THOMAS TRAHERNE'S SPIRITUAL POETRY

Some Philosophical Considerations

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THOMAS TRAHERNE (1637–1674) was a religious poet, essayist and theologian. Supposedly born in Hereford, the son of a shoemaker, he was a child during the seven years of civil war in England (1642–1649), subsequently studying at Brasenose College, Oxford.[1] Originally educated along Puritan or Calvinist lines, Traherne was ordained by the restored Church of England in 1660, and served as rector of St Mary's, Credenhill, near Hereford. In his early years, Traherne wrote a scathing criticism of the medieval Roman Catholic Church, entitled *Roman Forgeries.* His subsequent writings, however, were not polemical. He became part of a devotional circle grouped around the mystic Susanna Hopton, for whom he is thought to have composed *Centuries of Meditation*. His *Thanksgivings* were published anonymously in 1699. Only after very close examination of his anonymous writings were they properly attributed to Traherne. One manuscript, including the poems I shall consider here, was found by accident at a London bookstall after it had been lost for an interval of two hundred years. There was no signature on these poems, so literary detectives had to trace them by their similarities to works that were known to be written by Traherne. More writings have been discovered since then.

Traherne is considered as belonging in the group of so-called metaphysical poets, of whom T. S. Eliot wrote:

> You only have metaphysical poetry, as I understand it, when you have a philosophy exerting its influence, not directly through belief, but indirectly through feeling and behavior, upon the minute particulars of a poet's daily life ….[2]

[1] See *Happiness and Holiness: Thomas Traherne and His Writings*, edited by Denise Inge (Norwich: Canterbury, 2008), 49.

[2] T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry,* edited by Ronald Schuchard (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 294.

Traherne was heavily influenced by the works of Neoplatonist philosophers and, in particular, by several of his contemporaries known as the Cambridge Platonists.[3] The Cambridge Platonists were *latitudinarians*: they argued for moderation and dialogue between the Puritan and High Church factions in the Anglican Church. They believed that religion and reason could be in harmony with one another on the basis of a mystical understanding of reason as something that rose beyond mere sense perception. Reason was an echo of the divine residing within the human soul.

The beliefs and teachings of the Cambridge Platonists—doubtless there was a group of Platonists or Neoplatonists at Oxford as well—were derived in part from the Florentine Platonists of the Renaissance. Chief among these was Marsilio Ficino (1443–1499),[4] whom Traherne is believed to have read. These beliefs and teachings were very far from the Calvinistic Puritan opinions in which Traherne had been brought up. Very generally, the Platonists believed in the goodness of human nature and the spark of divinity within each human soul. The Puritans believed strongly in original sin and in the basic sinfulness or perversity of human nature.

As a poet, pastor and theologian, Traherne rejected the doctrine of original sin. In *Centuries of Meditation*, he transmits his childhood sense of living in an earthly paradise, surrounded by the beauty of creation. Some of his writings suggest that adults have lost the joy of childhood, and with it an intuitive understanding of the divine nature of creation. In this, he is somewhat like William Wordsworth and the English Romantic poets of the next century. Writing often in the spirit and style of the psalms and the Gospels, Traherne seems to convey the idea that paradise can only be rediscovered and regained through reacquiring this childlike innocence—an original state that precedes the knowledge of good and evil, and seems to be composed of boundless love and wonder. He feels that the world was entirely created for his delight, and his natural response is praise of the creator. His abiding feeling of joy and spiritual elevation, together with a sense of the God-given purpose of all creation,

[3] Denise Inge, *Wanting Like a God: Desire and Freedom in Thomas Traherne* (London: SCM, 2009), 20 following. Or see *Thomas Traherne: Selected Poems and Prose*, edited by Alan Bradford (New York: Penguin, 1991), 365; 'For Traherne, as for the Cambridge Platonists, the human soul always mirrors the Deity …'.

[4] Paul Oscar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 126–135.

he calls *felicity*. God's happiness is eternal, and God abounds in joy. Humans are created with the capacity to enjoy happiness and bliss, both in this life and in heaven. Like God, humans enjoy giving and sharing joy as much as receiving it from God and other creatures.

