

Sublime Innocence of Human Soul: Reanalysing Traherne's Deep Philosophical Optimism of the Divine Verses

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Abstract: *This paper aims to demonstrate a crucial observation of Thomas Traherne's philosophical optimistic approach of reshaping and reviving the true self of the soul's projection towards salvation through enormous and steadfast devotion to God. Traherne's fundamental optimistic outlook on the notion of the sacrament and spiritual sense made a fitting and realistic undertone towards the changing scenario of divinity and the concept of devotion during seventeenth-century England. Traherne's philosophical optimistic approach towards divinity is a strong propensity of rekindling the effects of the seventeenth-century devotion to God and led that matter very clear and evocative to the susceptibility of the divine impulse of humankind. Traherne is and will be discussed nowadays, why he will be given the privilege, and what significance his work bears is a matter of ongoing critical judgment. Unhesitatingly the fact relating to Traherne's overall justification and outlook to the divinity and sacramental identity of his time, must be acknowledged that he was a mystic not by compulsion or having no other option to do, but by choice completely derived from heart, which was also palpitating, unlike other human beings who wanted to be devout sincerely, vivifying its own identity towards God.*

Keywords: *concept of devotion; religiosity; seventeenth century poet; Thomas Traherne; Traherne's philosophy.*

Introduction

Thomas Traherne (/trə'ha:rn/; 1636 or 1637 – c. 27 September 1674) was an English poet, Anglican cleric, theologian, and religious writer.¹ With a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Oxford, Traherne believed that light, as the shadow of God, culminates the illuminating vision of the divine. He attained the highest unitive state, and like his predecessors, he is called a mystic by the critics who proclaimed that the ecstatic experience of Traherne is much greater than that of Vaughan.² In this regard, Alison Sherrington pointed out that "Traherne's thoughts rather than his verses are poetic is not only to confuse the nature of poetry and biography but to ignore altogether the chief question—that of his work".³ In fact, in all his verses, Traherne's strong forte, as several critics and researchers have subtly observed, in his dual vision of reality, categorizing him as a writer of luminous vision. To Traherne, light and its gradual manifestation is everything for experiencing the God in the souls, lighting the lamps of hopes to recapture the soul's innocence with God's help. John Aubrey, in his *Miscellanies*, says that "Mr. Traherne, B.D., . . . a learned and sober person".⁴ Traherne's works thus produce a strong relevance both of finite and non-finite elements over the finiteness, thereby establishing God's image on every creation.

Traherne received his M.A. at Brasenose by decree on November 6, 1661, and in the same year, to change his profession and the level of his understanding of theology, he returned to Oxford to study B.A. in Divinity.⁵ For Traherne, the world is not, for, most part, a puzzle, rather a satisfying vision of spiritual organization where light is the source of everything to rebuild the desolated and barren souls of humankind. In this regard Seelig has observed that "the poet moves from physical smaller things go greater, from the grain of sand to the stars; he also moves from physical enjoyment to understanding to ecstasy".⁶ Yet what he understands is less the world as the image of God or as a means to come to him that the world as man's glorious inheritance. His ecstasy is not a losing of himself ion God, as Herbert did in *The Temple*, but an expansion of self by means of this inheritance".⁷ Traherne maintained a structured and unified existence, human beings' various activities and involvement. Traherne's poetry is examined by repetition, determining some series of background glances from present to past, capitulating the efforts of the present with the light of

¹ Vera E. Purslow, *Centuries of Traherne Families*, 1979, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=JVMInQEACAAJ>; Elizabeth S. Dodd, "'Perfect Innocency by Creation' in the Writings of Thomas Traherne," *Literature and Theology* 29, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 216–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/LITTHE/FRU051>; Denise Inge, "On Becoming Anglican: Emerging Anglican Thought in the Works of Thomas Traherne," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 14, no. 1 (May 1, 2016): 8–28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355314000230>.

² Sharon Cadman Seelig, *The Shadow of Eternity : Belief and Structure in Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne* (University Press of Kentucky, 2015).

