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## An Analysis of Thomas Traherne's Centuries of Meditations

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AN ANALYSIS OF THOMAS TRAHERNE'S

CENTURIES OF MEDITATIONS

By

SUE GUTHRIDGE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts  
English Department

DIVISION OF GRADUATE INSTRUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Traherne is still little known to the general reader, though he has been bandied about in literary circles from history book to anthology as a naïf, charming lesser member of the seventeenth-century religious group, composed of Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan. But Traherne is not just a minor metaphysical poet; his achievements are amazing. His remarkable theological background both widens and strengthens the group of which he is now a recognized part.<sup>1</sup> He wrote, as far as we know, no word that did not deal with religious experience, and he wrote with the express purpose of imparting his experiences to others. No little of his importance, however, results from that happy expression of his ideas which gives to readers, whether or not they accept his theology, a deep satisfaction.

While recognizing the close relationship between his poetry and his prose, this study addresses itself to an analysis of Traherne's Centuries of Meditations, and the position it takes among the great prose works which are a part of the turbulent seventeenth century. The writer will attempt to show that Thomas Traherne justly deserves a place with those

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<sup>1</sup>T. O. Beachcroft, "Traherne, and the Doctrine of Felicity," The Criterion, IX (1930), 292: "His unique qualities are to be discovered in a rare intimacy in his mind, between an intensely personal mystic experience, and another side of his nature more truly described as poetical, which tended outwards toward self-expression and an aesthetic consciousness as intensely experienced as his mysticism."

great men of the century who, while seeking Truth in the still, small voice of God, gave to us some of the most beautiful examples of English prose.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the entire history of literature Thomas Traherne, perhaps, furnishes the only example of a writer whose manuscripts were discovered and first published some two hundred and twenty-five years after his death, and whose works immediately took their place with the classics. In 1896, two volumes of manuscript verses were picked up from a London bookstall by Mr. W. T. Brooke who was an authority on hymns. The purchaser felt that the verses bore a strong resemblance to those of Henry Vaughan. Mr. Brooke sold the manuscripts to Dr. Alexander Grosart, a prominent figure in London literary circles. Dr. Grosart was at the time preparing a volume of Vaughan's poems for publication and, convinced like Mr. Brooke of their resemblance to Vaughan's poems, he planned to insert the verses in the volume. Fortunately for the literary world, Dr. Grosart died before the volume under way was completed. At his death his library was sold and these two manuscript volumes, one a folio and one a small octavo, were bought by Bertram Dobell, a prominent bookseller, along with a third manuscript in Dr. Grosart's library which Mr. Dobell felt was by the same author.

Mr. Dobell studied the manuscripts carefully and was convinced that both Mr. Brooke and Dr. Grosart were wrong in attributing the verses to Vaughan. He saw that they were religious as were Vaughan's later poems; that the vocabularies were similar; that they employed the same verse forms; that they both held childhood recollections and Nature in a special religious symbolism. The difference lay in his belief that the unknown poet was more vital, more joyous, and more exuberant in his verse.

Mr. Dobell went to the British Museum, remembering an anonymous poem that he had used in an anthology which had much the same tone as these, and found the book from which the poem had come. It was A Serious and Pathetical Contemplation of the Mercies of God, in several most Devout and Sublime Thanksgivings for the same. Dobell reread the poems in this volume and was convinced that they were from the same pen. However, more proof was needed. There was no name appended, no information except that the author had been "Private Chaplain to Sir Orlando Bridgman." Sir Orlando was soon traced as the Lord Keeper of the Seal under Charles II, and Dobell found that Sir Orlando had had a chaplain by the name of Thomas Traherne.

Mr. Dobell went a step further and found in Anthony à Wood's Athenae Oxonienses, the following entry:

Thomas Traherne, a shoemaker's son of Hereford, was entered a Commoner of Brasen-n, college on the first day of March 1652, took one degree in arts, left the house for a time, entered into the sacred function, and in 1661 he was actually created Master of Arts.



About that time he became rector of Credinhill commonly called Crednell near to the city of Hereford, afterwards domestic chaplain to S. Orlando Bridgman lord keeper of the great seal, and minister of Tuddington, called by some Teddington, near Hampton Court in Middlesex, and in 1669 bach. of divinity. He hath written,

Roman Forgeries: or, a true account of false Records discovering the Impostures and counterfeit Antiquities of the Church of Rome. Lond. 1673. oct.

Christian Ethicks: or divine Morality, opening the Way to Blessedness, by the Rules of Virtue and Reason. Lond. 1675. oct.

He died at Teddington before-mention'd, in the house of S. Orl. Bridgman, and was buried on the tenth day of October in the church there, under the reading desk, in sixteen hundred seventy and four. This person, who always led a single and devout life, was well read in primitive antiquity as in the councils, fathers, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Traherne's authorship of the two published books which Wood mentioned in the Athenae Oxonienses was soon proved. Mr. Dobell studied the volume carefully; finally, imbedded in the pages of the prose Christian Ethicks, he found one of the poems contained in the collection of verse.

Thus it was that in 1903, Mr. Dobell gave to the world the first volume of verse by Thomas Traherne; in 1908 the second manuscript, a volume of prose passages, which Dobell

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<sup>2</sup>Anthony à Wood, Athenae Oxonienses: An Exact History of Writers and Bishops Who Have Had their Education in the University of Oxford, ed. Philip Bliss (2nd. ed.; Oxford: Ecclesiastical History Society, 1848), III, p. 1016

called Centuries of Meditations, was published. In 1910, another volume of verse was found in the British Museum, and was published as Poems of Felicity by its discoverer, Dr. H. I. Bell.

The story of this modern-day discovery of a forgotten poet is exciting and romantic. It has aroused much interest in the scholarly world, but few people outside a small circle have heard of this truly great man. It is sincerely to be hoped that he will not slide back into oblivion.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

The exact date of Thomas Traherne's birth can only be surmised. Gladys I. Wade, in her exhaustive search of all the likely parish registers near Hereford, was unable to find any record of his birth. The record of his entry into Brasenose College, which Miss Wade discovered in an old Record of Admissions at Oxford, fixes the date of his birth fairly narrowly. The record says that Thomas Traherne was fifteen on March 1, 1652. "That would be 1653 by modern

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<sup>3</sup>Gladys I. Wade, Thomas Traherne (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 11: "He [Traherne] stands in peril of slipping back into the mists. . . . The reason for this is, I am convinced, that only a few devoted Traherne enthusiasts have seen Traherne as a man. To the world at large he is at best only a disembodied voice, coming thinly across the centuries. The biographical facts are bare bones, lacking the flesh and blood of life. His rare jewels of idea and inspiration seem but ghostly moonshine; they cannot win our acceptance, they seem too far sundered from the harsh realities of our daily life."

reckoning, as the new calendar year then began on March 24.<sup>4</sup> So, if Traherne were fifteen on March 1, 1653, he must have been born between March 1, 1637, and February 28, 1639.

Traherne was born in the city of Hereford, the capital in the county of Hereford. It is far to the west of England, bordering on Wales. It was in Traherne's day a land of timbered farmhouses, orchards, clear streams and little hills. The city was isolated and self-sufficient. In Traherne's childhood the city was untouched by events happening in the outside world.

In 1642, however, Hereford had its first taste of the Civil War. The city endured many hardships and suffered numerous tragedies, but it remained ardently Royalist. From 1642 until the Restoration in 1660, Parliament was the master of Hereford. In these twenty years of warfare and uneasy peace, Thomas Traherne grew through adolescence to manhood, and pursued his career with perfect equanimity. He was twenty-three when Charles II came to the throne.

Traherne's excellent schooling, his university education, and a subsequent new and wealthy environment were due to a patriarch of the Traherne family, Philip, and no picture of Thomas Traherne would be complete without some mention of him. Philip Traherne, who was born in 1566, emerged into public life at Hereford in 1619 as a leader and spokesman in a dispute between the citizens and the mayor of the city. He was, because

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

of this, imprisoned in London and tried before the London Privy Council. He won his case and returned to Hereford in 1622 as the people's choice for mayor. As well as being twice mayor of Hereford, he was a prosperous innkeeper and a leading citizen.

Philip Traherne, the innkeeper, died in 1645, when Thomas was eight years old. Certainly someone made it possible for both Thomas and his brother Philip to be well educated, and all evidence points to the patriarch of the family. This same person must also have made possible Thomas' prolonged stay at Oxford. "Who more likely than the one well-to-do Traherne of the day, the generous, hot-tempered old pagan whose inn I suggest afforded a home for a period to a 'sad and desolate' little boy?"<sup>5</sup>

In the registers of the excellent grammar school attached to the Hereford Cathedral, there is no mention of either Thomas' or his brother's name. It can be assumed, then, that both brothers had private tutors, probably one of the cathedral clergy evicted by the Puritans. On March 1, 1653, Thomas Traherne was entered a commoner of Brasenose College. Within the next three years he won for himself his bachelor's degree and additional high qualifications for ordination, as well as securing for himself the foundation of scholarship on which he built his later original research in a difficult field of ecclesiastical history.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

In 1657, Traherne was ordained and went to the little parish of Credenhill, near Hereford. The legal age for a rector was twenty-four, and Traherne was only twenty. It is safe to assume that he left the cares of the parish to the man who had previously held it, the Reverend George Primrose, while he, Traherne, returned to Brasenose again. This we know to be a fact from the pages of Anthony à Wood's Athenae Oxonienses, and it is also mentioned in Traherne's own Centuries of Meditations. By 1661, Thomas Traherne had received his degree of master of arts, a fact which further proves residence at Oxford. It was during this time, probably, that he did his research for the book Roman Forgeries. In November, 1661, Thomas Traherne took up his residence as rector of Credenhill, in the Church of St. Mary.