Traherne stained-glass window, by Tom Denny, Hereford Cathedral

For Traherne, however, the divine felicity is not incompatible with the idea of need or want in God. As Denise Inge writes, 'Because desire exists in God, felicity is about living in lack and longing, being simultaneously needy and filled'.[5] Inge has brought to the surface, and into contemporary conversation, the themes of want and desire in the work of Traherne. In this poet, she finds a theologian for whom desire is the underlying theme and spring of action. He holds in equipoise the reality of God's want and desire for human love and response, and our corresponding human desire for life, enjoyment and union with God as our only ultimate fulfilment. Thus there obtains an ongoing mutuality and reciprocity in the exchange between the divine and the human.

Another commentator, A. Leigh DeNeef, argues that the works of Traherne offer a sustained and rigorous analysis of questions of human existence and of being: 'I am positing a Traherne who is constantly interpreting the conditions and contexts of man's existence: what allows him to be, what grants him being …'.[6] DeNeef places Traherne 'in dialogue' with the thought of Martin Heidegger, as the modern champion of the phenomenological ontology that deals with questions of being; Jacques Lacan, with his interest in the structure and the power of

[5] Inge, *Wanting Like a God*, 246.
[6] A. Leigh DeNeef, *Traherne in Dialogue: Heidegger, Lacan, Derrida* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1988), 39.

human desiring; and Jacques Derrida, with his understanding of how there is always something *more* to be thought about or dealt with in living.

I should now like to look more closely at this complex of philosophical and theological concerns through four closely related poems by Thomas Traherne.

'The Circulation'

Traherne's poem 'The Circulation' describes a relationship of exchange and reciprocity between creatures and God.[7] God creates us out of a need that God self-constitutes within God; Traherne perceives and elaborates this self-generated need in God for reciprocity and mutuality. Just as we humans are created to need and desire union with God, God self-constitutes in such a way as to need and desire our human and creaturely love. This pattern of circulating love is basically the Neoplatonic one of emanation and return,[8] in which all creatures emanate from the divine fecundity and then return to God as into their own completion and fulfilment in the mystical union of love.

The Circulation

I

As fair ideas from the sky,
Or images of things,
Unto a spotless mirror fly,
On unperceived wings,
And lodging there affect the sense,
As if at first they came from thence;
While being there, they richly beautify
The place they fill, and yet communicate
Themselves, reflecting to the seer's eye;
Just such is our estate,
No praise can we return again,
No glory in ourselves possess,
But what derived from without we gain.
From all the mysteries of blessedness.

II

No man breathes out more vital air
Than he before sucked in:
Those joys and praises must repair
To us, which 'tis a sin
To bury in a senseless tomb.
An earthly wight must be the heir
Of all those joys the holy Angels prize,
He must a king before a priest become,
And gifts receive or ever sacrifice.
'Tis blindness makes us dumb:
Had we but those celestial eyes,
Whereby we could behold the sum
Of all His bounties, we should overflow
With praises did we but their causes know.

[7] *Happiness and Holiness*, 134–136. The texts reproduced here are taken, for copyright reasons, from *The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne*, edited by Bertram Dobell (London: privately printed, 1906).
[8] See Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 38.

III

All things to Circulations owe
Themselves; by which alone
They do exist; they cannot shew
A sigh, a word, a groan,
A colour or a glimpse of light,
The sparkle of a precious stone,
A virtue, or a smell, a lovely sight,
A fruit, a beam, an influence, a tear,
But they another's livery must wear,
And borrow matter first,
Before they can communicate.
Whatever's empty is accurst:
And this doth shew that we must some estate
Possess, or never can communicate.

IV

A sponge drinks in the water, which
Is afterwards exprest.
A liberal hand must first be rich:
Who blesseth must be blest.
The thirsty earth drinks in the rain,
The trees suck moisture at their roots,
Before the one can lavish herbs again,
Before the other can afford us fruits.
No tenant can raise corn or pay his rent,
Nor can even have a lord,
That has no land. No spring can vent,
No vessel any wine afford
Wherein no liquor's put. No empty purse,
Can pounds or talents of itself disburse.

