly seeks to suck the sweat of the exhausted jade, but also at the jade herself, whose sweaty coat More compares to a "vitall mire," a swamp of fleshly life.<sup>59</sup> The simile triangulates the starry heavens, the flesh of an old female horse, and a swampy bed of teeming life. More reverses the distinctions between the slimy and terrestrial over and against the astral and distant only to insist that all created matter is repugnant to the heavenly origins of the soul's life.<sup>60</sup> This repugnance extends to all things bodily, conceived as fleshy, wet, stinking:

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<sup>57</sup> Translated by Culverwell in *An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature* 92, my emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> *Præexistency* 11.4-6.

<sup>59</sup> *Præexistency* 11.7.

<sup>60</sup> More's expressed his disdain for astrology in a later treatise. There, he borrows Pico della Mirandola's argument (originally conceived by Plotinus) that astrology

female sexuality transformed into an amorphous zone of derision and fear. This attraction to the exhausted jade whose flesh the soul seeks to suck is a sin of self-reflexivity, for what the soul seeks in all these encounters with physicality is not matter but itself. Just as Plotinus described the soul's voluntary enmeshment in corporeal life, for More human sin began "when we gan first t'assay / By stealth, of our own selves something to been."<sup>61</sup> Discovery of individual being—being separate from God—resulted in human separation from God and descent into sinfulness.

Given the poem's commitment to seminal imagery, with God's first act of creation emitting human souls into life, this stealthy assay with matter conveys the paranoid anxiety of personal masturbation. Summarizing More's argument here, Peter Sterry draws a picture of More's soul similar to Milton's Eve gazing like Narcissus at her reflection in a pool, which in Sterry's analysis becomes the soul's body: "In [the body], as in a clear and chrySTALLINE Glass, the Soul, with ravishing delights, seeth her self in all her own beauties and sweetnesses... Thus is the Soul tyed by *irresistable Charms* to its body."<sup>62</sup> By gazing at its own sweetness, the soul delays and distracts itself from its proper journey back to God. Whether attached to the soul's own body or to the physical world, all such encounters with the fleshy world must be equally empty, for while the human soul is not quite "something," the physical world is absolutely nothing. Given that the human seed is not "kindled" with life-giving power and matter is dead, even apparently procreative sex is masturbatory. The politics and

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grants inappropriate power to the astral objects, merely physical objects in themselves, to control and direct the higher objects of the human soul.

See More, *Tetractys anti-astrologica* 1681 and Pico della Mirandola *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatrium*, 1491.

<sup>61</sup> *Præexistency* 3.5-6

<sup>62</sup> Sterry, *A Discourse on the Freedom of the Will* 31.

discourse of procreative and nonprocreative sex map paradoxically onto the contemplative and active life. The latter results only in frustration and self-involvement, while the former leads out of itself and to the one genuinely creative force, God.

More's metaphysical romance follows the soul's wandering path from and back to God. The narrative of the soul is not simply a line in this poem, extending from God to earth, but a circularity, both on the cosmic and individual scale. At the cosmic scale, the story of the soul is "A Præexistency of souls entire, / And due Returns in courses circular," while in the soul's journey from heaven to the earth, it repeatedly gets caught in the circular orbits of the magnetic planets and stars that attract them on their eventual path to terrestrial birth: "Infinite Myriads undipt as yet / Did still attend each vitall moveing sphear / And wait their turnes for generation fit."<sup>63</sup> The cosmic story is a series of dizzying (and infinite) gyres inside one of literally boundless size. The image of circularity, of a natural cycle of soul, lies also at the heart of More's conception of the World Soul, in the poem figured as the celestial "Nemesis," the autonomous force that sorts souls to their proper places with the abstract precision of the scientific water cycle.<sup>64</sup> Souls do not merely travel up or out but omnidirectionally: souls travel from heaven to the astral spaces, from there to the earth, and on death return to circle the aerial regions of earth until such a time as the Nemesis summons all the souls back to the heavenly realm.

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<sup>63</sup> *Præexistency* 98.7-8, 12.1-3.

<sup>64</sup> *Præexistency* 99.2.

Amidst this massive cosmos, the only truly living thing is the soul itself, a “spark or ray of the Divinity” now “Clouded in earthy fogs, yelad in clay.”<sup>65</sup> As noted, More’s metaphor is drawn directly from the *Divine Pymander* and partakes of the variegated ambiguities of the metaphor in its context. The metaphor relates to the precise question posed by Calvin and the interpreters of Hermes in the seventeenth-century: is the human soul a subsidiary, created being, or a piece of the divine nature broken off into individuality? Ambiguity persists between two divergent possibilities: human beings as mere creations, or human beings as partakers in God’s divinity, perhaps even in his eternity. A ray implies a common beginning, as well as a point of departure at which the human soul diverges from its origins in the divine. The idea of the soul as a ray suggests not just a common ancestry in God, but a common nature. More would vociferously deny that his lineage of the soul implies a divinity shared between God and soul, but the imagery of the poem highlights the implication. To be a child of the Emperor in the family romance is to be the future Emperor oneself. To be a “ray of the divinitie” is to be an extension of that divinity: an “emanation,” but also a participant in that same first light. If the sun is made of light, the ray is made of sun. As Nathaniel Culverwell wrote in seeming exasperation, the soul “cannot have any of His Essence, unlesse it have all of it. He that calls the creatures a drop in such a sense, may as well call it a fountain; he that thus termes it a ray of Divinity, may as well call it a Sun, for there are no particles in essentials.”<sup>66</sup> The image’s own internal

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<sup>65</sup> *Præexistency* 3.1-2. See also More’s *Psychodia Platonica*:

Hence the souls nature we may plainly see:  
 A beam it is of th’Intellectuall Sun.  
 A ray indeed of that Aeternity;  
 But such a ray as when it first outshone,  
 From a free light its shining date begun  
 And that same light hath given a free wonne. (3. 22)

<sup>66</sup> Culverwell, *An Elegant and Learned Discourse on the Light of Nature* 88.

structure demands an identification in substance of the ray with its source, the soul with God. More's imagery vacillates: "A spark *or* ray." A spark is a flicker from a fire, in Stoic cosmology the substance of the soul, which was fully divine. A spark is fire writ small, the fire's essence distilled, whereas a ray maintains an umbilical connection to its creation.

Outside of its larger context, the image may seem like a dismissible aspect of the poem, a Hermetic metaphor used but not emphasized to convey More's otherwise Plotinian perspective on the soul's nature and its descent to matter. Context matters here, because the image does not stand alone but is integrally connected to the other details in the poem. The poem's imagery is more tightly connected than one might assume from an author better known as philosopher than poet. In the poem, fatherhood, light, transcendence, penetration, desire, fire, and creation point toward and confirm each other in the light that each reflects back onto the other. Fatherhood arises from sexual desire, which is experienced as a form of fire—the heavenly father is in turn a source of light, a creative force and the essence of human soul, a fire that in turn spurs the soul's desire back toward the world's two great fires and lights, God and itself. At the level of these images, the poem establishes a reflection between God and the human soul, which in turn creates a struggle over the proper object of the soul's desire, whether God, itself, or the created world. God's status as creator and his being as a pure spirit dissolve into the metaphors of a soul conceived as "a spark or ray of the divinitie."

This fantasy of divine resemblance permeates More's invocation to Apollo, which opens the poem. Like the soul, the poet's divine inspiration traces a line from grimy world back to essential fire. In the language of invocation that begins the poem, Apollo's "Treasures of heavenly light with gentle fire" recalls the "spark or ray of the



Divinity” which we are.<sup>67</sup> Inspired poetry uncompact the immanent, trammeled soul from its container body, or at least taunts both reader and poet with the possibility of bodily rupture and the flood of light, like waters, over the entire universe. More describes the soul as being “Like to a light fast-lock'd in lanthorn dark, / Whereby, by night our wary steps we guide / In slabby streets... But when she's gone from hence, / Like naked lamp she is one shining sphear.”<sup>68</sup> This imagery makes the body appear like a trammeling force and the soul an imprisoned energy waiting to escape. “Gods wisdom thorough all may pierce / From hight to depth,” and as a spark from that same fire the soul longs to crash thalassic waves of itself over everything that is.<sup>69</sup> The disappearance of God into man’s soul and vice versa indicates the desire to imagine oneself as purely creative energy detached from the physical world: a floating masculinity that penetrates everything but is penetrated (in More’s language, discerped) by nothing, in short, God. The poem’s metaphoric structure bends toward an identification of the human soul with everything transcendent, with God-like capacity for vision, thought, and freedom.

For More, God’s capacity for thinking, for moral goodness, and for freedom, are preminent among God’s attributes.<sup>70</sup> Rather than ultimate power, status as creator, or eternal sovereignty, these intellectual virtues made God God. These same

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<sup>67</sup> *Præexistency* 8.6.

<sup>68</sup> *Præexistency* 101.-3, 102.5-6.

<sup>69</sup> *Præexistency* 9.4-5.

<sup>70</sup> More wrote that “It is an invalid consequence...that the Idea of God does mainly consist in Dominion and Sovereignty; which abstracted from his other Attributes of Wisdom and Goodness, would be a very black and dark representation of him, and such as this ingenious Writer could not himself contemplate without aversation and horror. How then can the Idea of God chiefly consist in this? It is the most terrifying indeed, but not the most noble and accomplishing part in the Idea of the Deity.” (*Annotations upon the two foregoing treatises*, London, 1682, 42-43)

virtues belong to human beings, especially to the rationalist philosopher who conceives God in his own image and himself in the image of God. Deification, the Platonist aspiration of intellectual communion with God, in More involves a blurring of those categories such that the poem speaks about both God and the philosopher simultaneously.<sup>71</sup> The referential slippage creates space to imagine divine fruition as something claimed by the philosopher but also piously deferred to God alone. The philosopher is not God, but the best aspects of God belong to the philosopher; seen from a distance, More could mistake himself for God. When Terryl Givens writes that “Cambridge Platonism inevitably culminates in a recuperation of the Hellenic idea of deification,” he means something weaker than I intend here.<sup>72</sup> This usual sense of deification entails that the contemplative mind by purification approaches communion with God and a limited resemblance to him in terms of intellectual powers. As an excerptable intellectual doctrine, the idea in More is nothing more than this, but in the poem’s thought-world, God’s being is light and fire, pure creativity expressed as universal penetration. The soul’s being is nothing less than God’s equal, expressed with the same metaphors, bent on the same purposes of penetration and creation, and equally repugnant to everything created.

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<sup>71</sup> Frederick C. Beiser is insightful into the importance of reason in More’s contemporary and mentor Benjamin Whichcote in ways that apply equally to More: “It is important to see precisely why Whichcote thinks that reason is such a reliable criterion of salvation. Reason is not obliged to make speculations or inferences about the divine tribunal, which exists in some heaven above us. Rather, its judgments will be infallible because it is the divine tribunal itself.” *The Sovereignty of Reason: the defense of rationality in the early English Enlightenment*, (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1996), 162. Reason is for More and Whichcote a divine faculty.

<sup>72</sup> Terryl Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought*, Oxford, New York: Oxford U P 2009, 152.

With its Gnostic flirtations, romance structure, and epic voice, *The Præxistency of the Soul* demonstrates the doctrine of preexistence's capacity for mythologizing in radical and idiosyncratic ways. While the poem's mainline argument suggests that the soul turning away from God toward itself is the source of sin, the poem demonstrates the soul's desirability through an essence shared with God, its nature as creative fire and source of light. Even the created universe itself is a network of lights, the stars, that continually offers a temptation by way of a resemblance to God and the soul. The Augustinian orthodoxy that God is the proper object of desire becomes a bare statement, unsubstantiated in the imagistic flesh of the poetry, as both soul and world continue to accrue likeness to God through metaphor. The creative force of the soul never achieves positive expression but remains a source of anxiety and paranoia, prompting paroxysms of fear that cast human sexuality and desire, whether directed at the outside world or at the soul itself, as an onanistic self-regard, a negative image of the love of the soul for that which is like but superior to itself, God. The intensity of this self-critique on the soul's part arises from the recognition of the similarity of More's soul to God and a reflexive turning away from the affective drives operating at the level of image that tend toward their identification.

### III. The Hierarchy of Souls: More and the Response to Preexistence

Though modern critics have failed to recognize the radical, enthusiastic nature of More's belief in preexistence, his critics in his own century recognized this and more. Several brilliant contemporary philosophical critiques, produced in the decades following the publication of More's poem, outline the political and religious implications of the ideas and style of expression found in More's *Præxistency of the*

*Soul*. These texts show that the intellectual history of preexistence in the seventeenth century has an unrecognized relationship to enthusiasm. As will be shown, they also confirm my reading of More's poetry in its spiritual aspiration and display the hierarchical, elitist nature of More's thought about the soul.

Written two decades after *The Præexistency of the Soul*, Samuel Parker's two texts *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophy* and *An Account of the Nature and Extent of the Divine Dominion*, characterize the orthodox response to preexistence and recognize More's tightrope walk with enthusiasm.<sup>73</sup> An ambitious Presbyterian cleric and later conformist Bishop of Oxford, Parker responded critically to the texts on preexistence by More, as well as his students Joseph Glanvill, and George Rust. Parker's reading of More's philosophy of preexistence supports my reading of More's *Præexistency of the Soul* as indicative of an enthusiastic view on the soul and a corresponding belief in personal authorization, expressed through romantic images and metaphors. Though Parker criticized Platonism and preexistence in separate texts (the *Censure* and the *Account*), his arguments hover around the same issues. Both arguments attack non-uniformity in religion and non-empiricism in philosophy, especially philosophy that builds elaborate metaphysical schemes. For Parker, these tendencies characterize enthusiasm, because they suggest a person is unwilling or unable to be corrected by arguments or the conforming pressure of society. Ironically, these are exactly the enthusiastic tendencies Henry More criticized in his writings against Thomas Vaughan. Parker recognized in More many of the

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<sup>73</sup> Samuel Parker, *A free and impartial censure of the Platonick philosophie, being a letter written to his much honoured friend Mr. N.B.*, Oxford, 1666, and *An account of the nature and extent of the divine dominion & goodnesse, especially as they refer to the Origenian hypothesis concerning the preexistence of souls: together with a special account of the groundlessness of the hypothesis itself: being a second letter written to his much honoured friend and kinsman, Mr. Nath. Bisbie*, Oxford, 1666.

problems More saw in others. Parker's criticism demonstrates how More's preemptive attack against enthusiasm disguises his attraction to its methods of self-authorization and confirms that the excesses of his philosophy appeared clearly to his most critical contemporaries.

Samuel Parker was an ambitious young cleric at Oxford in the mid-1660s, now twenty years since More published *The Præexistence of the Soul*. Along with Edward Warren, Parker responded to the growing diversity of views on psychogenesis with a negative attack on preexistence and Platonic philosophy in general. The Cambridge philosophers were his primary targets. His two texts, *An Account of the Nature and Extent of the Divine Dominion* and *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophy* are not just powerful philosophical critiques but, in their own way, astute works of literary criticism. Parker's analysis of the connection between romance and Platonic philosophy lays bare the hierarchical thinking that characterizes the Platonist defense of preexistence from the 1640s to 1660s. Through his adroit criticism, Parker recognized the enthusiastic nature of More's philosophy and the aspiration toward apotheosis characteristic of *The Præexistence of the Soul*.

Of the two, *An Account of the Nature and Extent of the Divine Dominion*, is by far the more conservative and milder of the two attacks against the Platonists. Here Parker responds to More's philosophical arguments for preexistence, devolved through his students Rust and More. Parker's critique of preexistence centers on More's argument about God's goodness, his necessity to always do what is best for his creatures, and the corresponding necessity he should have created human beings at the earliest possible date. Perceiving this belief to be the most pertinent philosophical defense of preexistence, Parker challenged the supremacy of the goodness of God at great length, defending the absolute freedom of God as a necessary aspect of his

dominion over all his creation. He buttressed this theological defense with a political argument very congenial to the Restoration religious establishment of the late 1660s, claiming that just as every Englishman “holdeth his Estate of the King, and the right of all Tenures being derived from his Grant with certain conditions,” so does each individual hold their own soul and body only on the sufferance of God himself.<sup>74</sup> Existence can and will be taken away from everyone as a result of God’s supreme will. Parker’s argument stakes out a conservative position, Calvinist in its orientation, by which God’s sovereignty and absolute freedom are held preeminent. Calvin believed that “[t]he will of God is the supreme rule of righteousness, so that everything which he wills must be held to be righteous by the mere fact of his willing it. Therefore, when it is asked why the Lord did so, we must answer, Because he pleased.”<sup>75</sup> Parker adds nuance to Calvin’s extreme position on the priority of God’s will over the good by suggesting that God’s freedom is necessary for his actions to be good. A necessitated action being neither good nor bad, God’s freedom to be good or not is a condition of his goodness. Thus, God is under no necessity to have created human beings at any particular time, early or late.

While Parker pursues the more abstract arguments against preexistence with precision, he generalizes and hides his targets when criticizing the enthusiastic tendencies of Platonism. Parker often accuses the Rosicrucians of the worst excesses of philosophical, enthusiastic Platonism, though many of these supposed excesses can be found in More.<sup>76</sup> That said, Parker’s targets could not have been mysterious. In the

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<sup>74</sup> *An Account of the Nature and Extent of the Divine Dominion*, 14.

<sup>75</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes*, 791.

<sup>76</sup> Parker accuses Eugenius Philalethese, the pseudonym of Thomas Vaughan, of inventing overblown romances that glorify his own soul. Perhaps out of

*Account*, he frequently quotes from the work of More's student Joseph Glanvill, *Lux Orientalis*, singling out particular passages for criticism, but does not in this text accuse the English writers of enthusiasm, merely a failure of argumentation. However, when Parker criticizes ancient philosophers of enthusiasm and blasphemy, he opens a subtle line of attack against the English Platonists as imbibers of enthusiastic writing. The list of ancient and foreign authorities Parker criticizes could not have made more clear which English Platonists he was reading. They are exactly those authorities More, Glanvill, and Rust held up as authors of the true theology: Zoroaster, Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, Apollonius of Tyre, the Cabbalists, and Pico della Mirandola. Criticizing these writers, who feature in a near-identical roll-call in each of the English texts defending preexistence, widens Parker's critique of enthusiastic Platonism to include More and his disciples.

*A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophy* more widely critiques Platonism in terms that extend from the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers to the modern English Platonists. Parker's insightful critique in this text exposes the connection between Platonic speculation about the nature of the soul, the genre of romance, and philosophical enthusiasm. Platonic philosophers, according to Parker, arrogate authority to describe the highest beings in precise detail, despite having no special divine authorization or Scriptural evidence for their claims. These

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circumspection or respect for More's durable reputation as a genuine philosopher, Parker avoids laying that charge at More's door, though More speculated and wove tales about the soul's aristocratic nature in much the way Vaughan did. Part of this circumspection may arise from difference in seniority: though eventually Bishop of Oxford, at the time of these two tracts Parker was twenty-six. While Glanvill was near his age at thirty, George Rust was about forty, and More (whom Parker would have known the originator of these arguments) a respected philosopher in his fifties. Decorum may also have prevented a public dispute, which Parker and Glanvill considered, until dissuaded by John Beale of the Royal Society.

philosophers “confidently take upon them to give the world exact and minute descriptions of Incorporeal Beings” and “discourse about the Substance, Nature, Properties, Offices, Actions, Orders and Polities of Angels” as if they had seen them with their own eyes.<sup>77</sup> For Parker, this tendency to describe invisible and metaphysical entities adds up to enthusiasm, since these philosophers can cite no evidence for their speculations either in Scripture or the authority of the senses. Their authority, Parker claims, is entirely internal, imagination and personal speculation, rather than an external standard that could be approved or disapproved by one’s fellows. Parker compares Platonists both in the method and content of their theology to the controversial German mystic Jakob Böhme, considered a heterodox if not heretical thinker even in his own Germany. Parker jokes that to lay out the full Platonist views “would tempt your gravity (though you were most Stoically morose) much beyond the essay of a smile, unless perhaps your perusal of Jacob Behem may have prevented their novelty.”<sup>78</sup> The comparison clearly falls to the disadvantage of the Platonists, who are considered fanciful, singular, and possibly unorthodox. To Parker, the Platonists are a species of enthusiasts.

Platonists throughout history, according to Parker, have been liars and creators of romantic fictions and fancies. Parker notes that the Neoplatonists whom writers like More uphold as philosophical giants were pagans and more than pagan, they were theurgists who inclined to “*Magical Arts*, or rather *Jugling Tricks*,” designed to deceive the unwary and gratify their own desire for spiritual exceptionalism. Counted among the ranks of ancient magicians are Iamblichus, Apollonius of Tyre, and all

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<sup>77</sup> *An Account of the Nature and Extent of the Divine Dominion*, 80.

<sup>78</sup> *An Account of the Nature and Extent of the Divine Dominion*, 59.



those “that did most *Pythagorise*.” Though More stopped short of commending theurgy, believing it to be idolatry of a daemon instead of worship of God, he did borrow the scheme of spiritual creatures from Iamblichus and, with Marsilio Ficino, asserted that Apollonius of Tyre flew to heaven in a celestial chariot.<sup>79</sup> His trust in Platonick philosophers’ claims to have visited the upper heavens was matched by his credulity of stories of witches, demons, and the living dead. While Parker had in view the works of More’s students and More’s own later *Immortality of the Soul*, had he examined More’s *Præexistence of the Soul*, he would have discovered the lengthy descriptions of supernatural creatures invisible to the eye, complemented by confident assertions about the nature, location, and history of the immaterial beings—angels, daemons, and human souls—created by the divine mind.

For Parker, this confidence indicated a spiritual and philosophical presumption, but also a self-authorization to generate “Romantick” fictions pleasing to the individual mind and have them pass as true. Parker singles out preexistence for special criticism in this regard: philosophers also arrogate spiritual authority “[w]hen they frame particular *Hypotheses*, not onely of the nature of the Soul but of the manner of its living, before its lapse into this life, and after its return home again.”<sup>80</sup> Preexistence is a singularly “rash and unwarrantable opinion[,]” produced without evidence.<sup>81</sup> Parker has cause to explain why these thinkers, who have no evidence to

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<sup>79</sup> Of his third vehicle for the soul, the “celestial chariot,” More writes that

In this the famous Tyanean swain,  
Lifted above the deadly charming might  
Of the dull Carkasse could discover plain  
From seven-hill'd Rome with speedy piercing sight  
What they in Egypt did as Stories write. (*Præexistence*, 14.1-5)

<sup>80</sup> *A Free and Impartial Censure*, 82.

<sup>81</sup> *A Free and Impartial Censure*, 3.

do so, believe in preexistence and recommend it to their fellow Christians. The answer, Parker consistently maintains, is that these individual minds choose to believe these fictions because they please their romantic imaginations and flatter their sense of individual spiritual and intellectual merit. Thus, Platonist writers resort to circular thinking to justify the fancies on which their minds have already taken hold. Parker's great example of this is from Plato himself, who according to Parker "abound[s] with infinite...Circles." Plato's *Meno* "bottomes the Souls Reminiscency...upon its presupposed Immortality, and yet in his *Phaedo*, he fairly argues for the Souls Immortality from its presupposed Reminiscency."<sup>82</sup> If such circles proliferate in Plato's writing, according to Parker, they appear even more in his imitators and admirers.

This circular reasoning leads to metaphoric rather clearly logical expression of their ideas. "I can easily allow their Discourses the Title of *Philosophical Romances*," he announces, since they are full of "nothing but rampant Metaphors, and Pompous Allegories, and other splendid but empty Schemes of speech." Their tendency to write philosophy with obscure figures of speech, metaphors, allegories, and other conceits renders them not so much philosophers but "(to say no worse) Poets & Romancers."<sup>83</sup> Parker draws metaphor out for particular criticism. Since the Platonists usually are speaking about abstract objects that no one has seen or can fully understand, metaphors that attempt to convey that abstraction via a concrete image are creating an imaginary object composed of disparate objects from concrete reality. These concrete realities add up only to a chimera, not a metaphysical reality the Platonist has intuited

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<sup>82</sup> *A Free and Impartial Censure*, 37-38.

<sup>83</sup> *A Free and Impartial Censure*, 74-5.

and fleshed out with images, since after all, the objects of the Platonist's attention—souls, emanations, and other abstractions—are not observable: “such Discourse must be Non-sence, and the matter of it must needs be nothing...they that talk thus, do but first imagine a subject, and then imagine in it some Resemblances to something else, that is in effect, they make a bauble, and then play with it.”<sup>84</sup>

Parker's criticism reveals insightful truth about the nature of metaphor in More's writings about the soul. The unobservable nature of the objects that More discusses means that More might compare his abstract conception of the soul to almost anything within a range of possible resemblances. His limitations relate only to his intentions and perhaps to his unconscious biases. When More deploys the Hermetic metaphor of the soul as “a spark or ray of the divinitie,” he reaches for a metaphor that intentionally ennobles the image of the soul and that further implies a shared essence with its source in God. Comparing the soul to light is nothing new, even outside the tradition of Hermetic writing, but the image of the ray is precise in the *Pymander*, conveying the exact substantial relationship between God and its offspring soul. As Parker recognizes, More's metaphor connects its semantic elements in a way that fits More's own inclinations and tendencies, “impregnating the mind” with “Phantasmes” that do not reveal but project. What they project is More's own desire, not his explicit belief about the soul and God, but his unvoiced aspiration for the human soul, especially his own.

This self-interest on More's part is, for Parker, characteristic of Platonism. Plato's followers look toward the nature of the mind itself—the nature of their own mind, since that is the only mind available to them—and derive conclusions from it,

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<sup>84</sup> *A Free and Impartial Censure*, 77.

as if the mind itself were authoritative. To Parker, this self-analysis is not only wrongheaded, but arrogant and self-interested. Believing themselves to be “pure and Seraphick Intellectualists,” the Platonists “despise all sensible knowledge, as too gross and material for their nice and curious Faculties, and disdain to pursue any knowledge, but what is pure and Intellectual, that is such as is sutable to their refin’d, and as it were, separated understandings.”<sup>85</sup> The Platonists believe their own understandings “separated” from the rest of the human race, and their tendency to search their own minds frees them from the dirtiness of materiality and of other, less pure minds. Parker’s vocabulary of criticism for the Platonists is consistent. He reverses their belief in their own “refined” and “seraphick” intellect and announces it to be windy, airy, and mirage-like. “Instead of real conceptions and notices of Things,” the Platonists’ metaphors “impregnate the mind with nothing but Ayerie and Subventaneous Phantasmes.”<sup>86</sup> The critique reaches More not only in his deeply intellectualist philosophy, but in his high perch at the Cambridge, though the same critique of elitism could apply to the learned academic Parker as well.

Another of More’s metaphors, already discussed, reveals this philosophical and religious elitism Parker discerns in the Platonists. Once again, Parker’s point is that any image might be used to describe these invisible objects, and thus More’s choice of image bears particular weight. While describing the soul in metaphor, More’s poetry unexpectedly grasps the idea that the soul is an aristocratic “babe,” left to the care of a “sorry salvage wight.” The image turns on a strange contradiction implied by the metaphorical elements. While More imagines that all souls enjoy the

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<sup>85</sup> *A Free and Impartial Censure*, 60.

<sup>86</sup> *A Free and Impartial Censure*, 77.

same parentage—after all “we were” this same “spark or ray of the Divinity”—he populates the metaphorical world of his comparison with a “sorry salvage wight” who cares for the aristocratic soul, a low-class figure drawn from the periphery of Spenser’s society of romance. On his philosophical scheme, all human beings have souls with divine lineages, prompting the question of why More fixates on a character whose “noble blood” is denied. To a critic like Parker, it would have appeared that More the Platonist is making room for a hierarchy of souls, in explicit contradiction to Christian theology.

Once again, More’s explicit perspective contains one story, but the more complicated elements of his imagery and poetic exploration of his ideas tells another. As previously mentioned, *The Præexistency of the Soul* includes a lengthy disquisition in its second half (stanzas 36-84) on witches, evil spirits, and salvation-denied ghosts floating in the middle air above the world. This “*Stygian crue / Of damned wights made fast by their own bloud / To their bad Master, do his service due,*” and in the process fall by the wayside of human progress toward salvation and return to God’s heaven.<sup>87</sup> Despite More’s optimistic providentialism, his earnest belief that God takes every opportunity to do his creatures good, his worldview contains a vast number of creatures that are by their nature evil, damned, and destined for suffering. More’s poem has the equivalents of Spenser’s Archimago, as well as his Grill, “The walking Skeleton in *Bolonia / Laden with rattling chains, that showed his grave / To th’ watchfull Student,*” and “those wicked Hags... whose writhled bags / Fould feinds oft suck and nestle in their loathsome rags.”<sup>88</sup> More’s student Anne, Lady Conway

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<sup>87</sup> *Præexistency*, 49.1-3.

<sup>88</sup> *Præexistency*, 46.1-3, 47.6, 8-9.

pushed him on exactly this point: “How Man can be Restor'd, to what he Fell from; And why the Devils that Fell, cannot? Why Christ's Death should [sic] Extend more to One than to the Other?”<sup>89</sup>

Unlike Conway herself, More does not extend salvation to the Devil for reasons arguably as much aesthetic as ethical. The belief in witches and ghosts conforms to More's sense of a spiritualized world, the latest setting of an episodic cosmic romance. Every romance needs its villains, and More's is full of unfortunate souls destined for no bliss, as well as miscreant willful sinners. This romance began in heaven and will finish when the soul returns to bliss. Along the way, lesser creatures, including lesser souls, suffer worse fates, retreating into their mere bodily selves and never achieving the spirituality that comes from contemplation of God in the inner soul. These woe-begotten souls, destined never to reach the astral heavens of their birthplace, appear to be a blemish in More's otherwise optimistic providentialism, but in reality they are the spots of darkness that make the varied picture of his romance achieve the bright colors of glory. In his poetry, More paints a picture of a world with spiritual haves and have-nots. This spiritual inequality expresses itself in the metaphor of the “noble babe” through the inappropriate and sudden appearance of the “sorry salvage wight,” a figure transposed out of Spenser's own romance that, while representing the world of matter, confronts the reader's attention with a logic of high and low, of a person transcended by the philosopher in his imagined journey toward spiritual actualization.