In 1667, Traherne left Credenhill to become private chaplain to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, Lord Keeper of the Seal. The introduction to Sir Orlando Bridgeman probably came about through Mrs. Susanna Hopton. Traherne very likely met Mrs. Hopton during his second stay at Oxford. She had renounced the Anglican Church and had become a Roman Catholic. Her husband, Richard Hopton, desired her to return to the Anglican Church, but she refused to do so lightly. By extant letters, and in Philip Traherne's preface to his brother's The Soul's Communion with her Saviour, one learns that Mrs. Hopton was finally convinced that she should return to Protestantism.

She learned of the gross errors and forgeries upon which the Church of Rome had upheld her greatness, and we know that at this time Thomas Traherne was at work on the research which led to his Roman Forgeries.

Mrs. Hopton returned to the Church of England and Traherne was brought to the notice of Sir Orlando Bridgeman. This may have come about through Mrs. Hopton. At any rate a lasting friendship grew up between her and Thomas Traherne. The notebook she gave him holds the beautiful writings of the Centuries of Meditations, and it is believed it was for her that they were written. This assumption is based upon the fact that the following inscription appears on the first leaf of the manuscript.

This book unto the friend of my best friend  
As of the wisest Love a mark I send,  
That she may write my Maker's prais therein  
And make her self therby a Cherubin.<sup>6</sup>

It is a relationship reminiscent of the many Platonic friendships of the seventeenth century, but most of all that between Anne Finch, Lady Conway, and Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist. The extraordinary tenderness and beautiful purity of their relationship is evident in their letters, as is the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 182: "I, too, believe that the giver of the notebook and the inspiration of its contents was a woman, and that I have identified her in Mrs. Hopton. But I think that these four lines have nothing to do with her. I am quite sure that Traherne, who never uses words lightly, would not apply the phrase 'my best friend' to any human being; and to God he has referred over and over again in these very words . . . . But all is clear if we interpret the lines as meaning that he dedicates this work to his own spirit, now

more subtle and spiritual relationship of Thomas Traherne to Susanna Hopton in the Centuries of Meditations.

By November, 1672, Sir Orlando had been finding it increasingly difficult to hold office under such a king as Charles II. He, like so many Royalists, believed that the monarch was divinely appointed by God; he had worked hard to maintain that belief. Yet the time came when Sir Orlando had to go against the wishes of his monarch because he felt that what the King asked of him imperiled not only the nation but also the Established Church. In refusing obedience to the King, he found himself deprived of his office, and saw the unprincipled Shaftsbury succeed him.

Sir Orlando left London for Teddington, and Thomas Traherne followed him. The next year, 1673, saw the Roman Forgeries published and on sale in London. It was dedicated to Sir Orlando and supported Bridgeman's anti-Catholic views.

During all of the years in the Bridgeman household, Traherne had been writing. He was at work on the Centuries of Meditations, and during the last two years at Teddington, he was at work on his larger book, Christian Ethicks. He was writing this when, in June of 1674, Sir Orlando died.

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purified and consciously the friend of God, as a mark of that self-love which he has elsewhere defined and exalted as wisdom, in order that his spirit may pour forth in its pages the praise of the Maker of his whole self--of body and mind as well as spirit--and in so doing perform the office of the cherubin."

After his death, Traherne remained with this family, a proof of his place in their thoughts. By September of the same year, Traherne became seriously ill and died. The date of his death is not known exactly, but he was buried on the tenth of October, beneath the lectern in Teddington Church.<sup>7</sup>

These words are but weak testimonials to the spiritual greatness of Thomas Traherne. In reading his works one feels that he would not consider a factual biography necessary or important. It is the life of the man as seen in his works that lives and influences, and that life is seen lucidly and beautifully in his Centuries of Meditations, for it is, in reality, a spiritual autobiography.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Thomas Traherne, The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1903), The Will of Thomas Traherne, as Registered in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, p. 167: "Memorandum that Thomas Traherne late of Teddington in the County of Midd Clerk deceased in the time of the sickness whereof he dyed and upon or about the Seaven and Twentyth of September 1674. . . . ."

<sup>8</sup>Queenie Iredale, Thomas Traherne (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1935), p. 9: "Very few poets have left so clear an account of their early mental life, and the growth of their poetic and religious consciousness, as Traherne."



## CHAPTER I

### THE PLAN OF THE CENTURIES OF MEDITATIONS

The manuscript of the Centuries of Meditations is a leather-bound octavo volume in perfect condition, which, though its history is unknown, shows that it was valued and kept with loving care. There is no title although a blank space was left. This blank space and the absence of the author's name are characteristic of Traherne. Mr. Dobell gave the manuscript its name from its form and content, and published it in 1908, four years after the first edition of Traherne's poems.

The work is divided into "Centuries," or sections of a hundred prose meditations which are in paragraph form, and which average about one hundred and fifty words. Though some of the meditations are quite short and almost epigrammatic, others have as many as three hundred words. Groups of meditations, because of unity of idea, may well be classed as essays, as sermons and, in the case of the Third Century, as letters. More often, however, the paragraphs have no significant direction; rather, they have the quality of informal intercourse. The Fifth and last Century breaks at the end of the tenth meditation because, undoubtedly, of Traherne's death. "He may, indeed, have intended to write

more than five 'Centuries,' for there is plenty of blank space still left in the manuscript."<sup>9</sup>

The First Century is the least interesting of the four, and it might well be called doctrinal, the thesis being: "You must want like a God that you may be satisfied like God."<sup>10</sup>

The Second Century is concerned with Love. The reader has been introduced to the idea that through a serious and reverent love of simple, natural things, he will be enabled to open the door of Nature. This love of Nature is expanded by another emotion--a companionable and human love one has for a friend, and the greater love that he will ultimately bear for his Creator.

The Third and Fourth Centuries deal with Life. From the first sentence of the Third Century a different note is sounded in Traherne's writing. The meditations pass naturally into the first person. The style takes on a greater intensity and speed. This Century can be divided into two parts--Traherne's own life and its parallel in the Psalms. He identified himself with David, and believed that

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<sup>9</sup>Gladys E. Willett, Traherne: An Essay (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, Ltd., 1919), pp. 38-39.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century I, Number 44, p. 30.

in following the psalmist's path he would be brought into the presence of God. Traherne's life as seen in this Century is a veritable Pilgrim's Progress: he was born in an earthly Paradise; was tempted and tasted of the deadly fruit; was cast out and lived for a time in the wilderness; but finally, through travail and suffering, he found the answer which led to the Kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup>

In his own experiences in reaching the divine state, Traherne saw that the triumph which came was a triumph which every man could attain. It can be assumed that through this spiritual biography, Traherne was trying to show Mrs. Hopton the way to find the joy and power which he firmly believed to be an essential part of Christian religion. It was for her that he went back over the path of his own experience to describe it, and to point out with tender and encouraging persuasiveness what she must do if she would dwell with him on the sunlit peaks.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>J. T. W. Higginson, "The Merits of Adversity," A Library of the World's Best Literature Ancient and Modern, ed. Charles Dudley Warner (New York: The International Society, 1897), XXXVI, p. 14556: "Traherne was searching for the answer which Jeremy Taylor, who had lived longer, had found. 'Our virtues are but in the seed when the grace of God comes upon us first; but this grace must be thrown into broken furrows, and must twice feel the cold and twice feel the heat, and be softened with storms and showers, and then it will arise into fruitfulness and harvest!'"

<sup>12</sup>Gladys I. Wade, "Mrs. Susanna Hopton," The English Review, LXII (1936), 47: "It is after all the finest tribute we possess to the essential nobility of Mrs. Hopton's character

There is some possibility that a rather long period of time elapsed between the writing of the Third and Fourth Centuries, for the idea begins to evolve that what Traherne had already written might be beneficial to those besides his friend. The style changes abruptly from the personal to the impersonal, and the Fourth Century begins on a different note.

HAVING spoken so much concerning his entrance and progress in Felicity, I will in this century speak of the principles with which your friend endued himself to enjoy it. For besides contemplative, there is an active happiness, which consisteth in blessed operations. And as some things fit a man for contemplation, so there are others fitting him for action: which as they are infinitely necessary to practical happiness, so are they likewise infinitely conducive to contemplation itself.<sup>13</sup>

In the original version of this opening meditation, the word "friend" was "author," indicating even more strongly that Traherne anticipated publication for the work. It implies a consciousness of an unknown reader, and a change from the personal to the impersonal would alleviate any

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that such a man as Traherne could love her with such a quality of love, and that the friendship between them should be so frank and full and unselfconscious as we see it in the Centuries of Meditations, which were written for the most part solely for her--yet which in all probability she never had the joy of reading."

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century IV, Number 1, p. 238.

implications of the work's being purely autobiographical.<sup>14</sup>

The theme of the Fourth Century is stated in the opening meditation, and the entire Century is a correlation of daily living with the eternal quest for God. It can safely be assumed that this Century was written while Traherne was at Credenhill, for it was there that he began to gather up the raveled threads of his experiences, and it was there that he began to weave them into pieces which became the integrated and harmonious principles of conduct which guided his life.

The personal element in the Fourth Century is even more subordinated than in the Third Century, and Traherne's principles for the nobler conception of life are restated. The philosophy in this Century is more profound than in any of the other three, and he recognizes the fact that Love is the universal principle of harmonious living and being. The Power of Love is a Christian doctrine, but there are echoes of Plato here.

In the Fifth Century, Traherne begins a contemplative study of the Divinity itself. "God is the object, and God is the way of enjoying" is the theme of this unfinished Century. "In this Fifth Century Traherne would contemplate

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<sup>14</sup>Gladys I. Wade, Thomas Traherne (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 186.

all things as manifestations of the divine, and was beginning with the essential attributes of deity: omnipresence, infinity, eternity, omnipotency."<sup>15</sup>

These meditations, of varying length, are the thoughts which emanate from a sensitive mind, a mind that is exquisitely subtle and perceptive. In the Centuries of Meditations we come into contact with a man of so radiant and so joyous a personality that we feel humble in his presence. "Here is a writer so on fire with love of his subject that his natural speech becomes poetry--the flame is so pure that the vessel glows with a great light."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>16</sup>Frances Towers, "Thomas Traherne: His Outlook in Life," The Nineteenth Century, LXXXVII (1920), 1029.