V

Flame that ejects its golden beams
Sups up the grosser air;
To seas that pour out their streams
In springs, those streams repair;
Received ideas make even dreams.
No fancy painteth foul or fair
But by the ministry of inward light,
That in the spirits cherisheth its sight.
The moon returneth light, and some men say
The very sun no ray
Nor influence could have, did it
No foreign aids, no food admit.
The earth no exhalations would afford,
Were not its spirits by the sun restored.

VI

All things do first receive, that give:
Only 'tis God above.
That from and in Himself doth live;
Whose all-sufficient love
Without original can flow
And all the joys and glories shew
Which mortal man can take delight to know.
He is the primitive eternal spring
The endless ocean of each glorious thing.
The soul a vessel is,
A spacious bosom, to contain
All the fair treasures of His bliss,
Which run like rivers from, into the main,
And all it doth receive returns again.

The first of the poem's six verses contemplates the economy of the exchange between God and human creatures. We gain much from our relationship with God, and we can return no praise to God except in virtue of the inspiration that God has given to us. Even so, God is enriched by the free donation of praise and thanks that we return to God. In this poem, our minds are like mirrors on to which images of things are projected. 'While being there'—in the mirror, or the mind—'they richly beautify / The place they fill'. The theme is simultaneously visual and cognitive: the acquisition of new knowledge or the seeing of new sights is a cipher for the enrichment of our being. Our whole being is like a mirror, not just our mind.

Verse two rehearses the message of verse one: 'No man breathes out more vital air / Than he before sucked in …'. It says that we must become

a king before we can become a priest; that is, we must receive gifts from God, as a king receives tribute, before we can return them in sacrifice to God. The poem proceeds by a succession of contrasts. There is a philosophic and Neoplatonic contrast between emanation and return, which turns into a simpler one between giving and receiving. And there is a metaphorical contrast between the king who receives gifts in tribute and the priest who returns gifts of sacrifice to God. Each new contrast supplements and adds shades of meaning to those that precede it.

Verse three reinforces what is declared in verse two. 'All things to Circulations owe / Themselves; by which alone / They do exist …'. All things exist in so far as they participate in this circulation process. Verse three also declares that all non-divine things are material, and must be so in order to communicate, that is, in order to participate in the economic exchange of circulation. Being material or having matter is a form of otherness given to creatures so that the immaterial Godhead will have something other than itself in which to communicate itself.

In the remaining verses a series of images present a similar economy: we have a flame that burns and radiates outward only in so far as it sucks in the air around it; the sleeping mind creates its dreams from the materials of waking experience; the moon reflects or returns light in so far as it receives light from the sun. And the final verse reproduces the whole system in miniature: its first line is 'All things do first receive, that give', and its last—the last line of the poem—'And all it doth receive returns again'.

'Amendment'

What 'The Circulation' does not deal with are the ways in which things are transformed by free self-alteration as they return to God. But in the next poem in the manuscript sequence, 'Amendment',[9] the soul is a mirror that reflects love and praise back to God, who takes an increased delight in creation as it is *amended*, or enhanced, by the human response to it.

[9] See A. L. Clements, *The Mystical Poetry of Thomas Traherne* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1969), for the relationship between the poems as a coherent sequence in manuscript.

Amendment

I

That all things should be mine,
This makes His bounty most divine:
But that they all more rich should be,
And far more brightly shine,
As used by me;
It ravisheth my soul to see the end,
To which this work so wonderful doth tend.

II

That we should make the skies
More glorious far before Thine eyes
Than Thou didst make them, and even Thee
Far more Thy works to prize,
As used they be
Than as they're made, is a stupendous work,
Wherein Thy wisdom mightily doth lurk.

III

Thy greatness, and Thy love,
Thy power, in this, my joy doth move;
Thy goodness, and felicity
In this exprest above
All praise I see:
While Thy great Godhead over all doth reign,
And such an end in such a sort attain.