More found this dual aesthetic-social vision, with a theory of a hierarchy of souls, in his reading of Plotinus. In the critical period of the 1640s, when More wrote

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Terryl Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* Oxford University Press, 2009, 152-153.

the *Præexistency of the Soul*, he discovered the *Enneads*, a text that together with the *Theologica Germanica* effected his conversion to philosophical and mystic Platonism. As mentioned in the introduction, in the *Enneads*, Plotinus argues that the world made by God enjoys a variety and fullness that necessitates the mortality and low status of some beings. The world is full of high and low, and Plotinus insists that the world's variety of stations and degrees constitutes a version of aesthetic unity or harmony. Plotinus's idea merges aesthetic theory into a cosmic theodicy that is deeply and explicitly conservative about political and social hierarchies. Plotinus extends this hierarchical thinking to metaphysical as well as political and social realities: "Souls vary in worth; and the difference is due, among other causes, to an almost initial inequality."<sup>90</sup> This belief in the inequality of souls is contrary to the claims of many of More's contemporaries, in particular Jean Calvin. For the French reformer, "the impurity of parents is transmitted to their children, so that all, without exception, are originally depraved," a fact that challenges and overcomes the "Pelagian cavil" of the personal goodness of some.<sup>91</sup> Following both More and Plotinus, Peter Sterry rhapsodized about the inequality of the entire universe, claiming that "[b]eing it self, in its universal Nature, from its purest heighth, by beautiful, harmonious, just degrees and steps, *descendeth* into every Being, even to the lowest shades. All ranks and degrees of Being, so become like the mystical steps in that scale of Divine Harmony and Proportions, *Jacobs Ladder*...full of all Angelick Musick and Beauty."<sup>92</sup> This idea is nakedly hierarchical, providing an image of degrees of being ascending to the

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<sup>90</sup> *Enneads*, 3.2.18.

<sup>91</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes*, 216, 217.

<sup>92</sup> *Discourse on the Freedom of the Will*, 31.

One. For Sterry, the “Angelick Musick and Beauty” is effected through a various and stadial progress of being, the familiar idea of the Great Chain of Being acclaimed as a positive aesthetic good.

Parker’s critique of Platonism as conveying a secret elitism resonates with this undertone in Sterry and More of a hierarchy of souls—never stated explicitly, but allowed as the consequence of a creator who wisely invested being with levels and degrees. The hierarchical nature of Platonic thinking received criticism from others who believed they could discern in Platonic aspiration a secret preference for the souls of the Platonists themselves. More’s direct respondent Edward Warren complained that More and his fellow Platonists “fetch their rise a great deal higher [than the earth], and give their origin a far earlier date” and “make them coaeval with the Angels, and tell us they were once copartners with them in their glories.”<sup>93</sup> Spiritual arrogance was a constant complaint against the Platonists from the orthodox, though the theologically liberal also criticized their presumption of near-divinity. In 1678, the Deist Charles Blount described the pretensions of ancient Platonists in terms that could nearly apply to the modern English sort: “Many old Philosophers of great eminency, especially the *Platonists* in their airy discourses of Human Souls first in favour of their own, plac’d them in an higher form then those of ordinary persons, and other Animals, pretending that by frequent Philosophical meditation, they so far refined themselves, as that after death they remain’d in a kind of Astral, or (as term’d by later times) Angelical condition.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Edward Warren, *No Præexistence; Or, A Brief Dissertation against the Hypothesis of Humane Souls*, London, 1667, 3.

<sup>94</sup> Charles Blount, *Anima Mundi, or, An historical narration of the opinions of the ancients concerning man’s soul after this life according to unenlight[e]ned nature*, London, 1679, 20-21.



Blount's criticism is incisive about the Plotinian devaluation of the souls of many human beings in favor of the elect few. That same criticism fits More as well. With his encomium for the soul of Plotinus, mounted on a celestial chariot and borne out of the world to heaven, More distinguished a place for those select souls "plac'd [] in an higher form then those of ordinary persons." More builds this sense of the soul's nature from his "inward Sense" of his own nature. "[E]ven in my first Childhood," writes a much older More, "an inward Sense of the Divine Presence was so strong upon my Mind [that] I think it is very evident, that this was an innate Sense or Notion in me."<sup>95</sup> More's anecdotal evidence for innate ideas is unlikely to convince any but the already-convinced, and that is precisely his point. His sense of himself is beyond dispute, a first principle on which the remainder of metaphysics will build. The desire for abstraction is also a desire for transcendence and penetration, conveying a sense that the universe corresponds to More's intuition of it. The cosmic story of the preexistence of souls fits to More's own desires and to his sense of himself as a virtuous, freethinking, and deep-souled knower. More's poetry drifts toward the literal apotheosis of the speculative soul, a sense that the philosopher lives a life as spirit to such an extent that he is nearly divine, above legions of inferiors. The philosopher's consciousness dates back almost to eternity, forming a soul that demonstrably exceeds the created universe and resembles nothing less than the being of God.

More's message was destined for an elite and met its target in several highly-placed pupils and disciples, many of whom repeated his arguments for the preexistence of souls, as well as the extension of spirit, in their own works. Unlike for the Presbyterians, for More, writing in the Platonic tradition of Erasmus and Lefèvre

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<sup>95</sup> Richard Ward, *Life of Dr. Henry More, Parts 1 and 2*, ed. Sarah Hutton, Dordrecht, Netherlands, Kluwer Academic, 2000.

d'Étaples, salvation is a personal matter, and human goodness consists precisely in individual virtue. "I am above all Sects whatever as Sects," More writes, "for I am a true and free Christian; and what I write and speak is for the interest of Christ."<sup>96</sup> His writings are attuned to the personal, individual expression of faith, neither to the broad conformity to ecclesiastical authority nor to the radical, liberating potential of new sects. The politically conservative imagery of *The Præexistency of the Soul* is consonant with More's simple, individualist theology. His idea of purification is an elitist concept that exalts some souls over others and stresses the subjectivity of the individual perceiver.

This focus on individual soul-formation, imaged by the deified soul in *The Præexistency of the Soul*, points toward More's unusual position in relation to both the high and lower elements of his society. More is not exactly an enthusiast, but the intellectual position he stakes out eliminates the levels of hierarchy between him and the divine truth. In a sense, he wants both the protection and appearance of orthodoxy and submission to hierarchy with a private fantasy of direct contact with the divinity in his very essential nature. He seeks comfort, wonder, self-knowledge, and hope in his philosophical vision of a soul descended from primordial bliss to matter. He also seeks exaltation in his image of a divine soul soaring above mere matter and above dark and dangerous human and subhuman forces, but he does so within a framework that, from his perspective at least, preserved him from the claim of enthusiasm. Later in life, he would admit, according to his biographer "[t]hat he had a Natural touch of Enthusiasme in his Complexion; but such as (he thanks God) was ever governable

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<sup>96</sup> Henry More, *The second lash of Alazonomastix, laid on in mercie upon that stubborn youth Eugenius Philalethes, or, A sober reply to a very uncivill answer to certain observations upon Anthroposophia theomagica, and Anima magica abscondita*, Cambridge, 1651, 198.

enough.”<sup>97</sup> The diminution of enthusiasm to a “touch” shows that More did not realize how to integrate this, to him, anomalous part of himself. In *The Præxistency of the Soul*, More’s philosophy falls into enthusiasm, and through a moment of poetic expression, substantially merges with it.

The elitist nature of More’s spiritual thinking does not stand in contrast to his enthusiasm. Rather, as Samuel Parker realized, his elitism and his enthusiasm are part of the same cord that ties More’s Platonic aspiration for the personal soul. In writings cloaked by the appearance of orthodoxy and scholarly rigor, More indulges his fantasy of a divine soul that places human nature in a higher register than Christianity allows and that places himself above his fellow Christians. In sympathy with Plotinus and Hermes Trismegistus, More’s poetic expression outlines a philosophy of the preexistent soul that expresses his own desire for fulfillment and aspiration, one he must have found frustrated by the Calvinism that characterized the orthodoxy of his day. His poetic philosophy crosses multiple levels of signification and reference to become a variegated portrait of a subtle and intuitive mind at work, one that said much more than his philosophical arguments. His soul reaches beyond the boundaries of time and space and acclaims itself in the light of its own imagination.

## Conclusion

More is something of a transitional figure in early modern intellectual culture, bridging the old metaphysics of the scholastics and the new experimentalism and materialism of the Royal Society. More’s philosophical identity seems to flow in both directions, and yet *The Præxistency of the Soul* in fact reveals the mystical,

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<sup>97</sup> Ward, *Life of More*, 1710, 35.

spiritualist elements of his thought comparable to neither of these familiar intellectual paradigms. Though More thought himself a rational philosopher, his poem's radical presentation of Hermetic imagery of the soul undermines his consistent, and orthodox, picture of himself and suggests that his reasons for believing in preexistence are as much affective and emotional as sober and rational. More wrote in poetry the excesses of his thought that he could not announce in prose. This esoteric radicalism should be seen as the pattern of heterodox writing about preexistence in the period, as many contemporary readers of More picked up on the radical elements of his thought, even as his later exegetes have not. More's critics anatomized his many extravagances and blasphemies, just as his admirers discerned these and carried them further. In his time, More was esoterically read, criticized, and interpreted. According to his followers and critics, the picture of More received from the poem is of a philosopher who seeks to belong to special, elect group of souls separated off from the rest of humanity by their intrinsic goodness and higher level of spirituality. This belief in personal election places More in an ambiguous place between the ruling Presbyterians and the underclass enthusiasts in the late 1640s.

Moreover, the complex path More's enthusiastic conception of preexistence walked through genre, philosophical concepts, and cultural reception maps onto the larger history of theology through the Civil War period and after. More's poetic speculation and easy borrowing from his own imagination and from literature produce a text and set of ideas that have the cultural markers of authority and religious truth. More's text, like his identity as a rational but Platonic philosopher, moves along a thin line between orthodoxy and heresy, but this line was made possible by several cultural traditions More himself did not produce. The first was the great opening of the theological canon authorized by Martin Luther, exemplified in transitional figures like

the earlier Platonist John Colet. Since Protestant theological custom asserted that Church theology went wrong at some point in antiquity, Protestant theologians and scholars relitigated the reputation of particular authors under the cover of restoring ancient wisdom known to the early Fathers but corrupted by the later. Second and related is the tradition of *prisca theologia*, greatly in decline by More's own time, that attempts to recreate the prehistoric wisdom of Zoroaster, Moses, and Hermes Trismegistus, a philosophy that supposedly circulated orally and by hieroglyphs to the Greeks and the Jews. Contemporaneous with these backward-looking traditions of historical recreation was the Great Instauration of Francis Bacon, the belief in a new science and new knowledge forthcoming in the seventeenth century; though Bacon had particular ideas about what this knowledge would look like, many philosophers followed him in name and ambition but not in method or temperament, with the result that a Millenarian like Joseph Mede, Henry More's and Milton's tutor, could believe the new science was a kind of Messianic divine insight rather than an empirical procedure. When More winds these threads together—along with other discourses and traditions like alchemy and theurgy that straddle science and *prisca theologia*—he asserts the reality and doctrinal orthodoxy of his essentially poetic speculations. He can write a poem that he believes should be accepted, not merely as a wonderful artificial creation, Philip Sidney's golden world, but as an expression of highest divine truth.

The story of More's response in the later seventeenth century can be seen as the unwinding of these divergent threads of legitimation. When More's Calvinist opponents Samuel Parker and Edward Warren attack him as an enthusiast, they tear up the fabric of *prisca theologia*, the new science, and theological renovation and recast More's poetic speculation as out of cultural bounds, even as fanaticism. The

specific attacks by Parker, the most perceptive of More's critics, focus on More's singularity, his attachment to his own moods and preferences, and above all to his belief that his own private speculation and imaginary creations could set a standard for his fellow Englishmen and Protestants. In a wider sense, Parker's attacks represent the banishment from the theological mainstream of English Protestantism of innovative and constructive theology altogether, an attack carried out in institutional form by the Latitudinarians in the later part of the century and emblemized by King William's later legal declaration that no new theological terms could be invented to describe the Trinity. William's Toleration Act of 1688 likewise represents, like the Edict of Nantes in France, the quasi-liberal settlement of "the religious question," the banishment of religion to the private realm and the end of public debate about religious variants, not merely which are to be permitted, but which one is in fact true. In this context, More's public arguments, combined with his clear display of personal inclination toward the more heretical dimension of his own belief in the soul's preexistence, were not received poorly by the clerical establishment as a mere incidental fact. They were rejected because the church establishment was moving beyond his style of speculation and proposals for innovation, and beyond his style of writing—prophecy, mystical theology, poetic fancy melded into one. Implicit in the reception of More's version of the soul's preexistence are the decline and fall of innovative theology and the emergence of a secularized philosophy of political economy.

Outside of Parker and Warren, the enthusiastic implications of More's belief in preexistence largely escaped condemnation by the church and state. More claimed the discursive space allowed by the concept of *adiaphora*, or things indifferent, to speculate and express his heterodox spiritual yearnings in poetry. As the predecessors

of the tolerationist Latitudinarians, More's philosophical circle at Cambridge refused to comment on adiaphora, or things indifferent, that so violently separated the high and low church in the seventeenth century.<sup>98</sup> According to More's students Joseph Glanvill and George Rust, doctrinal latitude existed precisely to make space for personal satisfaction in matters unrelated to the practice of religion and to allow differing opinions, such as their own belief in the soul's preexistence. Most of More's contemporaries considered the origin of the soul one of the adiaphora or things indifferent to matters of faith. Many considered it far too speculative a point for the church to decide.<sup>99</sup> With the idea of the soul's preexistence More explores a personal, speculative faith that is all his own, through a network of images and ideas. Under the name of poetry, More engages in speculation that some of his contemporaries felt comfortable calling enthusiasm.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> More and Ralph Cudworth, as well as their other associates John Smith, Benjamin Whichcote, and Peter Sterry, possessed many of the traits associated with the later latitudinarians whose primary sources of influence were not them but the Falkland circle at Great Tew. (Griffith Martin, "Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth-Century Church")

<sup>99</sup> The author of the preface of *Præexistence* (1714) announces that, "seeing there is no possibility of demonstrating a Point so sublimely Speculative as is that of the Soul's original, he leaves Mankind to the Dictates of their own judgment, to believe either or neither of the forementioned Hypotheses," and of the soul's origin Joseph Glanvill writes "to impose difficult and disputable matters under the Notion of Confessions of Faith and fundamentals of Religion, is a most unchristian piece of Tyranny, the foundation of persecution, and very root of Antichristianisme." (*Præexistence, Lux Orientalis*, "Preface")

<sup>100</sup> Despite being first used in application to More and his friends at Cambridge, the term latitudinarian best applies to the high-ranking divines whose moderate conformist church doctrine helped define the English Church in the early eighteenth century. Nevertheless, More and Cudworth were first described in print as "latitude-men," the term Cambridge Platonist being a product of late nineteenth-century scholarship. The term was popularized by John Tulloch's *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth Century* (1872).

More's poetry is the epitome of supernature. He is a metaphysician in the extreme, investing his every line with the solidity of metaphysical reality. In what he writes he absolutely believes. That said, More's poetry is disruptive to the existing order of theology, especially the idea that Man is differentiated in kind from his Creator. In More instead there is a divine aspiration, an ambivalent sense that human beings are not "middle creatures," or simply plastic, as Pico della Mirandola asserts, but the highest entity in the universe, especially when thinking philosophically and most especially when writing philosophical poetry. In More therefore is an idea that will recur among the theologians of preexistence: metaphysical humanism. No materialist, More nevertheless displays the authority and agency of human beings in the highest degree, especially in their creative and intellectual faculties. Poetry for More becomes a means of creation, equal in character to the creative acts of God. This metaphysical humanism, subterranean as it is, is his greatest contribution to Enlightenment, and it offers a picture very different from the materialistic humanisms of John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Baruch Spinoza.

Like enthusiasm itself, the doctrine of preexistence creates a register for individuals and groups to assert their relationship to the divine in terms that do not rely on mediators—church, preacher, state, even Christ. It is no surprise that many of the later spiritual movements in the West, particularly in America, from Hermeticism to Theosophism to the Bahá'í and Mormon faiths, formed in isolation and under persecution from their wider societies' religious communities, find solace, comfort, and direction in a theology that imagines their origins as particular individuals to be points of contact with divinity that stand in contrast to their present state of cultural marginalization, without recourse to existing, perhaps hegemonic, narratives of spiritual formation. The tantalizing dream of shared essence with divinity that



animates the metaleptic network of *The Præexistency of the Soul* continues to draw new admirers, and perhaps adherents, today, seeking forms of spirituality outside the familiar ones, as a brief survey of the interest in pre-birth memoirs reveals.<sup>101</sup> Today's alienation from existing organized religion is not Henry More's, but the fact that many draw on the vocabulary of preexistence points toward its power as a language of aspiration and hope.

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<sup>101</sup> "Pre-birth memories page," <https://www.oberf.org/prebirth.htm>

## Chapter Two

### The Very World: Early Modern Metempsychosis as Secular Theodicy

*Not in Utopia,—subterranean fields,—  
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!  
But in the very world, which is the world  
Of all of us,—the place where, in the end,  
We find our happiness, or not at all!*

-William Wordsworth<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

A small group of philosophers, meeting in a private residence, revived the ancient doctrine of metempsychosis, with substantial consequences for their conception of self, world, and history.<sup>2</sup> For a period of around a decade, Ragley Hall, the home of Anne, Lady Conway and her husband, became a zone of heightened intellectual production. The chronically ill Lady Conway gathered to her sickbed a circle of Christian Kabbalists, consisting of her dearest friend and onetime physician

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. M.H. Abrams, New York: Norton, 1979, 11.143-145.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Fine explains that while the transmigration of souls was never a piece of mainstream Jewish theology, they were not either the exclusive opinions of a kabbalistic elite: “The earliest ideas about transmigration of souls in Judaism predate Kabbalah and appear to have emerged among Jews living in the Near East, especially Iraq, in the eighth through tenth centuries, perhaps, under the influence of Mutazilite Muslims and Gnostics of an Ismailian orientation.” (*Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and his Kabbalistic Fellowship*, Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003, 304)

Francis Mercury van Helmont, the accomplished Hebraist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, her former mentor Henry More, and the Quaker George Keith. The relationship among these associates was broadly collaborative, though comparison reveals the difference in their ideas, especially between More and van Helmont.<sup>3</sup> What they all had in common was a belief in the perfectibility of the human soul, an emphasis on personal, divine illumination, and a search for an ecumenical religion that would limit rather than broaden differences in faith. Excepting More, the group also shared an excitement for the metaphysics and cosmogony of the Kabbalah, as revealed in their group production of the *Kabbalah Denudata*.<sup>4</sup> Through their adherence to Kabbalah, the so-called Conway or van Helmont circle believed in the preexistence of the soul, the spiritual nature of all matter, the existence of four world-cycles called *shemittah*, the soul's transmigration through a period of seven-thousand years, and the universal salvation of all souls.<sup>5</sup> Their works include von Rosenroth's

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<sup>3</sup> After an initial period of interest, More turned on the principal doctrines of Kabbalah, thinking them materialist, pantheistic, and thus atheist. More memorably describes his realization in a dream in which an eagle-boy, representing Kabbalistic knowledge, visited him at his window and confirmed Kabbalah's concordance with the atheistic philosophy More referred generally to as "Spinozism." See Allison Coudert, "A Cambridge Platonist's Kabbalistic Nightmare" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36 (1975): 633-52.

<sup>4</sup> According to David Byrne, Conway "probably was more influenced by van Helmont and von Rosenroth than she influenced them, but since there was such a close collaboration among the three at Ragley, Conway nonetheless must be considered as a contributor to the *Kabbalah Denudata*." (*Anne Conway: An Intellectual Portrait of an English Viscountess* 70) The tendency to identify the key doctrines of the group, such as the monad and transmigration, with van Helmont alone largely misses the collaborative nature of their work.

<sup>5</sup> The term "Conway Circle" comes from Sarah Hutton's intellectual biography, (*Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge U P, 2004), which argues for Conway's importance in setting the questions and terms for the conversations had at Ragley Hall. Allison Coudert's term "the van Helmont circle" probably describes more accurately the lineage of most of the circle's ideas. For my purpose, "the van Helmont circle" is more accurate, since Conway's circle would

*Kabbalah Denudata*, *Seder Olam* (1694) a description of the Cabbalistic cosmogony and the cycle of worlds, van Helmont's *Cabbalistic Dialogue*, the Quaker treatise *Two Hundred Queries Moderately Propounded Concerning the Doctrine of the Revolution of Humane Souls*, and Conway's posthumous treatise, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*. It is often nearly impossible to determine who contributed what piece of each idea, and their various productions are remarkably similar in style, content, and emphasis.<sup>6</sup> The group as a whole shares intellectual and spiritual commitments and aims that challenge the century's definitions of the human and of social life.

The van Helmont circle is a unique node in early modern philosophy and culture, representing both a forward-looking Enlightenment position and an esoteric Renaissance tradition blazing with the energetic optimism of mid-seventeenth-century Protestant Millenarianism. The group received most of their intellectual influence from the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, a sixteenth-century Palestinian rabbi who lived most of his life in Ottoman Syria (modern-day Tsafat Israel), though substantial pieces also came from the physico-alchemical philosophy of F.M. van Helmont's father Jean-Baptiste van Helmont. Further influences of their thought include Henry More's Neoplatonism, derived from his reading of Plotinus, and the later influence of the intellectual and political culture of Quakerism. As Allison Coudert points out,

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more largely include men like More and Jeremy Taylor, who were Conway's associates but not Kabbalists in the manner of van Helmont, Keith, and von Rosenroth.

<sup>6</sup> So great are the similarities between *Seder Olam* and Conway's own treatise that Daniel Walker has suggested Conway as the possible author of *Seder Olam*'s original Latin. It is certain she contributed substantially to the *Two Hundred Queries* and the *Cabbalistic Dialogue*, and likely she did so to *Kabbalah Denudata* (*The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, Chicago: Chicago U P, 1964).

The exhilarating optimism and ecumenism characteristic of Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* and *Nine Hundred Theses* resurfaces in the innumerable, though largely forgotten texts of these millenarians... Within what appears to be a narrowly esoteric work, one finds the basis of the kind of tolerant ecumenism and belief in progress that are generally associated with the Enlightenment, but which had their beginnings far earlier among Italian Humanists.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter steps beyond Coudert's broad point about the conceptual lineage of van Helmont's millenarianism by arguing that the van Helmont circle finally exceeded their origins and put forward a conception of the purpose of human life that radically decenters the afterlife and even a transcendent God. In their mature work, human history is a zone primarily defined by human efforts, and the most prominent rewards attach to our activities here rather than in a future life. Despite beginning their careers as inveterate questers for secret knowledge, by the time of Conway's death, the van Helmont circle was articulating an anthropology and sense of history that aligned them more with the burgeoning philosophy of Enlightenment liberalism, with its idea of justice fulfilled in the secular realm by right organization of society, than with the Millennial philosophies of divine entrance into history that defined their initial entry points into intellectual life.<sup>8</sup> Gradually, through decades and many

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<sup>7</sup> *The Impact of the Cabbala on the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614-1698)*, Leiden, UK: Brill 1998, 107.

<sup>8</sup> One of the sources of the circle's millenarianism was More's teacher at Christ's College, Joseph Mede, also the teacher of Milton. See Richard H. Popkin, "The Spiritualistic Cosmologies of Henry More and Anne Conway" from *Henry More (1614-1687)* ed. Sarah Hutton, Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 1990, As well as Marjorie Nicholson, "Christ's College and the Latitude-Men" *Modern Philology* 27.1 (1929): 35-53, and Robert Crocker "Mysticism and Enthusiasm in Henry More"

conversations with Quakers, Kabbalists, Platonists, and interlocutors in the increasingly secular “public sphere,” their religious enthusiasm transformed into a version of liberal optimism about human progress expressed, paradoxically, in the very anti-secular language of Kabbalah and transmigration. The complexities of a divine justice system continue to stand in for what would later be the complexities of a human bureaucracy, but they nevertheless succeed in rendering this life, or rather *these lives*, as the realm of climacteric value, where justice will or will not be achieved. Divine theodicy, that looks to Last Things and articulates final rewards only in the heavenly realm, yields slowly to what Emmanuel Levinas called “secular theodicy,” an account of proper social organization such that human life itself upon the earth adds up to a just picture, fulfilled on its own terms without recourse to heavenly reward, eschatological purpose, or even immortality.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to previous interpretations, in my view Kabbalah becomes secular when transmigration becomes a means of writing out of the world a transcendent God who settles final deserts in heaven.

While I acknowledge the contributions of the entire group, it is Conway herself, rather than van Helmont or the others, who fully accepts the implications of their shared moral and philosophical commitment to metempsychosis as a form of secular theodicy.<sup>10</sup> Her commitment can be seen in the embrace of a natural-scientific

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*Henry More (1614-1687)* ed. Sarah Hutton, Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 1990, for more on the connection between More, Conway, and Mede.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering” from *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Woods, New York: Routledge, 1988: 156-167.

<sup>10</sup> As Stuart Brown explains, “it is not always easy to decide how far, if at all, van Helmont can be said to be the author of a work that bears his name. There are also various anonymous or pseudonymous works with whose publication he was closely

explanation for metempsychosis in her metaphysical treatise, articulated at a level of philosophical clarity approached by none of her collaborators. Her writing therefore marks a defined shift in worldview, not necessarily driven by Conway's idiosyncratic personality but as part of the larger shift toward Enlightenment at the end of the seventeenth century. Conway did not seek out Kabbalah in order to articulate a secularized worldview of human fulfillment. Indeed, in all likelihood part of Kabbalah's appeal for her consisted in it offering a horizon that transcended the merely human and captured the divine. Yet the worldly concerns of herself and the Quaker women with whom she increasingly identified, pressed ever more on her own mind and pushed her philosophy in a direction that imagined human life, especially civilized life, as the realm of climactic value, the world where God's purposes would be fulfilled, and at human hands. Conway's physical and mental suffering arguably contributed to her sense of the injustice of ordinary human life but also to her sense of the concrete steps humans can take to mitigate it. By virtue of Conway's all-too-real struggles with health, loss, and disappointment, her philosophy articulates a hope for the future, not in the next world, but in this one, in what Wordsworth later called "the

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associated. Since he acted *in loco auctoris* in relation to certain works of which he was not the author, printers sometimes used his name as if he were. And in the case of certain other works of which he was actually the author, he adopted a pseudonym or did not give any name. In such confusing circumstances there is no consensus about the precise list of genuine van Helmont writings. There is a use, therefore, for the wider term 'Helmontiana' to refer to writings van Helmont sought to publish or whose publication he encouraged, as well as those of which he was in some sense or to some extent the author." ("F.M. van Helmont: His Philosophical Connections and the Reception of His Later Cabbalistic Philosophy," from *Studies in Seventeenth-Century European Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997, 105)

very world, which is the world / Of all of us—the place where, in the end / We find our happiness, or not at all!”<sup>11</sup>

### I. The Identity Question

In the opening of *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode writes that “It is not expected of critics as it is of poets that they should help us to make sense of our lives; they are bound only to attempt the lesser feat of making sense of the ways in which we try to make sense of our lives.”<sup>12</sup> As Kermode shows, in making sense of a life, we often have recourse to fictional forms, searching for the coherence, the meaning bestowed by beginning, middle, and end. The formal arrangement of life into a narrative of actors and actions makes possible the distribution of praise and blame. When we look at the structure of a life, we usually do so within an ethical framework that facilitates judgments about the actions and deserts of the person who lived it. We have demands for justice and think of those demands within the confines of what an individual life could have known. In fiction, this idea is sometimes popularly called “poetic justice.” In theology, it is called theodicy, the vindication of God’s justice in the face of the existence of evil.<sup>13</sup> The relationship between theodicy and the narration

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<sup>11</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. M.H. Abrams, New York: Norton, 1979, 11.143-145.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Oxford: Oxford U P, 2000, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Conway’s intellectual era was a time of attempted theodicies. Her contemporary and intellectual admirer, Gottfried Leibniz coined the term “theodicy” for the title of his treatise on existence of evil and the status of the created world as not just good but “the best of all possible worlds,” inspiring later his satirical depiction as Doctor Pangloss in Voltaire’s *Candide*. In England, the most significant long poem of the period, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, set out to “Justify the ways of God to men.”



of a life arises from a tendency to assess life in general from within the framework of a single life, given that that life is the only one the person will get. When we consider the life of another, in a sense we are often considering Life, by imagining the internalistic perspective of one person's lifetime. How must life have seemed to them? If we smoothed the entirety of one lifetime into a form with dimensions, a purpose, a lesson, a point, would we think justice had been done?

The word theodicy is more appropriate than a term drawn from secular ethics, because it is the precise term for the explanatory framework of a life as conceived by Anne Conway. Deeply pious and yet deeply concerned with the justice of life and God, life's creator, Conway tended to conceive every serious ethical or theological project as a version of theodicy. For example, Conway justified her belief in the vitality of all matter with an appeal to God's attribute of goodness: "since God is infinitely good and communicates his goodness to all his creatures in infinite ways, so that there is no creature which does not receive something of his goodness, and this as fully as possible, and since the goodness of God is a living goodness, which possesses life, knowledge, love, and power, which he communicates to his creatures, how can any dead thing proceed from him or be created by him?"<sup>14</sup> Everything in her philosophical system needed to prove God's goodness to his creatures.<sup>15</sup>

Conway's intense focus on God's goodness receives a new valence when we consider her own struggles with unmitigated evil. From the time Conway was twelve

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<sup>14</sup> *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Allison Coudert, Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1996, 44.

<sup>15</sup> Van Helmont also maintained the moral efficacy of pain as part of the larger project of vindicating God's justice: "Is it not the Nature and end of God's vindictive justice, and indeed of all punishment, to aim at the good of those that are punished? Is not the Nature of all punishment Medicinal?" (quoted in Brown 101)

years old until the end of her life, she was stricken by nearly constant grievous migraines. A glance into her letters shows evidence of the continual, unremitting suffering she endured in her own body. In a typical example, on Jan 19 of 1656, Conway wrote to her husband while away from their home at Ragley Hall, “I have continued ever since in as ill a condition of health as you left me, besides a violent fitt of the headache which troubled me 2 or 3 dayes.”<sup>16</sup> Conway’s lifelong pain from migraines was so great that in 1656 she traveled to Paris with More to have her skull drilled open with a trepan. At another time, she had her jugular vein cut open and bled. In 1666 the famous Irish faith healer, Valentine Greatrakes laid hands on her in front of the scientific Royal Society. None of these cures affected Conway’s migraines, though they may have helped convince her of the inadequacy of existing explanations of the relationship of body, mind, and soul.

As Sarah Skwire suggests, migraines were “something of a mystery” in seventeenth century England; Conway’s contemporary “Thomas Willis notes in frustration that they are constant to no temperament, constitution, or manner of living, nor to no kind of evident or adjoining causes; ordinarily fall[ing] upon cold and hot, sober and intemperate, the empty and the full-bellied, the fat and the lean, the young and the old; yea upon Men and Women of every age, state, or condition.”<sup>17</sup> The deeply moralized systems of early modern medicine could offer little in the way of explanation for migraines; they were not the result of intemperance, of lust, of bad behavior, of being a woman, of spending too much time indoors or out of doors, of

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<sup>16</sup> *The Conway Letters: the Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, Henry More, and their friends, 1642-1684*, ed. Sarah Hutton, New York: Oxford U P, 1992, 129.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah E. Skwire, “Women, Writers, Sufferers, Anne Conway and Ann Collins,” *Literature and Medicine* 18.1 (1999): 2.

self-obsession, of pride, of anything at all. They were seemingly random acts of God, edicts of suffering without redemption, purpose, or point. For a pious Christian like Conway, whose painful migraines continued throughout her entire life, they deeply threatened the sense of the moral order and the idea that suffering was the result of sin and that it served a preparative function for the moral health of the sufferer. It seemed to Anne Conway, and to many of her friends and family, that she suffered for no reason.