## CHAPTER II

### THE IDEAS PRESENTED IN THE CENTURIES OF MEDITATIONS

Great literature has a cognitive content and affords the reader knowledge concerning the writer's philosophy of life. This is as true of the Centuries of Meditations as it is true of the other meditations and devotions of the seventeenth century and of the preceding centuries. Yet there is no attempt made at formal composition in Traherne's prose work; it is as if he were indulging in a quiet talk with a friend, in which his thoughts follow no categorical pattern. For all of this seeming lack of direction, there is unity. This is because Traherne has set forth and has held to several dominant ideas.

The first of these ideas concerns his own philosophy. He speaks of God, of Man, of Nature, of Man's relation to God and to Nature, and of Man's relation to his fellow men; and of the mystery of God's becoming Man in the person of Christ. Another idea is that there is but one path for the man who has sinned to follow. That is the path which he will find through a love of the simple, natural things of life. This love leads to a love of Nature, and finally to that great love--the love of God.

Traherne's personality was so unified and so harmonious

that he was able to combine several different strains of thought and feeling. He had the intellectual curiosity of the philosopher; the fervent ecstasy of the mystic; the argumentative tendency of the theologian; and the sensitive perception of the poet. All of these qualities found a place in Traherne's mind.

### Nature

The love of Nature is the central theme in Traherne's life, and it very naturally becomes the central theme of the Centuries of Meditations. His age was full of men who believed that through a return to Nature man comes closer to God. This idea is found in the sermons of Jeremy Taylor; in the devotions of Sir Thomas Browne; in the simple, natural beauty of Walton's prose; in Paradise Lost in the beautiful garden of Eden; and in the very core of Henry More's philosophy. An understanding of Nature enabled Traherne to harmonize ideas and feelings gathered from various sources of experience: religion, philosophy, and poetry. These are all bound together by his mystical delight in the beauty of Nature. This love of Nature inspired all of his best work.

The first stage in the development of Traherne's appreciation of Nature is one of delight in physical movement. This sense of energy is a constant force in Traherne's prose, and it comes from his knowledge of power which is God-given.



His childish curiosity is colored with a sense of deep mystery which grew out of wonder perceived in God's treasures.

Sometimes I should soar above the stars, and enquire how the Heavens ended, and what was beyond them? Concerning which by no means could I receive satisfaction. Sometimes my thoughts would carry me to the Creation, for I had heard now, that the World which at first I thought was eternal, had a beginning: how therefore that beginning was, and why it was, why it was no sooner, and what was before, I mightily desired to know. . . . Sometimes I wondered why men were made no bigger? I would have had a man as big as a giant, a giant as big as a castle, and a castle as big as the Heavens. Which yet would not serve: for there was infinite space beyond the Heavens, and all was defective and but little in comparison; and for him to be made infinite, I thought it would be to no purpose, and it would be inconvenient. Why also there was not a better sun, and better stars, a better sea, and better creatures I much admired.<sup>17</sup>

. . . . .

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>18</sup>

In his youth, Traherne knew nothing of the madness and miseries of man. "Nor did I dream of such a thing/

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<sup>17</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century III, Number 18, pp. 170-171.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., Number 3, p. 158.

As Sin, in w<sup>ch</sup> Mankind lay dead."<sup>19</sup> His soul was filled with the beauties of Nature, not with the works of man; but when Traherne grew older, the power of Nature began to dim, for he was assailed with the evil and corrupting influences of man. These same influences were never quite erased from his memories.

Long before philosophy tempted Traherne he was happy with Nature. He was free from the conventional world, and he saw natural things with a clear eye as he had in his childhood. English literature had to wait until Blake and Wordsworth before it again saw such lucid pictures of the beauties of Nature as seen through the eyes of a child. In perhaps one of the most beautiful of the meditations, Traherne enables us to see through his eyes the natural beauties of Nature as recollected from his childhood.

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 skies were mine, and so were the sun and moon and stars, and all the World was mine; and I the only spectator and enjoyer of it. I

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<sup>19</sup>Thomas Traherne, Poems of Felicity, ed. H. I. Bell (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1910), "Eden," p. 6.

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>20</sup>

Through these childish thoughts and joys inspired by the simple, natural things of God's creation, Traherne turned to thoughts of God, and these joys made "my wonder, and His glory higher."<sup>21</sup>

The world and its beauties were created by God for men to enjoy, and by placing these concrete manifestations so easily within his grasp, they are readily obtainable. The sun serves man as much as possible and more than he is capable of imagining; the clouds and the stars are there for him to enjoy; the entire world surrounds him with its beauties; the air refreshes man; the sea revives the earth and man. The earth is better than the gold he thirsts for, because it produces fruits and flowers. All of these earthly treasures can never be fully enjoyed until man realizes that they were created for his sole benefit by God. Some of these treasures may be common and rough on the exterior,

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<sup>20</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century III, Number 3, pp. 157-158.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., Number 4, p. 159.

but their inner glory is made precious by man's ability to reason. "The services of things and their excellencies are spiritual: being objects not of the eye, but of the mind: and you more spiritual by how much more you esteem them."<sup>22</sup>

The world can never be enjoyed by man until, in seeing the beauty of it, he persuades others to enjoy it. This leads to the knowledge that man is, at the same time, capable of corrupting the world. There are folly and ingratitude in the world; the world mirrors perfect beauty, yet there are those who never see it; it is full of mystery, yet there are those who never think about it; it is a sphere of peace, yet there are those capable of destroying this peace. Men live in darkness where envy, malice, covetousness, fraud, oppression, discontent and violence dwell, all because these same men refuse to seek the riches of God, and they invent treasures of their own which will lead them into eternal darkness.

Would one think it possible for a man to delight in gauderies like a butterfly, and neglect the Heavens? Did we not daily see it, it would be incredible. They rejoice in a piece of gold more than in the Sun; and get a few little glittering stones and call them jewels. And admire them because they be resplendent like the stars, and transparent like the air, and pellucid like the sea. But the stars themselves which

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., Century I, Number 26, p. 19.

are ten thousand times more useful, great, and glorious they disregard. Nor shall the air itself be counted anything, though it be worth all the pearls and diamonds in ten thousand worlds. A work of God so Divine by reason of its precious and pure transparency, that all worlds would be worth nothing without such a treasure.<sup>23</sup>

To Traherne, the study of natural philosophy is the most sublime and the most perfect of the sciences. When man extends the study of natural philosophy to that which its name implies, the love of Nature, it leads him to consider all natures, their qualities, affections, relations, causes, and effects. This science of natural philosophy will include all of humanity and the divinity together. Through such a study the riches of God's creation are displayed to man in all their glory, but man must be willing to give up the material, and he must not expect that language, apparitions, and miracles will divulge the secrets of divine happiness.

When I came into the country, and being seated among silent trees, and meads and hills, had all my time in mine own hands, I resolved to spend it all, whatever it cost me, in the search of happiness, and to satiate that burning thirst which Nature had enkindled in me from my youth. In which I was so resolute, that I chose rather to live upon ten pounds a year, and to go in leather clothes, and feed upon bread and water, so that I might have all my time clearly to myself, than to keep many thousands per annum in an estate of life where my time would be devoured in care and labour.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., Number 34, pp. 23-24.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., Century III, Number 46, p. 194.

In the modesty and moral prudence of such a passage as this, the reader is impressed with the humility of Traherne's desire to live close to Nature, and in contrast to it the self-assertive passages of Thoreau and other moderns who made a profession of the free life in Nature seem unsatisfactory and dogmatic.

Traherne states that when he had discovered the objects which were to be enjoyed in Nature, he was greatly aided by remembering that man was created in God's image, and that it would, perforce, follow that God's treasures would be man's treasures. To enjoy the treasures of God in the similitude of God was the most perfect blessedness He could devise for man, because the treasures of God are the most perfect and the manner of God is the most perfect. When man reaches this state of perfect harmony with the universe, he has found happiness. In seeing happiness, man's soul is transformed and thus becomes heavenly, and is then capable of communion with God.<sup>25</sup>

There is little of the sensual beauty of Nature in Traherne's work, for he spent his time on the beauty of God's

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<sup>25</sup>J. B. Leishman, The Metaphysical Poets: Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1934), p. 207: "In many ways, then, Traherne's conception of felicity. . . . differs from that of orthodox Christianity. Illumination rather than victory in a moral conflict, union with God through impassioned contemplation and recreation of his works, through renunciation of self, or rather through the discovery of the real self, which, as he is never tired of affirming, contains God and the whole world--it is for these that he prays; and his attitude to

creation and the aptitude of perception. There is very little of that Elizabethan flash of color, smell, light, and shade; not because Traherne could not master this technique for he does, in both prose and poetry. For the most part he turns his back on imagery and trusts to the relationship of ideas. Thus "there is more of the glory than of the look of things in so much of his work."<sup>26</sup> Traherne speaks of Nature with ardent love and sees it as a shining jewel. Nature appeals to him intellectually and spiritually, not sensuously, and his attitude is appreciative, not adoring. The pageantry of Nature adds to his spiritual complacency.<sup>27</sup>

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the Incarnation and Passion is akin to that of the German mystics and to some of the Cambridge Platonists, notably John Smith, for whom Christ is less an historical person than a spirit and a life."

<sup>26</sup>Helen Constance White, The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), p. 371.

<sup>27</sup>W. K. Fleming, Mysticism in Christianity (London: Robert Scott, 1913), p. 190: "They [Centuries of Meditations] put the earth and its wonders before us in a new and entrancing fashion; there is no one in the whole range of mystics who looks on Nature just as Traherne does; we take a fresh breath, rub our eyes, and get our gratitude newly back again, as if indeed we were abroad with him on some sunlit down, seeing with him God's grace in every 'spire of grass' and in His 'Orient and immortal wheat'."