IV

What bound may we assign,
O God, to any work of thine!
Their endlessness discovers thee
In all to be Divine;
A Deity
That will for evermore exceed the end
Of all that creature's wit can comprehend.

V

Am I a glorious spring
Of joys and riches to my King?
Are men made Gods? And may they see
So wonderful a thing
As God in me?
And is my soul a mirror that must shine
Even like the sun and be far more divine?

VI

Thy Soul, O God, doth prize
The seas, the earth, our souls, the skies;
As we return the same to Thee
They more delight Thine eyes,
And sweeter be
As unto thee we offer up the same,
Than as to us from Thee at first they came.

VII

O how doth Sacred Love
His gifts refine, exalt, improve!
Our love to creatures makes them be
In Thine esteem above
Themselves to Thee!
O here His goodness evermore admire!
He made our souls to make His creatures higher.

God has designed and created the universe in such a way that God is pleased, not only with doing the good work of creating things, but with having conscious human beings add to God's delight by appreciating God's work. God makes human beings capable of *amending*, or enhancing, the divine delight in creating the universe. As looking in a mirror adds to the satisfaction one has in presenting a good appearance, so looking at creation adds to God's creative satisfaction. Every created thing is enhanced as it is seen or beheld by human beings: 'Consequently, the Deity depends on us for enjoyment of His works: "In them [His creatures] He sees, and feels,

Creation window, St Chad's Church, Far Headingley

and smells, and lives … "'.[10] Out of this state of affairs, that is, out of the principle of amendment, there comes the idea that God needs God's creatures; God wants us as God's creatures; God desires us because God derives something from us. God's gifts to us acquire more value as they are returned to God by us.

Modern analogues for this idea can be found in the work of the scientist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin and of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. Teilhard de Chardin gives great importance to human consciousness in its role of furthering evolutionary advance. Human consciousness makes the evolutionary process capable of reflecting upon itself, so as to appreciate its own existence as well as its own technical complexity, organic unity and ultimate destiny. For Teilhard all matter belongs, *ab initio*, to the ever-developing Body of Christ, whose development is aimed at a full articulation in the ultimate state of the Lord's body known as *Omega Point*.[11] Human appreciation and gratitude to God enhance the divine experience of satisfaction.

In Alfred North Whitehead, we also find the idea that God derives something from non-divine beings. Whitehead's doctrine of the *consequent nature of God* asserts that every morsel of reality adds something to God's reality. There is a part or nature of God that is enriched and enhanced by the achievement, however miniscule, of every particle of reality.[12] In Whitehead, as in Traherne, there is reciprocity between God and creatures, and there is mutual

[10] Alan Bradford, in *Thomas Traherne*, 337. And see also Bradford's commentary on another poem, 'The Anticipation': '… God's wants anticipate their own satisfaction …. Anticipation and fulfillment are thus simultaneous ….'

[11] Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, translated by Bernard Wall (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 261: 'what is the work of works for man if not to establish, in and by each one of us, an absolutely original centre in which the universe reflects itself in a unique and inimitable way? And those centres are our very selves and personalities. The very centre of our consciousness, deeper than all its radii; that is the essence which Omega, if it is to be truly Omega, must reclaim.'

[12] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1985), 345: 'Thus, by reason of the relativity of all things, there is a reaction of the world on God. The completion of God's nature into a fulness of physical feeling is derived from the objectification of the world in God.'

enhancement in the interaction between God and the world. Whitehead allows for a primitive kind or level of awareness in all molecules and minerals, such that they too make a contribution to the divine consequent nature.

'The Anticipation'

'The Anticipation', is about the human spiritual condition and about contemplation.[13] It presents the fruit of the poet's contemplation in hopes of evoking deep prayer and self-understanding in its readers.

The Anticipation

I

My contemplation dazzles in the End
Of all I comprehend,
And soars above all heights,
Diving into the depths of all delights.
Can He become the End,
To whom all creatures tend,
Who is the Father of all Infinites?
Then may He benefit receive from things,
And be not Parent only of all springs.