Strange as it may have seemed to her Protestant contemporaries, the Kabbalistic notion of metempsychosis provided an explanatory framework for otherwise inexplicable evils, like Conway's migraines.<sup>18</sup> Pain, for Conway, always has purgative value; it is God's way of driving out or punishing some sin. In her posthumously published philosophical treatise, she writes that "every degree of evil or sin has its own punishment, pain, and chastisement appropriate to the nature of the deed, by means of which evil turns back again to good."<sup>19</sup> Through discussions with her friends George Keith and Francis van Helmont, Conway came to the conclusion that metempsychosis provided the framework for understanding the preparatory and purgative value of human suffering that receives no recompense inside a given human life. The person who lives a life of suffering and dies without reward will be reborn into another body, one without the same disease and limitations, so that in a renewed

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<sup>18</sup> Lurianic Kabbalah served a theodical function from the beginning. As Allison Coudert writes, "By attributing the inequalities, misfortunes, and horrors of life to the faults of previous existences, Luria reaffirmed a belief in God's goodness and justice. Human beings were responsible for their own sin and suffering, but God was lenient and granted every soul the opportunity and assistance necessary to complete the arduous process of repentance, purification, and redemption." (*The Impact of the Kabbalah on the Seventeenth Century* 638)

<sup>19</sup> *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* 42.

state of goodness, she may continue to strive to love and serve God. The reverse of this is also true: those who suffer in this life are receiving the punishment of a previous one, so that their sins will be purged off, and next time, they will prosper in goodness.

The doctrine of transmigration, and with it the doctrine of preexistence, reduces the importance of Original Sin. In Augustine's influential conception, human beings are punished in aggregate for the sins of the first two individuals. Though Adam committed the sin of disobedience against God, the rest of humanity inherits their ancestor's punishment without having sinned themselves. As Joseph Glanvill writes, "If I was then newly created when first in this body; what was Adam to mee, who sinned above 5000 years before I came out of nothing?"<sup>20</sup> The theology of Isaac Luria offered a solution to this problem by suggesting that each individual human soul sinned against God before having assumed a human body. As Allison Coudert explains, the idea of *gilgul* suggests that "Every soul had participated in Adam's sin and consequently must suffer for it. Luria's belief that souls had twelve reincarnations, or twelve 'revolutions,' in which they perfect themselves and escape the cycle of birth and death laid the foundation for a belief in universal redemption."<sup>21</sup> While not repudiating the importance of the central event, the apologists for transmigration suggest that not all human suffering comes from the actions of Adam and Eve acting on behalf of the collective unborn human race. Instead, human beings

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Lux orientalis, or, An enquiry into the opinion of the Eastern sages concerning the Præexistence of souls being a key to unlock the grand mysteries of providence, in relation to mans sin and misery*, (London, 1662), Early English Books Online, 9.

<sup>21</sup> *The Impact of the Kabbalah on the Seventeenth-Century* 192.

receive their own punishments for their own crimes.<sup>22</sup> In demanding that God's punishment of human beings be isolated to those who committed the crimes, transmigration offers a more rational framework for the justice of the created world.

Through metempsychosis, Conway and her collaborators create a narrative structure for a human existence that exceeds the temporal dimensions of a single life. We live for seven thousand years, all of us, and in that time, every piece of suffering will be redeemed, every moral act good or evil will receive its reward: "at length the Souls and Bodies may be purified in this VWorld from all dreggs of Sin and Death, as in a refining Furnace of Affliction and Suffering, and lastly, eternally glorified in a indissolvable & incurruptible union of both Body and Soul."<sup>23</sup> In this framework, these kabbalists explain the contradiction of injustice and an all-knowing creator within a global picture. All the elements of life add up to a fully justified whole, such that each human's existence constitutes a theodicy in itself. Futurity continually makes space for moments of God's grace. Even those "whose Sins are neither forgiven in this World, nor in that which is to come, and yet are forgiven in some

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<sup>22</sup> For a point of comparison, see the Origenist author of *A Letter of Resolution*, probably George Rust: "If the Soul was not in the world before she was born upon earth, it is not conceivable how she should in so little a time contract so peremptory an affection to vice amidst those continual chidings and reproofs, those sharp and painfull corrections, those several waies of ignominous punishments she meets with, those advantageous representations made to her of that which is good and laudable, those many and earnest invitations and allurements to of her to embrace it, with all other methods of a good and prudent institution." George Rust, *A letter of resolution concerning Origen and the chief of his opinions*, (London, 1661), Early English Books Online, 37.

<sup>23</sup> *Seder Olam* 51.

third World.”<sup>24</sup> All those forms of material injustice that affect human beings and all other creatures unequally can be explained through recourse to the overall theodicy.<sup>25</sup>

There is a problem, however, in this ethical framework, one that has been identified by Emily Thomas: “For Conway, what secures a [person’s] identity over time?”<sup>26</sup> The context of a system of justice in which every wrong will be righted requires a stable human *person* to whom all the activities, right and wrong, can be attributed. In the *Grand Mystery of Godliness* Conway’s mentor More solved this problem by appeal to the immaterial soul:

why are men solicitous of the same *numerical body*, but that they may be sure to find themselves the same *numerical persons*? But it being most certain there is no *Stable Personality* of a man but what is in his Soul, (for if the Body be Essential to this *numerical Identity*, a grown man has not the same individuation he had when was Christned;) it is manifest, that if there be the *Same Soul*, there is exactly the *Same*

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<sup>24</sup> *Seder Olam* 64.

<sup>25</sup> Levinas offers a critique of such thinking that draws attention to the nature of the structure envisaged by Conway and her collaborators: “Such is the grand idea necessary to the inner peace of souls in our distressed world. It is called upon to make sufferings here below comprehensible...The evil which fills the earth would be explained in a ‘plan of the whole’; it would be called upon to atone for a sin, or it would announce, to the ontologically limited consciousness, compensation or recompense at the end of time. These supra-sensible perspectives are invoked in order to envisage in a suffering which is essentially gratuitous and absurd, and apparently arbitrary, a signification and an order.” (160-161)

<sup>26</sup> Emily Thomas, “Anne Conway on the Identity of Creatures over Time” from *Early Modern Women on Metaphysics*, ed. Emily Thomas, Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2018, 131.

*Person*; and that the change of the body causes no more real difference of Personality than the change of cloaths.”<sup>27</sup>

Believing both in transmigration and the soul’s materiality, Conway cannot solve the problem as More does. If my soul travels from body to body, does my body have anything to do with who I really am as a person, with what makes me me? Where am I inside this process of continual change? Conway understands the importance of this problem and insists in her philosophical treatise that God’s wisdom has seen to it that human identity must persist through these transformations: “if we suppose that one righteous man is changed into another, as Paul into Peter and Peter into Paul, then Paul would surely not receive his proper reward but that of Peter, nor would Peter receive his but that of Paul. This confusion would not suit the wisdom of God.”<sup>28</sup> While Thomas supposes that Conway resolves this issue by an appeal to the continuous “substance” of the soul, I suggest instead that the problem is unresolvable. In fact, the writing of the van Helmont circle intensifies the problem of human identity, rather than trying to identify a solution.

The van Helmont Circle’s ethical theory takes up the large question of the persistence of identity over time, a question that significantly engaged John Locke in the later part of the century. Anne Conway’s philosophy contains the most challenging version of their metaphysics for traditional conceptions of personal identity, though any belief in metempsychosis, considered seriously, poses problems for a grounded sense of personal identity. Conway is not unique among the circle for

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<sup>27</sup> Henry More, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness; or, A true and faithfull representation of the everlasting gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the onely begotten son of God and sovereign over men and angels* London, 1660, Early English Books Online, 223.

<sup>28</sup> *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* 29.

challenging the positioning of self in traditional ethics, but she is more aware of and more committed to the consequential implications of their divergence from philosophical doxa. *Seder Olam*, a Kabbalistic work translated by one of Conway's associates and possibly written in Latin by Conway herself, accords very closely to the philosophy outlined in her posthumous *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*. So close are they in broad points and tone, I will treat them as productions of a single mind. These texts together give the fullest picture of the *aporia* created by Conway's investigation into the nature of individual identity, and in the end they challenge rather than resolves the problem of who exactly *is* the moral agent supposed to accrue positive or negative reward from her actions.

*Seder Olam* describes a world in which every human being has existed for thousands of years before his or her bodily, material birth. According to Conway, the opening of Genesis describes not the creation of *the* world, but the creation of *a* world, called the "World of Fabrication," or the "Asiatick World." God built the visible world from the pieces of the two earlier worlds, the "World of Formation," and the original, the "World of Creation," the only world that God specifically created.<sup>29</sup> Each world existing seven thousand years, human beings have forgotten most of our history and nearly all of our significance. "Men are created in the World of Creation...formed in the World of Formation..." and "made in the World of Fabrication," but the whole of our living memory belongs to the World of Fabrication,

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<sup>29</sup> *Seder Olam, or The order, series or succession of all the ages, periods, and times of the whole world is theologically, philosophically and chronologically explicated and stated also the hypothesis of the pre-existensy and revolution of humane souls together with the thousand years reign of Christ on earth*, London, 1694, Early English Books Online, 78.



and only one meager age of our lives in that world.<sup>30</sup> The difference between what the human soul has experienced and what the human mind remembers is staggering. We remember bits of our one life as human beings, but we have lived a dozen lives. We have existed for thousands of years, and we have been created as part of the pre-existent principles that make up the fundamentals of Creation.

As a result of our impossibly long lives before our most recent birth, human consciousness only dips a toe into the enormous pool of everything we are, our countless previous lives and other spiritual-physical formations, as well as everything we will be. The antiquity of matter implies the antiquity of our souls as well. As van Helmont and the others write in the later *Two Hundred Queries*: “Is not the Soul of Man as ancient as the body? And is not the body confessed by all to be a Praeexistent matter or substance?”<sup>31</sup> We have existed as souls at least as long as the corporeal elements that make up our bodies have, but we cannot remember the entirety of our lives as souls. Consciousness does not have a monopoly on the important facts of who a person is and for what they are responsible. The object that was for Conway’s contemporary Descartes the ground and root of all further knowledge—the *cogito*—would for Conway capture only the mere sensation of one late form of being, a form that the living spirit will soon transcend on its path to other forms. If the *cogito* established the root of knowledge, it also established the root of identity: *I am* as a logical consequence of my thinking. *Seder Olam* supposes instead that human consciousness lacks a direct relation to human identity, since the vast majority of the facts about a person’s life are unnoted and unrecorded by consciousness.

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<sup>30</sup> *Seder Olam* 42.

<sup>31</sup> *Two Hundred Queries* 130.

What are we, then, as human beings, and in what sense can we be understood to bear moral responsibility for our actions? One way to understand the core of identity may be to look at those parts of identity that survive the human person's death. While there will be many "bodily deaths" along the way, there will also be one, final, all-time death prior to the soul and body's resurrection in heaven. This final death will occur after the Millennium and will result in new, glorified bodies for all the righteous: "the Saints ought to live a thousand Years on Earth, partly that they may receive a visible Reward from God" and "obtain so much, and so great Glory, as they shall be invested with, when they shall ascend Bodily into Heaven."<sup>32</sup> The fact that the bodies are new indicates that we will not find the stable person by looking at the heavenly resurrection. Human bodies are not restored to their original perfection but simply *improved* by passing into heaven. A thoroughgoing Platonist might suggest that the afterlife strips mere materiality from the human person, conceiving that materiality never constituted the core of the person from the beginning.<sup>33</sup> But

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<sup>32</sup> *Seder Olam* 128.

P.C. Almond observes that *Seder Olam* argues for "two somewhat confused pictures of the millennial period. On the one hand, at the millennium (or during the 260 years preceding it), all would be raised up to live upon the earth for a thousand years in a terrestrial body not needful of food or drink. Until 260 years after the beginning of the millennium, the saints would marry and have children. Those who were alive at the beginning of the millennium would live on, the wicked only for a hundred years, the good for its duration. The good would bear children who were the Saints who had lived before." (*Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England*, New York: Cambridge U P, 1994, 21)

<sup>33</sup> See Thomas Burnet: "what need is there of a Body to Souls already established in the supreme Light of Heaven? You will, perhaps, say, that the Body may participate of the Glory and the Reward, as it was once a Partaker of the Calamities which the Soul endured in this Life, or of the good Works which is wrought. You trifle with me: The Soul of every Man is the Man: *It is the Soul that sees, and the Soul that hears.* The Body perceives nothing of Good and Evil: Matter neither enjoys pleasure, nor is

*Seder Olam* merely grants *another* body to the human person who has enjoyed many different bodies—a better body, but not an original one. This new, glorified body is the reward of the virtuous person on earth, but it is not the essence of that person any more than any given body occupied on the long journey of transmigration.

Neither our present consciousness nor our final reward in heaven constitutes the autonomous “self” to whom the reward of all our actions good and bad accrue. The new soul will never recognize the structure of its existence within a given lifetime. The beings that do experience them will not have the present person’s memories, will not experience a continuity of consciousness, will be, in a certain sense, a new person. Thus, *Seder Olam* gives no coherent account of the essence of human personhood. Rather, it is human beings’ placement into a moral story that gives them distinction from one another. At the imagined telos of the end of time, each person will look back over his or her life and understand the story that was being told. It is not the substance of this final body, but its promise that suggests the integrity of the human person. “Why therefore cannot Men remember that they have lived before?” the text asks. “For that stands in the Counsel and Goodness of God; but in the end of the World the Books shall be opened, and they shall remember all things.”<sup>34</sup> Only in the fullness of time, in the apocalypse, will souls look back on their collective lifetimes and understand the story being told.

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affected with Grief; turn it which way you will, and join it to what you will, in vain you may endeavour to crown with Glory a Lump of senseless Clay, or make that the Author of Good or Evil, which is equally void of Understanding and Will.” (*A treatise concerning the state of departed souls before, and at, and after the resurrection*, London, 1733, Early English Books Online, 70)

<sup>34</sup> *Seder Olam* 44.

In the here and now, the success or failure of a life can only be appreciated formally, because no human being will ever experience the deserts of his or her own good deeds or the redemption of suffering. Life will only reveal its genuine shape at its end. The end promises to reveal not just the purpose of life but the identity of the life's protagonist, which otherwise never comes into view. I will not know who *I* was, until the end of time, when at last I see all the people *I* have been. Rather than showing the true location of personal identity, the vision of a soul in continual transmigration upsets traditional perspectives on the stability of personal identity. It is the overall framework of ethics, the global picture, that supports the attempt at theodicy, not any particular individual's actions and deserts.

By redrawing the boundaries of a human life to a 7000-year span of repeated soul transmigrations, *Seder Olam* reconceptualizes personal identity and attempts to push her contemporaries to rethink the ethical boundaries of a human lifespan. The author's theory of metempsychosis articulates a vision of world history that does not depend on the imagination of a future state of heavenly bliss. *Seder Olam* imagines an overall theodicy for each human lifetime spread out over several reborn lives. In order to accomplish this re-envisioning, the author diminishes the importance of each individual human self in favor of an extended and more global personality.

Conway's idea of metempsychosis upsets the humanistic notions of personal autonomy being articulated in the same moment by her contemporaries John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. The fact that the human soul bears responsibility for so many unremembered actions, for so much pre-conscious activity good and bad, suggests that Conway has an idea of ethical being that does not rely on the agency of the autonomous individual. Instead, human responsibility arcs over a vast range of time, over 7000 years and countless bodies; within that global perspective, human

sinfulness has the potential to be distributed beyond the confines of a single life. Conway may imagine that each piece of human suffering receives redemption and reward, but she does so inside a framework impossibly vast and intricate.

The clean distinction between that for which I am responsible and that for which I am not vanishes under the perspective of Conway's globally-conceived lifetime. The black box of my past lives may contain anything and everything that has occurred in human history, and the entire future will be, in a sense, my responsibility to live through as well as to influence and determine. Metempsychosis transforms the concept of the 'I' by extending it, mysteriously and almost infinitely, in all directions around one's geographic, temporal, and social self. Though conceived as an organic unit, the borders of a given lifetime vanish into the horizons of a self continually and unpredictably reborn. The implications of the sociality of the self as conceived in Kabbalistic metempsychosis connect to a struggle for ideological power inside the leadership of the growing Quaker community and more broadly within the religious-political goals of late seventeenth-century Millenarianism.

## II. Millenarian Optimism in the *Two Hundred Queries*

The members of the van Helmont circle always wrote with the aim of persuading readers to adopt their theories. This attempt at persuasion had different interlocutors but a common eschatological purpose. Van Helmont and his collaborators were attempting to bring about the forthcoming Millennium by means of persuasive, conversionist writing. Much more tolerationist than many of their contemporaries, they believed Jews, Muslims, and Catholics could be potential converts to a Protestant Kabbalist-Quakerism that would be the authentic Christian truth and a spiritually liberated theology. This theology uses metempsychosis as the

engine of its history, which might potentially lead to a philosophy of quietism. Since metempsychosis places into God's hands the exclusive capacity to settle the affairs of justice on earth, metempsychosis might lead to quietism, the belief that God will sort out human problems without human effort. The van Helmont circle was committed to the opposite hypothesis and to the drive to work actively in order to fulfill God's purpose on earth. Indeed, in the *Two Hundred Queries*, the Kabbalist emerges, simultaneous with metempsychosis, as the engine of history.<sup>35</sup> Eschatology prompts an immediate political and social response on the part of true believers. For them, conversion and the propagation of authentic truth are a mission toward which the Millenarian converts contribute by sharing their abstruse but salvific philosophy with the unconverted.

These eschatological efforts and Millenarian expectations came together in the publishing effort of the *Two Hundred Queries*. In the 1680s van Helmont and his collaborators wrote a work that pressed the Quakers to accept the doctrine of metempsychosis as a centerpiece of their radical theology. As a text worthy of study in its own right, showing van Helmont's eclecticism as well as Conway's perspicacity, it represents one of the era's profound explorations of the idea of transmigration and its compatibility with a version of Christian history. Traditionally attributed to van Helmont alone, the *Two Hundred Queries Moderately propounded concerning the Doctrine of the Revolution of Humane Souls, and its Conformity to the Truths of Christianity* reflects the collective work and interest of Keith, Conway, and van Helmont. The text was an attempted intellectual and dogmatic coup within the

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<sup>35</sup> *Two Hundred Queries Moderately Propounded Concerning the Doctrine of the Revolution of Humane Souls: and its Conformity to the Truths of Christianity*. London, 1699. Early English Books Online.

Quaker ranks. Written to show the Scriptural reasonableness and compatibility with Quakerism of van Helmont's Kabbalistic doctrine of the soul's preexistence and transmigration, the text was met by a stern response both from English academic theologians and the unofficial leader of the Quaker movement, George Fox.

Unwilling to see the Quaker faith split into separate camps of Helmontians and Foxians, Fox quickly pressured other Quaker leaders to condemn the treatise and the Kabbalistic theology it represented.

Due to modern perceptions of Quakerism as a modest, individualist, and simple faith, van Helmont's attempt to interpose these baroque Kabbalistic theories may seem out of touch with Quakerism's intellectual and religious core, but to van Helmont, Quakerism and Kabbalah had more in common with each other than they did with the Christianity of England and his native Netherlands. From van Helmont's perspective, Quakers and Kabbalists likewise believed in a universal faith that downplayed the importance of the historical Jesus and more complex theological doctrines like the Trinity and thereby created an ecumenical faith for the conversion of Jews and Muslims. Like Quakerism, van Helmont's faith had a strong Millennial aspect; in his spiritual optimism, van Helmont was always looking forward to the coming Millennium, a time when the spiritual purity of individual believers, actualized by the recognition of the divine seed or inner light within them would be shared not just with a small community like that at Ragley Hall, but with everyone in a global Christian community.

Of particular importance in this respect were the Jews, whose conversion had been imagined in traditional Christian theology as a means of hastening the forthcoming *eschaton* and thus became for van Helmont one of the active duties of the intellectual Christian. The intellectual heritage of the circle was largely Millenarian.

Conway was of course taught by More, whose tutor at Cambridge was the Millenarian Joseph Mede, a so-called “Middle Puritan” and voice of moderation during the years leading up to the Civil Wars.<sup>36</sup> Believing the millennium incipient, Mede thought that the people of England were in the midst of a revolution of knowledge that would only intensify in the ensuing decades as the end of days drew near.<sup>37</sup> More was “an heir of this puritan expectation of a radical increase in knowledge as a presage of the Millennium,” and Conway’s letters show the great expectations for a renewal in knowledge she shared with her former mentor.<sup>38</sup> Through Conway and More the van Helmont circle shared the Cambridge Platonists’ millenarian enthusiasm. The development of a purified theology, one aimed at the conversion of both Jews and Muslims (the latter tolerated by van Helmont even if their conversion did not effect the same results), was a matter of the first degree as both a spiritual and political project. Through texts like the *Two Hundred Queries*, where he tried to establish Quakerism as a Kabbalistic faith perfect for the conversion of Jews, van Helmont believed he was saving souls, correcting centuries-old errors, and hastening the forthcoming Millennium and the fulfillment of the purpose of history.

The text’s revision of Christian chronology is the most explicit statement of transmigration’s agreement with Christianity produced by this circle of thinkers.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> In one of the many parallels of the lives of the two men, Mede was the teacher of John Milton as well as More.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform, 1626-1600* New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976.

<sup>38</sup> P.C. Almond “Henry More and the Apocalypse,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54: 189-200, 190.

<sup>39</sup> As Sarah Hutton points out, the author also argues that the transmigration of souls provides the only rational explanation for the resurrection of the body, contorting Jewish Kabbalism toward the decidedly non-Judaic doctrine of the resurrection. (*Anne Conway, Woman Philosopher* 208)



The author frames the introduction of a bizarre revisionary chronology through Scriptural examples, everywhere making the soul's transmigration appear the only reasonable interpolation to resolve otherwise illogical exegetical inconsistencies. "Seeing Christ said in *John 9.12.35.*," the author writes, "*There are twelve hours in the day...doth he not thereby intimate, that those men had had a long day, which was no expiring, and with many of them, perhaps the very last hour?*"<sup>40</sup> Questioning the literal reader, the author demands "what day is this? and what are the twelve hours thereof? is it (think you) the natural day? and natural hours?"<sup>41</sup> The author takes up Christ's parabolic metaphor of the lifetime as a "day" and, rather than allegorizing it, treats it numerologically, with each hour esoterically linked to the hour represented by a single reborn lifetime: "is it not much rather to be understood of twelve distinct intervals of life, which every man receives upon this earth, by the appointment of God, in much long-suffering, causing them to be twelve several times born into the World?"<sup>42</sup> Despite van Helmont's adoption of the idea of transmigration, or *gilgul*, from the Jewish Kabbalah, the author here tries to justify the idea as rising naturally out of paradoxical cruxes in Scripture. This apology for Kabbalah requires a voluntary display of ignorance of the typical Christian practices of allegorical reading, born from Tertullian and the Platonist school at Alexandria in the early Christian era, in order to justify the importation of an otherwise foreign (to the work's English, mostly Christian and Quaker, readers) theological concept. Only *gilgul* or transmigration saves Scripture's reasonableness from the abyss of literal reading. Exegesis, however,

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<sup>40</sup> *Two Hundred Queries* 6.

<sup>41</sup> *Two Hundred Queries* 7.

<sup>42</sup> *Two Hundred Queries* 7.

is not the text's primary justificatory strategy; the primary strategy to defend *gilgul*, and likely the motivation for the idea's inclusion at all, remains its work as an engine of theodicy. Transmigration does not just defend the reasonableness of Scripture but the reasonableness, and the justice, of God himself.

In keeping with the early modern assumption that virtue is learned over the course of a life rather than inherent, the author of *Two Hundred Queries* asserts that the early deaths of many human beings are a profound cosmic injustice, since these individuals are never given the opportunity to learn, grow, and repent of their earlier, youthful crimes. “*God hath indured with much long-suffering the vessel of wrath fitted for destruction,*” Paul writes in Romans 9.22, and the author asks “can this be properly said of such Vessels of wrath, as he cutteth off in their wickedness at eight, ten, twelve, or twenty years?”<sup>43</sup> God's justice owes an equal temporal duration to human beings; because (as the author quotes from Scripture) “*with God there is no respect of persons*” and “*all the ways of the Lord are equal,*” equal duration grants to all human beings equal opportunities for growth and development of virtue.<sup>44</sup> God's gifts extend to the gift of time itself, the mere sequence of instants that make up a human life, and even the duration of *these* instants must, in the final reckoning, have been equal for every human being, whether born in the first decades of Christian history, prior to it, or now.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Two Hundred Queries* 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Two Hundred Queries* 3.

<sup>45</sup> The author multiplies examples from Scripture where God's long suffering seems to fall short of true equality: “Had those children who mocked the Prophet *Elisha*, and (being cursed by him) were slain in their wickedness by the Bears...had they (I say) never any other time given them to repent in? If not, how can it properly be said, That God did bear with them with much long-suffering?” *Two Hundred Queries* 6.

This idea in van Helmont and Conway has a conciliatory and ecumenical dimension. Important for van Helmont and his company is the problem of the “noble pagans,” those virtuous men and women who lived before Christ or were otherwise unexposed to his Gospel. The idea of transmigration supposes an equal distribution of opportunities for virtuous action and Christian repentance. Those who do well in their lives as pagans will be reborn in Christian countries, to be afforded with a more bountiful opportunity for virtue in the form of exposure to the Gospel and the nurture of Christian community:

If all that dyed in their sins from the beginning of the World, to the death of our Saviour Jesus Christ, did immediately after death, suffer, and continue under the same punishment, as those that lived after, and rejected the mercy and Grace offered through Jesus Christ; how could the Apostle say, That God winked at them all that time of Ignorance?...Is it not most probable from hence, that those very Men then living, whom the Apostle so warned, had lived before in those times of Ignorance, sleeping as in the Night?<sup>46</sup>

The idea of the noble pagan suggests that Jews, Muslims, and pagans have in them the capacity for virtue. From the perspective of Kabbalistic metempsychosis, the noble pagan idea receives the additional dimension of future lives for those experienced in virtue during their lives. The noble pagan, born before the birth of Christ, will be reborn in a Christian society. Gradually, as they are reborn, the noble pagans will be exposed more fully to the Gospel. The Christian therefore is placed

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<sup>46</sup> *Two Hundred Queries* 9.

toward the ends of the historical cycles of birth and rebirth, transforming the Jewish Cabbalistic *gilgul* into a form of Christian apologetics.

There is a stadial aspect to the view of history proposed in this notion, in which successive forms of human social and religious life lead inexorably, at least for the virtuous, Christ-ward. Human pagan societies are redeemed, soul by soul, into societies ever closer to the truth of Christianity. One at a time right-acting souls are reborn into Christian societies and places with increasingly liberal practices. One could compare this view of history to a progressivist, Whiggish theory of history, but the idea bizarrely transposes the cultural history of nations and races onto the history of a single individual, whose continual birth and rebirth registers, with passing centuries, the appearance, death, and reappearance, of higher forms of culture and religion, culminating in a Christian society. For van Helmont and Conway, the ideal society, founded on Christian principles, had not yet been fully achieved, for that would be the Millennium society, one brought into temporal existence by the conversion of the Jews, the very act of conversion narrated in the history of the individual soul's cycle of *gilgul*. The fact of the Jew's present state of non-conversion indicates that the Millennium is yet to come. It also shows that while the historical scheme of *gilgul* is stadial, the final stage has not been achieved.

The "end of history" is not the current state of things, either in Christian Europe (regardless of van Helmont's tolerationist attitudes toward fellow Christians, both Protestant and Catholic) or in Restoration-era England. The end of history rests on the other side of a concise and specific political activity, the conversion of the Jews, but also, mysteriously, as the incalculable result of the endless varieties of lives acted out, being born and reborn according to their moral deserts, and preparing in that fashion for universal conversion to Christianity in some future, unguessably

distant life. History is therefore malleable, subject to the political projects of individuals who undertake the political task of conversion; but it also rests in the uncountable hands of the many, whose personal morality directly ties to their reward after death, a reward that will further advance history, both personal and global, toward its higher stages.

The increased political agency of the individual, who acts through conversion to bring about the turn toward history's liberating conclusion, stands in contrast to the measured, top-down quietism of *Seder Olam*, where the individual's life contributed only to its own recuperation. In fact, the historical agent was absent from the theology of *Seder Olam* except as a total picture, a sum of all the actions good and bad undertaken by a repeatedly reincarnated spirit over several lifetimes. By contrast, the *Two Hundred Queries*' emphasis on Christian rather than cosmic history transforms the realm of climactic value from the final moments in the heavenly realm, when the universal story will be revealed, to the pre-Millennial world where right-thinking Christians will contribute to and hasten that forthcoming golden age. The two texts dramatize a conflict between the quietist and revolutionary mindsets embedded in the van Helmont circle's Millenarian discourses. At the same time, they present rival visions of the function and consequence of transmigration, or perhaps two sides of its nature. Transmigration either involves human beings in a cosmic story of such mysterious complexity as to be unintelligible to all but the providential intelligence of God, or it places humans into a context that makes broad collective action spiritually as well as politically meaningful. In *Seder Olam*, the purpose of a life adheres only in those little actions of good and bad that add up to no pattern discernable by human perception; in *Two Hundred Queries*, purpose lies in the pragmatic organization of individual and collective beliefs in order to effect a more perfect social world.

### III. The Natural Science of Metempsychosis

Metempsychosis has a strange afterlife as mechanical theory of existence and material replication. This afterlife began in the writing of Conway herself, as she attempted to articulate the natural scientific explanations and implications of a belief in metempsychosis. The Kabbalah espoused by the van Helmont circle finally repudiated its own epistemic foundations, when Anne Conway offered a natural scientific justification of metempsychosis in place of the esoteric knowledge on which it was first grounded. In Conway's posthumous treatise, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, the means of proving the coherence of Kabbalistic metempsychosis become conceptual and natural-scientific. Just after Conway's time, natural scientists and esotericists like Whitelocke Bulstrode articulate a vision of metempsychosis fully coherent with the most groundbreaking corporealist philosophies of the day, an articulation anticipated and largely directed by Conway herself. The transition from a philosophy of divine immanence to one of materiality can be seen therefore in the way metempsychosis is reinterpreted by corporealists, but also in the way corporealism can be found as an under-theme in the writing of avowed spiritualists like Conway.