As with Wordsworth, Traherne's early love of Nature led gradually to his love of Man.<sup>28</sup>

I remember once the first time I came into a magnificent or noble dining room, and was left there alone, I rejoiced to see the gold and state and carved imagery, but when all was dead, and there was no motion, I was weary of it, and departed dissatisfied. But afterwards, when I saw it full of lords and ladies, and music and dancing, the place which once seemed not to differ from a solitary den, had now entertainment, and nothing of tediousness but pleasure in it. By which I perceived (upon a reflection made long after) that men and women are when well understood a principal part of our true felicity. By this I found also that nothing that stood still, could by doing so be a part of Happiness; and that affection, though it were invisible, was the best of motions.<sup>29</sup>

### Man

Traherne develops his conception of Man in a way that anticipates Berkeley. He insists that God, Man, and Nature are organically and dynamically related because God's creation exists only through Man's mind. It would follow then that Traherne is not very greatly interested in man's relationship to his fellow men; rather, he is more

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<sup>28</sup>Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Mysticism in English Literature (Cambridge: The University Press, 1913), pp. 77-78: "He [Traherne] shares Wordsworth's rapture in the life of nature, and Browning's interest in his fellow men; he has Shelley's belief in the inner meaning of love, and much of Keats' worship of beauty, and he expresses this in an original and lyrical prose of quite peculiar and haunting beauty."

<sup>29</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century III, Number 22, p. 174.



interested in man only as a divine mediator. In the meditation just quoted, Traherne states that men and women are of interest in that only when they are well understood does one realize that they are a part of true felicity. Felicity for Traherne is synonymous with happiness, and true happiness comes only in recognition of the Divinity. Traherne's definition of felicity is taken from Aristotle, who said that felicity was the fruition of a perfect soul acting in perfect life by perfect virtue. For Traherne it was not enough to know the nature of virtue; man must endeavor to possess it and then exercise it. He accomplished perfect felicity by a study of beauty which led to virtue. This felicity is exemplified in the union in love of the soul and God.

Man's greatest lesson to learn is that the creation and its treasures are his. Until he learns this he will never appreciate the greatness of sin, the meaning of man's fall, or the magnanimity of his redeemer's love. This, then, is his first step toward the ultimate goal of oneness with his Creator.

THE Services which the world doth you, are transcendent to all imagination. Did it only sustain your body and preserve your life, and comfort your senses, you were bound to value it as much as those services were worth: but it discovers the being of God unto you, it opens His nature, and shews you His wisdom, goodness and power, it magnifies His love unto you, it

serves Angels and men for you, it entertains you with many lovely and glorious objects, it feeds you with joys, and becomes a theme that furnishes you with perpetual praises and thanksgivings, it enflameth you with the love of God, and in the link of your union and communion with Him. It is the temple wherein you are exalted to glory and honour, and the visible porch or gate of Eternity: a sure pledge of Eternal joys, to all them that walk before God and are perfect in it.<sup>30</sup>

For Traherne it is "the shame and reproach of Nature" that men spend so much time in the acquisition of knowledge which will lead only to the skills necessary for the dubious procurement of gold and silver, rather than spending time in the study of God, and of themselves, and of Felicity. "It more concerns me to be divine than to have a purse of gold."<sup>31</sup>

It is man's duty in this world to be a seeker of wisdom, and as such he will be a philosopher, which is in reality a Christian, for a philosopher seeks wisdom in his study of the Divinity. As a philosopher, man's duty lies in his contemplation of happiness and in his practice of virtue. He must learn to subdue his vices, to live by reason, to rule his passions, and not be guided by the conventions of the world around him. "He Despiseth those riches which men esteem, he despiseth those honours which men esteem, he forsaketh those pleasures which men esteem."<sup>32</sup> Thus man

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., Century II, Number 1, p. 80.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., Century IV, Number 7, p. 243.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., Number 8, p. 244.

is enabled to see the beauties of higher reason, and becomes Divine because he has accomplished this end by these noble principles.

Traherne laments the fact that man is prone to study only that he may receive honor and glory in this world. Man must delight in the contemplation of the ways of God. He may study the heavens with Galileo, or the body of man with Galen, or the nature of diseases with Hippocrates, or poetry with Homer, but he will learn nothing if he studies them only as idle speculation. The man who studies in these same areas and realizes their value to him and to humanity, and who knows they exist for his own use, is the only man who profits from such a study. The conclusion is that of all kinds of learning, only humanity and divinity are important.

By the study of humanity one learns to search man's soul so that he may discover what man is, wherein his happiness lies, and how he may best attain it. When this is accomplished, man has discovered the power of wisdom-- the means of perfect happiness. This leads quite naturally to Divinity, for God has endowed man with an eye to behold Eternity and to dwell within it by his very goodness, and when man is able to see the beauty and goodness of God, he has reached the divine state.

Traherne saw that God had made man a free agent that he might benefit by his own counsel. If man has learned the secret of happiness, he has learned that the beauties of Heaven and Earth were created for his enjoyment. By this act, God gave man the power which lent him excellence, dignity, and exaltation. "This principle of nature, when you remove the rust it hath contracted by corruption, is pure gold: and the most orient jewel that shines is man."<sup>33</sup> But this jewel will lose its luster if it exists only in the belief that it is blessed to receive. God gave to man the world, his soul, and his body, but if in this gift the Creator gained not the man in return, there is no pleasure and there is no honor.

Throughout the Centuries of Meditations, it is Traherne's thesis that spiritual living is the greatest, the most excellent, and the most delightful experience, and man can find it only in his discovery and complete acceptance of the divine principle of God. As the completeness of the Godhead lives in Christ so will it live in man.

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., Number 45, p. 269.

That a man is beloved of God, should melt him all into esteem and holy veneration. It should make him so courageous as an angel of God. It should make him delight in calamities and distresses for God's sake. By giving me all things else, He hath made even afflictions themselves my treasures. The sharpest trials, are the finest furbishing. The most tempestuous weather is the best seed-time. A Christian is an oak flourishing in winter. God hath so magnified and glorified His servant, and exalted him so highly in His eternal bosom, that no other joy should be able to move us but that alone.<sup>34</sup>

### God

Without a doubt Thomas Traherne can be called a true mystic. He is a contemplative man, and he is concerned with trying to understand the external world in its relationship to the spiritual world. He is interested not in possessing this external world, but only in understanding it. The poet-mystic "asks of God only that He will give of Himself and that he may behold Him face to face."<sup>35</sup> Traherne's faith rests in his knowledge that there is a union of the soul of man with a higher and a greater spirit or force in the conception of the deity. This union is achieved through imagination and contemplation. Traherne's source of contact was established through the exuberant and overflowing joy in the creation which he realized by his love of Nature.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., Number 91, p. 311.

<sup>35</sup>White, op. cit., p. 1.

Traherne comes rather late in the history of seventeenth-century mysticism. Donne lived from 1573 to 1631; Herbert, from 1593 to 1633; Vaughan, from 1621 to 1695. The Cambridge Platonists wrote, for the most part, about the middle of the century. Traherne was born in 1636 or 1637, and died in 1675, and probably the greater part of his work was done toward the end of his life. He lived on the ebb of the mystic period. He reflects the general rather than the particular spirit of the time, and he absorbed so much of these men's thoughts that it is not possible to say what is actually his and what actually belongs to the other mystics.<sup>36</sup>

Traherne's first source of inspiration for becoming the "beloved friend of God" was the Bible, and he read it with his own eye of vision. He felt an intense desire for a book from Heaven, for he observed the corruptness and rudeness of ways upon earth, and he felt that only the angels must know the ways of God. He began to read the Bible, and he began to study it with great diligence. "In the matter I found all the glad tidings my soul longed after in its desire of news; in the manner, that the Wisdom of God was infinitely greater than mine, and that He appeared

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<sup>36</sup>Willett, op. cit., 17: "On the foundation laid for him by others he built up a mystical philosophy of his own--a philosophy of great beauty and originality, bearing witness to the nobility of its maker."

in His Wisdom exceeding my desires."<sup>37</sup>

Traherne found that he was the son of God; that he possessed all the wonders of the world; that he was glorified. He found, moreover, that in the Redemption God had glorified him even more than he had thought possible. This, the Redemption, was the very core of seventeenth-century Christianity. The suffering of Christ and his sacrifice moved Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan to feelings which ranged from awe through pity, and finally to a deeper sense of mystery as in Vaughan. Traherne did not see the Redemption this way. He was moved with wonder at Christ's sufferings to say: "Shall not all things in Heaven and Earth serve him in splendour and glory, for whom the Son of God came down to minister in agonies and sufferings?"<sup>38</sup> The meaning of the Redemption is to restore man to himself and bring him once more within the sphere of the mirror's ray, so that he will apprehend immortal love, for the true healing of the soul is through love.

The human mind for Traherne, in apprehending an object, accepts the object and recreates it. So it is that the mind of man enters into God's creation, fulfills the

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<sup>37</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century III, Number 29, p. 181.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., Century II, Number 34, p. 106.

function of an appreciative witness, and thus completes the work of the Creation.<sup>39</sup> "Even so may we by Reason discover all the mysteries of Heaven."<sup>40</sup>

Christ first revealed love, and through him we learn that God lives for man. This love finds its concrete manifestation in the symbol of the cross. "There we may see a Man loving all the world, and a God dying for mankind."<sup>41</sup> There is, however, no salvation in the symbol of the cross until it inspires love in the heart of man, and he that is not led by the spirit of this symbol of love is not worthy of the kingdom of God.

God must live in man and man must live in God, so that there is but one Spirit. Man must be filled with the Holy Ghost which is the God of Love, and he must be of the same mind as Christ and led by his spirit. No man can be more miserable than one who alienates himself from the paths of holiness and of wisdom.