³ Alison J Sherrington, *Mystical Symbolism in the Poetry of Thomas Traherne*, 1968, https://search.library.uq.edu.au/primo-explore/fulldisplay?vid=61UQ&search_scope=61UQ_All&tab=61uq_all&docid=61UQ_ALMA2198926330003131&lang=en_US&context=L.

⁴ Gladys E. Willett, *Traherne: (An Essay)*, 1919, https://books.google.nl/books/about/Traherne.html?id=a_w7AQAAAMAAJ.

⁵ William Witt, "Creation and Cross in the Anglican Spirituality of Thomas Traherne:," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 4 (November 1, 2016): 413–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385121602500403>.

⁶ Seelig, *The Shadow of Eternity : Belief and Structure in Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne*.

⁷ Kelley S. Kent, "The Typology of Sacrifice in George Herbert's 'The Temple,'" *Inquiries Journal* 5, no. 07 (2013), <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=742>.

the past experiences just to objectify the self in a perfect smoothest way than before. His use of the child is the emblem in the vision of the reality of God.⁸

Traherne's principal aim and objective of life are to go into detail about every creation to accomplish the reason behind creation.⁹ By knowing so, he moved forward and proceeded closer even more closer to God to perpetuate and vindicate the creation of his soul too, and thereby wanted to know how to protect them from its eternal damnation by its trim course of time.¹⁰ Traherne believes that every composition of creation is the reciprocal factor derived from the Creator, and that we must, what John Aubrey significantly noted "contemplate and ponder towards all that represents the Creator, and from this notion Traherne might have surely encountered his fact and the idea of felicitation".¹¹ Felicitation, to Traherne, means simply to love and care for the belongings of the Creator. He is a poet of felicity who did not fail to love to God and His entire creation through his entire life, and by doing so, he recommended and suggested us to the effectiveness and benefit of a true felicitator, whose unbiased association of sensibility towards devotion and the divinity will surely lead a great cause to the dissociation sensibility of this mundane world. The aim of Traherne's journey of devotion by finding the sacramental identity of his age had been led a great succession towards the concept of a new possibility and thinking of devotional and ecclesiastical zeal, which will surely eradicate the dark and seamy sides towards the devotion of human beings.¹²

Traherne, by his subjective correlation, had incorporated and idealized the view and identity of the sacrament of his time a new.¹³ There is no doubt about that to acknowledge the fact that his enormous care and prayer had led Traherne's principle mastery over the subjugation of the ideas of subjectivism to the Creator with which he wanted to procreate a new self and identity of soul's way to purgation and salvation. By doing so, he has excelled an idea of devotion and the divinity that was fruitful and effective to the sublimity of the seventeenth and the post seventeenth-century devotion. Felicitation to the creations determines Traherne's absolute faith on the Creator, and that's why he never tried to make any rebuff against the will of his heart, because he knew it perfectly, by his constant and enormous prayer, that its liking up to the Creator very defines a clear indication towards the amalgamation to the Creator. Traherne did not follow, since his journey towards devotion and ecclesiastical overview, any conditions, never led himself to go towards controversies that would aggravate his growing understanding of the Creator.¹⁴

⁸ Carol Ann Johnston, "Heavenly Perspectives, Mirrors of Eternity: Thomas Traherne's Yearning Subject," *Criticism* 43, no. 4 (2001), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23126278>.

⁹ Cassandra Gorman, "Thomas Traherne. The Works of Thomas Traherne," *Seventeenth-Century News* 73 (March 21, 2015).

¹⁰ Robert Ellrodt, *Seven Metaphysical Poets a Structural Study of the Unchanging Self* (Oxford University Press, 2000), <https://philpapers.org/rec/ELLSMP>.

¹¹ Poetry Foundation, "Thomas Traherne," PoetryFoundation.org, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-traherne>.

¹² Keith W. Salter, *Thomas Traherne: Mystic and Poet* (Barnes & Noble, 1965), https://books.google.nl/books/about/Thomas_Traherne_Mystic_and_Poet.html?id=seZxvgeEACAAJ&redir_esc=y.