The *Principles* does not reproduce the ideas of any of her collaborators or contemporaries but instead blazes ahead into the intellectual territory they left unexplored. Where the *Two Hundred Queries* and *Seder Olam* approach metempsychosis from a scriptural point of view, in the *Principles* Conway explores the quiddities of distinctive Kabbalistic doctrines under their metaphysical aspect. Her analysis opens up a heretofore unexplored intellectual terrain: the relationship between metempsychosis and a philosophy of materiality. Her idea of materiality

must be qualified, since it might also be described as anti-material. Like her contemporary Margaret Cavendish, Conway rejected dualistic premises altogether.<sup>47</sup> Where Cavendish conceptualizes a world built, like Thomas Hobbes's, entirely of matter, albeit intriguingly sensitive matter, Conway collapses bodies into the wider category of spirit.<sup>48</sup> Conway justified the spiritual aliveness of matter with an appeal to God's attribute of goodness: "[h]ow can it be, that any dead Thing should proceed from him, or be created by him, such as is mere Body or Matter, according to their [the dualists'] Hypothesis, who affirm, that the same is wholly inconvertible [sic], to any degree of Life or Knowledge?"<sup>49</sup> For Conway, the goodness of God made impossible his creation of anything dead, corrupt, or immoral. Conway maintained a conviction that matter possessed an irreducible moral good, that it participated in and could be formed into spirit, and that it was created for the enjoyment of living beings. This spiritual theory of matter derives largely from van Helmont's Kabbalistic non-dualism. Though many of the large points of her metaphysical scheme accord with van Helmont's, her sharper metaphysical focus rejects many of the unproveable

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<sup>47</sup> See Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 2007, 66. Broad notes that while Henry More encouraged Conway to challenge Cavendish in print (Cavendish's male contemporaries being uniformly unwilling to do so), Cavendish's critique of More's dualism resembled what would become Conway's own.

<sup>48</sup> Her conception of spirit most nearly resembles that of John Milton, for whom body and spirit exist on a continuum, with spirit as the more rarefied and superior element emerging out of the grosser materials of body. Milton's archangel Raphael explains to the prelapsarian Adam and Eve how their fine diet of light but physical food will contribute to their bodies' eventual transmutation into spirit "from these corporal nutriments perhaps / Your bodies may at last turn all to Spirit, / Improv'd by tract of time, and wingd ascend / Ethereal, as wee." *Paradise Lost* 5.496-99. Stephen M. Fallon first suggested that Conway's philosophy "offers illuminating similarities to Milton's" (*Milton Among the Philosophers: Poetry and Materialism in Seventeenth-Century England*, New York: Cornell U P, 1991, 111).

<sup>49</sup> *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* 92, 93.

historical aspects of Kabbalah, such as the cycle of worlds. The rejection of these unproveable historical details indicates how Conway takes onto Kabbalah the task of explaining the operations of the physical universe absent scriptural verification.

Like her mentor More, Conway was undoubtedly interested in the philosophical implications of the new experimentalism. Like More, however, she mostly rejected its premises, especially materialism and empiricism, believing that reasoning from the attributes of God secured a more stable foundation for natural knowledge. Conway's natural scientific mode grounds even the radical conclusion that human and animal natures can mutually transmute into each other. As P.C. Almond explains, "Since all created beings share in the one substance, their essence is mutable. Thus, human substances can change—are really changed—into different kinds of things, sometimes into animals, eventually into aethereal beings."<sup>50</sup>

Though the *Principles* presents a natural science of metempsychosis, the primary explanation for Conway's idea of transmigration is ethical. Transmigrations or, it is equally appropriate to say, transformations, occur as a result of the ethical lives lived by the individuals; such is a requirement of metempsychosis being used as an engine of theodicy, where deed is always linked to punishment as cause is to effect. Conway writes of this process in an exuberant mode characteristic of Pico della Mirandola's famous encomium for human transformation: "is it not just that if a man lives a pure and holy life on this earth, like the heavenly angels, that he is elevated to the rank of angels after he dies and becomes like them, since the angels also rejoice over him?"<sup>51</sup> Like Pico, Conway imagines the human soul capable of a remarkable

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<sup>50</sup> *Heaven and Hell* 23.

<sup>51</sup> *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* 35.



range of transformations toward the highest orders of being, but the same morally-driven transformation also occurs in the instance of an evil or “diabolical” man who dies unredeemed. On death he becomes a devil. The soul transforms its body into what it emotionally and morally resembles.<sup>52</sup>

Despite its ethical motivations, the actual process of transformation is narrated physico-chemically via her concept of the plastic faculty and the relationship among competing spirits inside the individual soul. Conway argues that the so-called plastic faculty of the spirit creates the outward form of the body from its constituent parts. Her defense of this power draws upon myths (which also occupied the attention of Plotinus) about the power of the mother’s body to form the infant body into whatever she looked at or imagined during the time of conception. By the same logic in Conway’s account, the human soul creates and sustains its own human body by its plastic power. By its righteousness and resemblance to God, the human soul manages to generate its own body out of a certain arrangement of smaller, lesser spirits. Over this “innumerable multitude of Spirits united together” reigns “one Captain, or Chief Governor,” with an array of lesser spirits serving as administrators. When the chief spirit in an organism cedes power through sin to one of its lower powers, the organism transforms to resemble more closely the lower element, which is animal in nature: “if someone lives neither an angelic or diabolical life but rather a brutish or animal life, so that his spirit is more like the spirit of beasts than any other creature, does the same justice not act most justly, so that just as he became a brute in spirit and allowed his

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<sup>52</sup> There are indications of a more traditional concept of soul side by side with the more radical identification of soul and matter. The divine soul breathed into human beings by the creator stands in contrast to the other types of soul that emerge from the earth and the rest of creation. There is a distinction, therefore, between the human soul and mere matter, despite matter’s spiritous nature.

brutal part and spirit to have dominion over his more excellent part, he also (at least regards his external shape) changes his corporeal shape into that species of beast to which he is most similar in terms of the qualities and conditions of his mind?”<sup>53</sup>

Conway explains how transformations occur only at death by appealing to the reconstituting power of the plastic faculty. While individuals are constantly changing in minor ways, only at death do they undergo a radical bodily change in the form of decomposition, and over this radical process the plastic faculty exercises its force and sway.

This process will occur by means of the conflict among spirits within the human soul. When the bestial part of a human assumes dominance over the rest, “[i]t necessarily follows that this body, which the vital spirit forms, will be that of a brute and not a human, for the brute spirit cannot produce or form any other shape because its formative power is governed by its imagination, which imagines and conceives as strongly as possible its own image, according to which the external body must take shape.”<sup>54</sup> The captain spirit strives in competition with these lesser spirits, which denote the human being’s connection to brutal and inhumane vices such that when the singular spirit dies in a brutish person, the brutal spirit carries dominion and returns, now with “Dominion over that Body, so that its Plastick Faculty hath the Liberty of forming a body, after its own Idea and Inclination (which before, in the Humane Body, it had not).” On death, the lower spirits inside the body assume control and, having dominion over the body, begin to form the new body in accordance with their own nature. Thus, a man becomes bestial and through the vital spirit’s imaginative,

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<sup>53</sup> *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* 36.

<sup>54</sup> *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* 36.

forming power, becomes a beast. This unique argument, filtered through the Kabbalistic definition of matter as a spiritual substance, effectively offers a natural scientific explanation for metempsychosis, one not to be found in the writings of the other members of the van Helmont circle.

While Conway's argument would not pass for empirical observation in the vein of her contemporaries in the Royal Society, her arguments about the nature of substance partake not only of the moralizing logic of theological sin and punishment, but also of the contemporary debates about embryology and the nature of biological life as such. This natural scientific register in regards to the soul's transmigration is corroborated in the work of other philosophers of the period. In 1692, over a decade after Conway's death, the English mystical writer Whitelocke Bulstrode published "An Essay of Transmigration in Defence of Pythagoras," in which he challenged the predominant view of Pythagoras's doctrine of metempsychosis on corporealist grounds.<sup>55</sup> Bulstrode argues that all previous interpreters of Pythagoras had understood his signature theory of the soul's transmigration incorrectly. "I writ this Essay for my own Satisfaction and Use," Bulstrode writes, "and now publish it to vindicate the Honour of Pythagoras, whom, though I would not, with the Heathen, Deifie for his eminent Works; yet I would defend him from the Calumny of the World, so unjustly cast upon him, as the Author of an erroneous Doctrine."<sup>56</sup> The "erroneous Doctrine" assumed to be held by Pythagoras was the idea that conscious human souls leave their bodies upon death and enter into the bodies of new creatures, including those of animals. Because of its unacceptable association of the human with

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<sup>55</sup> Whitelocke Bulstrode, *An Essay of Transmigration, in Defence of Pythagoras*, London, 1692, Early English Books Online.

<sup>56</sup> "Preface to the Reader."

the animal, the doctrine of transmigration into the bodies of animals was generally held “scarce worth the refutation,” as the Athenian Gazette put it in 1691.<sup>57</sup> Against these previous interpretations, Bulstrode argues that properly understood metempsychosis was nothing more or less than a consequence of the materiality of the sensitive and vegetative parts of the soul. Since all matter preexists the body, Bulstrode suggests, and since the sensitive and vegetative parts of the soul remain material, these aspects of the soul predate and postdate the body. Matter not being destroyed at the death of the body, the animal spirits in the blood continue after the body’s life. These spirits are in turn consumed by creatures in the soil, by worms and carrion birds, and in the process are incorporated into their bodies. In this fashion, the souls of human beings can really be said to have transmigrated into the bodies of brutes. This interpretation of transmigration might not have impressed Ovid’s Pythagoras, whose impassioned speech before the gods of Olympus argues for the moral necessity of vegetarianism because of the possibility of killing one’s brother or of eating one’s father in the form of a slab of meat. Bulstrode’s account, however much it downplays the element of consciousness in the lives of animals, provides a more radical sense of the common material basis of life on earth than the traditional conception of the Pythagorean account. Not only do animals consume and pass on the sensitive and vegetative aspects of the soul; even plants contain the transmigrated souls of human beings, as they suck up life from the remains of human bodies. The whole world, as one vast material substrate, hums with the same stuff that made up human life. This is Pythagoras, corporealized.

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<sup>57</sup> *Heaven and Hell* 21.

In Bulstrode's hands, transmigration is not an improbable immaterialist philosophy but a logical consequence of materialism. Bulstrode's natural scientific aspiration can be seen in his assertion that the idea of transmigration is not merely acclaimed as "Orthodox & Philosophical among the Ancients, but as *True and Evident in Nature*"<sup>58</sup> If the notion of transmigration were merely "a speculative Notion, and of no Use...it should have slept in eternal Shades; but in regard it acquaints us, in its full Latitude, with the various Operations of God, the Generation and Dissolution of all Created Beings...it is a subject not so mean as to be despised."<sup>59</sup> While Bulstrode's belief in an incorporeal rational soul separates him from materialists in the vein of Hobbes and Cavendish, his reinterpretation of the Pythagorean theory of soul origin rewrites its value for an increasingly corporeal science of embryology and bodily reproduction.

Bulstrode does not revolutionize the theory of Conway and her collaborators but instead follows it to its natural conclusion. Like Bulstrode, Conway recognizes the compatibility of a modified Pythagorean metempsychosis with corporeal explanations of soul activity. In the *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, Conway incorporates metempsychosis into a pseudo-materialist philosophy that ascribes ethical value to all forms of life, whether they have achieved the state of reason or remain irrational, if self-propelled bodies. Conway casts all living creatures—and all creatures in some respect are alive—into a state of perpetual redefinition that resists hypostasis into a single world order. With transmigration as the engine of this continual change, Conway's redefinition demonstrates the creature

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<sup>58</sup> "Preface" my emphasis.

<sup>59</sup> "Preface."

operating in accordance with the wide latitude of possibility offered by the universe's diversity for entities' transformation and repeated, not completed, fulfillment.

Conway's physico-chemical explanation for the processes of metempsychosis indicates how she has integrated the doctrine into a worldview that, while not strictly materialist, involves explanatory frameworks and expectations similar to the century's other forms of mechanistic naturalism.

### Conclusion

The vision of metempsychosis articulated by Conway and her collaborators repudiates the traditional vision of the afterlife represented by most seventeenth-century Christian philosophers, by virtue of its naturalism, its secularism, and the roles imagined for the human being inside history. It is an early attempt to articulate a theory of history as a phenomenon driven by human rather than divine efforts. The driver of this increasingly secular history is the liberating power of the authentic Gospel itself, understood as a private revelation and an inner purity. The overwhelming impulse of history for the van Helmont circle is to make human spirits free. Liberty is conceived as a state of transformation that frees us from external forms of social control by integrating essential truth into our very persons. Quakerism and Kabbalah together add up to a liberating theology that finally wrests itself even from the external Scriptures themselves.

Van Helmont, Conway, and Keith saw a future in which Quaker-Kabbalism swept across Europe and Asia, converting Jews, Muslims, and Christians into a Christocentric but individualist and spiritualist faith. Had such a conversion succeeded, the philosophies of Enlightenment might not have coalesced around the idea of the nation state, with its army of atomistic units brought into mutual relation

by social contract; instead, it would have involved a voluntary association of individuals united by their common sense of salvation and purification. It is no surprise that this ideological revolution did not happen; van Helmont and Conway were far from perfect representatives of the *vita activa* in the seventeenth century. Their perspective has more generalized quietism about it than activism, but they sensed and attempted to articulate another way of being-together than those in the imagined communities of Catholicism and Protestantism, one that would be private, ecumenical, and enlightened.

The vision of world order, however, imagined by these collaborators anticipates timely aspects of our modern conception of a global society. Without a doubt, the circle's employment of Lurianic Kabbala seems to drive against the encroachment of scientific and ecumenical modernity, but the uses to which they put this philosophy indicate their growing commitment to a kind of materiality (abstractly understood), a society built on consensus and human efforts, and, amazingly, a vision of world peace. Seen from this perspective, the van Helmont circle articulated an innovative vision of world order and built it around a to-hand metaphysical system in the form of Kabbala. In that system, metempsychosis provides an explanation of the positive engine of progress in history, in contrast to Renaissance theories of the degeneration of human civilization as well as Christian pessimism about the fate of the secular world. Finally, metempsychosis provided a fair approximation of the ways in which a secularizing world observes its own life, death, and survival. We die and become the next generation.

## Chapter Three

### Visions of Eternal Being in Thomas Traherne's Writings

*The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.*

-Leo Strauss<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

In several poems in his two manuscripts and in set piece reflections in his magisterial *Centuries of Meditation*, the poet and priest Thomas Traherne (1636-1674) borrows the Platonic theory of the soul's preexistence and experiments with its possibilities. Traherne's thoughts on preexistence are scattered throughout his works, not consolidated into a sustained treatment. Several of his poems feature imagery and language derived from previous explications of preexistence, sometimes directly borrowing from other writers who believe the idea, yet Traherne never professes belief in preexistence. Though each deployment of these tropes is different, Traherne's method consists in viewing preexistence as a fiction that displays a spiritual truth. Traherne consistently plays with preexistence in his poetry, because preexistence, like his other poetic conceits, suggests the grandeur of the human soul and the miraculous innocence of the newborn child. Entertaining the idea also allows Traherne to investigate and imagine several otherwise unimaginable events, such as the subjective experience of bodily creation. Traherne's poetic use of preexistence is

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1995, 13.



ultimately metaphysical conceit, highly valued for his poetic art, though an instructive fiction rather than a belief.

At the same time, this “conceit” is deeply revealing about the structure and character of Traherne’s poetic theology, especially how it manifests in his more “mystical” or “visionary” moments of poetic expression. These shopworn words effectively convey the kind of writing on which Traherne is engaged in certain passages. A crucial moment early in his *Centuries of Meditation* shows Traherne as a child confronted with the intuition that the entire world is not just preexistent but eternal. As a child, Traherne perceives a world that was not created by God, a world where “all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places.”<sup>2</sup> While the passage is justly celebrated as one of the heights of Traherne’s prose, when the vision denies a creator, it dangerously departs from the established theology of the Anglican Church and Traherne’s own theism. Traherne’s poetic preexistence conceit teaches us how to read this crucial moment. Traherne imagines a world that is endless, deathless, and unbeginning, precisely because these qualities correspond to his own intuitions about the nature of consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Since Traherne trusts vision to reveal the real nature of things, internal conceit and momentary vision become means of challenging

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Traherne, *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings*. Ed. H. M. Margoliouth. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1965, 3.3.

<sup>3</sup> As Jane Partner suggests, Traherne “believed that the spiritual condition of the individual ultimately depends on the way in which they look at the world.” (*Poetry and Vision in Early Modern England*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018, 89) This straightforward assertion points toward an important truth: that self and world are mutually involved for Traherne, and the means of gaining perspective becomes deeply spiritualized and moralized. In emphasizing the crucial role of internal observation, my work accords with Gary Kuchar’s sense of Traherne’s “deepened focus on experience and consciousness vis-à-vis embodied existence,” *Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne U P, 2005, 182) though with different emphasis.

authoritative accounts of reality. For this reason, though Traherne only entertains the doctrine of preexistence, his entertainments achieve paradoxically the strength and purposiveness of vision, almost a private revelation. Preexistence, though a fiction, reveals a truth, and Traherne's childhood vision of deathlessness shows the world, not as it is, but as it ought to be. The deathless and uncreated nature of the world occupies a conceptual character different from either metaphysical truth or religious belief. It remains true, but true in a mysterious sense, a mystery transcending facts, even transcending faith.

In line with Plotinus and several of the Cambridge Platonists, Traherne believes the perceiving soul to be the same perceptive unit through which God sees. The mind, for Traherne, is also "the candle of the Lord."<sup>4</sup> While drawing on this metaphysically-backed doctrine of Platonic contemplation, he flouts the supposed truth of this doctrine by using its purview to display an evident falsehood. He borrows the Platonic authorization of the individual philosopher—that power of contemplation we have seen in Henry More and in Plotinus—and secularizes its internal logics. Traherne aestheticizes the category of theology from the inside out by claiming the contents of personal vision, but by refusing to derive metaphysical claims from that vision. In his *Centuries* he carefully describes a vision, authorized as true by the Platonic theory of inspiration, but one that negates Christian theology and nature itself. About another early modern philosopher, Leo Strauss writes gnominically but intriguingly, "The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things."<sup>5</sup> For Traherne, appearances do not indicate essences,

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<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 20:27: "The spirit of Man is the Candle of the Lord."

<sup>5</sup> *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 13.

but exist as simple facts rather than surfaces of things with depths. For this refusal to move beyond appearances to essence, spiritual vision need not reveal metaphysical content, and vision itself—that high theory of Plotinus’s soul—is nothing more than what is captured by ordinary, if aesthetic, observation.

#### I. A sweet mistake intending true: Preexistence in Traherne’s Poems

Unlike Henry More and Anne Conway, who wanted to recruit sympathetic readers to their metaphysical positions, Traherne attempts to show how the Christian should meditatively organize his or her internal spiritual architecture. Rather than philosophical treatises aimed at doctrinal certainty, Traherne’s writings are meditations intended to help the Christian live spiritually. Traherne thus adopts the preexistence of the soul as one of his pleasing fictions, a choice conceit that mystically expresses a deeper spiritual truth without being literally true. An example of another of these is the “sweet mistake” of “Shadows in the Water,” in which Traherne sees another world beneath the surface of the water. A “mistake though false, intending true,” the perception of the watery world teaches the infant Traherne a lesson he will later encounter through direct instruction: that a heavenly world awaits him beyond this life.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Traherne’s entertainments of preexistence are mental heuristics that teach the soul the right way to understand its nature and the nature of its creator God. In this context, Traherne takes up the soul’s preexistence for much the reason he takes up the conceit of “Shadows in the Water.” He believes it teaches us something true about the nature of God’s goodness toward us.

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<sup>6</sup> “Shadows in the Water,” 2.

Preexistence furnishes a key metaphysical conceit that appears frequently in Traherne's poetry: the image of his own soul as a stranger newly arrived in the world. This fancy plays with alienation and with the Christian disjunction of the soul from the physical world. This conceit appears in "Wonder," "The Salutation," and "The Preparative." It is wittily reversed in "The Apostasie," in which Traherne narrates how the soul gradually transforms from a stranger to the world to a "stranger to the shining skies." Traherne uses this conceit to dramatize the spiritual attitudes that constitute the proper relationship of self to the world and God, but the metaphors of the "stranger" are troubled and questioned. Traherne refuses to endorse the traditional Christian interpretation of this idea—that the soul should act as a vaguely hostile stranger toward the world. Rather, the scene of encounter between the soul and the physical world is an opportunity to learn more about the soul's nature. The soul is starkly distinct from the "World of custom," but not entirely distinct from the world of nature. By pushing on these moments of encounter, Traherne dramatizes the acquisition (and loss) of the soul's self-knowledge.

While at one level these entertainments are heuristic devices, at another level they possess the authority of metaphysical vision. In Traherne's philosophical scheme, objects entertained by the mind achieve a level of reality that is greater than typical early modern conceptions of imagination. For Traherne, the act of thinking possesses a mystical character whereby ideas achieve new reality by means of the soul's contemplation. Traherne "asserts the ultimate reality of that which has been perceived," because the mind, the *imago dei*, authorizes and makes real that which it perceives.<sup>7</sup> Occasionally, in fact, Traherne asserts that objects or images in the mind

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<sup>7</sup> Jane Partner, *Poetry and Vision in Early Modern England*, 101.

have a higher reality than those that are merely physical. In the second century, he asserts that “a Thought of the World, or the World in a Thought is more Excellent then the World, because it is Spiritual and Nearer unto GOD. The Material World is Dead and feeleth Nothing.” Traherne adds that “GOD hath made you able to Creat Worlds in your own mind, which are more Precious unto Him then those HE Created.”<sup>8</sup> The spirituality of internal worlds, in contrast to the dead materiality of the actual, enlivens them with potential to body forth spiritual truth. The interior world exists in the vibrant structure of the human mind, an image of God, and thus thoughts, even “sweet mistake[s],” can transcend their literal falseness and mystically achieve the nature of a higher truth. This mystical and metaphysical transition of interior thoughts does not contradict the heuristic use of ideas as mere entertainments; indeed, this philosophy guarantees the heuristic will teach the spiritual truth, whatever its literal falsehood or truth.

A small group of “preexistence” poems can be found in Traherne’s two poetic manuscripts, Dobell and Burney.<sup>9</sup> Traherne’s poem “Wonder” is one of these handful of poems that think through the soul’s preexistence:

How like an Angel came I down!

How Bright are all Things here!

When first among his Works I did appear

O how their GLORY me did Crown?

The World resembled his Eternitie,

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<sup>8</sup> *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings* 2.90, 102.

<sup>9</sup> On the composition of these manuscripts, see Gladys I. Wade, “The Manuscripts of the Poems of Thomas Traherne,” *The Modern Language Review* 26.4 (1931): 401-407.

In which my Soul did Walk;  
 And evry Thing that I did see,  
 Did with me talk.<sup>10</sup>

As in Henry Vaughan's "The Retreat," a more conventional lyric in many ways, the speaker of "Wonder" entertains the possibility of the soul's preexistence without asserting it.<sup>11</sup> In the first line, the idea flutters over the speaker's mind, but he does not stretch forth a mental hand to grab it. It rises only from the implications of the temporal language, such as "When first among his works I did appear," the implied beginning before "came I down." Coming down implies that the speaker existed before his appearance on the scene of earth, an idea cut against by his evident nostalgia for the sensations he experienced as a newly arrived infant. Nevertheless, the aspects he values most about new experience are those he thinks may be reminders of a spiritual life in heaven. In his early days, "the world resembled [God's] eternity," and of all things, eternity best resembles eternity. The through-line of childhood and God is preexistence. Though Traherne points to his infancy and not to any "pre-infancy," that infancy possesses many of the angelic qualities of the typical pre-mortal existence. The speaker seems to remember coming down "like an angel" from a higher world. Yet the poem is not about that higher world; it never revisits heaven, if it really begins there.

Despite the visible absence of preexistence from the poem, a brief thought experiment elucidates the role it nevertheless plays in the poem's cosmic logic, a detail the philosophically-minded poet would not have missed. The poem's central

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<sup>10</sup> "Wonder" 7-10 from *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings*, 1-8.

<sup>11</sup> *Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems*, ed. Alan Rudrum, New York: NY: Penguin Books, 1995, 172-73.

concept is the scene of encounter between a fresh soul and a fresh world. Having come from afar, the soul arrives at the world and greets each new object with wonder. A newly created soul, under a psychological theory such as John Locke's, would not yet have the categories of ideas furnished from experience. In other words, the newly created soul in a Lockean scheme could not experience the world as new, because it has nothing to contrast with that world. The very idea of newness is something that must come later. Since Traherne believes the infant soul to possess a number of positive goods—epitomized by that state he called “Perfect innocency by creation”—the idea of preexistence may not be necessary for the encounter to take place.<sup>12</sup> A newly created soul may well be furnished with enough tendencies to have a full encounter with the world and experience it as new. Therefore, preexistence remains somewhat adjacent to Traherne's true aim and topic, childhood. Preexistence is only an implication of the poem, and even if literally true, the speaker is more invested in the idea of childhood that preexistence enriches and brings into focus.

The very brief, bright life of the child's soul perpetually tantalizes with the possibility that it may last forever. Indeed, the child's vision mostly consists in the illusion of eternity, the appearance that simple objects will last forever: “The world resembled his eternity.” The fresh appearance of healthy things gives no sign of the fact that they must die. Traherne hopes that the apparent eternity of sensory objects can be mirrored by a soul—presumably his—that can appreciate the same objects forever: “So rich and great did seem, / As if they ever must endure / In my esteem.” Such valuations do not last, as Traherne soon admits this failure by confessing that as

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<sup>12</sup> See Elizabeth Dodd, “‘Perfect innocency by creation’ in the writings of Thomas Traherne,” *Literature and Theology* 29.2 (2015): 216-236. Dodd argues strongly against a pre-Romantic Traherne, insisting that Traherne's idea of innocence is a specific early modern religious concept that does not imply primitivism.

a child he really knew nothing at all, not knowing pain and death: “Harsh ragged objects were conceal’d,” along with, “Oppressions tears and cries, / Sins, griefs, complaints, dissensions, weeping eyes.” The child has not seen anything ugly, dangerous, or imperfect. The phrases “were concealed” and “Were hid” indicate an active protection from these objects, by parents or happenstance. Despite the meditative power of the child’s moment of visionary contemplation, that vision is only protected by a deliberate ignorance, not just an ignorance of culture’s debilitating customs, but an ignorance of all life’s harder facts.

By emphasizing the child’s ignorance, Traherne deliberately shows the artificial construction of his visionary moment, the fact that it emerges from the contingent arrangements of his life as a child. The child’s vision is not a divination based on an inner power, grasping through mystery some ideal state. Traherne may want to suggest that what the child sees is better, “only things...the angels prize,” but he has no choice but to admit that the child misses substantially the real drama of life on earth, which is always bound up with death. Perhaps it is a miracle that things have been placed before the child in such a way that the unreality of what the child sees reveals a reality about the world to come. This true-false sight of the child is really a conceit, tested every time he repeats it. As in “Shadows of the Water,” the touchstone of Traherne’s use of such conceits, Traherne can believe the child has made a “mistake though false, intending true,” intending, but never certainly achieving.

Taken philosophically, Traherne has implied that the life to come—and possibly the life past—is like the life of a child, especially in the fact that the child does not yet believe in death. Traherne seems to believe in a childhood shot through



with portents of eternal life, “bright shoots of everlastingness” as Vaughan puts it.<sup>13</sup> For Traherne it is not just ignorance that impresses him, but the accompanying wildness of childhood, when he “wander’d over all men’s grounds, / And found repose,” and when he believed “Proprieties themselves were mine, / And hedges ornaments.” That wildness too comes from a kind of ignorance of the proprietary borders between field and field, which may be transgressed even by adults. One limitation on the poet’s aspiration, property relations, is negotiable; death, on the other hand, must be accepted. In the case of property, the child’s ignorance teaches adults a real lesson: that “proprieties” can and should be transgressed. If the child can transgress the borders of property, what else may it transgress? The implicit comparison between death and property suggests likewise that the heavenly border is as porous as the conventions governing property. As the child passes from field to field, so might he pass from the heavenly kingdom to the earthly realm, transgressing those “proprieties” as easily as he did the others.

Traherne puts no pressure on this thought, but merely suggests it, as in the first line, “How like an angel came I down.” Some phrases suggest temporal development, a gradient progress from heaven to earth, but others flatly declare a temporal beginning: “When I was born.” To conclude, Traherne floats the possibility of preexistence but does not assert it. The child’s “heavenliness” probably results from the contingent miracle of what the child sees, and this same glow of enchantment results from protection from the harsher elements of earthly life, especially “trades and poverties,” rather than being a glittering relic of the life he just departed.

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<sup>13</sup> Henry Vaughan, “The Retreat,” 20.

In “The Apostasy” Traherne uses the same language of preexistence he borrows from Vaughan to tell a reverse story, depicting how the child who enjoyed perfect sight came to fall from that state of grace. Once as wise and salubriously ignorant as the child in “Wonder,” the speaker of “The Apostasy” has fallen into a dejected state, where

The Sun  
 And Moon forgon,  
 As if unmade, appear  
 No more to me; to God and Heven dead  
 I was, as tho they never were.<sup>14</sup>

For the adult speaker in his indeterminate state of apostasy, creation has been virtually abolished. He is the opposite of the child whose celestial joy appreciates all things in their best aspects. This apostasy came when he caught the popular curse and “[grew] mad with customary folly.” He unlearned all his natural wisdom and came to value “their pence and toys,” trinkets and money:

But I,  
 I knew not why,  
 Did learn among them too  
 At length; and when I once with blemisht Eys  
 Began their Pence and Toys to view,  
 Drown'd in their Customs, I became  
 A Stranger to the Shining Skies,  
 Lost as a dying Flame;

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<sup>14</sup> “The Apostasy” 64-68 from *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings*, 95-97.

And Hobby-horses brought to prize.<sup>15</sup>

As a child, he instantly guessed the worth of “the shining skies,” the physical and metaphysical skies that surround him, but at some point, he lost his internal sight and clarity. The soul comes down from immortality and learns the many painful lessons of mankind, embodied in the *dramatis personae* of human lives. In More’s *The Præexistency of the Soul*, the soul is a “stranger” on the earth—in the whole extended cosmos—a refugee flown in from the “shining skies.” Traherne’s poem finds this same poetic character—the exiled soul—a little further along, having forgotten its earlier life. Traherne remolds More’s conception of the soul into a stranger, not to earth, but to the realm of his celestial nativity. In a short line Traherne refers to the soul “a dying flame,” as the Stoics did, glowing faintly in a dark material world and going out. As the flame gutters, the soul’s gleam and heavenly color fade. The last line impresses the sadness with which Traherne regards the “hobby-horses” the child has chosen, or been forced to choose, in place of a grander, vanished aura of knowledge. Traherne takes More’s image of a fiery, illuminated soul pressed in by dark materiality and transforms it into a moving if abstract image of loss, a once-wise soul caught up in the oblivion of childhood until it forgets itself to the point of playing insensibly with a toy.