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<sup>39</sup>Elbert N. S. Thompson, "The Philosophy of Thomas Traherne," The Philosophical Quarterly, VIII (1929), 107: "God's highest power was shown not as much in the mere act of creation as in the bringing of it to the human soul to enjoy. And without the enjoyment the creation would be incomplete and the creator himself would be unsatisfied."

<sup>40</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century IV, Number 81, p. 286.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., Century I, Number 59, p. 42.



For those who persevere, the final and ultimate attainment is the mutual enjoying, with God, of Heaven and Earth, and Time and Eternity. Man's highest joy comes in his sharing with God the act of cosmic creation.

The world within you is an offering returned, which is infinitely more acceptable to God Almighty, since it came from Him, that it might return unto Him. Wherein the mystery is great. For God hath made you able to create worlds in your own mind which are more precious unto Him than those which He created; and to give and offer up the world unto Him, which is very delightful in flowing from Him, but much more in returning to Him. Besides all which in its own nature also a Thought of the World, or the World in a Thought, is more excellent than the World, because it is spiritual and nearer unto God. The material World is dead and feeleth nothing, but this spiritual world, though it be invisible, hath all dimensions, and is a divine and living Being, the voluntary Act of an obedient Soul.<sup>42</sup>

The man who sees this inner world must look upon the outer world with different eyes, as if he had those of a child. He must make of himself a stranger to the customs, the thoughts, and the opinions of the world. Man is able to see these two worlds when he learns to envision Truth and thereby behold God. Since God is Love, even the most commonplace objects assume the qualities of Love; the soul that sees these objects in their glory is love; therefore, one discovers Traherne's Trinity--God, Nature, and the soul of Man.

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., Century II, Number 90, pp. 144-145.

God can be known only through the creation, and it becomes significant only when it is mirrored and reflected by the mind of man, which is more divine than its object. Man's duty is to recreate perpetually the world and then in turn present it as an offering to God.

Like Plato, Traherne felt that God created the world, not in order to perfect himself, because he was perfect, but to communicate goodness.

O the nobility of Divine Friendship! Are not all His treasures yours, and yours His? Is not your very Soul and Body his: is not His life and felicity yours: is not His desire yours? Is not His will yours? And if His will be yours, the accomplishment of it is yours, and end of all of your perfection. You are infinitely rich as He is: being pleased in everything as He is. And if His will be yours, yours is His. For you will what He willeth, which is to be truly wise and good and holy.<sup>43</sup>

Immanence and transcendence are evident in Traherne's Centuries of Meditations. There are numerous passages describing the sense of being filled with God and seeing Him at the same time in everything.

Till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels; till you are as familiar with the ways of God in all Ages as with your walk and table: till you are intimately acquainted with that shady nothing out of which world was made: till you love men so as to desire their happiness, with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own: till you delight in God for being good to all: you never enjoy the world.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., Century I, Number 53, p. 56.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., Number 30, pp. 20-21.

Traherne shares many ideas with the Cambridge Platonists, and he was undoubtedly under some influence from them. With Henry More he shares the belief that man's searching of the secrets of Nature was acceptable to God. Traherne possessed and advocated what this group called the "Divine Sagacity"; that is, the identification of goodness with wisdom, and the assurance that a good philosopher would never disagree with divine knowledge.<sup>45</sup>

Like the Cambridge Platonists, Traherne was able to translate his mystic experiences into intellectual terms. Through reason, Traherne explained the creation.

The Supreme Architect and our Everlasting Father, having made the world, this most glorious house and magnificent Temple of His divinity, by the secret laws of His hidden Wisdom; He adorned the regions above the heavens with most glorious spirits, the spheres he enlivened with Eternal Souls, the dreggy parts of the inferior world he filled with all kinds of herds of living creatures. . . . but His work being completed, He desired some one that might weigh and reason, and love the beauty, and admire the vastness of so great a work. All things therefore being (as Moses and Timaeus witness) already finished, at last He thought of creating man.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>William Ralph Inge, The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought (London: Longmans, Green and Company, Ltd., 1926), p. 38.

<sup>46</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century IV, Number 75, p. 296.

With John Smith, Traherne agreed that the man who reflects upon himself reflects upon his original.

And as much may be written of [him] man alone as of the whole world. The dividing of the sea, the commanding of the sun, the making of the world is nothing to the single creation of one soul: There is so much wisdom and power expressed in its faculties and inclinations. Yet is this greatest of all miracles unknown because men are addicted only to sensible and visible things. So great a world in explication of its parts is easy: but here the dimensions of innumerable worlds are shut up in a centre. Where it should lodge such innumerable objects, as it doth by knowing, whence it should derive such infinite streams as flow from it by Loving, how it should be a mirror of all Eternity, being made of nothing, how it should be a fountain or a sun of Eternity out of which such abundant rivers of affection flow, it is impossible to declare. But above all how, having no material or bodily existence, its substance, though invisible, should be so rich and precious. The consideration of one Soul is sufficient to convince all the Atheists in the whole world.<sup>47</sup>

Traherne's very neo-Platonism, his appeal to the reason, and his identification of the philosopher and the religious man are an unusual combination at this particular date.<sup>48</sup> Yet more than any of his group, Traherne approached his own ideal--the beloved friend of God. This he was able

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., Number 81, p. 301.

<sup>48</sup>T. O. Beachcroft, "Traherne and the Cambridge Platonists," The Dublin Review, CLXXXVI (1930), 290: "While he [Traherne] is considerably more than a Cambridge Platonist he is thoroughly representative of their salient ideas. He combines the rational calm of Whichcote, the organized circumspection of Smith, the poetic mysticism of More, with a sheer power of writing that has, in an extraordinary turn of fortune, preserved him to be far the best spokesman at large for the group."

to accomplish by his beauty of vision, by his intellectual grasp of the completeness and vastness of the universe, and by the joy which sprang from his own soul which he was able to communicate to others. He had become that most illustrious creature of the world, the philosopher.

### Self-revelation

The seventeenth century was one of strife in more ways than Civil War. In philosophy the new theories of Descartes were being considered, and many, if they could not follow him, began to question the plausibility of all things. In science there were Galileo's revolutionary discoveries. Francis Bacon brought the struggle of practical experiment into sharp conflict with the dogmatic beliefs of mediaeval scholasticism which was still in its prime. In religion Catholic and Protestant, Anglican and Puritan, were continually conjuring up subjects for dispute. Though Traherne pursued his career in these times, there is little but an occasional echo of these events in the Centuries of Meditations. If they touched his life they served only to make him more conscious of the fact that man's salvation and ultimate happiness lay in the contemplation and acceptance of God.

The reader learns little about Traherne's external personal life from the passages in the Centuries of Meditations.

It is his spiritual life which is important, and it was his desire to show the divine principles of an upright nature to the inhabitants of the world so that they might live blessedly and enjoy them. There is this kind of personal allusion in the Centuries of Meditations and, though nothing in the way of a biography has been written from an analysis of this prose work, it presents a beautiful and inspiring picture of Traherne's life.<sup>49</sup>

Thomas Traherne was from the beginning surrounded by the beauties of Nature, and the passion of this early love never diminished. He could remember in his adult years his first tumultuous feelings about the trees near his birthplace. His first memories are of the town, of the boys and the girls playing in the dust of the roads, of the humbleness of his home, and of the poverty he experienced and failed to understand.

Yet sometimes in the midst of these dreams, I should come a little to myself, so far as to feel I wanted something secretly, to expostulate with God for not giving me riches, to long after an unknown happiness, to grieve that the World was so empty, and and to be dissatisfied with my present state because it was vain and forlorn. I had heard of Angels, and much admired that here upon earth nothing should be but dirt and streets and gutters; for as for the pleasures that were in great men's houses I had not

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<sup>49</sup>Gladys I. Wade, Thomas Traherne (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 27.

seen them: and it was my real happiness they were unknown. For because nothing deluded me, I was the more inquisitive.<sup>50</sup>

As a child of four when, in an autobiographical sense, this story begins, Traherne was questioning God, yet at the same time trying to reason with himself about his poor state in life. He was extraordinarily aware of himself and of his environment.

Once I remember (I think I was about 4 years old when) I thus reasoned with myself, sitting in a little obscure room in my father's poor house: If there be a God, certainly He must be infinite in Goodness: and that I was prompted to, by a real whispering instinct of Nature. And if He be infinite in Goodness, a perfect Being in Wisdom and Love, certainly He must do most glorious things, and give us infinite riches; how comes it to pass therefore that I am so Poor? Of so scanty and narrow a fortune enjoying few and obscure comforts? I thought I could not believe Him a God to me, unless all His power were employed to glorify me.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps the most arresting things about this child's picture of his small world are the sense of the poverty which surrounded him, and the personal neglect which he felt so strongly. He found it hard to believe that the good God could leave him so neglected and so poverty-stricken.

Then something happened. Traherne suddenly realized that he was very rich--spiritually. The creation, and that

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<sup>50</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century III, Number 15, pp. 168-169.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., Number 16, p. 169.

which had been created, belonged to him expressly. "To make a world for me was much, to prepare eternal joys for me was more. But to give me a power to displease thee, or to set a sin before Thy face, which Thou infinitely hatest, to profane Eternity, or to defile Thy works, is more stupendous than all these."<sup>52</sup> Traherne had discovered that he was the son of God and the heir to all Creation.

It must have been about this same time that Traherne was alone in a field in which the solitude and the vastness of the scene awed him. Then, as often happens, the awe-inspiring scene became terrifying to him.