¹³ Jean Graham, "Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought. Edited by Elizabeth S. Dodd and Cassandra Gorman," *English: Journal of the English Association* 66, no. 253 (June 1, 2017): 190–92, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ENGLISH/EFX012>.

¹⁴ Stanley Stewart, *The Expanded Voice: The Art of Thomas Traherne* (The Huntington Library, 1970), https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Expanded_Voice_the_Art_of_Thomas_Tra.html?id=6nJbAAAAMAAJ; Witt, "Creation and Cross in the Anglican Spirituality of Thomas Traherne:"

Traherne's objective correlation through his sincere devotion finds a special way and tribute to God, and with this ecstasy Traherne was able to compete for his destination and apprehended the concept and subtle notion of felicitation- the leading way and parameter to have His grace and love, contemplating the salvation of soul of entire humankind of his time as well as of the post eras. Traherne wanted to occupy the path reaching to God, and researched on it through his practical sense of tremendous but straightforward devotional spirit, gyrating his mind/soul beyond his physical needs and fulfilment.¹⁵ Conversely, knowledge and complexity are features of the fallen, adult world. We should not constitute this thought and idea as contrary to intellectual. Traherne believed that truth and goodness are identical and close to one another, and that's why without compromising the very truth of soul's self he, through his constant prayer and advocacy to God, eradicated all obscurity from his laden heart and pushed it to the main axiom- the Creator of all creations, and wished to convey these very message for the enlightenment of the humankind of the seventeenth century and its post eras to scale down the idea of devotion and the fundamental identity and faith of the divinity that prayer and love and care for the Creator are the permanent solution and way to God. Stanley Stewart, in this regard, has rightly said that Traherne would have agreed with Thomas Jackson's comment on God's perfection: *bodies, another to mixt, a third to vegetables, a fourth to sense, one to humane nature, another to Angelicall.*¹⁶

Like Milton, Traherne was a learned and processed man of devotion, having a strong sense of his age's divinity and sacramental identity and order. Both belonged to the age of religious and ecclesiastical controversies but ordained different routes of spirituality due to their own single ideology and faith to the Creator.¹⁷ Nevertheless, like Milton of *Paradise Regained*, he had tremendous doubt about the efficacy of supreme knowledge. Truth becomes truth always, and that idea Traherne incorporated through his objective correlation to establish the power of felicitation with a very simple way, which is acknowledged and granted at our present scenario of devotion and the divinity and spirituality.¹⁸

Traherne did not think of knowledge as the appropriate end of human life, and therefore he attempted to have the Creator's grace, love and mercy by objectifying a marvellous but straightforward skill of felicitation to all creations. Traherne was unjust and unaccustomed too to have been ordained by pleasures of earthly beings and materials, rather he wished to gather the sublime beauties of the earthy creations to introduce himself to be the truly least follower and devotee to the Creator just to have His minimum mercy and love, which would embellish the new notion of devotion, the importance of sincere devotion through the ardent prospect of felicitation from its true sense.¹⁹ In the absence of sin- consciousness, in his deep faith in the natural phenomenon, in his deep faith on Reason and irresistibly taught by Nature as long as it is uncorrupted by Customs, Traherne departs from the Christian tradition of Herbert, Crashaw and Vaughan. Despite his sincere confidence in institutional faith, he stands on the threshold of the age of Christianity, and looks and makes the people of his age accustomed to the eighteenth century

¹⁵ Seelig, *The Shadow of Eternity: Belief and Structure in Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne*.

¹⁶ Stewart, *The Expanded Voice: The Art of Thomas Traherne*; Thomas Jackson, *A Treatise of the Divine Essence and Attributes*, 1628.

¹⁷ Poetry Foundation, "Thomas Traherne."

¹⁸ Sherrington, *Mystical Symbolism in the Poetry of Thomas Traherne*; Kathryn Murphy, "Thomas Traherne, Thomas Hobbes, and the Rhetoric of Realism," *The Seventeenth Century* 28, no. 4 (2013): 419–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.2013.845734>.