II

The End doth want the means, and is the cause,
Whose sake, by Nature's laws,
Is that for which they are.
Such sands, such dangerous rocks we must beware:
From all Eternity
A perfect Deity
Most great and blessed he doth still appear;
His essence perfect was in all its features,
He ever blessed in His joys and creatures.

III

From everlasting He those joys did need,
And all those joys proceed
From Him eternally.
From everlasting His felicity
Complete and perfect was,
Whose bosom is the glass,
Wherein we all things everlasting see.
His name is Now, His Nature is Forever:
None can His creatures from their Maker sever.

IV

The End in Him from everlasting is
The fountain of all bliss:
From everlasting it
Efficient was, and influence did emit,
That caused all. Before
The world, we do adore
This glorious End. Because all benefit
From it proceeds: both are the very same,
The End and Fountain differ but in Name.

V

That so the End should be the very Spring
Of every glorious thing;
And that which seemeth last,
The fountain and the cause; attained so fast
That it was first; and mov'd
The Efficient, who so lov'd
All worlds and made them for the sake of this;
It shews the End complete before, and is
A perfect token of His perfect bliss.

VI

The End complete, the means must needs be so,
By which we plainly know,
From all Eternity,
The means whereby God is, must perfect be.
God is Himself the means
Whereby He doth exist:
And as the Sun by shining's cloth'd with beams,
So from Himself to all His glory streams,
Who is a Sun, yet what Himself doth list.

[13] DeNeef, *Traherne in Dialogue*, 205–211.

VII

His endless wants and His enjoyments be
From all Eternity
Immutable in Him:
They are His joys before the Cherubim.
His wants appreciate all,
And being infinite,
Permit no being to be mean or small
That He enjoys, or is before His sight:
His satisfactions do His wants delight.

VIII

Wants are the fountains of Felicity;
No joy could ever be
Were there no want. No bliss,
No sweetness perfect were it not for this.
Want is the greatest pleasure
Because it makes all treasure.
O what a wonderful profound abyss
Is God! In whom eternal wants and treasures
Are more delightful, since they both are pleasures.

IX

He infinitely wanteth all His joys;
(No want the soul e'er cloys.)
And all those wanted pleasures
He infinitely hath. What endless measures.
What heights and depths may we
In His felicity
Conceive! Whose very wants are endless pleasures.
His life in wants and joys is infinite,
And both are felt as His Supreme Delight.

X

He's not like us; possession doth not cloy,
Nor sense of want destroy;
Both always are together
No force can either from the other sever.
Yet there's a space between
That's endless. Both are seen
Distinctly still, and both are seen for ever.
As soon as e'er He wanteth all His bliss,
His bliss, tho' everlasting, in Him is.

XI

His Essence is all Act: He did that He
All Act might always be.
His nature burns like fire;
His goodness infinitely does desire
To be by all possesst;
His love makes others blest.
It is the glory of His high estate,
And that which I for evermore admire,
He is an Act that doth communicate.

XII

From all to all Eternity He is
That Act: an Act of bliss:
Wherein all bliss to all
That will receive the same, or on him call,
Is freely given: from whence
'Tis easy even to sense
To apprehend that all receivers are
In Him, all gifts, all joys, all eyes, even all
At once that ever will or shall appear.

XIII

He is the means of them, they not of Him.
The Holy Cherubim,
Souls, Angels from Him came
Who is a glorious bright and living Flame,
That on all things doth shine,
And makes their face divine.
And Holy, Holy, Holy is His Name:
He is the means both of Himself and all,
Whom we the Fountain, Means, and End do call.