Another time in a lowering and sad evening, being alone in the field, when all things were dead and quiet, a certain want and horror fell upon me, beyond imagination. The unprofitableness and silence of the place dissatisfied me; its wideness terrified me; from the utmost ends of the earth fears surrounded me. How did I know but dangers might suddenly arise from the East, and invade me from the unknown regions beyond the seas? I was a weak and little child, and had forgotten there was a man alive in the earth.<sup>53</sup>

Yet something of hope and of expectation comforted Traherne, and God's presence and His watchfulness in all the ends of the earth became his strength and his assurance. He felt and saw God in Nature; he saw his God-given possessions, and he felt the glorification of himself. He became peaceful, confident, sure of his treasures, and conscious of his own importance. "This taught me that I was concerned in all the

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., Century IV, Number 43, p. 267.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., Century III, Number 23, p. 175.



world: and that in the remotest borders the causes of peace delighted me, and the beauties of the earth when seen were made to entertain me."<sup>54</sup>

The disorder of the period and the interruptions of normal living because of the Civil War may have had something to do with the difficult living conditions Traherne pictures. But there was more than that extraneous condition. There were vice and sin in his home; tears and quarrels; sickness and death; difficulty in getting money to pay taxes and to buy bread. Nevertheless, Traherne was too young at the time to be fully aware of these troubles, and he was too immersed in the world which he so blissfully made for himself.

All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. I was a little stranger, which at my entrance into the world was saluted and surrounded with innumerable joys. My knowledge was Divine. I knew by intuition those things which since my Apostasy, I collected again by the highest reason. My very ignorance was advantageous. I seemed as one brought into the Estate of Innocence. All things were spotless and pure and glorious: yea, and infinitely mine, and joyful and precious. I knew not that there were any sins, or complaints or laws. I dreamed not of poverties, contentions or vices. All tears and quarrels were hidden from mine eyes. Everything was at rest, free and immortal. I knew nothing of sickness or death or rents or exactions, either for tribute or bread. In the absence of these I was entertained like an Angel with the works of God in their splendour and glory. I saw all in the peace of Eden; Heaven and Earth did sing my Creator's praises, and could not make more melody to Adam, than to me. All Time was Eternity, and a perpetual

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

Sabbath. Is it not strange, that an infant should be heir of the whole World, and see those mysteries which the books of the learned never unfold?<sup>55</sup>

There is a remarkable resemblance here between Wordsworth and Traherne in their fundamental intuitions and experiences. Wordsworth, like Traherne, after disillusionment, found happiness in the reflections of childhood, but more in those strange moments when the soul felt itself to be on the verge of a great discovery.<sup>56</sup>

In Traherne's philosophy the child, the same child who in the New Testament is a member of the Kingdom of God, is spiritually perfect. For Traherne the passage of the soul through life is both Platonic and Christian. Plato had taught that the soul carried with it into the world visions of celestial creations, and that learning was a renaissance or rediscovery of what was already its own. This came by recollection, and was taught by slow experience and search. The seed of Christianity, which Traherne added, is found in this one line which he repeats over and over again: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., Number 2, p. 156.

<sup>56</sup>William Wordsworth, The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1904), "The Prelude," Book V, lines 506-517.

Dumb yearnings, hidden appetites, are ours,  
 And they must have their food. Our childhood sits,  
 Our simple childhood, sits upon a throne  
 That hath more power than all the elements.  
 I guess not what this tells of Being past,

enter the kingdom of Heaven." The child has an undistracted and an uncorrupted view into the heart of the matter. He is capable of this insight because, in his innocence, he is still in touch with God and His activity in Nature. His infant eye sees the beauties of the hills, the brightness of the sun, and the vastness of the sea, because his child's eye is still as clear as God meant for it to be. Here Traherne is a precursor of both Blake and Wordsworth, and the recollections of childhood are vividly shown both in his poetry and in his Centuries of Meditations.

To Traherne it was a tragedy that the naturally good and innocent child was subjected to the corruptness of the world and was thus exposed to the evils of the adult world in his childhood. These adults made the child's temple crash to the ground. For the wonderful state wherein one may cry, "Am I a Glorious Spring/ Of Joys and Riches to my King?" is not long lived. Traherne is not quite clear as to the cause of this "fall," unless it is education. The child recognizes the beauty around him, and then suddenly those with whom he is associated make him take stock of the

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Nor what it augurs of the life to come;  
 But so it is, and, in that dubious hour,  
 That twilight when we first begin to see  
 The dawning earth, to recognize, expect,  
 And, in the long probation that ensues,  
 The time of trial, ere we learn to live  
 In reconcilment with our stunted powers;. . . . .

material world. "The process of the world's corruption seems, then, to have been for Traherne essentially what later it was for Wordsworth, an inculcation of false values, and a distraction of attention from the true."<sup>57</sup>

The first Light which shined in my Infancy in its primitive and innocent clarity was totally eclipsed: inso much that I was fain to learn all again. If you ask me how it was eclipsed? Truly by the customs and manners of men; which like contrary winds blew it out: by an innumerable company of other objects, rude, vulgar and worthless things, that like so many loads of earth and dung did overwhelm and bury it: by the impetuous torrent of wrong desires in all others whom I saw or knew that carried me away and alienated me from it: By a whole sea of other matters and concernments that covered and drowned it: finally by the evil influence of a bad education that did not foster and cherish it. . . .  
 . . . and at last all the celestial, great, and stable treasures to which I was born, as wholly forgotten, as if they had never been.<sup>58</sup>

Traherne has given his readers the reasons why his first child-like awareness of the Divine was deadened in him; he said it was because of the new environment into which he was thrust. He was overwhelmed by an "impetuous torrent of wrong desires" in those whom he saw and knew. The writer has mentioned the evidence that Traherne, as a child, was taken to a second home and it very probably was to

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<sup>57</sup>White, op. cit., p. 338.

<sup>58</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century III, Number 7, pp. 162-163.

the home of his relative, the mayor of Hereford, Philip Traherne. Evidence to support this theory is found many times in the Centuries of Meditations. There are references to taverns and tavern life; so his home was undoubtedly with the mayor-innkeeper Philip.

Being swallowed up therefore in the miserable gulf of idle talk and worthless vanities, thenceforth I lived among dreams and shadows, like a prodigal son feeding upon husks with swine. A comfortless wilderness full of thorns and troubles the world was, or worse: a waste place covered with idleness and play, and shops, and markets, and taverns. As for Churches they were things I did not understand, and schools were a burden: so that there was nothing in the world worth the having, or enjoying, but my game and sport, which also was a dream, and being passed wholly forgotten. So that I had utterly forgotten all goodness, bounty, comfort, and glory: which things are the very brightness of the Glory of God: for lack of which therefore He was unknown.<sup>59</sup>

These persons who were new to Traherne were kind to him and over-generous with their gifts. "They did impose upon me, and obtrude their gifts that made me believe a ribbon or a feather curious."<sup>60</sup> These riches which Traherne refers to as "barbarous inventions" are a far cry from the rags and poverty of his first home, yet they made him aware of the need for nurses and parents to remove those "silly objects" from the children so that they might learn of God instead. "For nothing is so easy as to teach the truth

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., Number 14, p. 168.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., Number 9, p. 164.

because the nature of the thing confirms the doctrine."<sup>61</sup>

The outer history is clearly an advancement, but Traherne's inner history is one of deterioration and of loss during this period of his life.<sup>62</sup> "The interaction of material prosperity and deep indefinable inner restlessness continued to determine the course of Traherne's life for many years."<sup>63</sup>

The writer has mentioned that Traherne's early schooling was probably by a tutor, but that is mere supposition. He does make note of this early training, and he makes some mention of his subjects. "Thus also when any curious cabinet, or secret in chemistry, geometry or physic was offered me, I diligently looked into it, but when I saw it to the bottom and not my happiness I despised it."<sup>64</sup> Traherne had an avid curiosity for news concerning far countries, and in his imagination he was transported to their shores where he indulged in thoughts of fancy concerning their people, their commodities, and their natural beauties. This desire to see clearly all that he came in contact with,

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., Number 11, p. 166.

<sup>62</sup>cf., Note 61.

<sup>63</sup>Gladys I. Wade, Thomas Traherne (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 37.

<sup>64</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century III, Number 25, p. 177.

coupled with his insatiable curiosity, naturally led Traherne to thoughts of faith and of the Divinity.

Then came the dark period in Traherne's life, lasting we know not how long. He knew that he was seeking an answer to his question of the "Why" of life, but he was not sure where to turn. In his poetry we know that he "tried" amusements and sports, and turned away from study and school. Because he was curious and eager, he had the natural passions and headstrongness peculiar to youth. In his manhood he was to look back on these dark days and remark: "Riches are but tarnish and gilded vanities, honours are but airy and empty bubbles, affections are but winds, perhaps too great for such a ship as mine, of too light a ballast: pleasures, yea, all these, are but witches that draw and steal us away from God."<sup>65</sup>

That Traherne at this time may have fallen in love is a probability which would lend reason to this long period of dejection.

Suppose a curious and fair woman. Some have seen the beauties of Heaven in such a person. It is a vain thing to say they loved too much. I dare say there are ten thousand beauties in that creature which they have not seen. They loved it not too much, but upon false causes. . . . They love a creature for sparkling eyes and curled hair, lily breasts and ruddy cheeks. . . .

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., Century IV, Number 89, p. 309.

They love her perhaps, but do not love God  
 more: nor men as much: nor Heaven and Earth  
 at all.<sup>66</sup>

The final stage in this dark period in Traherne's life is revealed in his scepticism in matters of religion. In the Third Century, meditations twenty-seven through thirty-five, the account of this period is given. At first reading it seems childish and unattractive. However, when the reader remembers that these meditations were written for Mrs. Hopton, and when he reads these particular passages as an allegory of a desire for proof, they are far from immature. This allegory served as an explanation for his friend of his desire for faith, and it was written in a manner which would not destroy her belief. Briefly these passages tell of Traherne's desire for an angel to bring him personally a book from Heaven which would solve his dilemma; they progress by telling how this would have been an unsatisfactory procedure.