¹⁹ Willett, *Traherne: (An Essay)*.

primitivism.²⁰ He stands alone in his sense of great wonder and illuminated vision, suggesting that human beings be associated with the sense of felicitation and love to perpetuate their souls.

At Traherne's time, the Church was looking for better methods, but he realized God was looking for better human beings, and that's why a man was sent from God whose name was John. The world's salvation comes out of that cradled man who had sacrificed and devoted himself, by the cost of his own life, to circulate a message of felicitation, care, love and belief upon God. This was the relevance and importance of devotion through the prospect of felicitation, which Traherne vivified and made the world acknowledged with the notion of his new principle of devotion, whose creed and essence has been smoothly brightening. When God declares that His eyes run to and fro throughout the entire world to show and establish His courage and strength, He fulfils and satisfies the demands and necessity of human beings to show what reality and actuality they would possess for Him into their hearts.²¹

Therefore, this paper aims to demonstrate a crucial observation of Thomas Traherne's philosophical optimistic approach of reshaping and reviving the true self of the soul's projection towards salvation through enormous and steadfast devotion to God. Primary sources like books, critical theory, journal papers have been thoroughly examined to assemble the idea. Additionally, secondary materials like internet articles literature reviews have also been digested to arrange this paper.

Traherne's ideology and depiction of spiritual reverberation

Traherne viewed out the fact in front of the seventeenth century people as well as of us that the true importance of a preacher in creating a close connection in between God and man. Traherne believed that the true divinity and sacramental identity is formed through only a true and sincere preacher, a devotee.²² A preacher is a golden pipe through which divine oil flows to spread it to the different segments of a massive organization like earth in which creations are being created. In "Innocence", he narrated the tranquillity of the soul's journey towards devotion to have a perfect salvation:²³

No darkness then did overshadow,
But all within was pure and bright,
No guilt did crush, nor fear invade
But all my soul was full of light.
A joyful scene and purity
Is all I can remember. (“Innocence”; line 5-10)

²⁰ Salter, *Thomas Traherne: Mystic and Poet*.

²¹ Tanya Zhelezcheva, “The Poetics of the Incomplete in the Works of Thomas Traherne (ca. 1638–1674)” (Northeastern University, 2011), <https://www.proquest.com/openview/967f9e31976ad6e92e21c6f9b6e75245/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750>.

²² Hugh Adlington, “Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought,” *English Studies* 100, no. 7 (October 3, 2019): 933–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2019.1658474>.

²³ Thomas Traherne, *Innocence from Poems from the Dobell Folio*, ed. Jan Ross (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Traherne believed that "prayer always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints".²⁴ What Traherne believed is the total of this conviction, and he solemnly vouchsafed the fact about prayer: "I must pray, pray, pray. I must put all my energy and all my heart into prayer. Whatever else I do, I must pray. With all prayer and supplication praying at all seasons in the Spirit, and watching thereunto in all perseverance and supplications for all the mystics".²⁵

Traherne, by his own understanding and belief, noted that "prayer is the means that Christ has appointed whereby our hearts shall not become overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness and cares of this life, and so the day of Christ's return come upon us suddenly as a snare".²⁶ He observed that:²⁷

A serious meditation did employed

My soul within, which taken up with joy

Did seem no outward thing to note, but fly

All objects that do feed the eye.

While it those very objects did

Admire, and prize, and praise, and love, (line 13-18)

Just by prayer, as Traherne argued sincerely, one can easily assume faith and believe in God, talk to God and even feel God inside the heart, expounding the fact that those who know the deep identity of God, the unfathomable peace that passeth all understanding, are always men and women of such and much prayer. Traherne notified us, in this regard too, of the prayer with the truest concept of the Bible that "take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness and cares of this life, and so that the day come upon unawares. There is the only way to know of His coming and entering into the hearts, that is, through sincere prayer".²⁸

Traherne's sacramental and sublime overview

As Traherne pointed out, the man who spends a little time in prayer will not be ready for Lord's coming, and to testify the sacramental identity, one must devote oneself completely to have the

²⁴ R. A. Torrey, "How To Pray," BibleBB, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.biblebb.com/files/prayer-torrey.htm>.