The first verse of 'The Anticipation' holds in tension the images of heights and depths in the experience of deep prayer. It reports the mystic's exuberant experience of dazzle and delight. God is 'the End / To whom all creatures tend'. God is also the Source or Parent from whom all things proceed. We are immediately drawn into a tension between opposites and a circular motion, a movement from a high place to a low place, and

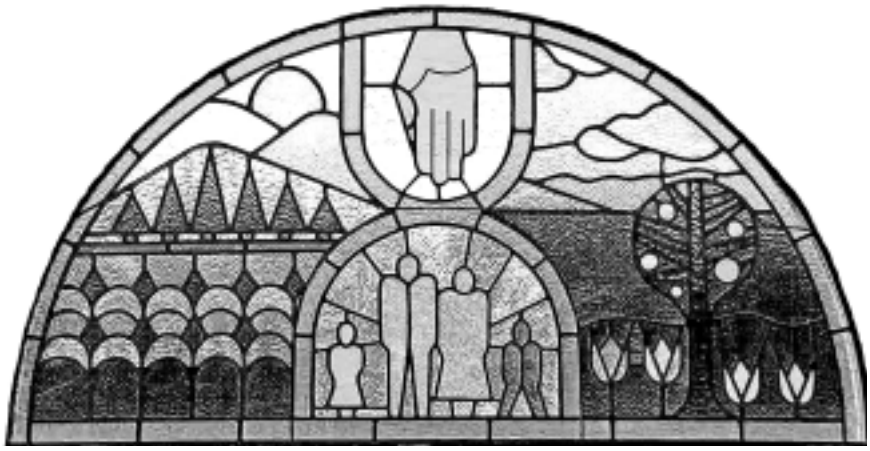
another movement from the low place back to the source from which it springs.

In the second verse God as End wants (that is, both lacks and desires) the means by which we, his beloved creatures, will be brought back to God as our End. It is established now that God *wants*, that God *needs*, that God desires the unity that we will ultimately enjoy with God. This second verse also places us in eternity where, in one single everlasting moment, God is to us God's creatures, our source, our end and the means to the end. So as well as the source and the End, we are dealing with God as the *means* by which we make our return to the source which is also the end or goal of our sojourning.

Verse eight says that 'Wants are the fountains of Felicity'. This would mean that having wants is the necessary condition for felicity, which consists in having those wants satisfied. Want and satisfaction imply each other as inseparable polar opposites. Verse eight also says: 'Want is the greatest pleasure / Because it makes all treasure'. What makes a thing a treasure is its ability to give pleasure, to satisfy a want. God would not be able to appreciate all things as treasures if God did not take pleasure in them. Want and pleasure are different, to be sure, but they coincide perfectly in the eternal moment of divine being.

The poem 'The Anticipation' is indeed about anticipation, even though the word itself is not mentioned in it. Somehow, in the timeless experience of consummated bliss, and in the infinitesimally small gap between divine want and satisfaction, want anticipates satisfaction. Even for God, need anticipates supply. Lack precedes possession. Desire serves as the condition for satisfaction. The idea of God, for Traherne, is thus cast and conceived in the image of the human, just as the human being is created in the image of God. Anticipation is also reciprocal. Anticipation fills in God an almost non-existent gap, which is noticed, appreciated and celebrated by the poet at prayer.

We do not yet have the capacity we need in order to experience the ultimate joy of the mystical life. However, the process is already begun in us, and we can anticipate the joys that we cannot yet fully even imagine. This poem also anticipates its own comprehension by an attentive and appreciative reader; it looks forward with pleasure to the moment of its own enjoyment by others, ever relishing further readings and future felicity. The other person as reader and as prayerful devotee is anticipated by the poet and the poem.



Creation window, Bethel Lutheran Church, Bemidji, Minnesota

In verse twelve, Traherne addresses a concern that those who know something more about Neoplatonism might have. In that philosophy, God is not free. God cannot contain God's love, and it is necessary that God create every possible kind of creature, and every possible individual within every species of creature. In Christian philosophy and theology, God always creates freely and never by necessity. So, here Traherne writes: 'Wherein all bliss to all … Is freely given …'. Whatever God gives—life, other gifts and ultimate bliss—is a gift freely given by God.

In the final verse it is established that God is the means by which creatures reach satisfaction and fulfilment. However, it is only by means of Godself, and not by means of creatures, that God enjoys and attains infinite bliss. Traherne faces an impasse, as he ends his poem on a note of orthodoxy. Whatever God's wanting, lacking, desiring or needing may mean as they are affirmed in Traherne's poetry and poetics, these things are not meant to imply, metaphysically and theologically, that God requires any other means than Godself to be perfectly happy. Whether Traherne can have his personal doctrine about God's wants, and the orthodox resolution as well, remains as a question that lingers beyond the poem itself.