Traherne’s language here resembles that of Plotinus, who declared that the descended soul “has become a partial thing, isolated, weakened, full of care, intent upon the fragment.”<sup>16</sup> Once a participant in all things through their participation in Platonic realms of being, the soul is now just one single part fiddling idly with one

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<sup>15</sup> “The Apostasy” 55-63.

<sup>16</sup> *Enneads* 4.8.4.

other single part. Even the metaphor of play is the same, “fusses” being a word for children. Traherne draws out this pathos recognized by Plotinus, who could scarcely have drawn more poignant images than these of the soul’s catastrophic drift into matter, its appearance as “stranger to the shining skies” and destiny “lost as a dying flame.” The preexistence of the soul becomes the language of loss and painful transformation.

In another poem, preexistence helps Traherne think the unthinkable. As Timothy Harrison shows, Traherne often poses philosophical questions in his poetry, and, like a science fictional thinker, he is drawn to the most impossible questions.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, his most interesting poems often resemble thought experiments, passing judgment on ideas and possibilities as the poem unfolds and completes. In “The Salutation,” Traherne employs a framework of preexistence in order to dramatize the scene of his own birth, an otherwise unimaginable event. As the introductory poem of Traherne’s most important poetic collection, “The Salutation” is Traherne’s salutation to existence itself, played out over several stanzas of philosophical poetry. The Dobell manuscript begins with Traherne’s own version of Genesis, a personal one. Against a void of non-being, Traherne imagines himself coming to life as a baby, and when he imagines this scene, he is swarmed by the questions it raises:

These little Limmes,  
 These Eys and Hands which here I find,  
 These rosie Cheeks wherwith my Life begins,

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<sup>17</sup> Timothy Harrison, *Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England*, Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2020, part two “Traherne and the Consciousness of Birth.”

Where have ye been? Behind

What Curtain were ye from me hid so long!

Where was? in what Abyss, my Speaking Tongue?<sup>18</sup>

These questions are directed at the mental image of himself as a newborn child, but in a deeper sense they are directed toward being as such, of which the child is a new member and vehicle for its experience. Material being, as opposed to non-being, is asked to justify its sudden appearance on the mental scene: “behind / What curtain were ye from me hid so long?” The indexical quality of “these little limbs” draws the reader toward a lyric present. Keats memorably draws us into the moment of composition by pointing directly to his writing hand, “This living hand, now warm and capable,” which itself contains a reminder to the reader, separated by time and space, that hand and voice are both gone. In a similar fashion, Traherne places the reader in a suspended moment and asks her to consider its implications, but he draws attention to a moment already lost, perhaps always lost: the birth of the infant. He asks his body and tongue a series of questions and in the process draws into alignment the body of the child, now gone, with his own body in the moment of writing. Behind these questions, bodily existence may be experienced as if new.<sup>19</sup> These thoughts gather precision from the adjectives this and these.<sup>20</sup> The poet looks at his own hand

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<sup>18</sup> “The Salutation” 1-6 from *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings* 4-6.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Culler in his succinct, transhistorical *Theory of the Lyric*. Culler suggests indexicality as one of the great tools of the lyric situation, mobilized in different situations and contexts for particular lyric purposes. The account given in the *Theory*, and even more so the classic 1977 article “Apostrophe,” demonstrates the vocative power of indexicality, routed toward the domain of lyric speech itself. (Jonathan Culler, “Apostrophe,” *Diacritics* 7.4, 1977: 59-69; and *Theory of the Lyric*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Heather DuBrow problematizes these instances of indexicality in early modern lyric. She resists the (for her) egocentric tendencies of deixis within lyric address and

and imagines the vast time when it had not been, together with the surprise of the fact that it exists now. Traherne takes up the philosophical implications of this consideration, namely its importance both for his identity and the ontology of the universe as such. These are the same, because Traherne imagines that his own period of pre-nativity was part of the “chaos” that predated the world’s formation into a completed object. Traherne uses this Greek term for the formless primordial matter of the universe to characterize his own identity prior to his physical creation:

When silent I,  
So many thousand thousand yeers,  
Beneath the Dust did in a Chaos lie.<sup>21</sup>

A preexistent soul is implied by the existence of personal identity before matter. To say that “I” lived in a chaos is ambiguous, because in the confusion of pre-formed matter, “I” could not be distinguished from the general universal material. Chaos has no space for individual identity. The only “I” that could exist while one’s physical parts spun about in chaos is the soul, but what soul-birth looks like and when and how that soul that joined with the physical body, is unknown. That question, called psychogenesis, Traherne’s poem does not answer. Soul must come before matter, but of the look and feel of the transition from nothing to new soul and from new soul to soul-with-body, Traherne tells nothing. Clearly, Traherne can imagine his body not existing, but he cannot imagine himself not existing. His soul must have existed prior to the body if he imagines that some part of him did “in a chaos lie.” In

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expands the referentiality of words like this and there to constitute a shifting ontology as readers and hearers choose to occupy the there or the here respectively. *Deixis in the Early Modern English Lyric: Unsettling Spatial Anchors Like “Here,” “This,” “Come,”* London, UK: Palgrave, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> “The Salutation” 7-9.

an Aristotelian sense, the soul is the pattern or form of the body, the integrity that makes the body hold. If the various atoms that make up his physical body pre-exist him in matter, “a chaos,” then his soul must not pre-exist, since the integrity that the atoms need to become a body is not yet there. His soul could not exist prior to his body because if it did, the body itself would have achieved integrity and it too would exist. If, however, Traherne takes a more Platonic view, then his soul must have had some self-existence prior to the assumption of integrity that calls his body up from the embryonic atoms of chaotic matter. Traherne does not choose any one of these theories from the philosophers—traduction, immediate creation, nor even really preexistence. His poems do not function as philosophical systems, and therefore these specifics remain unresolved. Regardless of the nature of the soul he investigates, Traherne makes the significant choice to leave out its creation. All the wondrous features of his child’s body discussed in stanza one do not reveal his real, immaterial creation. The implication of preexistence, or non-creation, lies behind this gap in the metaphysical narrative, a possible explanation to sort out the mess Traherne’s speaker has created.

In “The Salutation,” Traherne offers no resolution, but other poems suggest a clue toward the solution of this problem of origins. Traherne’s speaker cannot imagine the creation of his soul, but he can look at that soul in its current state and make guesses that might begin to lighten the uncertain path toward its origin. Traherne knows this path will be uncertain, as difficult to see clearly as the answers to the questions that begin “The Salutation.” Therefore, when he takes up the question of the soul’s original state, the one it enjoyed when freshly created, he begins in a riddling mode, aware of how little can be known about the things he seeks to learn. His best poem on the soul’s nature, “My Spirit,” falls midway through the Dobell

collection, and its riddling procedure works to answer some of the questions asked by that first poem, “The Salutation.” The first stanza begins describing an indeterminate past in a series of philosophical words that do not hide their strangeness from common use:

My Naked Simple Life was I.  
 That Act so Strongly Shind  
 Upon the Earth, the Sea, the Skie,  
 That was the Substance of My Mind.  
 The Sence it self was I.<sup>22</sup>

Act, life, substance, sense—these are metaphysical ideas, unusual and estranged from ordinary use and certainly from poetry. They alert the reader the poem has embarked toward the understanding of a quiddity. The inkhorn is nearby. Through these various philosophical names, the speaker offers different hints about that unnamable thing, whose name is known only through the title: “My Spirit.” That title is a clue that offers no explanation. “Spirit” has always been a less precise word than “soul,” itself no standard of definitional precision, variously described by different philosophical schools. In Traherne’s time, the word filled in for a vast array of other terms and ideas, as it does today. The title is therefore a something searching for a name. “Spirit” is no name but a placeholder, and the speaker cannot say really say whether it is a placeholder for “Act,” “Life” “Substance,” or “Sense.” Traherne’s speaker characteristically keeps them all: I am “Life,” I am “Act,” I am “Substance,” and I am “Sense.” Traherne does not specify, and as a result, the name “spirit” hovers ambiguously over the arresting first few lines. As in Traherne’s other poems, the

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<sup>22</sup> “My Spirit” 1-5 from *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings* 51-56.



speaker consistently uses the past tense. “I felt”; “the sense itself was I”; “my essence was capacity.” Loss, descent, and failure are the themes of these past-tense declarations. At the same time, the poet scarcely dwells at all upon this loss, manifesting it only in these past tense phrases. Even the poem’s last moments dispense with sin in two and a half lines: “Tho’ now eclipsed / by sin / There they are useful and divine, / Exalted there they ought to shine.” Traherne’s speaker is not presently concerned with fallenness. The fall narrative disappears as the speaker merely looks within his own mind. About this inner awareness, he exclaims

It Acts not from a Centre to  
 Its Object as remote,  
 But present is, when it doth view,  
 Being with the Being it doth note.  
 Whatever it doth do.<sup>23</sup>

And later,

An Object, if it were before  
 My Ey, was by Dame Natures Law,  
 Within my Soul..<sup>24</sup>

Traherne is considering the very process of his own thinking. The second set of lines quoted offers an explanation of the first: whatever the eye observes, the soul immediately captures and brings into itself: “an object, if it were before / My eye, was...within my soul.” Traherne distinguishes his own conception of the working of the internal eye by explicitly rejecting the Galenic theory of optics. To imagine a

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<sup>23</sup> “My Spirit” 18-22.

<sup>24</sup> “My Spirit” 37-39.

“centre” reaching to a remote object is to imagine something physical stretching from the eye—or the mind, as internal eye—to the thing observed, as Galen did. Traherne rejects this possibility. When the eye-soul-spirit sees something, it cuddles right next to its object, almost temporarily sharing its being, as seen in “Being with the Being it doth note.” It can move lightning quick, but not through physical space, and it instantly shares essences with another being. Through this elastic power, the inner eye can almost trade souls with other forms of being. This spirit is the very conscious spirit that wrote all these poems, driver of the “thoughts that wander through eternity.”<sup>25</sup> Realizing that he has this magnificent elastic inner sight, he proclaims its sublime importance:

My Soul a Spirit infinite!  
 An image of the Deity!  
 A pure substantial light!  
 That Being greatest which doth nothing seem!  
 Why, ’twas my all, I nothing did esteem  
 But that alone. A strange mysterious sphere!  
 A deep abyss  
 That sees and is  
 The only proper place of Heavenly Bliss.<sup>26</sup>

The nature of the soul at present abnegates the reality of a temporal fall. The soul’s very solidity, its completeness and incredible elasticity, belie the possibility that it is currently in some degraded state. This internal eye sees all the heaven

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<sup>25</sup> *Paradise Lost* 2.148

<sup>26</sup> “My Spirit” 71-79.

possible for a human being, “A deep Abyss / That sees and is / The only proper place of Heavenly Bliss.” Traherne focuses on the quick impressive internal changes he can effect by the exercise of his internal eye. Like Benjamin Whichcote, Traherne is implying that heaven itself is a “temper,” an emotional state or quality in the soul rather than a physical, or for that matter metaphysical, location.<sup>27</sup> The metaphysical facts that attend the Christian fall—a decline in the world, in the soul, a need for restitution by divine agent, a set of final places to receive the dead—are nowhere to be found. A tension with Christian doctrine therefore arises, because the present strength of the soul negates the explanatory need for a fall in the first place. The soul is the soul, complete and perfect.

The speaker spends the rest of the poem unwinding this possibility. His spirit is what the speaker saw, but also that by means of which he saw; that “wondrous Self” and “sphere of light” is also the “living orb of sight” that allows him to see.<sup>28</sup> “My naked simple Life” consists not in biological body, nor in the “I” that participates socially, but in “sense itself,” the fact of being presented with a world. Life, or perception, is “the substance of my mind,” not thinking exactly, but sense, the awareness of thinking: the “I” that performs the subject-role in thought, but also the I that notices thought, always capable of stepping outside the thought, but never capable of stepping outside itself. Traherne thus argues that the nature of the soul is awareness, acts of perception that cut across time. For Traherne, thoughts flow so majestically by the direction of his internal attention that he cannot help but feel awe toward those thoughts and the will that directs his attention. “It was so quick and

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<sup>27</sup> *Works of the learned Benjamin Whichcote*, Aberdeen, 1751.

<sup>28</sup> “My Spirit” 107.

pure” he insists, “[t]hat all my Mind was wholly Evry-where.”<sup>29</sup> In these magnificent capacities to summon things near, far, past, present, and future to the chamber of its own observation, the soul demonstrates its true, elevated nature. In this responsive, viewing part Traherne sees the image of the divine origin of his own soul. “Tho now eclipys’d by Sin,” the nature of his mind or “intellect” testifies its divine provenance, even its divine nature.<sup>30</sup>

Through these poems, Traherne is approaching, from the underside, the Platonic doctrine of deification, a significantly ambiguous word that always suggests more than it says. Among the mystics, deification means to merge with God, usually in some transcendent experience that fades. The same idea among Puritans might be living regenerated or “walking with God.” The Platonic concept of the “internal eye,” the eye with which both God and human beings see, goes further than the implication of mere personal rectitude entailed by the doctrine of personal regeneration. There is an amoral aspect to deification, an identification with God’s power, not only with his goodness. I am “not fetter’d by an iron fate,” says Traherne in the “The Preparative,” thundering also, “simple sense / Is lord of all created excellence.” Human beings hold sway over the kingdom of their own lives and especially the kingdom of their own minds. This possibility had taunted and tempted Henry More. In More’s *Præexistency of the Soul*, the human soul fell when it came to this belief in its own power, thinking “of [it self] something to have been.”<sup>31</sup> What More regards with monotheistic

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<sup>29</sup> “My Spirit” 56-57.

<sup>30</sup> “My Spirit” 117.

<sup>31</sup> *Præexistency* 3.5-6.

anxiety—he both wants and fears to be a power opposite to God—Traherne welcomes as a delicious option.

Traherne grasps this theme of divine resemblance, but he holds it as lightly as he holds any idea. He draws a connection in “The Preparative” and “My Spirit” between the soul and God by means of a self that is whole and uninterrupted by non-existence, a soul whose history drifts back into eternity. The soul is so much like God that all time can be bounded up in human perception, our eye being God’s eye.<sup>32</sup> Traherne’s relationship to this Platonic doctrine is ambiguous. He is far more of a materialist than More. For that reason, Traherne invites the question why we should trust the power of a faculty known to be only the projection of nerves and atoms. His answer comes at the problem from the side, bypassing truth, bypassing immortality, and looking for philosophy from unphilosophical phenomena. Traherne accepts contingency, for he is looking mostly at resemblance. Even mistaken perception grasps something real. Eternity is what appears to be eternal. This doctrine is put into practice in *The Centuries of Meditation*. What Traherne performs at the beginning of the third century is a subtle experiment in negative capability. He trusts perception to tell him something profound but almost indescribable in words of any kind, certainly inexplicable by formal logic. To understand this capacity for openness, it is necessary to review the early modern concept of “experience.”

## II. Experience and Vision in Traherne

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<sup>32</sup> Malcom M. Day, “Thomas Traherne and the Doctrine of Pre-existence,” *Studies in Philology* 65.1 (1968): 81-97, 88.

The richness of the category of experience in early modern thought emerges from its status as the coordination between the philosophical, Baconian concept of experiment as a source of true knowledge of natural things and the mystical conception of experience as the direct, immediate conveyance of knowledge of things divine. Both ideas, in their most interesting formulations, make special importance out of human sensation, granting special status to our organs of perception. Both of them also stand against the orthodox Christian definition of what counts as true knowledge. Faith, for the Calvinists, is the imposition of knowledge on a mind and body that endlessly resists that knowledge, the forceful integration of the revealed knowledge of God, his acts as creator, judge, and redeemer, that are not revealed by way of the natural faculties but by an original expression by the deity. True knowledge for the Calvinists stands in blithe contradiction to experience: it is experience that must be made subject to knowledge, rather than vice versa. We are to find our knowledge as participants in the cosmic Christian story, not find the cosmic knowledge through experience.

If the two are to be distinguished, it would be on the grounds that in the mystical view, there is an additional, preternatural if not supernatural, perceptive organ—the soul or spirit as the medium between self and God. The mystics, like Peter Sterry, believe that this mystical faculty conveys para-psychological information and something like sensory experience itself, even if expressed in partly ambiguous terms. Reason is one extra-sensory instrument, but there is another implanted alongside it, the wandering experience called “the Spirit of God.” These two elements Sterry describes by the awkward term “Principles,” and asserts that they “are the *Spirit of Man* or *Reason*; the *Spirit of God*.” He proceeds to elucidate their

different natures by means of a metaphor drawn from the manifold of sensory experience:

I can no more convey a sense of this difference [Between Reason and the Spirit of God] into any soule, that hath not seen these two Lights shining in it self: than I can convey the difference between *Salt* and *Sugar*; to him, who hath never tasted *Sweet* or *Sharp*. These things are discerned only by *exercise of senses*; and are too hard for those, who have not their own *senses* exercised in them.<sup>33</sup>

The two experiences are rendered into sensation, but the medium of that sensation is not the physical body but the immaterial soul. The soul is a broad, sensitive, perceptive medium, a consciousness separated from the body, but also subject to the tumult and agitation of experience. For Sterry, these “two Lights” manifest as the “difference between Salt and Sugar” in a figure deprived of that experience, like Locke’s blind man trying to imagine color. Peter Lopston called More a “somewhat wooly thinker[]” in contrast to Anne Conway, but compared to More Sterry himself is a mystic.<sup>34</sup> He likes paradoxes and living in doubt, not carefully hammering out his metaphysical predicates. He is a “poetic philosopher” drifting toward the irrational and beautiful, tendencies that are only at the suggestive fringes of More’s rationalism, as seen in chapter one. Sometimes, Sterry explicitly “feels” the spirit of God, a fact he incorporates into his wider philosophy.

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Sterry, *The Spirit Convincing of Sinne opened in a sermon before the Honorable House of Commons*, London, 1645.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Lopston, *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, Boston, MA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982, “Introduction.”

In temperament and style of thought, Traherne is more like Sterry than like any other of the Cambridge Platonists. Traherne begins with the concept of “experience” and leverages an entire alternate view of the metaphysical universe—one played with, suggested, but never quite asserted in the tantalizing dance of his poetry and mystical prose. “God is unseen till He be so known,” Traherne writes in the Fourth Century, “and David’s Spirit an inscrutable mystery, till this is experienced.”<sup>35</sup> Statements like these are indeed theological, yet in the same instant something about them remains merely experiential. Though it is a transcendental belief—a higher plane intersecting with this one—the experience *of* that transcendence plays out in the consciousness of ordinary experience. Ordinary experience is to be transcended, but by means of ordinary experience. By accounting for experience, albeit in abstracted terms, something like phenomenology is approached, as Gary Kuchar explains and Timothy Harrison elaborates further in diverse ways.<sup>36</sup> Traherne’s trust in experience borders on the Gnostic, as Geoffrey Babbit has recently noticed.<sup>37</sup> Babbit’s analysis focuses on the moment of “uplift” associated with poetic composition, which can be deepened into Traherne’s wider sense of the relationship between experience and truth. Poetic composition is indeed crucial to Traherne’s theory of experience, but it is modulated through another intellectual concept of his day, the figure of the Platonic rapture. This idea of rapture

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<sup>35</sup> *Centuries* 4.92.

<sup>36</sup> Gary Kuchar, *Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England*, Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne U P, 2005.

Timothy Harrison, *Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England*, Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Babbit, “That Thin Skin Is Broken: Thomas Traherne's Gnostic Bent.” *The Ben Jonson Journal* 27.2 (2020): 301-308.



is a theory and practice of experience that connects the emotional sensorium to metaphysical reality, capturing what Kenneth Borris has called an aesthetics of the “sublime” generated, not from scientific awe, but perception of a completed divine plan:

Unlike the postmodern sublime, which focuses on materiality and its contrasts with consciousness, perception, and representation, its early modern predecessor was still, as before, associated with a sense of transcendence, with intimations of a sacred realm beyond materiality, or with perception of the natural world in ways complementary to felt supernatural awe.<sup>38</sup>

*Felt supernatural awe* is a succinct explanation of the “affect of preexistence” identified in the introduction, connected to its “intimations of a sacred realm beyond materiality.” What is felt is feelable and transmittable through experience. According to John Guillory, this “poetic furor” disappeared after the Florentine Neoplatonists, except in the poetry of Spenser and Milton, but that aspiration reappears in Traherne’s and Sterry’s language of experience.<sup>39</sup> The fact of the soul’s rapturous experience of vision, called “prophecy,” manifests as “supernatural awe,” a present fact that plays across the internal senses. The immaterial becomes feelable for them. In Traherne’s scheme the immaterial and metaphysical—the real—manifests itself through the sensations of ordinary experience. But it especially manifests through sensations and observations that *seem* to rise above ordinary experience and offer themselves up as “visions” that convey intellectual truth. This type of experience is secured as true

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<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Borris, *Visionary Spenser and the Poetics of Early Modern Platonism* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017, 2.

<sup>39</sup> John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History*, 20.

knowledge by way of poetic furor: by the sensation of the very emotions that accompany it.

This formulation creates an opening toward the concept of experience for experience's sake, and for a vision of poetry that disconnects from its theologized origins and drains "vision" of its metaphysical content. Looking, in one famous section of the *Centuries of Meditation*, Traherne experiences a vision. In this famous "Corn passage," Traherne makes a mistake, intending true, but he does not this time look beyond this mistake toward a deeper truth. He takes the mistake, not as revealing the truth of the matter, but as the truth itself. Traherne sticks to the surface of things. Appearances do not indicate essences or reveal metaphysical reality, but appear as simple facts. Nature is that which has no inside and no depths. Traherne's passage writes a spiritual life without metaphysics through an act of mere observation.

The idea of the intuitive truth of mere observation is best compared with Ralph Waldo Emerson, the genius of nineteenth-century American literature, in *Self-Reliance*. Emerson demands, "Let us stun and astonish the intruding rabble of men and books and institutions, by a simple declaration of the divine fact."<sup>40</sup> The suggestiveness of these words lies in the conviction that human experience itself is a formless content that resists incorporation into a system of meaning that is public and universal. The individual has her own prized experience, a kind of possession. The proprietary and individualist aspect of Emerson's theory stands in contrast to Traherne's own sense of the injustice and absurdity of "proprieties," the capitalist relations that he, unlike Emerson, resists. Nevertheless, on the importance and power of the "divine fact," Traherne would agree with the later visionary. Traherne has his

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<sup>40</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte, New York, NY: Penguin, 1992, 272.

own theory of the “rabble of men and books and institutions,” which he calls “custom.” “[I]t is not our parents’ loins, so much as our parents’ lives, that enthrals and blinds us,” he writes in the Third Century, reversing Benjamin Whichcote’s point that “custom is a second nature.”<sup>41</sup> In Traherne likewise, the proper response to this ruin lies in “a simple declaration of the divine fact.” The worldview of the preexistent soul is a lonely one, as it stands in distinction to the whole weight “of men and books and institutions.” This Platonism which sets itself in fundamental metaphysical opposition to the world beyond the philosopher’s own mind here becomes transmogrified, not exactly to the mind of the philosopher, but to the experience of the feeling person and the poet. States of elevation connect to a kind of speaking truth, but what that truth is difficult to say, for Traherne as well as for Emerson.

And now at last the highest truth on this subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition. That thought, by what I can now nearest approach to say it, is this. When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the foot-prints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name;--the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience. You take the way from man, not to man.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Centuries*, Third Century, 8.

Benjamin Whichcote, *Works of the learned Benjamin Whichcote*, Aberdeen, 1751.

<sup>42</sup> *Essays and Lectures*, 271.

For Emerson, original intuition possesses *something*, the very something that abnegates the rest of life, a kind of Gnosticism by way of sensorial impressions. It is important that “the highest truth on this subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said.” To say and name in this final area is to transgress on what Fredric Jameson once called “the unnameable,” the remaining sense of all to be yet described.<sup>43</sup> “[G]ood” does not exist according to the normal rules of reality but intrudes on reality in the form of an interruption. Paradoxically, this intrusion upon normal reality is not opposed to experience but a part of it. The hour of vision is ordinary; it comes and goes. Before leaving, however, it calls all into doubt.

Transcending the different boundaries of Traherne’s theological categories is a bare attention to the truth revealed in ordinary experience, forever transgressing against the realms of the not known. He wrote poetry not because he was ignorant of philosophy, but because he wished to see it pushed further into the wilds of unknown experience. The *Centuries of Meditation* as a whole dramatize the drift of his distinctive style of thought. The *Centuries* are full of moments of vision and rapture that add up to a rather lopsided and occasionally repetitive whole. One of Traherne’s particular visions, the “Corn was orient and immortal wheat” passage, is one of the most popular passages of Traherne’s prose for the poetic construction of its sentences that lay out one of the most powerful statements of spirituality in seventeenth-century literature. Despite its wide acclaim, the passage has rarely been studied for the particulars of its vision, as if it were just a uniform account of rapture. The content of Traherne’s poetic account of rapture reveals his intuition of preexistence, or rather, more boldly, eternal existence:

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<sup>43</sup> Fredric Jameson, “First Impressions: Review of *The Parallax View* by Slavoj Žižek.” *London Review of Books*, <https://post.thing.net/node/1686>.

Those pure and virgin apprehensions I had from the womb, and that divine light wherewith I was born are the best unto this day, wherein I can see the Universe...

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. The city seemed to stand in Eden, or to be built in Heaven.<sup>44</sup>

Traherne's first, anchoring perceptions indicate that the objects of his vision are pre-existent and eternal. By the poetry, we have been prepared to see "pleasing fictions" as opportunities for deep instruction. This vision is certainly a fiction. Traherne imagines the corn standing "from everlasting to everlasting,"

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<sup>44</sup> *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings*, 3.2-3, 110-11.

participating in an existence with neither beginning nor end. It is not just immortal, undying, or sempiternal, as it “never should be reaped,” but preexistent, since it was not “ever sown.” The corn was not created. Unlike Adam in *Paradise Lost*, who leaps up newborn from the grass declaiming his creator’s existence, Traherne’s infant in the third Century does not perceive any act of creation implied by the fact of a world itself.<sup>36</sup> The world, including the corn, the human figures, the city, all appear as if they are eternal. Older men appear “Immortal Cherubims!” and young men “Glittering and Sparkling Angels,” while the girls are “strange Seraphick Pieces of Life and Beauty.” The comparison of living human beings to angels suggests that humans rightly understood are immortal creatures. This comparison appears to indicate only the presence of an immortal soul inside these human creatures, but when placed against the claim about “nor was ever sown,” these angelic creatures appear to have existed from eternity: “I knew not that they were born or should die.” These angels “stood from everlasting to everlasting,” though only in appearance.

According to the passage, the infant’s ideal sight, which discovers the great vision of the passage, arises largely from ignorance of human institutions and customs. At the time of his vision, the speaker “Dreame[d] not of Poverties Contentions or Vices, as well as “churlish proprieties [read: properties], nor bounds, nor divisions.” Traherne characterizes this ignorance as “Divine...Knowledge.” Ignorant of custom, “proprieties,” and “divisions,” the human infant apparently perceives the divine reality. However, if it is divine reality the infant perceives, that reality does not include many things that belong in reality as human beings know it. As in the poem “Wonder,” already discussed, the infant does not know death, pain, or even birth: “I knew not that they were born or should die.” Custom, propriety, and division may be imaginary and unreal, but these things are, even to Traherne, undeniably

real. “Everything was at Rest, Free, and Immortal,” the speaker writes, yet restlessness, unfreedom, and mortality are real. The speaker’s “divine knowledge” is profound ignorance, not just of human custom but of the reality of a fallen world. Becoming “a little Child again,” and entering into “the Kingdom of God” means unlearning many true facts about the world, not just unlearning human superstitions or foolish customs:

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>45</sup>

The end of the passage jerks abruptly to the present, to the decay of this transcendent vision and the arrival of reality: “with much adoe 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.” Traherne is ignorant of the fact that the world had a creator. The knowledge of the world’s creation is one of the “Dirty Devices of this World,” whereby he was corrupted. Traherne seems to insist that the world is rightly understood when once more the corn becomes “Orient and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown.”<sup>38</sup> Contemplation of his vision as a child thrusts Traherne into a transcendent perspective that has transcended Nature itself, perhaps better to say has ignored it. He is living a fantasy that the world is “in Eden” and was “built in Heaven.” He describes

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<sup>45</sup> *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings*, 3.2-3, 111.

his realization of death and birth as a process of “corruption,” as if he were deceived, rather than educated, by coming to know beginnings and endings.

The account of the Third Century, incandescent with a sense of the everlasting, is a recovery of past knowledge that cannot be proven true by reality. This true feeling that all has lasted forever, cannot be confirmed by experience, indeed is disconfirmed by the facts of life. Traherne later suggest that these perspectives can be “Collected again, by the Highest Reason” and reincorporated into the adult vision.<sup>39</sup> He also repeated the same vision in “Wonder”:

The streets were pav'd with golden stones,  
 The boys and girls were mine,  
 Oh how did all their lovely faces shine!  
 The sons of men were holy ones,  
 In joy and beauty they appear'd to me,  
 And every thing which here I found,  
 While like an angel I did see,  
 Adorn'd the ground.<sup>46</sup>

Traherne has minutely but significantly altered the vision in this different presentation. Once again he boldly claims to possess all the creatures that he sees, insisting that he did not know “[c]urs'd and devis'd proprieties.” He has tempered his statements about the eternity of the world of his vision. The boys and girls appear “in joy and beauty,” not suggesting their everlastingness. Instead of angels, “the sons of men were holy ones.” This change allows Traherne more ambiguity: rather than being immortal creatures, almost gods, the children of men may be merely blessed,

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<sup>46</sup> “Wonder,” 33-40.



but still human, creatures. Traherne's devaluation of the strong terms of the vision from the third century likely indicates that he recognized how difficult it was to incorporate into a larger scheme of interpretation.

Traherne's vision is irrecoverable. The descent into personal identification, into the knowledge of life and death, perhaps simply into language itself, have all placed the hour of vision immeasurably far away. The experience of vision is not a certain number of regimented degrees, of historical and psychological experiences, removed from the present moment. "This spectacle once seen," Traherne writes later in the *Third Century*, "will never be forgotten."<sup>47</sup> But Traherne cannot use ordinary language to convey what vision sees, and the realities of language, like the realities of the world itself, will not just diminish but make absurd what Traherne powerfully felt and lost as powerfully. A single shift from the moment of vision results in an irreversible transformation from then to now. We are an inch from that vision, but from the vision's perspective, we are contained inside its ever-nowness where immanence and transcendence are the same. Traherne's loss of vision is also a means of gaining it: that single, imaginative step of reading finds us again inside the world where everything clung together and being seemed available, if unable to be voiced again.