Had the Angels brought it [the Bible] to me alone, these several inconveniences had attended the vision:- (1) It had been but one sudden act wherein it was sent me: whereas now God hath been all ages in preparing it: (2) It had been done by inferior ministers, whereas now it is done by God Himself: (3) Being Satan is able to transform himself into an Angel of Light, I had been still

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., Century II, Number 68, pp. 126-127.



dubious, till having recourse to the excellency of the matter, by it I was informed and satisfied: (4) Being corrupted, that one miracle would have been but like a single spark upon green wood, it would have gone out immediately: whereas I needed a thousand miracles to seal it, yea and to awaken me to the meditation of the matter that was revealed to me: (5) Had it been revealed no other way, all the world had been dark and empty round about me: whereas now it is my joy and my delight and treasure, being full of knowledge and light and glory: (6) Had it been revealed at no other time, God had now only been good unto me; whereas He hath manifested His love in all ages, and been carefully and most wisely revealing it from the beginning of the world: (7) Had He revealed it to no other person, I had been weak in faith, being solitary and sitting alone like a sparrow upon the house-top, who now have the concurrent and joint affections of Kingdoms and ages.<sup>67</sup>

Then it was that Traherne found the answer to some of his problems. The question is presented, he doubts the question but applies reason, and thus finds himself one step nearer to the goal he has envisioned. At times, in the quiet of a field and alone in the solitude, his old fears would come upon him and he would become frightened. These fears would lead him to think of the material way of life he was leading and, as he drew closer to Nature, there came an almost immediate revulsion. Never again could he be satisfied with the material world, nor with the merely sensuous. He had discovered that his riches lay in his ability to envision the truth and he, like many saints and mystics, made an involuntary though painful turn in life's road.

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., Century III, Number 33, pp. 184-185.

At this point of Traherne's renunciation of the material world, he entered Oxford, and though little is known about these first three years from historical sources, much is learned of the inner history from a study of the Centuries of Meditations. Traherne was conscious that the life he had led was not one that satisfied his desire for that plane of living which he knew existed somewhere. He was still groping for the answer but he was well aware of his state, and he was determined to find the road at any cost.

As yet I did not see the wisdom and depths of knowledge, the clear principles, and certain evidences whereby the wise and holy, the ancients and the learned that were abroad in the world knew these things but was led to them only by the fame which they had vulgarly received. Howbeit I believed that there were unspeakable mysteries contained in them, and tho' they were generally talked of their value was unknown. These therefore I resolved to study, and no other. But to my unspeakable wonder, they brought me to all the things in Heaven and in Earth, in Time and Eternity, possible and impossible, great and little, common and scarce; and discovered them all to be infinite treasures.<sup>68</sup>

Traherne surrendered himself to his studies at Oxford with an intense interest and joy. The following quotation is a record of the studies he followed and his delight in them.

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., Number 54, pp. 201-202.

Having been at the University, and received there the taste and tincture of another education, I saw that there were things in this world of which I never dreamed; glorious secrets, and glorious persons past imagination. There I saw that Logic, Ethics, Physics, Metaphysics, Geometry, Astronomy, Poesy, Medicine, Grammar, Music, Rhetoric all kinds of Arts, Trades, and Mechanisms that adorned the world pertained to felicity; at least there I saw those things, which afterwards I knew to pertain unto it; and was delighted in it. There I saw into the nature of the Sea, the Heavens, the Sun, the Moon and Stars, the Elements, Minerals, and Vegetables. All which appeared like the King's Daughter, all glorious within; and those things which my nurses, and parents, should have talked of there were taught unto me.<sup>69</sup>

The major disappointment was that not one of Traherne's teachers professedly taught Felicity, and to him it was the "mistress of all other sciences." Also, the students studied to amass facts rather than to gain knowledge of a certain subject. There was not, at the university, the answer to his spiritual needs. Traherne was not sure that there was a God, for to him if one had no conception of God then there could be no God. His trouble lay in the fact that God must appeal to man's higher reason, and rational theology was in its infancy. God was still interpreted by means of scripture alone, and Traherne's mind sought further than that. But he studied the Bible, and slowly, with his study of Ethics and Logic, he built up a rational theology that was to give him complete satisfaction.

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., Number 36, pp. 186-187.

Traherne began to see that God was revealed in scientific truth, and when religious traditions stood up under the critical eye of man's reason, then their truths were valid. "For it is impossible for language, miracles, or apparitions to teach us the infallibility of God's word, or to shew us the certainty of true religion, without a clear sight into truth itself, that is unto the truth of things."<sup>70</sup>

It is interesting to know that Traherne dedicated himself to the Church following this period of spiritual regeneration. His first tenure at Credenhill followed a period of several months spent in the country, we are not told where, but we do know that he returned to Nature and dedicated his time to the study of Felicity. Even then he was not sure of the path he should follow. He knew that in dedication to Nature he would be led to a more complete understanding of Felicity, but how to attain this understanding was the problem. He put it into the hands of God and "made it my prayer to God Almighty that He, whose eyes are open upon all things, would guide me to the fairest and divinest."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., Number 45, p. 194.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., Number 52, p. 200.

Following this submission to mysticism, we can assume that Traherne, after being ordained, again returned to Oxford. We know that he received a bachelor of arts degree in 1661, and this implies a return to the university. He says in the Centuries of Meditations that "he was ten years studying before he could satisfy his self-love."<sup>72</sup> His first stay at Oxford was for three years; he was at Credenhill for six years after he received his bachelor of arts degree. That makes nine years; the tenth year is accounted for by his second visit to Oxford after the sojourn in the country. These years of study completed the period which led from scepticism to the acceptance of religious philosophy wherein he could firmly believe that the truths of religion and the truths of science could not be in opposition. Traherne emerged from his intensive study absolutely sure of his position as a priest of the Anglican Church.

With the Fourth Century, Traherne dropped the first-person pronoun and simply and beautifully translated his long-sought-after philosophy into practical living. He faced his faults frankly and made himself follow the opposite virtues; he set aside seven times a day and two times at night for prayers of praise and thanksgiving to God; he

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., Century IV, Number 55, p. 278.

resolved to glorify and sanctify the name of God where all men could hear; he made constant use of the inner eye of wonder that saw the wisdom and love of God in even the minutest particle of sand. Traherne's own words form a summation of these rules. "These principles are like seed in the ground, they must continually be visited with heavenly influences, or else your life will be a barren field. . . . but if well cultivated they will be as fruitful, as if every husk were a golden rind. It is the substance that is in them that is productive of joy and good to all."<sup>73</sup>

Traherne's one request of God was that he might be a blessing to mankind, and he was this because his love of Nature and God implanted in him this inclination.

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., Number 94, pp. 313-314.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PROSE STYLE OF THOMAS TRAHERNE

As the writer has mentioned before, Traherne lived and wrote in a period of transition. This was true not only of political and social conditions, of philosophy and religion, but also of style in writing. With the Restoration a change in prose style was taking place, but it did not happen in a period of a few years. There was still the sonorous rhythm of the long sentence with its balanced clauses that was handled well only in the case of the masters, but a more modern prose was being developed. It was prose of shorter sentences, with a tone of informal intercourse, and it is this last category into which Traherne's writing falls. Traherne is the master of the short sentence, and his prose, set beside Milton's, seems almost modern. "The sentence rarely reaches the stately periodic march of the Miltonic sentence."<sup>74</sup> The rhythm and the pattern in the Centuries of Meditations are Biblical in form, and bring to mind, at once, John Bunyan. Traherne does not have the rich imagery of the Elizabethans, yet he does make use of poetic imagery and of antithesis. He has the same straightforward desire to impart knowledge, quietly, as one finds in Izaak Walton. With all of this lucidity,

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<sup>74</sup>Louise Collier Willcox, "A Joyous Mystic," North American Review, CXGIII (1911), 903.

straightforwardness, ease, and sincerity in style, there is not in Traherne the orderly and masterly progress one finds in the similar writings of Lancelot Andrewes, yet therein lies the ever-present charm of the Centuries of Meditations.

There is a total absence of self-consciousness in the style of Traherne's prose work. There is an ease in the flow of thought, and an intimacy and tenderness that make the Centuries of Meditations, half meditations and half autobiography, a unique treasure. Traherne's personality stands out because the work is infused with his eagerness which animates the style. The reader is ever conscious of the sincerity, the truth, and the purity of the passages. There is an intensity about some of the meditations, simple and direct as they are.

For a more careful study of Traherne's style, the writer would like to illustrate some of the characteristics that have been mentioned. Now that the long sentence with its balanced subordinate clauses of earlier seventeenth-century writers began to disappear, there came a substitution of balanced short sentences. This shorter sentence has given a more emphatic tone to Traherne's prose than the involved and complex form of the Miltonic sentence would have given.



Love is the true means by which the world is enjoyed: Our love to others, and others' love to us. We ought therefore above all things to get acquainted with the nature of Love. For Love is the root and foundation of nature: Love is the Soul of Life and Crown of rewards. If we cannot be satisfied in the nature of Love we can never be satisfied at all. The very end for which God made the world, was that He might manifest His Love. Unless therefore we can be satisfied with His Love so manifested, we can never be satisfied.<sup>75</sup>

Traherne's use of direct antitheses is a predominant feature of his style, but it has none of the artificiality that it was later to assume.

By how much the greater His love was, by so much the greater may His sorrow be at the loss of His object: and by so much the greater His desire also in its restoration. His love therefore being infinite, may do infinite things for an object infinitely valued. Being infinite in Wisdom, it is able also to devise a way inscrutable to us, whereby to sever the sin from the sinner, and to satisfy its righteousness in punishing the transgression, yet satisfy itself in saving the transgressor: And to purge away the dross and incorporated filth and leprosy of sin: restoring the Soul to its primitive beauty, health, and glory. But then it doth this at an infinite expense, wherein also it is more delighted, and especially magnified, for it giveth Another equally dear unto itself to suffer in its stead. And thus we come again by the Works of God to our Lord JESUS CHRIST.<sup>76</sup>

The use of the metaphor and other poetic imagery is found in Traherne's prose, but it is not the erudite

<sup>75</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century III, Number 62, pp. 122-123.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., Century II, Number 31, p. 103.

and ambiguous use that is found in his predecessors. Traherne's imagery is drawn from the simple, natural objects of life around him.