'My Spirit'

'My Spirit' is about how we know things, about how knowing is a spiritual activity and state of being, and about the way in which mind or spirit knows things. It is also about the spiritual, transcendent or numinous

quality of this knowledge. Furthermore, it is about my being and the being of the things I know. Thus it places itself on the level of epistemology and ontology, as it wonders at the proportion and complementarity of the knower and the known. Concerned with what is holy, Traherne's poem is numinous; concerned with knowledge in the philosophical sense, it is noetic and epistemological.

My Spirit

I

My naked simple Life was I;
That Act so strongly shin'd
Upon the earth, the sea, the sky,
It was the substance of my mind;
The sense itself was I.
I felt no dross nor matter in my Soul,
No brims nor borders, such as in a bowl
We see. My essence was capacity,
That felt all things;
The thought that springs
Therefrom's itself. It hath no other wings
To spread abroad, nor eyes to see,
Nor hands distinct to feel,
Nor knees to kneel.
But being simple like the Deity
In its own centre is a sphere
Not shut up here, but everywhere.

II

It acts not from a centre to
Its object as remote,
But present is when it doth view,
Being with the Being it doth note
Whatever it doth do.
It doth not by another engine work,
But by itself; which in the act doth lurk.
Its essence is transformed into a true
And perfect act,
And so exact
Hath God appeared in this mysterious fact,
That 'tis all eye, all act, all sight,
And what it please can be,
Not only see,
Or do; for 'tis more voluble than light:
Which can put on ten thousand forms,
Being cloth'd with what itself adorns.

III

This made me present evermore
With whatsoe'er I saw.
An object, if it were before
My eye, was by Dame Nature's law,
Within my soul. Her store
Was all at once within me; all Her treasures
Were my immediate and internal pleasures,
Substantial joys, which did inform my mind.
With all she wrought
My soul was fraught,
And every object in my heart a thought
Begot, or was; I could not tell,
Whether the things did there
Themselves appear,
Which in my Spirit truly seem'd to dwell;
Or whether my conforming mind
Were not even all that therein shin'd.

IV

But yet of this I was most sure,
That at the utmost length,
(So worthy was it to endure)
My soul could best express its strength.
It was so quick and pure,
That all my mind was wholly everywhere,
Whate'er it saw, 'twas ever wholly there;
The sun ten thousand legions off, was nigh:
The utmost star,
Though seen from far,
Was present in the apple of my eye.
There was my sight, my life, my sense,
My substance, and my mind;
My spirit shin'd
Even there, not by a transient influence:
The act was immanent, yet there:
The thing remote, yet felt even here.

V

O Joy! O wonder and delight!
O sacred mystery!
My Soul a Spirit infinite!
An image of the Deity!
A pure substantial light!
That Being greatest which doth nothing seem
Why, 'twas my all, I nothing did esteem
But that alone. A strange mysterious sphere!
A deep abyss
That sees and is
The only proper place of Heavenly Bliss.
To its Creator 'tis so near
In love and excellence,
In life and sense,
In greatness, worth, and nature; and so dear,
In it, without hyperbole,
The Son and friend of God we see.

VI

A strange extended orb of Joy,
Proceeding from within,
Which did on every side, convey
Itself, and being nigh of kin
To God did every way
Dilate itself even in an instant, and
Like an indivisible centre stand,
At once surrounding all eternity.
'Twas not a sphere,
Yet did appear,
One infinite. 'Twas somewhat everywhere,
And tho' it had a power to see
Far more, yet still it shin'd
And was a mind
Exerted for it saw Infinity.
'Twas not a sphere, but 'twas a might
Invisible, and yet gave light.