Traherne's openness to a condition that transgresses against his own faith constitutes the incorporation of his trust in vision into a life philosophy deeper even than faith: "This spectacle once seen is never forgotten." Regardless of what the preachers and grammarians say, this vision remains a testament to something otherwise revealed. If this theory of experience resembles anything, the resemblance

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<sup>47</sup> *Centuries*, Third Century, 60.

is with the negative theology of Christian Platonism, at least in approach, for the vision resists explication and meaning and can thus be known by what it resists. Traherne tries to say, in effect, nothing—to express being without commentary, experience without interpretation. Traherne approaches nature from a situated standpoint, the Christian determination of nature’s meanings according to God’s purposes, but he does not see what that standpoint is supposed to show him. He sees a vision that negates Christian theology, one that writes against existing descriptions of nature. He makes a mistake, intending true, but he does not this time look beyond this mistake toward a deeper truth. He takes the mistake, not as revealing the truth of the matter, but as the truth itself. By sticking to the surface of things, Traherne writes a spiritual life without metaphysics but also without “nature,” through an act of mere observation that does not distinguish between the natural world and Traherne’s own perception of it, seeing them both as a continuum of being, a continual surface, like the Platonist’s sensitive soul, vibrating meaning.

## Conclusion

In *Mortal Thoughts*, Bryan Cummings puts forward the content of secularization in early modern ethics and epistemology as the acceptance of human finitude, the end of the belief in life after death (or by extension life before life).<sup>48</sup> Traherne shows how it means moreover the acceptance of “walking with God” or spiritual regeneration as a process integrated into ordinary human life. Spiritual living, like spiritual knowledge, becomes instantiated through ordinary, not extraordinary acts of perception and integration. This is the very purpose of the *Centuries of*

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<sup>48</sup> Brian Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity and Identity in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

*Meditation*, as Louis Martz understands, to integrate the act of perception, which he calls by its Christian name, meditation, into the wider experience of life.<sup>49</sup> Integration and connection of the richer parts of experience are the goals of the *Centuries*, which were written for Traherne's friend Susanna Hopton of Hereford in a notebook that she herself provided him: "since Love made you put it into my hands I will fill it with those Truths you love without knowing them." From this outset, the *Centuries* are a book about writing and connection, the connection of one soul to another, the connection of a soul to God, even the connection between the blank pages and the pen with which Traherne writes. Traherne makes explicit this link between the human soul and the pages of a book: "An empty book is like an infant's soul, in which anything can be written. It is capable of all things, but containeth nothing." The linkage also suggests a connection between Susanna Hopton's soul and the very book he writes in; he writes with a pen on both Mrs. Hopton's soul and his own, making those marks that help to form the soul in the direction intended by God. Fulfilling the soul's nature in capacity, Traherne proposes to trace out the "invisible ways of conveyance by which some great thing doth touch our souls, and by which we tend to it."<sup>50</sup>

Those invisible ways of conveyance are natural to the soul even in its infant state, but easily forgotten, clouded over by what Traherne usually calls "custom." Custom, by which Traherne mean the implicit education conveyed by our

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<sup>49</sup> Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*, New Haven, CT: Yale U P, 1954.

See also, Olivia Anderson, "'Easy and Sweet': Thomas Traherne's Method of Meditation," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 50 (2019): 177-206.

<sup>50</sup> *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings* 1.1, 1.2, 3.

upbringing in human society, is always a negative word in Traherne. With custom put aside, Traherne's connecting pen shows the metaphysico-spiritual linkages that tether the human being to the universe and the universal creator. Each time the linkage is experienced, a fresh well of life is found. The concept of walking with God or regeneration is the global reincorporation of these experiences into a way of life. When cast together over a lifetime, they add up to a state of regeneration or spiritual completion. This regeneration takes the form of integrated aesthetic experience, the aestheticized category of "vision" that we have already seen.

Traherne's account of his own vision shows his expansion into new territory in English literary history, into a "disinterested" perspective on religious vision that resembles the new developments in aesthetic theory by the early eighteenth-century philosopher Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713). Shaftesbury wrote an influential three-volume treatise, the *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, that among its many dynamic advancements, arguably began the tradition of aesthetic theory in England.<sup>51</sup> The poet, Shaftesbury writes, must

fix his eye upon that consummate grace, that beauty of Nature, and that perfection of numbers which the rest of mankind, feeling only by the effect whilst ignorant of the cause, term the *Je-ne-sçay-quoy*, the unintelligible or the I know not what, and suppose to be a kind of

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<sup>51</sup> R.L. Brett deserves credit for increasing popular attention for Shaftesbury's role as aesthetic theorist and for setting the terms of discussion of that role in the twentieth century ("The Third Earl of Shaftesbury as a Literary Critic," *The Modern Language Review* 37.2 (1942): 131-146). For a revised account, that emphasizes Shaftesbury's discontinuities with later aesthetic theory, see Karen Collis, "Shaftesbury and Literary Criticism: Philosophers and Critics in Early Eighteenth-Century England," *The Review of English Studies* 67.279 (2016): 294-315.

charm or enchantment of which the artist himself can give no account.<sup>52</sup>

It is this concept, of *Je-ne-sçay-quoy*, that arguably constitutes Shaftesbury's most original contribution to the critical study of literature. Precisely by not naming that quality that makes art art, Shaftesbury lays the foundation for Addison's more Lockean account of the preeminence of the experiential and sensorial qualities inside art; *Je-ne-sçay-quoy* moreover captures something factual about the process of art appreciation, which is that art always seems incompletely explained no matter how finely tuned our explanations. In Shaftesbury's view, attention to the subjective experience and away from what can be rationally established as truth nevertheless achieves a kind of truth, though of a different order. Truth in art is beauty. Literary art makes this identification especially difficult, since literature from a philosophical perspective consists of propositions that are untrue; Shaftesbury maintains, however, that "In poetry, which is all fable, truth still is the perfection."<sup>53</sup> Shaftesbury's account of the literary arts is mainly found in his "Advice to an Author," collected in the *Characteristics*. His wider theory here advances disinterested or "objective" taste, which nevertheless has a "subjective" element; in a Platonist fashion, the intelligent critic gradually molds his taste after "the good," "the beautiful," and "the true." Still, since the experience of art belongs in one of the human being's higher faculties, Shaftesbury can fit even this open-ended idea of appreciation into a roughly Platonist psychology that acclaims such perceptions as possessing intimations of higher, even metaphysical truth.

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<sup>52</sup> "Advice to an Author," from *Characteristics* 1.333.

<sup>53</sup> *Characteristics*, 1.143.

Like Shaftesbury, Traherne presents a “disinterested” point of view, not described with any such name, but present in the existential implications of his account of childhood vision. Traherne’s vision offers no answers, no gloss that can equip one for the proper spiritual life. It is, in Philip Sidney’s sense, a lie, a golden world offered as an alternative to the brazen world of actuality. But unlike Sidney’s golden world of the poets, it is not derived from the imitation of nature in its truth, but an account merely of what one man saw, once. For this reason, it bears important similarity to Shaftesbury’s salutary ideas of *Je-ne-sçay-quoy*, that property in an artistic vision that is difficult to describe, essentially itself, a part of one perspective and no other. In Traherne’s reading of his older contemporary Vaughan, his rewriting of that classic poem “The Retreat,” he rejects the easily resolvable default aesthetic model, the lyric, for which the theory of preexistence is so apt. This moment from the *Centuries* is an advancement on his deployment of preexistence in “Wonder,” precisely because it does not fit itself into the category of lyric but remains inert and unallegorized. It is a step toward the perspective of “disinterestedness,” for Traherne wants nothing from his vision.

Shaftesbury also is one of the great creators of the idea of sensibility, by which a person’s moral character is established through their emotional refinement and sensibility. A form of moral and aesthetic qualification, sensibility is a theory of human experience that grants a special status to the sensitive person. The soul of the Neoplatonist, vulnerable to the quivering onset of emotion, is a sentimentalist, albeit on other terms than the exponents of sensibility in the later part of the century. Poetic composition joins with vision to make up a theory of sensibility on its own, by way of Platonic mysticism. The mysterious and ambiguous truth in Traherne’s vision indicates how theology is transformed in his work into an aesthetic object. Though a

believing Christian, Traherne treats doctrines as ideas to be put on or discarded insofar as they enlarge his aesthetic horizons and make him a better writer. Moreover, his work displays how the doctrines and theories of knowledge that lie behind theology yield to an epistemology of subjectivity and artistic effects. The ideas' value lies in their contribution to a whole, not a whole world, but a whole book or a whole poem.

Traherne's anticipation of Shaftesbury shows a shift in the realms of value from spiritual or religious practice toward, not just art, but the unified perceptions of the observer as such.<sup>54</sup> Traherne's vision captures things in their very aliveness, their completeness, and their excess of all the desires of the individual viewing subject. In their ontological completeness, objects of vision become not so much repositories of individual desire as ever-present suggestions of the world's ideal character, in which all things deserve respect. The perspective of preexistence in Traherne therefore reveals the *je ne sais quoi* of all things, their resolute perfection when retrieved from the usual systems of valuation and division: property, classification, even assessment in terms of subjective wants and needs. Traherne's view thus anticipates Shaftesbury's but with a radical and more universal focus, transcribing the power of disinterested art into the account of the mystical viewer, who achieves a sense of the excess in things themselves and thereby learns their inexpressible and uncontainable

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<sup>54</sup> For Shaftesbury, the critic is a "virtuoso," a worldly person aware not just of the British or classical traditions in the arts, but of foreign arts, precisely so that the virtuosic person might differentiate between their native tradition and its others. Thus, the development of aesthetics becomes a portion of an educational program that produces the "manners" of British subject-citizens. There is much to support this view in that Shaftesbury unites his critique of egoism to the appreciation of art, and especially of orderly art, which finally prepares the affections for human order itself: he praises the human "Affection" for "the Beauty of Order and Government, and the Interest of Society and Mankind," against the interest of the "narrow self."

nature. This nature is always in excess of programs of thought, even of interpretation. Traherne shows, therefore, a version of perception that refuses to fix a value on anything, exactly at the moment, the late seventeenth century, when the idea of value became paramount in the organization of collective social life.



## Chapter Four

### Gnostic Deists: Preexistence after Milton

*I believe in death. I believe in disease. I believe in injustice and inhumanity, torture and anger and hate. I believe in murder. I believe in pain. I believe in cruelty and infidelity. I believe in slime and stink and every crawling, putrid thing, every possible ugliness and corruption, you son of a bitch. I believe in you.*

*-The Exorcist III<sup>1</sup>*

#### Introduction

The philosophical transitions of the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century have been widely studied as significant for the production of secular modernity. The Deists, the Spinozists, the empiricists, the political liberals—all of these have their place in the historiography of emerging Enlightenment. This chapter introduces a figure absent from the existing scholarship, though one who participated in these same debates at these same historical junctures. This figure is the Deist who believes in the preexistence of the soul. Radicals of all stripes have been contextualized and understood, but not this figure, because the number of scholars searching for the odd combination of radical questioning of Christian orthodoxy and radical metaphysical dualism—characteristic of the believers in preexistence—is small.<sup>2</sup> A “metaphysician in the dark,” challenging Christian doctrine *and* expressing spiritualist dualism is a specimen unfamiliar to our paradigms of philosophical materialism and natural science. Yet they existed, and their existence suggests that we

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<sup>1</sup> William Peter Blatty, *Exorcist III*, Twentieth Century Fox, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> James Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: 1680-1750*, Charleston, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1997.

have missed the true extent and also the character of the rethinking of Christian doctrines in the transition from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries.

In the later part of the century, the doctrine of preexistence found a home not among clerics and bishops like George Rust and Joseph Glanvill, nor among aristocrats like Anne Conway, but among Deist authors at the periphery of English social life. From 1690 to 1735, the primary and almost the only defenders of preexistence were the Deists Jacob Ilive (1705-1763), William Staunton (1663-c1740), and the anonymous author of *Præexistence* (1714).<sup>3</sup> Characteristic of their skeptical questioning of Christian theology, these early English Deists employ a version of preexistence that breaks with the more modest Christian Platonism of the previous century. The Platonist Henry More had argued that the souls of human beings were created by God in Heaven before the creation of the world, a reality allegorically expressed in the Book of Genesis by God's first command, "Let there be light." Like Henry More before them, these writers argue that preexistence was a lost part of the Gospel truth, but they press their case in terms and with additions that

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<sup>3</sup> Jacob Ilive, *The Oration spoke at Joyners-Hall in Thames-Street: on Monday, Sept. 24, 1733: pursuant to the will of Mrs. Jane Ilive, who departed this life, Aug. 29, 1733. Ætat. 63: proving. I, The plurality of worlds. II, That this Earth is hell. III, That the souls of men are the apostate angels. And IV, That the fire which will punish those who shall be confined to this globe after the day of judgment will be immaterial: with large notes confirming the hypothesis, and refuting Dr. Lupton's opinion of the eternity of hell-torments*, London, 1733.

--. *The oration spoke at Trinity-Hall in Aldersgate-street: on Monday, Jan. 9. 1738. Before the gentlemen of the grand inquest of the ward of Aldersgate: in answer to Dr. Felton's two discourses on the resurrection of the same body*, London, 1738.

William Staunton, *The Sincere Thoughts of a Private Christian, Touching the Faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Doctrine of the Apostles. Humbly Offered in Abatement of the Socinian and Trinitarian Controversies. With a Postscript on occasion of Dr. Mangey's Plain Notions*, London, 1719.

Anonymous, *Præexistence, a Poem, in Imitation of Milton*, London, 1714.

would have shocked the earlier philosopher. Unlike the seventeenth-century defenders of preexistence, the authors of the early eighteenth century assert the bolder idea that human beings are in fact fallen angels. Rather than arguing for an allegorical interpretation of the Genesis creation myth, these authors substantially reject that myth. Claiming that Genesis is a false and corrupted version of the true story of preexistent creature, they undermine the authority of both reason and revelation and write original narratives of the creation that center human beings as powerful cosmic agents trapped inside limited bodies in a fallen world.

Both Ilive and the *Præexistence* author construct their cosmologies with the colors and concepts of their most influential contemporary author on angelic matters: John Milton. Though no believer in preexistence, Milton wrote landmark epics that memorably describe actions in heaven consequential for the lives of human beings. In the process, he firmly cemented his own vision of heavenly life in the minds of his literary successors, and these English Deists combine their preexistence theology with Milton's astonishing heavenly landscape and set of actors. Moreover, as other critics have shown, Milton's own poetic expansion of biblical stories opened a new genre of religious poetry, extra- or para-biblical in character, of great creativity and a degree of theological originality.<sup>4</sup> Preexistence enters both the poetic and philosophical works of Deists in a Miltonic garb, because Milton's work suggested a practice compatible with these authors' questioning of Christian orthodoxy and scripture, a way to speak

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie Moore, *The Beautiful Sublime: The Making of Paradise Lost, 1701-1734*, Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 1990, Nicholas Von Maltzen, "The Whig Milton, 1667-1700" in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner, Cambridge, UK (Cambridge U P, 1995): 229-253, and Dustin Stewart, "Angel Bodies to Whig Souls: Blank Verse after Blenheim" in *Milton in the Long Restoration*, ed. Blair Hoxby and Ann Baynes Coiro, Oxford, UK: Oxford U P, 2016: 205-224.

heterodoxy with an orthodox voice and to narrate cosmic, divine things without relying on scriptural accounts.

The most salient text among these is *Præexistence, a Poem in Imitation of Milton* (1714). Contrary to the analysis of the poem's modern critics, the poem presents a Deist theology in which preexistence plays a primary role. After creating the world, the God of *Præexistence* does nothing to affect that world and its inhabitants. The poem also describes the entire progress of human life without any mention whatever of the Incarnation, sacrifice, and redemption of Christ. Like his fellow Deists William Staunton and Jacob Ilive, the author of *Præexistence* believed that human beings were angels fallen from heaven after their conflict against God and that God did not intervene after the world's creation. These beliefs supported each other by cleanly separating the heavenly (supernatural) and earthly (natural) worlds and by telling a story of the creation and depravity of human beings more reasonable than the account in Genesis. Through it all runs alienation from the world as created, a state of spiritual pravity that leaves one unsatisfied in the world as found, especially because it so contrasts with our essence as angels. Both Jacob Ilive and the author of *Præexistence* express deep dissatisfaction with the created world, regarding it as a hell rather than a gift—created evil, as the God of *Præexistence* avers, not corrupted by human failure. For Ilive, human beings are eternal, pre-existing principles, gods in their own right.<sup>5</sup> In *Præexistence* humans are literally Miltonic warriors, like Michael and Satan in *Paradise Lost*, who squaring off seem larger than the planets in conflict.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In the first issue of the *Athenian Gazette*, which addresses preexistence, printer John Dunton firmly asserted that if the soul existed eternally, it would be a kind of God and not a creation.

<sup>6</sup> *Paradise Lost* 6.310-315:

Ilive and the *Præexistence* author contrast these elements with the world through antitheses, “God principles” and “hell principles,” divine soul and devilish flesh.

Strangely, Ilive and the author of *Præexistence* reject nearly every doctrine of Christianity as mystifications and yet erect the stridently metaphysical doctrine of preexistence in their own cosmology. In the cosmologies of Ilive and the *Præexistence* author, a transcendent God exists, but only on the other side of a metaphysically impassable barrier. The created world is “orphaned,” permanently beyond its transcendent father’s reach. The earth is governed only by natural causes, and supernatural revelation has never happened, all apparent revelations being mystifications by crafty priests to control the ignorant. Christ is not to be worshipped, and general redemption from human sin has not been effected. The metaphors that govern these cosmologies arrange God’s light against the created world’s darkness, transcendence against immanence, with the whole world seen as irretrievably dark and immanent and God’s transcendent light placed at an unapproachable distance. The category of “knowledge” unites their Deism and belief in preexistence into a structural, not a doctrinal, gnosticism. Characteristic of this metaphorical and affective gnosticism, the only possible hope lies in the recognition (re-knowing, recovered *gnosis*) of what Gnostic founder Valentinus calls “the knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown.”<sup>7</sup> In

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such as to set forth  
Great things by small, If Natures concord broke,  
Among the Constellations war were sprung,  
Two Planets rushing from aspect malign  
Of fiercest opposition in mid Sky,  
Should combat, and their jarring Spheres confound.

<sup>7</sup> Valentinus in Clement of Alexandria’s *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78.2, quoted in Hans Jonas *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1958, 45.

other words, human hope lies in individuals recognizing themselves as preexistent souls dwelling previously in Heaven, a fact that does not ameliorate the brutality of earthly life but reveals it. The soul's preexistence is the content of a dual forms of knowledge: knowledge that the priests' authority is false and knowledge of human beings' semi-divinity. This twofold knowledge authorizes the individual's experience as the only source of truth. This knowledge takes the form, as will be shown, of Enlightenment skepticism built on truly radical metaphysical and ethical foundations.

### I. Deism and Preexistence

*Præexistence, a Poem in Imitation of Milton* is a strange and for the most part unfamiliar poem, known mostly to students of Milton's influence on early eighteenth-century poetry. It was published in 1714 by John Clarke, a Whig bookseller in London. The poem is a few hundred lines of formidable blank verse, written as the title indicates in imitation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The book proved popular in the mid- and late-eighteenth-century, not in its original printing but as a part of Robert Dodsley's *Miscellany*, which itself was famous even in the nineteenth century among literary antiquarians. With regards to plot and setting, *Præexistence* is almost nothing but a speech by God to the angels in heaven, modeled on the Father's similar speeches in *Paradise Lost*. After a description of heavenly noise ringing through the cosmic frame, the poem opens with the good angels returning from the gates of Hell, "Hot with pursuit, and reeking with the blood / Of guilty cherubs smear'd in sulphurous dust."<sup>8</sup> *Præexistence* is set between books six and seven of *Paradise Lost*, between the war in heaven and the creation of the physical world. *Præexistence* gives these

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<sup>8</sup> *Præexistence*, 4-6.

two events a strong causal link.<sup>9</sup> The God of *Præexistence* creates the physical world in order to have a place to house the middle angels, those who followed Satan in his rebellion without malice or stubbornness. These angels will be given a place befitting the lesser severity of their crime and their sincere repentance: the earth. He also creates human bodies to house these angelic souls and to carry out his punishment on them for their fall. In his long speech, God lays out a cosmological plan for effecting this transformation of the guilty from angels to human beings. God will send the rebel angels out into the darkness of “eternal night” where the anthropomorphized “Silence sits, whose visionary shape / In folds of wreathy mantling sits obscure.”<sup>10</sup> There in the abyss of night flows the River Lethe, the famous river of oblivion that washes away the memories of all who drink its waters. “Hither compell’d, each soul must drink long draughts / Of those forgetful streams,” the poem’s God announces, and in the process the “forms within, / And all the great ideas fade and die.”<sup>11</sup> By the classical topos of Lethe, God makes clear: nothing of the divine knowledge will remain to fallen human beings, so that when they assume their bodies, they do not inherit any of the high Platonic knowledge and sense of metaphysical unity, that experience of divine oneness that characterizes Plotinian contemplation. Instead, human beings will

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<sup>9</sup> In its choice of subject matter, the poem reflects what critic Leslie Moore has called the eighteenth-century interest in the “divine poem” inside *Paradise Lost*, the poem focused on the activities of the “machining persons”—the angels and divine characters—rather than the human characters of Adam and Eve. These readers of Milton, John Dennis chief among them, prefer Books 1, 2, 6, 7 to the more domestic and human subjects of Books 4, 5, 8, and 10. In keeping with such readers’ proclivities, the subject of *Præexistence* connects more closely to Book 6 than to the books that describe the terrestrial lives of Adam and Eve or to the future history prophesied in Books 11 and 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Præexistence*, 184, 185-186.

<sup>11</sup> *Præexistence*, 190, 191-2.

be lost in a lost world, without a metaphysical guiding light or hope for true knowledge. This is the condition of humanity on God's newly created Earth.

As Dustin D. Stewart has recognized, *Præexistence* is politically a Whig poem.<sup>12</sup> It was published anonymously by John Clark in 1714, during the lengthy and politically divisive peace negotiations concluding the War of the Spanish Succession. The death of the last Spanish Hapsburg left the Spanish throne vacant and sparked a war lasting from 1701 to 1714, dividing Europe into partisans of the French King, Louis XIV, and those of an oppositional coalition headed by the Holy Roman Emperor and the Dutch. On the English front, this conflict widened the growing ideological gulf between the English Whigs and Tories.<sup>13</sup> Whigs argued for strong opposition to the French, hopeful to maintain a Protestant Netherlands and to prevent the Catholic French from gaining further power in Europe.<sup>14</sup> While not exactly supportive of the French monarchy, the Tories argued against entering the war and called for peace several times during its progress. The Treaty of Utrecht brought the war to its conclusion slowly from April 1713 to February 1715. Having witnessed the triumph of the anti-French Duke of Marlborough at Blenheim in 1702, the minority

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<sup>12</sup> Dustin D. Stewart, "Angel Bodies to Whig Souls: Blank Verse after Blenheim" in *Milton in the Long Restoration*, edited Blair Hoxby and Ann Baynes Coiro (Oxford; New York: Oxford U P 2016): 204-223.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Varney, "Ending the War and Making the Peace: The Literary Languages of Public Controversy in 1713," In *Guerres Et Paix: La Grande-Bretagne Au XVIIIe Siècle, I-II*, edited by Paul-Gabriel Boucé, (Paris, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1998): 243-254.

<sup>14</sup> "Early in 1702, Lord Shaftesbury told a correspondent that all depended on the support of the English people for the war. 'They must know their cause for which they fight,' he said

And no French-King of Spain is a plain cause, as plain as no King James, no owning a Prince of Wales, no Popery, nor Slavery.'" in John B. Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession: A Study of the English View and Conduct of Grand Strategy, 1702–1712*, (New York: Garland, 1987), 3.



Whig parliamentarians desired the treaty to demand considerable concessions from the Catholic and, from their perspective, tyrannical Louis XIV. Under Tory minister Robert Harley, the House of Commons negotiated a treaty that in the Whig view favored the French. The resulting conflict escalated political tensions among the relatively new political parties. As Andrew Varney writes, “The debate about the peace extended all the way from the Queen and her ministers to the scruffy boys who sold badly printed half-sheet ballads and songs in the muddy streets of London.”<sup>15</sup> It was in this political atmosphere that John Clark published *Præexistence* in 1714.

Nearly all of Clark’s publications during the war years, with the minor exceptions of some devotional handbooks, offered support for either Dissent from the Church of England or for the Whig side of the war debates.<sup>16</sup> The other publications of his imprint include several sermons by preachers Dissenting from the Church of England from the early years of the eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup> In 1713 Clark printed a political pamphlet by John Withers entitled “The dutch better friends than the French, to the Monarchy, Church, and trade of England.”<sup>18</sup> The pamphlet argues for the Whig position on the Treaty of Utrecht, asking for greater penalties for the French. He also printed in 1714 a treatise offering support for the censure of a few articles from the

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<sup>15</sup> Varney, “Ending the War and Making the Peace,” 42.

<sup>16</sup> See also his printing of an encomiastic funereal sermon for William III, the king most popular in the Whig imagination in the early eighteenth century: Thomas Goodwin, *A sermon preached on the sad occasion of the death of the best of kings, William the IIIrd. King of England; Scotland; France; and Ireland, &c.*, London, 1702. Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

<sup>17</sup> Clark, Samuel, *A sermon upon occasion of the death of Her Majesty Queen Anne: preach'd to a congregation of Dissenters, at St. Albans: Aug. 22. 1714*, (London, 1714) Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

<sup>18</sup> John Withers, “The dutch better friends than the French, to the Monarchy, Church, and trade of England,” (London, 1713), Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

Treaty by several Whig members of the House of Commons.<sup>19</sup> Besides that, Clark printed in 1706 a translation of Le Clerc's enthusiastic biography of John Locke, the thinker most commonly associated with the political settlement of 1689 and the Whig constitutional interpretation.<sup>20</sup> Clark's record of printing Whigs and Dissenters should prompt a look at the political context of *Præexistence*. That effort is made harder by the anonymity of the author, but the poem's considerable preface is signed by J.B., probably the Dissenting preacher John Bowden from Somersetshire.<sup>21</sup> Bowden was the brother of Samuel Bowden, a physician and poet in Frome. He became a minister in Frome in 1707, and by 1717 preached to a congregation of about one thousand Somerset denizens. A Dissenter, John Bowden published four sermons, two of them printed by Clark. In 1715, the year after the publication of *Præexistence*, Bowden published a sermon in which he attacked critics of English Dissent along Latitudinarian lines.<sup>22</sup> Bowden's probable authorship of the preface contributes to the idea that Clark saw the poem as part of a larger project in defense of Whig and Dissenting ideas.

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<sup>19</sup> J. Egleton, *A vindication of the late House of Commons, in rejecting the bill for confirming the eighth and ninth articles of the treaty of navigation*, (London, 1714), Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Le Clerc, *The life and character of Mr. John Locke, author of the Essay concerning humane understanding. Written in French, by Mr. Le Clerc. And done into English, by T. F. P. Gent.*, (London, 1706), Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

<sup>21</sup> Bowden himself has been confusingly identified as two separate persons, the minister associated with Henry Grove at Taunton, and the brother of Samuel Bowden. The latter John Bowden is the minister from Frome who probably wrote the preface to *Præexistence*. See Jim Benedict, "John Bowden," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> John Bowden, *A sermon preach'd at Frome, in the county of Somerset, January the 20th 1714/5*. (London, 1715). Early English Books Online.

Even the form of *Præexistence*, non-satirical Miltonic blank verse, announces its party affiliation. Whig encomiasts of the early eighteenth century wrote several poems in Miltonic blank verse, such as *Joshua*, *Ramellies*, and *The Battle of Ramillia*.<sup>23</sup> Modeled on Book VI of *Paradise Lost*, these epic encomia mostly appear around 1704 as tributes to the military success of Lord Marlborough at Blenheim, an important victory in the War of Spanish Succession. Among these Whig writers, Miltonic blank verse becomes a vehicle to celebrate the victories of the anti-French Duke of Marlborough and King William III, two figures closely associated with the Whig conception of liberty in the early eighteenth century. A second type of Miltonic imitation relevant to *Præexistence* has Dissenting sympathies. Several poems appear in the early 1700s in a genre R.D. Havens calls “essays in the sublime.”<sup>24</sup> Among these are Elizabeth Rowe’s “A Description of Hell” and “A Description of Heaven” as well as *Præexistence* (1714) and William Bond’s *A description of the four last things*.<sup>25</sup> These poems imitate Milton in his imagination of heaven, hell, death, and Apocalypse, offering poetic speculations on theological doctrine. They use imitation as an opportunity to imagine and celebrate religious freedom. These Dissenters

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<sup>23</sup> Anonymous, *Joshua: A Poem in Imitation of Milton: Humbly Inscrib'd to the Duke of Marlborough* (London, 1706), Eighteenth Century Collections Online. John Paris, *Ramillies: A Poem, Humbly Inscrib'd to His Grace the Duke of Marlborough* (London, 1706), Eighteenth Century Collections Online. John Dennis, *The Battle of Ramillia or, the power of union. A poem. In five books. by Mr. Dennis*, (London, 1706), Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

<sup>24</sup> R.D. Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, (Cambridge, Harvard U P), 109.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *Divine hymns and poems on several occasions: viz, A pastoral on our Saviour's nativity; the wish; The description of Heaven, in imitation of Mr. Milton, &c.*, (London, 1704), Eighteenth Century Collections Online. William Bond, *A description of the four last things viz. death, judgment, hell, & heaven; in blank verse*, (London, 1719), Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

develop their religious ideology where rational speculation and poetic fancy meet.

The author of *Præexistence* belongs in one sense to this class of writers.

*Præexistence* has attracted critical interest in two respects. The first is as part of the early response to *Paradise Lost*. From this viewpoint, the poem has been judged remarkable. In an encyclopedic study from 1922 of Milton's influence on eighteenth-century poetry, R. D. Havens commended *Præexistence* as written in the best blank verse between Milton and Thompson. "Best" is highly qualitative but Havens seems to mean the most Miltonic, a thoroughgoing imitation of Milton's prosody that walks the narrow line between imitation and parody.<sup>26</sup> Recently, Dustin Stewart has grouped the poem with a set of "Whig" Miltonic imitators struggling to define the party poetry after the death of Dryden. "Milton" offered a vision of poetry with a moral message that corresponded to Whig optimism and opposition to absolutism. Stewart suggests Milton's angels are the image these Whigs most want to imitate—free, creative, and expansive. For Stewart, *Præexistence* thus shows a desire to imagine oneself as an angel, meaning a creature free from rigid order and tradition. Blank verse, too, is the language of freedom.<sup>27</sup> Related but not identical is the critical study of *Præexistence* as an example of religious poetry or theological thought in the early eighteenth century. In one volume of *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, Hoxie Fairchild examines *Præexistence* in this respect and finds it to contain deep spiritual pessimism, denying human redemption and deprecating human ability—exactly the opposite of Stewart's claim of "Whig" optimism. In this detailed analysis, Fairchild

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<sup>26</sup> Raymond Dexter Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1922, 109.