The Sun is but a little spark of His infinite love: the Sea is but one drop of His goodness, But what flames of love ought that spark to kindle in your soul: what sense of affection ought to flow for that drop in your bosom! The Heavens are the canopy, and the earth is the footstool of your throne: who reign in communion with God: or at least are called so to do.<sup>77</sup>

In straightforward narrative of fact, both Traherne and Walton used a plain, simple style that is noted for its directness. They both used the short sentence for argumentative passages. Where further effectiveness was necessary, Walton used wit where Traherne was sometimes known to use irony. Both men used aphorisms to sum up, or to clarify, an argument.

#### Traherne

Happiness was not made to be boasted, but enjoyed. Therefore tho' others count me miserable, I will not believe them if I know and feel myself to be happy; nor fear them. I was not born to approve myself to them, but God. A man may enjoy great delights, without telling them.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., Number 14, p. 88.

<sup>78</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century IV, Number 12, p. 247.

## Walton

And yet God deliver us from pinching poverty; and grant, that having a competency, we may be content and thankful. Let not us repine, or so much as think the gifts of God unequally dealt, if we see another abound with riches; when, as God knows, the cares that are the keys that keep those riches hang often so heavily at the rich man's girdle, that they clog him with weary days and restless nights, even when others sleep quietly. We see but the outside of the rich man's happiness: few consider him to be like the silkworm, that, when she seems to play, is, at the same time spinning her own bowels, and consuming herself; and this many rich men do, loading themselves with corroding cares, to keep what they have, probably, unconscionably got.<sup>79</sup>

Traherne's style has an easy, friendly intimacy that gives depth to the prose. In the meditation Traherne found a literary form that was perfectly suited to his genius and to his quick-moving mind. It exerted a necessary discipline, for a meditation must be comparatively short, and there is not room in its narrow compass for redundancies. Though this form was disciplined it left Traherne's spirit free to follow its own promptings.

A perfect description of Traherne's prose might very well be spoken in his own words--"infant-like and clear." "He [Traherne] was a pure and noble soul, a man of deep experience and fruitful meditation; the master of a rare and wonderful style, and we shall find in his writings a glowing

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<sup>79</sup>Izaak Walton, The Compleat Angler (Everyman's Library Edition; London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1906), p. 206.

appreciation and a luminous expression of this type of inner, spiritual religion."<sup>80</sup>

The style of the Centuries of Meditations is closely analogous to that of Traherne's poetry.<sup>81</sup> The mystery of these prose meditations finds its organic expression in the poems which are, perforce, more condensed, so that the poetry is a distillation of the passages of the Centuries of Meditations. However, where Traherne's prose is beautifully electrifying, one waits often in vain for the flash of light to illuminate his poetry, not because of any defect in his experience, but in communication. It would have been better had Traherne held to the prose-poetry of the Centuries of Meditations, where the passages are naturally brief, lyrical, inspired and fortuitous.

One finds in Traherne's poetry the strange mingling of reality with unreality. The lines of both his poetry and

<sup>80</sup>Rufus M. Jones, Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1914), p. 323.

<sup>81</sup>There are two manuscript sources for Traherne's poems, and three printed editions on the basis of these. The Poems of Felicity was edited by Dr. H. I. Bell in 1910, from the Burney MS 392 in the British Museum; The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne was edited by Bertram Dobell in 1903, from two or three sources, but chiefly from the folio MS 392 in the British Museum. The third edition of Traherne's poetry is The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne edited by Gladys I. Wade in 1932, and this collection contains the Poems of Felicity and the seven poems found in Christian Ethicks.

his prose are filled with objects of the material and natural world, yet they are surrounded with an aura of unreality.

The Streets seem'd paved with golden Stones,  
 The Boys and Girls all mine;  
 To me how did their lovely faces shine!  
 The Sons of men all Holy ones  
 In Joy and Beauty, then appear'd to me;  
 And evry Thing I found  
 (While like an Angel I did see)  
 Adorn'd the Ground.

Rich Diamonds, and Pearl, and Gold  
 Might evry where be seen;  
 Rare Colors, yellow, blew, red, white, and green  
 Mine Eys on evry side behold:  
 All that I saw, a Wonder did appear;  
 Amazement was my Bliss:  
 That and my Wealth met evry where.  
 No Joy to this!<sup>82</sup>

How like this poem is the following prose passage from the Centuries of Meditations. "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."<sup>83</sup> Here, as elsewhere, words and whole lines are found in the poems which correspond to the prose meditations. In the Centuries of Meditations one finds a prose passage translated into verse form to emphasize a point which Traherne wishes to make.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Traherne's poetry is his portrayal of the feelings of little children about the

<sup>82</sup>Thomas Traherne, The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne, ed. Gladys I. Wade (London: P. J. and A. E. Dobell, 1932), "Wonder," pp. 99-100.

<sup>83</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century III, Number 3, p. 158.

glorious earth they inherit. This same feeling of wonder and joy is evident in the prose, where the symbolic value of these experiences is most important. This feeling of joy is more strong in the poetry because it is more personal, and Traherne uses the first-person pronoun almost wholly. His writing in such poems as "The Salutation," "Wonder," "Eden," and "Innocence," is astonishingly free, spontaneous, and natural.

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

When silent I,  
     So many thousand thousand years,  
 Beneath the Dust did in a Chaos lie,  
     How could I Smiles or Tears,  
 Or Lips or Hands or Eys or Ears perceiv?

I that so long  
     Was Nothing from Eternity,  
 Did little think such Joys as Ear or Tongue,  
     To Celebrat or See;  
 Such Sounds to hear, such Hands to feel, such Feet,  
 Beneath the Skies, on such a Ground to meet.<sup>84</sup>

In the Centuries of Meditations, we find the same infant joy in the glory of the world and in its mystery.

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<sup>84</sup>Thomas Traherne, The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne, ed. Gladys I. Wade (London: P. J. and A. E. Dobell, 1932), "The Salutation," p. 3.

WILL you see the infancy of this sublime and celestial greatness? 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. By the Gift of God they attended me into the world, and by His special favour I remember them till now. Verily they seem the greatest gifts His wisdom could bestow, for without them all other gifts had been dead and vain. They are unattainable by book, and therefore I will teach them by experience. Pray for them earnestly: for they will make you angelical, and wholly celestial. Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world, than I when I was a child.<sup>85</sup>

Traherne had almost all the qualities of a poet, and one of the greatest gifts a poet can have--the eye of vision. No man ever saw beauty with a clearer eye, or worshiped it more completely; no man had more passion and sincerity than he; no man had any greater powers of intellectual force than he; yet he failed to be a great poet.<sup>86</sup> The answer to his failure seems to lie in Traherne's perception of the function of poetry. He knew that the mind was a creative force, yet in his poetry he did not quite perceive the creative power of poetic imagination. For him the function of poetry was to comment upon the beauties of the world in which he lived;

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<sup>85</sup>Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Published by the Editor, 1908), Century III, Number 1, p. 156.

<sup>86</sup>"A 'Student of Felicity'," The Living Age, CCLI (1906), 117: "He [Traherne] is full of subtle and beautiful things, but his mode of expression is apt to become monotonous, and we meet rarely in his poetry those lines or phrases where thought and music are wedded in an immortal harmony."

he depended too much on reason, and too little on imagination. Traherne is a religious lyric poet, and though he opens a spring of limpid expression and kindly piety, he has those faults which are peculiar to most religious poets: there is in his poetry a paucity of theme, and a difficulty in condensing the trailing clouds of glory into a concentrated poetical emotion.

For all of Traherne's freshness, his spirit of wonder and exuberance, he is a greater prose writer than a poet, and it is in his prose that his charm and value lie.



## CONCLUSIONS

The writer of this paper has attempted an analysis of Thomas Traherne's Centuries of Meditations because the character of the prose seemed to deserve a closer study than it had ever before received. Therefore, it has been her purpose to examine the prose work both internally and externally. In placing the Centuries of Meditations in relationship with other prose works of the seventeenth century, she has endeavored to prove that its author justly deserves to be included in that group which has as its literary godhead John Donne.

It has been shown that the Centuries of Meditations is a spiritual autobiography in which certain of Traherne's ideas have been set forth. These ideas have fallen naturally into two divisions--his general philosophy, and his specific ideas about God, Nature, and Man. The love of Nature is the central theme in Traherne's life, and so it is the theme in this prose work. This love of Nature led Traherne to the study of Man in his relation to Nature, to God, and to his fellow men. Thus Traherne discovered that the only two studies worthy of man's scrutiny were those of Humanity and of Divinity. It is man's duty to devote his life to the contemplation of happiness and to the practice of virtue, for only these principles will lead him to discover the power of wisdom which is perfect felicity.

The style of the Centuries of Meditations has been examined and the content of the prose has been compared with the style and the content of Traherne's poetry. It has been shown that the poetry is a distillation of the meditations' ideas, and that the two forms of expression are often similar.

Thomas Traherne seems to stand alone in his outlook on life. Nothing to him was common or unclean. He walked through life on the tiptoe of expectancy, and he always listened for the angelic voices. Traherne exulted in the beauties of the world; his raptures were never abstract, for he read into Nature the symbolism of metaphysics, and gave to whatever he wrote a note of human passion. Traherne was the same man when he died as when he was the "I" who saw the corn as "orient and immortal wheat"; he forever saw in Nature the manifestation of that spirit which was "the life and soul of the universe" and which brought him sublime happiness.

It is evident from the references to their work in this paper that those who have made any study of the Centuries of Meditations regard the work as of singular beauty and worthy of much greater recognition than it has received in most estimates of the prose of the seventeenth century. It will not then seem extravagant to say that for this writer Traherne is a master of prose.

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