VII

O wondrous Self! O sphere of light,
O sphere of joy most fair;
O act, O power infinite;
O subtile and unbounded air!
O living orb of sight!
Thou which within me art, yet me! Thou eye,
And temple of His whole infinity!
O what a world art Thou! A world within!
All things appear
All objects are
Alive in Thee! Supersubstantial, rare,
Above themselves, and nigh of kin
To those pure things we find
In His great mind
Who made the world! Tho' now eclipsed by sin
There they are useful and divine.
Exalted there they ought to shine.

In this poem, the knowing mind expands or dilates in order to include or embrace the entire universe and all of its contents. Bernard Lonergan refers to the human mind or spirit as an *unrestricted desire to know*.[14] This lack of restriction lies in the order of intentional knowledge, and

[14] Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1968), 352: 'But at the root of cognitional process there is a cool, detached, disinterested desire to know and its range is unrestricted'.

not in the order of physical containment. It is the being of the mind or spirit that embraces the being and the essences of everything there is. In this respect, the mind is like God; the mind is an image of God. The mind is like an eye that dilates to absorb and accommodate all that can be seen.

In 'My Spirit', the mind is like a circle that can expand to include everything, and still has a centre that maintains its own identity. It dilates itself in an instant, with God's help, and surrounds all things temporal and eternal. This is mystical experience, which is at once the very basis and the ultimate goal of human knowledge. Finite itself, the mind or spirit is a capacity for infinity. Everywhere extended, the soul is a centre that draws everything into the global space of its being.

Not only does the soul draw into itself the finite beings of the material universe, but it draws in God, infinity itself. The human spirit is made by God for the purpose of mystical and noetical dilation. Its spirituality and its epistemological or knowing function are complementary and closely related. It is a being that can, in imitation of God and with God's help, contain all being, not only its own being. As John C. Haughey writes:

> The fact is that we are *capax infiniti* …. We are hardwired to know being and to be in communion with being. But, once we have a sense of the unlimited horizon of our minds, we should be able to appreciate the limitlessness of our capacities for knowing.[15]

For Traherne, humans are images of God and so we reflect in ourselves God's inner dynamic of *desire* and *delight*. There are desire and delight in God. There are in God perfect fulfilment and satisfaction of this desire. Traherne is convinced of the primacy of desire in the universe. *Want* is the universal, alluring activity that permeates the entire cosmos.[16] For him, you must want like God and, like God, you will then be satisfied. Wants and their satisfactions belong to the essence of felicity.

God is the source or *fountain* of all desire and all delight. God is the source of all good things. The fountain is a recurring theme in Neoplatonic literature, in which the universe is a vast fountain that overflows with

[15] John C. Haughey, *Where Is Knowing Going? The Horizons of the Knowing Subject* (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 2009), 80.

[16] On allurement in today's spirituality, see Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 99: 'Longing for God and longing for our True Self are the same longing …. God implanted a natural affinity and allurement between himself and all of his creatures.'

being, unity and bliss. The dynamic movement of the fountain's waters involves both aspects of circulation, that is, flowing out and flowing back again to the source. In Traherne, creatures are also fountains or sources of reflecting and returning love as they seek reunion with God. This yearning to return back to God is due to God's allurement.[17]

All things allure God to make them. All things invite God into themselves. In view of the divine superabundance and prodigal generosity, it is as if creatures allure or seduce God, almost irresistibly, to create and provide for them. There is a hint of Neoplatonism here as, almost necessarily, God creates the creatures that God knows will be good, beautiful and capable of reflecting God's glory. The mutuality of allurement between humans and God may be regarded as a poetic exaggeration rather than as a theological doctrine. But Traherne's deep exploration of desire and its place in the heart of God and thereby in the heart of Christianity is perhaps the most significant theological contribution he has made.[18]

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[17] See Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013), 75: 'There is an ultimacy at the heart of being itself, an allurement or attraction that is more than any being can possess. This ultimacy of love is God.'

[18] Inge, *Wanting Like a God*, 4; 'Desire is not just one theme among many in Traherne but the backbone of his writing …', and, 'Desire is love "tending to perfection": we move in order to rest, so also the spirit moves toward its object in expectation of satisfaction and enjoyment' (217).