<sup>27</sup> Dustin Stewart, "Angel Bodies to Whig Souls: Blank Verse after Blenheim" in *Milton in the Long Restoration*, ed. Blair Hoxby and Ann Baynes Coiro, Oxford, UK: Oxford U P, 2016: 205-224.

also notes the ambiguous tone of the poem, which appears somewhere between sincere imitation and possible parody. Notably, the absence of Milton's distinctive claim to divine inspiration leaves the poem of uncertain seriousness, neither a prophecy nor an authoritative theological tract.

Only one critic has singled out *Præexistence* as an important work in its own right. As part of his larger study of preexistence in Western intellectual history, Terry Givens treats the poem as a unique example of the expression of preexistence theology in the early eighteenth century. For Givens, the theology of *Præexistence* is drawn from the theology of *Paradise Lost*. Since Milton memorably depicted the premortal lives of angels and divine agents in Heaven, the author of *Præexistence* understood himself to be completing Milton's project by extending that premortal existence to human beings. Givens writes that "If Milton resisted developing the motif [of preexistence] with real intent," the *Præexistence* author, "did not hesitate to repair the connection Milton had missed (or obscured) and identify the rebellious hosts with preexistent mortals."<sup>28</sup> Putting aside the unfortunate construction that Milton "resisted developing the motif with real intent"—is this the same as not intending to convey the motif?—this idea is unconvincing, partly because most readers then or now do not experience *Paradise Lost* as *almost* expressing the soul's preexistence. The Archangel Raphael conveys that the God of *Paradise Lost* breathes into Adam's nostrils the breath of life and makes him thereby a living soul.<sup>29</sup> In his own theological tract *De Doctrina Christiania*, Milton assents to soul creation by traduction, the process

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<sup>28</sup> Terry Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought*, New York, NY: Oxford U P, 2010, 182.

<sup>29</sup> *Paradise Lost*, 524-528.

directly opposed to preexistence.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Givens's interpretation produces an internal contradiction; Givens wants the author of *Præexistence* to be willful and creative and at the same time a mere handmaid of the impression he received from Milton. A variation on Harold Bloom's theory of "strong misreading" seems to lie behind Givens's depiction of the relationship between these writers.<sup>31</sup> As a matter of historical reality, the author of *Præexistence* did not find the doctrine of preexistence in *Paradise Lost* but instead placed the doctrine into Milton's mouth.

Against Givens's interpretation, I assert that Milton's *Paradise Lost* did not represent to the author a powerfully idiosyncratic theology awaiting a minor correction to achieve its true heterodox potential. Rather, Milton's grand epic represented the orthodox theological consensus that the author sought to overthrow, not to correct. The key to this argument is that the author is a Deist, and as such looked at *Paradise Lost* as a literary expression of mainstream Christian theology, a theology that was wrong almost to its bones. As a result, he treated Milton's epic as most Deists treated the Bible, as the necessary zone of argument about how to achieve a more just and rational theology. Orthodoxy must be battled in its own lair. The author turned toward *Paradise Lost* for strategic reasons, in order to depict an unorthodox theology in the garb and with the authority of mainstream theology. The author thus wrote about Milton for the same reasons the Deists wrote about the Bible, not because he was a "Miltonist" but because he was a Deist, intending to replace and not to supplement.

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<sup>30</sup> John Milton, *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine: Compiled from the Holy Scriptures Alone*, 192-3.

<sup>31</sup> Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, New York, NY: Oxford U P, 1975.

The scholarly understanding of the term Deism has changed in recent decades. The contemporary debate concerning seventeenth-century deism constellates around its sources and doctrines. Historians describe three sources of deism: radical Protestantism (especially the Socinians), materialist philosophy (especially Spinoza), and classical deism (the Epicureans, Stoics, Platonists, or Aristotle).<sup>32</sup> The third is especially intriguing because contemporary critics of deism often traced its lineage to the former two sources and not toward its classical ancestors. Stoicism, Pythagoreanism, Epicureanism, and other ancient philosophies can be called “deisms” and were of course well-known. Wayne Hudson has emphasized this aspect to the deprecation of the other two, but the radical Protestant element in the makeup of English deism matters, especially in the way deism critiqued aspects of orthodox Christian theology.<sup>33</sup> Deism emphasized the critique of Trinitarian theology, Christian ritualism, and priestcraft, all three aspects derived from Socinianism and other forms of radical Protestantism. Many Deists questioned crucial Christian orthodoxies like the Trinity, but so had Locke and the Socinians before them. Deists maintained that Christian ritual religion was a set of erroneous practices installed by priests to maintain their own power, but the most radical Protestants had argued much the same. Seen in their right context, Deists are not complete radicals breaking with tradition but thinkers who took certain radical Protestant criticisms of traditional theology further and who demanded an even simpler theology than that of Socinianism.

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Gay argues that the deism of the seventeenth century is a revival of classical deism, possibly traced through clandestine heterodox circles as early as the sixteenth century.

<sup>33</sup> Wayne Hudson, *The English Deists*, 2 vol., London, UK: Pickering and Chatto, 2009.

The replacement of Milton's theology intended by the author of *Præexistence* lies at this conjunction of the theological points between radical Protestantism and Deism. Milton may have been in his own day a radical Protestant, but by the early 1700s theological radicalism had taken a new turn, against the Bible and mainstream theology itself. On all the key issues of contemporary polemic—the necessity of revealed religion, the justice of Original Sin, the coherent and veracious nature of the Holy Trinity, and the justice of eternal punishment—the author takes the radical stance: that revelation is unnecessary, Original Sin incoherent, the Trinity nonexistent, and eternal punishment inconsistent with the justice of God. *Præexistence* balances this radical theology with a convincing depiction of *Paradise Lost*'s cosmology. Elements borrowed from Milton's epic contrast with its own rational and non-biblical account of God's justice.

Against the orthodox Augustinian position presented in Milton's epic, *Præexistence* transforms the nature of the Original Sin from the singular, representative action of Adam on behalf of mankind to millions of individual crimes performed by the angels. The story of Adam and Eve depicts a strongly anthropomorphic God whose voluntary action after the Fall upsets the laws of his own creation for a moral purpose. In the usual scheme, God punishes not only human beings for their original sin, but also birds, beasts, fish, and plant life, creatures that bore no responsibility for the sin of Adam. This scheme creates a host of difficulties for theodicy, both in the form of unjust punishment toward the animal world—embodied in Milton's God's inexplicable though Biblical condemnation of the innocent serpent—and in the form of a limitation on free will imposed as the *consequence*, not merely the cause, of the Fall. According to *Præexistence*, God did not first create a beautiful, perfect world and then mar it because of his creatures' sin.



The world the author envisions is created complete, and divine intervention does not occur after this first act of creation. The change of seasons, in *Paradise Lost* a consequence of the Fall, here is a constant feature of the world, since “frost / at either end shall rage” and “the torrid zone...fries with constant heat.”<sup>34</sup> God marks the moral reason for these painful consequences. The earth will be barren, overgrown, and prone to threatening weather conditions so that it must be “reform’d / To fields, and grassy dales, and flow’ry meads, / By your continual pains.”<sup>35</sup> This revision in the consequences of Original Sin abnegates the need for the Garden of Eden story and its anthropomorphized picture of a God intervening repeatedly in human life.

Human life is uniformly tragic but the afterlife is described only very briefly as the era when “the prisoner, now enlarg’d, / Regains the flaming borders of the sky.”<sup>36</sup> This brief description given by God is the poem’s entire story of life after human death, and it makes no mention of the possibility of Hell, only “the flaming borders of the sky.” Divine judgement is conspicuously absent from the imagination of death; God has done his worst already. Instead, the predominant fact of death is its unknown quality. The dying man expects to take a “dreary road...he knows not where.”<sup>37</sup> When the narrating God focuses on the unknown nature of existence after death (a fact on which presumably he speaks with authority), he does not emphasize that human beings will be unsure whether they are destined for heaven or hell. Rather, he focuses on the fear of annihilation, the radical position that made Lucretius such a significant and challenging figure for early modern theologians and philosophers. At

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<sup>34</sup> *Præexistence*, 164-5, 168-9.

<sup>35</sup> *Præexistence*, 163-164.

<sup>36</sup> *Præexistence*, 377-378.

<sup>37</sup> *Præexistence*, 370-371.

the end of the road that “leads he knows not where,” “empty space gapes horrible, and threatens to absorb all being.”<sup>38</sup> According to God, the fear of death comes not from the fear of eternal hellfire but of the “empty space” that may await the dying human being. God implies that human beings will not believe in the immortality of the soul, a doctrine that must be true since the human soul “[r]egains the flaming borders of the sky” at its end. Entertaining the imagination of annihilation, God reveals that there is no reasonable basis for fear of eternal punishment in hell, a fact that he compounds by his compatible assertions about the unreal nature of demons and other evil creatures that sometimes invade the imagination the dying man. The author goes out of his way to suggest that the vivid images of life after death that come to the dying man’s mind, torture by demons and haunting by ghosts, are the products of his imagination and not realities. In the moments before death, “sooty demons glare, / And dolorous spectres grin” before his eyes. These supposed “demons” are marked by their unreality. The author characterizes them as “the shapeless rout / Of wild imagination.”<sup>39</sup> Even the description “sooty” and the word “spectres” indicate these creatures’ unreality, their status as mere phantasms rather than real entities. Just as when God suggests that the imagination of annihilation haunts the dying man, in Lucretian mode he here intimates that the worst torments of the dying derive from man’s own imagination. The poem utterly renounces eternal punishment as a feature of life after death, because it is human life, not human afterlife, that constitutes the punishment of sinning against God. The punishment of the angels comes through their embodied lives as human beings, not through a divine dispensation at the Last Judgment.

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<sup>38</sup> *Præexistence*, 371-373.

<sup>39</sup> *Præexistence*, 373-375.

Judgment after death, Last or otherwise, is found nowhere in the poem's cosmological lexicon.

The poem's depiction of God also corresponds with one of the central points of Deism, reflective of its influence from Socinian theology: anti-Trinitarianism. Despite all the divine images the author borrows from Milton's God—throne, lightning, oratory—he never once refers to this divine sovereign as “the Father.” He is simply God, absent any Trinitarian entanglements. In heaven, the God of *Præexistence* acts and speaks alone, without the Son acting as the vehicle of his power. Throughout the poem, God makes no mention of Christ, but he also makes no mention of a Holy Spirit. Like the prototypical Deist clockmaker, God arranged human affairs before the first act of creation has been effected. In Milton's poem, of course, the Son of God ends the heavenly conflict, an act that earns him acclamation in song by the loyal angels. In *Præexistence*, God greets the loyal angels on their return from pursuing the rebel angels to the gates of hell and congratulates them for their victory, with no mention of a Son of God who won the war on their behalf.<sup>40</sup> God does mention that the fallen angels “have try'd the force / Of this right hand, and known Almighty pow'r.”<sup>41</sup> The right hand may be an obscure reference to the Son's status at God's right hand, but more likely the phrase is only a metonymy of God's vengeance, as in *Paradise Lost* when the rebel angels fear God's “red right hand” or when Satan claims, arrogating divine power, that his “own right hand / Shall teach us highest deeds.”<sup>42</sup> The slender nature of this reference, combined with the substantial

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<sup>40</sup> *Præexistence*, 97-125.

<sup>41</sup> *Præexistence*, 100-101.

<sup>42</sup> *Paradise Lost*, 5.865.

and unitary figure of God, indicates there is no Son in *Præexistence*'s heaven. The Holy Spirit, as "comforter," is nowhere to be found either.

Even more tellingly, God's narrative makes no mention of further intervention into human history in the forms of Incarnation or redemption. In the Christian scheme, human beings are punished for their sin, but Jesus Christ takes on the worlds' sins and offers himself as a sacrifice to redeem humanity. As Hoxie Fairchild notices, God's speech offers no suggestion that human beings "are to raise themselves through faith in a Redeemer. Life is to be for them a prison from which death provides the only escape."<sup>43</sup> Fairchild's point is apt, because it is death, not salvation, which makes human suffering end. When the human being dies, they "regain[] the flaming borders of the sky." The author makes mention that only when the human soul is "now enlarg'd," can he return to heaven, but it is by death the soul is "enlarg'd," not by regeneration. The emphasis on the return to heaven through mere bodily death confirms that the sacrifice of the Son of God is unnecessary, and human life proceeds without divine assistance or aid.

On this cosmic scheme, knowledge of God is impossible, whether won by right reason or divine revelation, Faith in Christ—even in God himself—plays no part in this story. Indeed, when the human being "tries / With all his might to raise some weighty thought, / Of me," the activity "but recoils to crush the laboring mind."<sup>44</sup> This skepticism about human capacity to conceive of God might indicate Calvinist pessimism, but if so, God does not add the further point that he will implant faith in the human soul, a necessary piece of Calvinist orthodoxy to secure human life from

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<sup>43</sup> Hoxie Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, (New York: Columbia U P, 1939), 168.

<sup>44</sup> *Præexistence*, 252-255.

utter hopelessness. No actions on the part of human beings, no faith or obedience by word or deed, work to secure a place for them in heaven. The author does not differentiate the fate of the faithful from the unfaithful. He mentions several figures who will suffer uniquely painful fates, presumably on account of their crimes, but these are all earthly punishments. Faith in the historical Christ and his sacrifice on behalf of all human beings, the crux of Christian theology, has no place in the scheme laid out by the author's God.

The author might be saved from complete defeatism about knowledge of God with recourse to the traditional Platonic doctrine of innate ideas. Like John Locke a few decades earlier, the author specifically denies this possibility. Though the angels beheld God in heaven, the soul's draft of the water of Lethe will purge all knowledge of divine things. The soul will enter the earth perfectly "blank," a significant word in the history of philosophy. God is explicit on this point: if the soul's heavenly knowledge, its "vast thought," were contained in a fleshly mind, the soul would break its material bonds and "wing away."<sup>45</sup> For this reason, "each soul must drink long draughts / Of those forgetful streams, 'till forms within, / And all the great ideas fade and die."<sup>46</sup> God insists that all this divine knowledge, Platonized by the names "forms" and "ideas," do not transform or weaken when the soul becomes embodied, but instead they utterly die as a result of those "forgetful streams." God announces that "'Tis therefore my decree, the soul return / Naked from off this beach, and perfect blank."<sup>47</sup> This position of an entirely blank soul reflects the position not taken by

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<sup>45</sup> *Præexistence*, 194, 196.

<sup>46</sup> *Præexistence*, 190-193.

<sup>47</sup> *Præexistence*, 197-198, my emphasis.

Platonists, whom one might expect be the philosophical parents of a poem called *Præexistence*, but of Locke himself. Locke strongly criticized the doctrine of innate ideas, usually associated with preexistence, and the author's emphasis on the total purging of all preexistent knowledge is in fact compatible with Locke's position. Like Locke, the poem deprecates the divine power of reason, for the Cambridge Platonists the great source of knowledge of God, in favor of a more skeptical, Lockean version of the source of knowledge, including knowledge of God. The God of *Præexistence* says that human "reasonings" are "high," but essentially deluded in its reasoning since, "the feeble clue / Of fleeting images he draws in vain / To wond'rous length."<sup>48</sup> The idea of the vanity of the "images" of God in the human mind correspondences to Locke's own position on the philosophy of religion, but for Locke, the poverty of reason in matters divine necessitated divine revelation. In this respect, his own theological view was more conservative than the first generation of Deists who were in some respects his heirs.<sup>49</sup> If the author of *Præexistence* believes the same, his God offers no promise that revelation will recompense this failure of reason. The author of *Præexistence* denies innate ideas in human beings, deprecates reason as a pitiful faculty in apprehending divine things, but does not offer revelation as a solution to either problem. Though the poem aims at a more rational theology, God in *Præexistence* is simply inscrutable to embodied human creatures, and the poem's view on the possibility of any theological knowledge is simply negative. Human beings will never obtain knowledge of God in this life.

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<sup>48</sup> *Præexistence*, 256-8.

<sup>49</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996, Chap. XVII: 323-328.

The poem's silence on revelation is compounded by its denial of eternal punishment, critique of Original Sin, and its anti-Trinitarian characteristics. Its emphasis on preexistence may seem to cut against the poem being a Deist work, but as mentioned above, two contemporary Deists committed themselves to exactly the position of the author of *Præexistence* on the status of human beings as sinful angels punished by God with embodiment: chancery clerk William Staunton and radical bookseller Jacob Ilive. Their theology includes the same critiques of Christian orthodoxy, but also the same story of human beings' genesis from angelic beginnings. Seeing their biographies and points of view places the author of *Præexistence* in the deeper context of the contemporary critiques of Protestant theology, critiques that both these authors carried almost as far as they could.

A legal secretary from Hampton, William Staunton wrote several treatises and letters on theological and philosophical subjects. His birth and death date are unclear, but according to *The Ancient Physician's Legacy to his country* (1732), a compilation of medical knowledge, he was sixty-seven in 1730 or 1731.<sup>50</sup> Staunton's philosophical views tended toward Deism, and he repeatedly defended the accomplishments and capacity of natural reason over revelation. Staunton believed the Gospels were "a Comment upon the Law of Nature, the Only Law now in force." This phrase, which is the title of one of his works, is similar to the more famous John Toland's *Christianity as Old as the Creation*. Christianity is not "news," not gospel, but a restoration to the knowledge of the singular ancient truth, a truth potent without

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<sup>50</sup> The only source of biographical information about him, *The Ancient Physician's Legacy to his Country*, (London, 1742), describes a "Mr William Staunton of Hampton, near Hampton-Court, formerly a Chancery Clerk of Furnival's Inn" who was "for twenty years afflicted with a violent Asthma." (20) Staunton's profession as a former chancery clerk is stated on the authorship lines of all his printed works.

revelation. For Staunton, the good news of Christ meant liberation from the law of God to the law of nature, whereby human beings could now trust their reason to discover the natural law. Staunton does not insist that there was never a Law of God in force, but that law is repealed by Christ. While once God, now Nature, reigns. For Staunton, Christ's Revelation announced the repeal of revelation and the ongoing reign of merely natural truths. Staunton also claims that Jesus forbade all worship and prayer of himself, instead claiming that all religion regard the Father directly, Staunton approaches something much more like Deism.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Staunton takes anti-clericalism further than a radical Protestant—like Milton—would have done when he insists that the corruptions of genuine Christianity can be found in the Bible itself, specifically in the later Gospels, Acts, and the various epistles. Christianity became corrupted, Staunton says, when Christians decided to worship the risen Christ instead of God the Father, when “Men first conceived that Jesus Christ, the Messenger of the Covenant between God and Man, and the Apostle or Ambassador of God, is God himself.”<sup>52</sup> This position sloughs off what many of Staunton's contemporaries considered the central Christian belief, the divinity of Christ. In that sense, Staunton is not an atheist, but a Deist on the border with Socinianism.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> William Staunton, *A Familiar Discourse* iv-v.

<sup>52</sup> William Staunton, *An Epistolary Conference with the Reverend Dr. Waterland*, London, 1724, 58.

<sup>53</sup> Characteristic of Deism, Staunton attacked the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, objecting to the orthodox conception of the hypostatic union and “three persons, one substance,” declaring “I read not in Scripture of an hypostatick Union.” A closer look at these positions reveals the connections between his belief in reason, his attack on the Trinity, and his anti-clericalism and even anti-biblicism. Staunton denied the existence of the Trinity, objecting at great length to the importation of Aristotelean and Platonic philosophical concepts in its definition, and in this sense, he is a radical Protestant.



Staunton combines this Deism with a belief in the personal preexistence of the human soul. He believes human beings were not just souls with preexistent lives in heaven, but actual angels, a theory he propounds in his modestly titled *Sincere Thoughts of a Private Christian* (1719). Like Henry More, Staunton believes that “this Ancient Doctrine” of preexistence “not only strikes a Light into several Texts of Scripture, otherwise dark and puzzling” but “in great measure Justifies the Providence, and Goodness, and Love of God.” Preexistence solves the problems of God’s providence—specifically the justice of Original Sin—by making each of us, as Staunton puts it, quoting John Norris, “his own Adam.”<sup>54</sup> Human beings earned their punishment not because Adam ate the apple, but because as angels they “were in some Measure partakers of the Sin of Devils, and fought under Satans banner.” His surprising proof for this fact lies in the biblical promise that both human beings and angels will be punished at the Last Judgment. God created Hell first for the evil angels, not for human beings and thus “if we Men, were never [God’s] Angels, then that Fire is not prepared for Men.” Otherwise, “an Infinitely good God” would have had to create a place of eternal punishment for his yet non-existent human creatures, prior even to their sin.<sup>55</sup> Staunton argues that no benevolent God would create a place of punishment as a threat to those who have not yet sinned, but the Biblical announcement that God created hell for human beings must be harmonized with the traditional story of the War in Heaven, because of which God threw down the evil angels into hell. Staunton’s solution is to suggest that we are the fallen angels. Thus, God created hell for us, not just for the angels, because we are the angels as well.

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<sup>54</sup> *Sincere Thoughts of a Private Christian*, 65-66.

<sup>55</sup> *Sincere Thoughts of a Private Christian*, 66.

Preempting a criticism from those scandalized by this idea, Staunton adds that the elect are not the most diabolical of the fallen angels but only a middle sort, much like the contingent that become human in *Præexistence*. This odd argument is revealing in its absurdity. Saving God from an ostensible lie is probably a pretense: more than likely, his Deism produced his belief in preexistence, a possibility compounded by the coincidence of these two factors in the minds of some of his contemporaries.

Indeed, Staunton's combination of preexistence with Deism is idiosyncratic, but resonant with that of other Deists. The notorious Deist bookseller Jacob Ilive preached a similar, though more radical, theory of preexistence in his public oration at Joiner's Hall (1733), a speech that incited considerable controversy and required his response a year later. Ilive is perhaps most famous as the publisher and secret author of a 1757 printing of the *Book of Jasher*, an apocryphal text mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and supposed to be translated by Alcuin. Though he was censured for this fraud, for a separate controversy he was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to two years in prison.<sup>56</sup> The speech at Joiner's Hall also attracted deserved controversy, as it is quite radical by the standards of the 1730s. In it, Ilive reproduces the private beliefs of his mother and brothers, all apparently heterodox, that human beings were the angels who followed Lucifer in Heaven, that the earth is Hell, that posthumous punishment is not eternal, and that human beings will eventually come individually to rule succeeding planets in an infinite procession. Eventually printed, the speech nominally proceeds as an exegesis of the sentence from Scripture, "In my Father's house are many rooms," but this exegetical point becomes secondary to the elaborate cosmology Ilive is establishing in his speech. Like Staunton, Ilive hangs preexistence on a textual

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<sup>56</sup> James A. Herrick, "Ilive, Jacob," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford U P, 2004.

technicality. Ilive asserts that there is a vast universe of worlds, drawing on Derham's plurality of worlds theory from *Astro-Theology*, through which human beings may eventually freely travel. This single world of earth is hell itself, and the human being is the soul of an angel trapped in a physical body. Ilive narrates his cosmology while drawing on Scripture at key points, but the cosmology itself seems to have a priority over the textual justification., only trying to elucidate difficult Scriptural points. Unlike Staunton, Ilive apparently lived in a small family community with whom he shared all these beliefs, and his mother made it an item in her will that Ilive should deliver this address upon her death. Ilive thus represents not a single isolated case but a voice of a small household of people of the mechanical class who ascribed both to Deism and preexistence.

The essence of Ilive's Deism is a sociological point with theological implications, though these two descriptors could also be plausibly reversed. This essence is the critique of "priestcraft," or the social and theological authority of the clerical castes dating back from the beginning of Christianity. The orthodox theology created by the priests justifies their own power as legislators over the human race. Thus, recovering the true Christian belief invariably entails triumphing over tyrannical priests. In one work, Ilive begins by asserting that "Opinions, like cities and empires, have owed their origin to certain causes; and have in every age like them, been subject to various changes and revolutions" and, like cities and empires, opinions have "degenerated so far from their original, that they have lost even their primitive intention, and have been perverted in order to convey to the minds of men ideas and doctrines the authors never intended."<sup>57</sup> In his two orations, Ilive attacks the

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<sup>57</sup> *Oration Spoke at Trinity Hall*, 1-2.

main opinion that protects priestly power, the doctrine of eternal damnation, from two different sides. The Oration at Joiner's Hall asserts the preexistence of the soul and the plurality of worlds, together with the notion that Earth is Hell. These concepts fuse together into a vision of the soul as coming from heaven and journeying not from earth to hell but to a vast number of different planets or cosmic levels in the soul's eternal life as spirit. Eternal damnation is impossible, because this earth is itself Hell and our eternal soul has an infinite lifetime's journey before it through physical space. The Oration at Trinity Hall argues strenuously against the resurrection of the body at the Last Judgment and for a denial of the Last Judgment in general, with the assertion that Jesus's reappearance on Mount Olivet following his death constitutes his "coming again." For obvious reasons, the denial of Last Judgment entails a denial of eternal damnation, but Ilive also insists that denying the resurrection of the body, found in the creeds, entails the impossibility of eternal damnation, since only bodies can suffer in Hell.

The doctrine of preexistence forms the keystone of these intersecting Deistic critiques of Christianity. In his oration, Ilive lays out his commitment to several theological theories, "the P[l]urality of Worlds," "That this Earth is Hell," and "That the Souls of Men are the Apostate Angels." These concepts add up to a single perspective, called "gnostic" by James A. Herrick.<sup>58</sup> Ilive offers little to no argument on behalf of a belief in preexistence. He does not make the pedantic case put forward by Staunton, but like Staunton, he claims to find authorization for preexistence in Scripture. His oration is not an argument in favor of preexistence but an elaboration of the idea, which cannot itself be proven. Beyond the belief in the soul's preexistence,

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<sup>58</sup> James A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists*

the theologies of Ilive and Staunton resemble that of *Præexistence* in denying the presence of a divine Messiah who saves sinful humanity. Considered against the reduced focus on life after death in *Præexistence* and the fact that human beings do not appear to go to hell, the positions of Ilive and the Miltonic imitator align in critical ways, especially in their common portrait of life on this earth. God intervened only once in human affairs, through the set of events that led to the creation of the world, and since this initial act, earthly life has proceeded according to its natural processes. The elaborate prehistory of human life stands in contrast to the dilapidated, desacralized world of created human life.

These three authors observed have much in common. These authors distrust revelation and deprecate stories of miracles and divine intervention, yet they also believe that human beings originated in heaven rather than earth. How do we explain the coexistence of general skepticism about Christian theology with a commitment to a strange, specifically metaphysical theological doctrine—preexistence—that is highly unlikely to be proved by reason or by empirical science? Settling this question of Deism and preexistence requires the importation of a third term, one that resonates with the oldest and perhaps the quintessential Christian heresy. The best word for them is “gnostic.”

## II. The New Gnosticism

The most famous creed of ancient Gnosticism comes from the sect of Valentinus: “What liberates is the knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we

are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth.”<sup>59</sup> Gnosticism is an account of human life in terms of an elaborate cosmology and “backstory” or prehistory of the world and the human person. This prehistory and cosmology have the result that the earth is evil, human life just manifold forms of suffering, and God—and all the good he represents—restrained permanently from the world. As descendants of the true God, human beings have something of the original divine spark of goodness, but it is imprisoned inside a flesh and a soul created evil in an evil cosmos. As the Valentinus quotation demonstrates, Gnosticism also purports to “liberate” the human being from this world and from its evil body and soul by recognition of its divine nature: a liberation to the “spirit,” pneuma or spark.

Gnosticism produces a particular metaphoric language centered on light and darkness. As the philosopher Hans Jonas describes the relation, “to the divine realm of light, self-contained and remote, the cosmos is opposed as the realm of darkness.”<sup>60</sup> This language flows directly from Gnosticism’s cosmology and cosmogony, in which the true God remains hidden from the entire created universe. He is “hidden from all creatures” and “unknowable by natural concepts” and thus “can hardly be expressed otherwise than in negative terms.”<sup>61</sup> These metaphors do not just express the relation between the reality of divinity and the created world: rather, the dependence on metaphor, and the metaphor’s implicit acknowledgment of its own failure, conveys

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<sup>59</sup> Valentinus in Clement of Alexandria’s *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78.2, quoted in Hans Jonas *The Gnostic Religion*, 45.

<sup>60</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 42.

<sup>61</sup> *The Gnostic Religion*, 42, 43.

the very failure of “concepts” to describe the true God accurately. Gnosticism’s inner logic refuses distillation into concepts describable by discursive reason.

The historical Gnostics themselves prized “experience,” a category not reducible to rationalism, over both authority and the erection of doctrinal creeds. Elaine Pagels characterizes this dynamic as Gnosticism’s reliance on “the primacy of immediate [religious] experience” over and against mediations by authorities.<sup>62</sup> For this reason, they produced works of art, poems, music, and other expressions of religious experience rather than theological works. The Gnostic works of theology, or really cosmogony, that exist are themselves slightly mystifying and semi-poetic. This reliance on metaphor and immediate experience has been described many ways, including as the “Eastern part” of first-century Christianity, as opposed to the “Western part” of Greek rationalism, with all the limitations and prejudices such essentialisms produce. Moreover, the point of Gnosticism’s irrationalism can be overstated, but as an analytic matter the unknowability of God in Gnosticism results in obviously symbolic language, as in the metaphors of light and dark. The metaphors comport with the unknowable nature of God but also highlight the personal, intuitive quality of “gnosis,” a form of authorizing knowledge that does not reside in institutions, traditions, or even in ideas, but in the experience of people.

The content of this experience relates directly to the theology outlined by Gnostic cosmology. Pagels explains the constructive cosmology of Gnosticism as flowing not from concepts but from the experience of the “anguish and terror” of human life. For Pagels, the gnostics knew the world was created by an evil God because of the experience of evil, or rather *kakia* [ill-ness], evil in the sense of “evils”

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<sup>62</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York, NY: Random House, 1979, 204.

not the moral category in the physical world but also in the human soul in the form of suffering.<sup>63</sup> In other words, human religious experience reveals the nature of the world and life as such, its nature as suffering. In this powerful interpretation, Gnosticism highlights suffering, brokenness, and frailty as the very nature of the created world. The metaphorical nature of Gnosticism, the reliance on personal experience, and the complicated theology that places God beyond the limit of the world and all experience add up to an affect of despair and awareness of suffering.