²⁵ Torrey.

²⁶ Torrey.

²⁷ Traherne, *Innocence from Poems from the Dobell Folio*.

²⁸ Seelig, *The Shadow of Eternity: Belief and Structure in Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne*; Regina Walton, "Midnight Bus to New York with Thomas Traherne.," *Anglican Theological Review* 99, no. 1 (August 25, 2021): 82–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000332861709900109>.

salvation of soul from the cycle of worldly aspects. Prayer strengthens our spiritual growth as almost nothing else, indeed as nothing else but the Bible study, and it must be acknowledged by the fact that true prayer and true Bible study go hand in hand, with which Traherne triumphed all obscurity of soul, and prepared a ground for devotional germination. It is through prayer, what Traherne exclaimed emphatically, that "my sin is brought to light. As I kneel before God and pray 'search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me'. God throws penetrating rays of His light into the most recess of my heart, and the sins I never suspected are brought to view. In reply, God washes all my sins and purifies the soul, preparing it to be interwoven with God's grace and love, and thereby procreating a new identity of soul in the realm of the divine, ecclesiastical and sacramental identity of all ages where we belong since our inception".²⁹ He, through his prayer, realized the calmness and peaceful moment of his soul and its effect:³⁰

....., My soul did kneel
 In admiration all the day. No lust, nor strife,
 Polluted then my infant life.
 No fraud nor anger in me moved
 No malice jealousy or spite;
 All that I saw I truly loved.
 Contentment only and delight
 Were in my soul. O Heav'n what bliss
 Dis I enjoy and feel!
 What powerful delight did this
 Inspire! For this I daily kneel (line 26-36)

With the help of the strong notion of prayer, Traherne occupied the identity and actuality of human soul that was quite relevant at his time as well as of our time, that will lead one from the obscure understand of the divinity to the tranquility of the soul by addressing God and the importance of prayer which will eventually and therefore lead one to the eternal salvation and redemption. Traherne, unlike other mystics of his time, did not follow the route and proposition as other followed and made us acknowledged us to be followed.

Gladys I. Willett, in this regard, has brilliantly argued that "Traherne is effectively preoccupied with the thoughts that during the time of prayer eyes are closed, but at time he also observed and experienced that at the same time divine eye; i.e. the eye of soul will surely be open

²⁹ Ellrodt, *Seven Metaphysical Poets a Structural Study of the Unchanging Self*.

³⁰ Traherne, *Innocence from Poems from the Dobell Folio*.

if one sincerely and earnestly tries to do so to communicate to God and His actuality and identity on the mirror of one's heart.³¹

Conclusion

Traherne's philosophical optimism towards his idealization of the seventeenth-century devotion and the divinity for the removal of the conditions of human beings is bearing a close significance to the arena of the present religious situation with a new outlook and attitude. Whatever situations regarding the religiosity of Traherne has depicted the seventeenth century England have a strong resemblance to our age, and it is acknowledged that we tremendously should follow the same to be free from our gradual damnation owing to the changing concepts of the religious, social, political atmosphere. To Traherne, reawakening the soul's identity means rekindling the ideas of devotion and its manifestation in the soul. To do that, one has to propagate the idea of the simplest form of felicitation, love and care for others to attain Him simply. God's grace would be, as Traherne observed and felt so since his objective co-relational understanding, the ultimate of human soul to be safeguard from its slow but evitable damnation. Sincere devotion and prayer to God will surely safeguard one from one's damnation, constituting the idea that damnation of soul does not determine and state the inability of salvation, for to have soul's salvation one should arrest oneself to the very bondage of God's possession, leaving off the materialistic and earthly substances.

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³¹ Willett, *Traherne: (An Essay)*.

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