In this sense, a lower-case gnosticism represents not so much a set of ideas as a mood, one that inverts mainstream Christian theology to emphasize the suffering, weakness, and incapacity that orthodoxy recognizes but subordinates to the principle of redemption. Gnosticism allows Christianity to become tragedy rather than comedy. The nature of this gnostic mood is evidenced well by the film *Exorcist III*. At the conclusion of the film, written and directed by William Peter Blatty author of the original *Exorcist* novel, the hard-bitten Detective Kinderman played by George C. Scott confronts the demon “Legion,” who has tormented him throughout the film. Having struggled throughout the film with his decayed religious faith, Scott’s detective is pushed too far when Legion kills his friend and religious conscience, Father Dyer, placing the priest’s blood in hundreds of small jars around Dyer’s hospital room. Rather than destroying Kinderman’s faith, the demon’s vicious act

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<sup>63</sup> Likewise, the achievement of “gnosis” and the resulting salvation or “rebirth” is the authorization of the individual through immediate experience of the divine: “as the gnostic teacher Heracleon says, ‘people at first are led to believe in the Savior through others,’ but when they come mature ‘they no longer rely on mere human testimony,’ but discover instead their own immediate relationship with ‘the truth itself.’” (*The Gnostic Gospels* 204) Pagels’s idea of the self-authorized reborn gnostic is obviously the other side of her belief in the self-discovery of life as suffering.



rekindles it, though permanently transformed. Face to face with Legion, Kinderman exclaims in a combination of ecstasy and anguish,

Yes, I believe. I believe in death. I believe in disease. I believe in injustice and inhumanity and torture and anger and hate. I believe in murder. I believe in pain. I believe in cruelty and infidelity. I believe in slime and stink and in every crawling putrid thing, every possible ugliness and corruption, you son of a bitch. I believe in you.<sup>64</sup>

Kinderman no longer believes in God, but he believes in something perhaps as powerful, evil. This faith gives him the strength to resist Legion, the embodiment of evil, not in the name of God, but, paradoxically, in the name of evil. He accepts the existence of a metaphysical principle of evil opposed by no equivalent metaphysical principle of good. Affected by the gnostic mood that isolates evil as the sole metaphysical principle in the cosmos, Kinderman comprehends that the cosmos will not stand up for justice on behalf of sufferers. He must do so himself.<sup>65</sup>

Like Detective Kinderman, *Præexistence* the poem powerfully rejects the Christian theology of redemption—as expressed in *Paradise Lost*—for a theology of suffering. As Gnosticism flips Christianity, *Præexistence* flips *Paradise Lost*; a

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<sup>64</sup> William Peter Blatty, *Exorcist III*, Twentieth Century Fox, 1990.

<sup>65</sup> Several authors have taken up the influence of the reception of Gnosticism upon early twentieth-century existential philosophy, as exemplified by Hans Jonas. Several recent critics have noted that this influence flows both ways, with the scholarly understanding of historical Gnosticism also being influenced by the effect of existentialism and other early twentieth-century theologies of malaise. Fryderyk Kwiatkowski, “About the Concept of ‘Gnosticism’ in Fiction Studies,” *Comparative Literature and Culture* 18.3 (2016).

These views “considered the world to be an evil, fallen, godless, demonic, meaningless, or inferior place in comparison to the fullness of a radically transcendent divine meaning.” Willem Styfhals, *No Spiritual Investment in the World: Gnosticism and Postwar German Philosophy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell U P, 2019, 2.

cosmic tragedy snatched from the jaws of comedy. “World without end,” in the poem’s gnostic cosmology, is not an appealing prospect. As in historical gnosticism, this affect finds expression in metaphors that concretize “the dark”—metaphysical evil—into a principle opposed to the true God’s far-off light. The poem’s dualistic metaphors differ in relation to the complex but ultimately more optimistic theology of *Paradise Lost*. Milton’s poem reproduces the Augustinian and Plotinian metaphysics of universal good, where evil is a *privation* of good, not an entity in its own right—*Præexistence* flips this binary and presents evil, if not as more solid than good, as a real contender in the cosmic fight.

This freighted opposition appears in the poem’s sole epic simile. Early in the poem, God shows up on the scene of heaven wheeled out on a large throne flashing with the usual iconography of deity. This prompts the author’s epic simile in the tradition of Milton and Homer, beginning with the long-established “As when...” followed by the traditional “thus...”:

Out flows a blaze of glory: for on high  
 Tow’ring advanc’d the moving throne of God,  
 Vast and majestic; on each radiant side  
 The pointed rays slope glittering: at the foot  
 Glides a full tide of day, that onward pours,  
 In liquid torrents through the black abyss,  
 Sparkling among reluctant shapes which thence  
 Retire confus’d; as when Vesuvio shakes  
 With inward torments, and disgorges flames,  
 O’er the vast mountain’s ridge the burning waves  
 Drive their refulgent curls, and on they roll

Sweeping the glowing plains down to the sea;  
 Th'affrighted sea leaps back with hideous roar  
 To give the fire its course: thus Chaos wild  
 Hissing recoils to let in floods of light."<sup>66</sup>

In this passage, the author creates a simile in which God, and the light from heaven, become the onrush of Vesuvian lava, while the world of Chaos outside becomes the sea, fleeing backward on itself with a "hiss." Here, the Miltonic imitator has done something Milton is careful not to do: compare God to physical nature. Though Milton describes God in figurative language, he favors Scriptural descriptions to those of his own invention, rarely if ever characterizing God as being *like* his creation, and certainly never placing him inside the world of a simile as one actor amid many. In a contrary practice, the *Præexistence* author constructs a metaphorical world in which God and Chaos are each transferred to physical, created things, lava and the sea. In saying God is like a volcano, the poem has confounded God with his creation and placed him on an equal imaginary footing with the other subject of the simile, the ambiguous and perhaps malevolent force of Chaos. Describing Satan as "Leviathan," as Milton does, is one thing—however different, both are created. Mount Vesuvius and the surrounding Mediterranean Sea differ not in kind, but in degree, being both majestic and powerful created things. In the *Præexistence* simile, God can be understood as one natural force battling another, lava struggling against sea, and the dazzling appearance he makes in heaven serves to highlight his absence from the earth. In reality, the explosion of Vesuvius is thoughtless destruction, neither

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<sup>66</sup> *Præexistence*, 43-56.

good nor bad. God in heaven may be great, but upon earth the natural forces that resemble his divine strength do not embody or serve his moral will.

God is a God of light against the darkness, of supreme majesty against cringing creatures of shadow. These “reluctant shapes” are a new creation by the author, and their presence displays the differential logic of God in *Præexistence*, foreign to *Paradise Lost*, where God is God of light *and* dark. *Præexistence*’s God battles darkness; he does not cover himself with its “Majesty,” as Milton’s Mammon avers about the Father. Something of dualism creeps into these descriptions, a sense that God is battling a “force” possessing will, animation, and at least animal reason. The “reluctant” shapes of night “retire confus’d” before God’s light—they do not vanish like unreal specters into thin air. The implication of such passages is that “Night” is not the mere privation of *Paradise Lost*, but a figure aligned with Hell and the evil that opposes God. Like the True God of Gnosticism, the God of *Præexistence* battles an opposing force of metaphysical evil, and even if God has the upper hand, the battle is ongoing. After his pompous triumphal entry, God explains his plan for the assembled “middle angels,” again those who followed Satan somewhat halfheartedly. God will lead the angels to the water of Lethe, where they will bathe until they lose their memories of Heaven and “all the great Ideas sicken and die.” God will send them into the new Earth, which he describes in gruesome and uninviting terms:

I rear

In those meanders turn’d, a dusty ball,  
Deform’d all o’er with woods, whose shaggy tops  
Inclose eternal mists, and deadly damps  
Hover within their boughs, to choak the light,  
Impervious scenes of horror, till reform’d

To fields and grassy dales, and flowry meads,  
By your continual pains.<sup>67</sup>

Prior to creation, the universe is disorganized—“meanders,” meaning rivers—until God ordains order. In stark contrast to the Genesis account, the world ordained is not “good,” but cruel and desolate, Earth a “dusty ball,” dry and dead compared to the lively rivers of Chaos it replaces. Even the vegetable life of earth, sign of divine beneficence in *Paradise Lost*, is not good either. Earth is “*deform’d*” by “woods,” which hide light from view, rendering Earth a place of “[i]mpervious scenes of horror.” Beyond the unappealing slant of all these descriptions, the metaphors of gnostic negative theology emerge. The veiling of light by forests metaphorically represents the hiddenness of God by the darkened cosmos. The only light in the physical world is a burning sun that “fries the torrid zone with constant heat;” this light is not a revelation but another punishment. The divine light of God cannot pierce into the created world. Physical life is a prison, without a lifeline to the world outside—to God. Even the human mind, the great perceiver of Platonic metaphysics, cannot bridge the gap of physical nature and divine essence. According to the poem, both body *and* soul make all human attempts to know God impossible. In another passage, God describes the useless attempts of the solitary “Sage”—the human philosopher or theologian—to understand divine nature:

The SAGE shall haunt this solitary ground,  
And view the dismal landscape, limn'd within  
In horrid shades, mix'd with imperfect light.  
Here JUDGMENT, blinded by delusive SENSE,

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<sup>67</sup> *Præexistence*, 157-164.

Contracted through the cranny of an eye,  
 Shoots up faint languid beams, to that dark seat,  
 Wherein the soul bereav'd of native fire,  
 Sits intricate, in misty clouds obscur'd,  
 Ev'n from itself conceal'd, and there presides  
 O'er jarring images with reason's sway,  
 Which by his ordering more confounds their form;  
 And by decisions more embroils the fray:  
 The more he strives t' appease, the more he feels  
 The struggling surges of the darksome void  
 Impetuous, and the thick revolving thoughts  
 Encountering thoughts, image on image turn'd,  
 A Chaos of wild science, where sometimes  
 The clashing notions strike out casual light,  
 Which soon must perish and be lost again  
 In the thick darkness round it.<sup>68</sup>

Human beings will fail to conceive the deity, because they are presented only with a darksome world that “choak[s] the light,” never with light itself: “The more [the sage] strives t’appease, the more he feels / The struggling surges of the darksome void.” In this long descriptive passage Milton’s imitator appropriates Milton’s language describing Chaos and applies it to the human mind itself. The author writes that “the soul bereaved of native fire...presides / O’er jarring images with reason’s sway,” sounding the decisive final note in Milton’s exact words: “And by decisions

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<sup>68</sup> *Præexistence* 233-244

more embroils the fray.” For the author, the human mind is one of those places, like Chaos itself, from which God has withdrawn himself. Not only is the mind unable to find God: he is not there, an absence, a void. The author thus coordinates the human mind with that “utter...darkness” beyond even Chaos, Hell, where the fallen angels “found no end in wandering mazes lost.” Hell is a place “which God by curse / Created evil,” where grace cannot reach and “hope never comes that comes to all.”<sup>69</sup> The author of *Præexistence* raises hell from cosmic fundament to “pendant world,” or perhaps lowers the earth to the hideous bottom of all things. God’s “curse” lies over the earth from its creation, this curse expressed as divine absence. Human beings cannot glimpse God, not even in their own natures as God’s image.

Under this general curse, human life is a parade of destruction and suffering. The author thus lays out a long future history, modeled on Books 11 and 12, taking up lines 215 through 356.<sup>70</sup> In this account, universal misery proceeds not from human sin—as a glutton must suffer gout—but from the fundamental flaw built into the created world. God ordains all the fruitless types of human character, the tyrant, the slave, the hedonist, the idiot philosopher, even, amusingly, the avaricious litigant. Each of these sinful natures creates worse sins in others, making the whole more contemptible than each would be on their own. This horrible history resembles the Archangel Michael’s prophecy of sin and consequence, but the omissions in the poet’s tribute to Milton are crucial. Not only are these human types bad, but they are apparently the *only* types, buttressed by no positive examples of human behavior. Even “the hero,” the admirable figure from the Virgilian and Homeric epics, “fiercely

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<sup>69</sup> *Paradise Lost* 3.16, 2.561, 2.622-3.

<sup>70</sup> *Præexistence* 215-356.

leads / A martial throng” of fellow humans that the poet calls “his instruments of rage,” with which the hero will “fill the world with death, and thin mankind.”<sup>71</sup>

As in Milton, the models of literary virtue exemplified by past epics are recast as moral failures, but here, unlike *Paradise Lost*, no Redeemer will bring them out from sin. Life “is one continued scene of grief,” human grief, never grief shared by a divine intercessor or mourned by a divine parent. Because of the denial of supernatural redemption, and this lunatic procession of stupid suffering, the God of *Præexistence* resembles simultaneously the Gnostic demiurge, deliberate creator of an evil world, and the removed “true God,” placed permanently beyond human experience. This God embodies both the negative and positive conceptions of Gnostic deity, because the poem’s theology flows from human suffering. Caught between an evil and unknowable God, the human mind remains trapped in “Wandering mazes lost,” and “by decisions more imbroils the fray” of fruitless thinking. The picture of the human world in *Præexistence* resembles therefore, not the Edenic or post-Edenic world of Adam and Eve, but the limited, doomed, self-enclosed prison of the fallen angels of Milton’s Hell. The solemn declarations of suffering put forward by the God of *Præexistence* resemble most the resolute despair of Mammon in Milton’s council of Hell or the titanic Stoic perorations of his Satan. Concluding that evil circumstances leave no option but self-reliance, Satan declares that in Hell “Here at least / We shall be *free*; th’Almighty hath not built / Here for his envy, will not drive us hence.”<sup>72</sup> The pragmatic Mammon cautions the fallen angels to accept Hell, as not so bad, to lower their gaze of the fallen angels to the infernal world they have, not the

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<sup>71</sup> *Præexistence* 282-284.

<sup>72</sup> *Paradise Lost* 1.258-59.



divine world they lost. Echoing Valentinus, “what liberates is the knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown,”

Mammon declares “we may / Compose our present evils, with regard / Of what we are and were.”<sup>73</sup>

Likewise, the God of *Præexistence* offers the small but real consolation that the created world will be “reform’d by your continual pains,” by the exertions of men and women in fallen lives, the responsibility humans must accept in a world without external redemption. The poet’s pessimism thus contains the seed of redemptive optimism. Like the woebegone Detective Kinderman of William Peter Bladdy’s *Exorcist III*, the author of *Præexistence* finds justification and a limited species of theodicy, not in the oversight of a benevolent God, but in the fact that our suffering matters and brings forth fruits. Suffering produces knowledge as a recompense for itself. The poem has aestheticized the suffering experienced by human beings into an object from which the reader may learn without undergoing the same trauma. God is triumphed over by his reduction to a mere character in a poem. Only we know what it is to know the world as *experienced* in this poem, *Præexistence*, a knowledge we

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<sup>73</sup> *Paradise Lost* 2.119-225, 2.229-283.

Mammon also:

Let us not then pursue  
 By force impossible, by leave obtain'd  
 Unacceptable, though in Heav'n, our state  
 Of splendid vassalage, but rather seek  
 Our own good from our selves, and from our own  
 Live to our selves, though in this vast recess,  
 Free, and to none accountable, preferring  
 Hard liberty before the easie yoke  
 Of servile Pomp. Our greatness will appear  
 Then most conspicuous, when great things of small,  
 Useful of hurtful, prosperous of adverse  
 We can create, and in what place so e're  
 Thrive under evil, and work ease out of pain  
 Through labour and indurance. (*Paradise Lost* 2.249-262)

carry forth as the knowledge of “what we are and were.” This knowledge is achieved through a fact unavailable to any of the poem’s characters, unavailable even to God. Even God does not know he is in a poem. The fact that the poem is read by modern readers, in the light of another poem, is a metatextual gnosis, an experiential fact not convertible to the propositions laid out by God. Moreover, human suffering and the meaning of human suffering belong solely to human beings. Human suffering teaches what sort of world we are in, “whereinto we have been thrown.” The fruits of human suffering include “experience” broadly conceived, the self-knowledge that is the true religious experience, not that experience held in the palm of the priestly power, the power represented by the authority of God.

Like other works written in the early days of the Deist controversy, *Præexistence* conveys a radical and liberating message between the lines. Human beings possess the capacity to set the meaning for their own lives. God expressed the reason for our suffering, the result of our libertarian choice to rebel in heaven, but cannot control that suffering. Human suffering directs itself. In this sense, the poem’s Deism and affective gnosticism comprise one cumulative argument. The world belongs to humanity, as meaning has devolved from cosmic origin to the experience of human beings inside a world. By this devolution, the author’s gnosticism unites to its Deism: human beings must search out their own path, never looking for the God who is not there, but trusting in human faculties and capabilities alone. This is the author’s version of enlightenment.

## Conclusion

Scholarship has produced several historiographical narratives with relation to “The Enlightenment.” All of these have in common materialism and humanism.

While the preexistence Deists like this anonymous author cannot be accused of materialism, they do suggest a drift toward what Charles Taylor calls “exclusive humanism,” the sociocultural worldview that presents human flourishing as the sole goal of political society.<sup>74</sup> Exclusive humanism contrasts with views that combine the goal of human flourishing with other goals, such as obeying the will of God—the Christian view—or with the view of modern environmentalism, which assert our duty to the planet and regard a sole interest in human flourishing as parochial.<sup>78</sup> Deism, with its radical distrust of metaphysics and supernatural ordination, represents an important thrust in the direction of exclusive humanism. But, once more, preexistence Deism appears to take one step forward—toward modern skepticism—and one step back—toward old metaphysics.

According to Yirmiyahuh Yovel, there was another Enlightenment that happened during the Enlightenment, a so-called “Dark Enlightenment” provoked by the political republicanism and philosophy of immanence of Baruch Spinoza. Dark Enlightenment “proved a sharp awakening from religious and metaphysical illusions, incurring pain and conflict in its wake...But for these very reasons, it was also a movement of emancipation, serving to inspire a richer and more lucid self-knowledge in man.”<sup>75</sup> This description aptly fits Staunton, Ilive, and the author of *Præexistence*, save in one crucial respect. Unlike the more typical anti-Christian Deism of the eighteenth century—and unlike Spinoza—this gnostic Deism derives exclusive humanism *from* theology and myth, not through their destruction. As proto-Enlightenment figures, these authors projected a vision of human progress—fueled by

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<sup>74</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Boston, MA: Harvard U P, 2007.

<sup>75</sup> Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, vol. 2: *The Adventures of Immanence*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1989, 136.

the “continual pains” of human beings. Yet they appear to have backed the wrong horse, believing the frontier of human progress lay in *theological*, instead of scientific, political, or economic innovation. They envisioned a world of Enlightened Ones, struck with a kind of gnosis, conscious of their cosmic origin and the grandeur of each human being. The metaphysical decay entailed by their gnosticism leads to a critique of the legitimacy of human institutions and sociopolitical hierarchy. What can we trust in a world that is made evil and governed by evil lords who cannot account for their legitimacy? Nothing, except, perhaps, ourselves, trusting in the knowledge of “what we are and were,” knowledge that reveals the evil of the world but does not ameliorate it. The only hope, the only freedom, lies in continual work, perhaps the work of skepticism, critical thinking—of Enlightenment, dark or otherwise.

Seen as the work of skepticism, the fundamental insight of these early modern Deists, like that of their ancient counterparts, is the moral crisis brought on by the failure of Christian theology and its justification for its own hierarchy. If the Apostles lied and Christianity is false, the moral weight of the deceit, mystifications, and authoritarian sway over so many generations must have a price. Brokenness, suffering, distrust, and metaphysical decay are the expression of that price. Once refuted, the Christian hierarchy is a cabal of demiurges. Jacob Ilive and William Staunton are both nobodies lacking credentials from the institutions of religious formation in early modern England, unlike, say, Henry More and Thomas Traherne, and their critique of the metaphysical-cum-ecclesiological hierarchy carries the force of this moral failure of the religious governing class to care properly for their flock. In this aspect of their theological character appears the radical strain of Protestant communitarianism embodied in a figure like Gerard Winstanley during the era of the Civil Wars.

The priestly metaphysics, not just the priestly social structure, must be challenged and defeated for human liberation to be possible upon any important terms. The work of the author of *Præexistence* takes on this same metaphysics and this same priestly hierarchy and battles it on new territory: not of Scripture, but of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The deep pessimism of the poem *Præexistence* represents not merely a response to the optimism of Milton's divine comedy, but to the Christian doctrine as a whole. For a gnostic Deist, the final and consequential freedom is not choice of good and evil, but the rejection of the moral terms offered us even by a benevolent God. Without this gnostic antinomianism, Enlightenment is Christianity by other means.

## Conclusion

*“The books of all the great philosophers are like so many men. Our sense of an essential personal flavor in each one of them, typical but indescribable, is the finest fruit of our own accomplished philosophic education. What the system pretends to be is a picture of the great universe of God. What it is—and oh so flagrantly—is the revelation of how intensely odd the personal flavor of some fellow creature is.”*

-William James, *Pragmatism*<sup>1</sup>

Almost a century after the writers covered in this dissertation, the Romantic poet William Wordsworth adopted the singular passion of Henry More, the soul’s preexistence. In this moment from Wordsworth’s famous “Immortality Ode,” he makes visible the crucial affective power of preexistence, its power as a resolution to emotional and existential turbulence. The first stanzas of the “Immortality Ode” are the description of a problem, a state of dejection in which alienation takes over from an earlier, richer experience: “The things which I have seen I now can see no more.”<sup>2</sup> Depressed and deprived of his previous, almost supernatural vision, the poet languishes in his depression until stanza five, when he hits upon a solution. The obverse of his depressed experience, and the solution to his depression, is the idea of the soul’s preexistence. Wordsworth raises More from the metaphorical dead and as the means of ending the existential exhaustion of the early stanzas:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,

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<sup>1</sup> William James, *Pragmatism*, Chapter One, p41.

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” 9.

Hath had elsewhere its setting,

And cometh from afar.

Not in entire forgetfulness,

And not in utter nakedness,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God, who is our home.<sup>3</sup>

In these famous stanzas, Wordsworth appropriates More's particular philosophy to serve his own emotional needs, as well as the needs of the poem he is writing. Since the lyric voice has proven unable to escape the slough of despond, the soul's preexistence bridges the depressed quality of the early stanzas with the modulated but real optimism of the later stanzas. The philosophical doctrine of preexistence, which More so passionately defended, for Wordsworth becomes a poetic element taken on for the purposes of transitioning his poem from one stage to another and for emblemizing a certain sublime feeling that mattered greatly to him. Believing the world to be dead matter—the tree in the field just to be a tree—is to be alienated, while believing that we come from afar is to be restored, even to achieve a state of elevation, like that which Plotinus believed characterized contemplation: the soul rising above itself and recognizing its massive inheritance of glory.

Wordsworth's poem uses the idea of preexistence as a means to move beyond alienation, an employment that corresponds with the many uses of the same idea observed in this dissertation. The soul's preexistence is not simply an idea, but a consolation, the consolation of philosophy, or theology. The porous boundary between theology and poetry can be observed in such writers, an integration of

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<sup>3</sup> "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," 57-65.

aesthetic and metaphysical explanations. Theology and poetry alike contain an achievement of closure or satisfaction after a state of alienation and confusion.

To this end, few authors have improved on John Barth's wordy but realistic description of narrative, "The incremental perturbation of an unstable homeostatic system and its catastrophic restoration to a complexified equilibrium."<sup>4</sup> Once taken apart, Barth's description appears remarkably simple, even simplistic: it could be described as a prolix elaboration of the plot triangle famous from introductory screenwriting courses. Yet the words "perturbation," "unstable," and "homeostatic" give a sense of the quality of emotional and physical disturbance that characterize the experience of creating and ingesting literature. Literature does not entirely produce catharsis, enjoyment, and even information, but something like a sickness that wracks the body and soul of those under its spell. Often literature creates a sickness only literature can cure, in the same way a joke is a problem only its punchline can resolve, while other literature deliberately leaves its audience febrile and searching, from philosophy or life, for a cure. Once we begin thinking physiologically about literature, John Dewey's *Art as Experience* can contextualize Barth's scheme of narrative, drawn from writing and reading stories, to the life of the living creature:

Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it—either through effort or by some happy chance. And, in a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed. If the gap between organism and environment is too wide, the creature dies. If its activity is not enhanced by the

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<sup>4</sup> John Barth, "The Hopwood Lecture," 1998, 666.



temporary alienation, it merely subsists. Life grows when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives.<sup>5</sup>

All living things continually pass through one state, what Dewey calls “disparity and resistance,” to another, “balance” or resolution. These differentiated states of being correspond to the activity of all living beings, down to the moss piglet, and perhaps of all being itself. States of disparity and union are universal but, for Dewey, the artist is the sole creature who “care in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved.”<sup>6</sup> All creatures seek an end to “perturbation,” but the artist seeks the resolution pathologically, as if it were a narcotic and not a natural part of life. Barth’s Dewey-like description of narrative applies equally to the artist and the receiver of art, for the receiver likewise is thrown into perturbation and moves toward resolution. Dewey therefore despairs there is no single word conveying “artistic” and “aesthetic” experience, and he condemns the artificial, capitalist-created barrier between them as blurring the essentially democratic character of experience, denied to none. The confused thinker, the disturbed reader, the sick animal, the star in nova, partake in a struggle, “through effort” or “chance,” and achieve equilibrium or die. The ambitious (perhaps fetishistic) thinker puts off the moment of resolution, or is forced to by the difficulty and intractability of the problem, most often in the hope of a larger and more satisfying balance: a state perhaps of nirvana, apatheia, enlightenment, joy, reconciliation, justification, shalom. The theologian does with all things—or at least aspires to, by use of universal terms—what the artist does with a few: suggest a path through which the universe as a whole passes toward some

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<sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2005, 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> *Art as Experience*, 14.

resolution. This resolution may be supposed permanent—as in Christianity, Islam, or Socrates’s deathbed mythmaking—or temporary and thus permanently interinvolved with the state of perturbation—as in the apothegms of Heraclitus, Nietzsche, the Gnostics, or the Buddha. The theologian is not in reality more capacious than the artist, since to use larger terms does not really mean to comprehend more; the map is not the territory. But the theologian is more of a fetishist perhaps even than the artist, since she cannot leave the whole universe alone but must involve everything in her state of unease and hoped-for resolution. To do theology is to bring things to a close, lowering the curtain and declaring one act in the universal play, at least for now, completed.

This dissertation has attempted to read philosophy with an eye toward its affective content, following the notion of John Dewey and William James that these affective attachments drive philosophy and are driven by philosophy in turn. Like all theological ideas, the concept of the preexistence of the soul results from a consideration of the world and life as a whole, a recreation of life on new terms. Various problems and perturbations prompt this refocusing and recreation—for Henry More, the moral instability of a world in which God picks winners and losers, the creeping impression of dead materiality brought on by the mechanistic sciences, but generally the weariness, fever, and fret of daily life, the tumult of the Revolution and end of episcopacy, the several secondhand sufferings of his beloved pupil Anne, the polemical strife with Thomas Vaughan and Robert Boyle on issues that touched him deeply, perhaps all summed up in the words of the poet Claudian which More hummed to himself in “a sort of Musical and Melancholick Murmur” as a teenager struck with universal doubts:

Oft hath my anxious Mind divided stood;

Whether the Gods did mind this lower World;  
 Or whether no such Ruler (Wise and Good)  
 We had; and all things here by Chance were hurld.<sup>7</sup>

More never wrote anything except theodicy. For him, experience asked a question: all for good or all for ill? More's answer hinged on the existence of spirit, supposed to be an answer to all questions: whether God existed, suffering mattered, whether death was the end or a higher existence. Into this overloaded notion of spirit, he poured all his knowledge, his sexual longings, personal friendships, and hopes for a Millennial future, his reputation and his faith. He expressed a complete thought, a thought to complete a life, to rest in forever. That thought was the power of his own soul, which transcended matter and history and shook the throne of God.

Dewey's description of experience flattens all experience together, and for that reason becomes itself a theology. Like Anne Conway's philosophy, Dewey's is built upon the linked principles of materialism and change. Conway's vehicle of explanation, the concept of transmigration, entails a looser idea of the boundaries between one entity and another, suggesting a state of universal becoming rather than being. In her works, Conway translated transmigration into the language of modern materialistic science. In the process she anticipated, albeit in a mystical language, articulations of the human relationship to nature and environment that embed humanity within nature rather than as a kingdom apart. For her, the theodicy created by transmigration made sense of her own continual suffering in the form of migraines but also that extended, as her aristocratic society did not, meaningfulness and importance to the lowest of creatures, including the Quaker women with whom she found comfort in later life. The words with which her grave marker is written, "A

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Ward, *The Life of the Learned and pious Dr. Henry More*, 7.

Quaker Lady,” commemorate not the whole woman, but only the last transmutation of many, into a Quaker, a status that equalizes all the others, as the Quakers themselves did by refusing the customary distinctions of their day.

On the other hand, Thomas Traherne intensified the moment of contemplation, for him stripped of its metaphysical entailments. He saw these moments of heightened awareness as themselves the ends toward which a spiritual life was directed, rather than believing them pointers to a greater reality such as God. Alienation for Traherne is not an individual state of depression but the education enforced on the “growing boy” by other people and finally by reality itself. For Traherne, it is reality that must wait on the moment of contemplation rather than vice versa. Thus, Traherne wants to insist upon the special importance of the state of union or the end of alienation. Like Dewey’s artist, he cares particularly for the state of experience in which union is achieved, wishing to extend it forever.

When Jacob Ilive and the author of *Præexistence* take up the ancient theology of “com[ing] from afar,” they reconstruct the political critique the historical Gnostics aimed at the early Christian Church. These early Deists drove a sociological critique of the legitimacy of the Christian church by listening to the everyday experience of human suffering and refusing the simple answer of suffering’s redemption at the hands of a supernatural redeemer. Suspended through the poetry of *Præexistence* is an alternate theological vision of the world, one that holds off the moment of redemption, continuing the story of human suffering without resolution into the optimistic Christian end. The Deists prolong the problem of negative experience in a form that, like Buddhism, requires acceptance of suffering as an integrated and interinvolved strand of life, granted meaning in a positive light as a substance itself.

In historical terms, all these authors are writing at the moment when philosophical theology of this kind became a purely private matter. King William's politically important Toleration Act of 1688 represents a victory for religious toleration, and yet simultaneously the act represents the relegation of religious matters to the private sphere. Events like this have the effect of deracinating spiritual speculation, almost putting an end to creative theologizing altogether. When religion becomes a private matter, public debate and innovative theology become dangerous. Before these events, and perhaps only for a few conspicuous decades in the seventeenth century, a different intellectual culture reigned in England, one in which theological innovation flourished. Moreover, men and women like More and Anne Conway could offer their own theological innovations as matters of public import, even to the ambitious end of reforming the entire theology of the English Church—and of all world religions, in Conway's case—in their preferred direction. This kind of broad and public expression of personal speculation would not be achieved again until the Romantics, though it remained and remains a part of occult and esoteric conversation.

Something is lost in this particular transformation, the right of the private person to speculate about highest things and express that speculation in universal terms that demand either assent or rejection. The different writers studied in this dissertation reveal the importance of speaking universal terms, even if that importance remains individual. In their several ways, More, Conway, Traherne, and the author of *Præexistence* show how the attempt to understand in wholes is also the attempt to achieve a private consolation of the value of the world as such. The thinker, to a large degree on her own, must determine if this world is worth living in when considered in the light of human and natural history, the permanent coincidence of suffering and

joy, and all metaphysical possibilities and impossibilities. The answer to this question, for the thinker, is the affliction or the consolation of philosophy.

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