

MODERN POETS ON  
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY POETS

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## That Thin Skin is Broken: Thomas Traherne's Gnostic Bent

I distinctly remember my first encounter with Thomas Traherne's poetry. As a sophomore in college, I was taking a course with poet and prosodist Charles O. Hartman. Because it was a workshop where we read mostly student poems, a small group of poets and I started meeting weekly to read more accomplished work. Charles would occasionally pluck a book off its shelf to supplement the discussion, and when he told us an anecdote of someone in the 1980s rescuing a seventeenth-century poet's manuscript from a burning rubbish heap, we were riveted. None of us had heard of Traherne. When I opened his book, I only had to read a single line before I had to stop, close the book, and digest what I had just read: "How like an angel came I down!"

The first line of "Wonder" is, after all, nothing short of sublime. It scans perfectly as iambic tetrameter, the only metrical substitution occurring in the first foot, where a spondee emphatically opens the poem. As ecphrasis, the line teems with exuberance. For a single line, however, it also does a lot of work. It makes striking claims of both an epistemological and a theological nature. That is, the speaker not only remembers his early infancy, but he even remembers the time before he was born—a claim that

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has theological implications. "Wonder" suggests that the soul pre-exists our birth, perhaps even our making (how long had the speaker been awaiting his birth?). Not only that, but the soul is also formed enough to be cognizant of its descent from heaven to earth, so cognizant, in fact, that he can remember the event later in life. Perhaps even more impressively, the speaker manages to compare himself to an angel without so much as a hint of self-aggrandizement. Rather, the tone is purely one of ecstatic innocence. The simile, thus, reads two ways. The speaker's manner of descent was like an angel's, but also, in his descent, the speaker was in a spiritual state comparable to that of an angel—heightened and graceful. The combination of the line's past tense and its ebullient comparison, however, suggests that the speaker's wondrous beginning could not be maintained, thereby implying a drama—a loss of innocence that would be in store for the speaker. What a line!

Traherne has stuck with me ever since. In fact, when I write poems, there are no poets predating Modernism to whom I turn more than Thomas Traherne and William Blake. Although the oft-discussed similarities between these two poets are usually posed in terms of their profound religiosity, their mystical proclivities, or their depictions of innocence, their influence on my poetics takes a different form—namely, their gnostic bent. These shared traits developed separately, of course, since Traherne's work was not available to the public until Bertram Dobell published the Dobell folio over 75 years after Blake's death. But the two poets did absorb strains of gnosticism from the same source—German mystic and theologian Jacob Boehme.<sup>1</sup> Traherne is not as thoroughly gnostic as Blake, but his work nevertheless bears a gnostic impression.

I'm especially drawn to gnostic poetry because it can break through the world that the poem begins inhabiting into some kind of beyond. So from a gnostic perspective, a poem is a jailbreak. In *The Gnostic Religion*, Hans Jonas describes the created world, according to gnostic cosmology, as "a prison for those particles of divinity which had become entrapped in [matter]."<sup>2</sup> And Michael A. Williams notes that gnostics commonly "spoke of the material body not as a garment designed and bestowed by a benign Creator (and then soiled by sin), but as a 'prison,' a 'cave,' devised in desperate malice ..."<sup>3</sup> The way beyond the body's prison bars

of sensory perception is via gnosis—a form of knowledge that constitutes salvation since gnostics reject the resurrection as a literal event. Such transcendent, mystical knowledge is necessary because gnostic metaphysics is based on radical dualism, wherein, as Jonas puts it, eternity or “the divine realm of light . . . [is] self-contained, remote,”<sup>4</sup> entirely beyond the material world and everything we are capable of perceiving sensually. The only way to access the eternal is, thus, via gnosis. Traherne inherits gnostic conceptions of eternity directly from Boehme, who writes, “Paradise is somewhat else; and yet no other Place, but another Principle . . . it has no Wall of Earth or Stones about it, but there is a great Gulf between Paradise and this World, so that . . . none can come therein but by a new Birth.”<sup>5</sup> Traherne’s system of belief replicates Boehme’s gnostic dualism. Indeed, according to C. L. Clements, for Traherne, “there are two worlds: the perfect, natural world . . . created by God and by God in the redeemed man . . . a glorious world for which . . . one renders joyful praise; and the fallen world fabricated by man’s conceptualized ego—an artificial, prideful, and ultimately illusory world, of which one should be contemptuous . . . ”<sup>6</sup> The material limitations of the world we inhabit must be transcended in order to glimpse Bohemian Paradise.

For Traherne, gnosis coincides with achieving spiritual redemption after having suffered a fall.<sup>7</sup> In the Third Century, Traherne outlines the spiritual progression with which many of his poems concern themselves: “man, as he is a creature of God, [is] capable of celestial blessedness, and a subject in His kingdom: in his fourfold estate of innocency, misery, grace, and glory.”<sup>8</sup> The *Dobell folio* can, in fact, be read as a unified sequence, whose trajectory begins in innocence, moves through a fallen state of “misery,” and culminates, finally, in grace. (The fourth estate, glory, is found in the afterlife: “Wherein further we are to see and understand the communion of saints, heavenly joys, and our society with angels.”<sup>9</sup>) In a state of grace, the true, infinite, and holy nature of ultimate reality becomes apprehensible for Traherne, but that reality is not the ordinary world we commonly see. It is Boehme’s Paradise, which we can only see after “a new Birth.” Traherne describes it beautifully in the *Dobell folio*’s final poem, “Goodness,” where everything appears bathed in celestial light.

The light which on ten thousand faces shines,  
     The beams which crown ten thousand vines  
     With glory and delight, appear  
         As if they were  
 Reflected only from them all for me,  
 That I a greater beauty there might see.  
     Thus stars do beautify  
     The azure canopy.  
         Gilded with rays,  
         Ten thousand ways  
 They serve me, while the sun that on them shines  
 Adorns those stars, and crowns those bleeding vines.<sup>10</sup>

For Traherne, grace enables gnostic perception, the fruits of which are the divine glories that cannot be accessed by the unredeemed via their ordinary perception.

While the other world to which Traherne's gnostic capacity grants him access often coinhabits ours, unseen by the fallen, it constitutes another world altogether. In "Shadows in the Water," – arguably Traherne's most thoroughly gnostic poem – the second of ten octets finds the speaker, "[i]n unexperienc'd infancy," perching "by the waters brink," thinking he sees "Another world beneath [him]."<sup>11</sup> In a state of innocence, the world reflected in the water appears to the speaker as another world. However, by the end of the fifth stanza, the end of innocence begins to give way to experience, as the speaker notices, "A film . . . that stood between"<sup>12</sup> the world and its reflection. Only by the end of the eighth stanza does the speaker sort out his initial misapprehension by forming a savvier but more worldly understanding: "They seemed other, but are we; / Our second selves those shadows be."<sup>13</sup> In a much lesser poem, this moment might be the *volta* that leads to an encapsulating realization closing the poem. But not for Traherne. Instead, the last four lines of this 80-line poem overturn all 76 lines that precede it – not only the experience but also the initial innocence. For although the speaker arrives at an innocent understanding resembling that with which the poem began, it is not the *same* understanding; it is wiser in its ability to grasp yet reject both worldly knowledge and ignorant innocence. The poem concludes, "Some unknown joys there be / Laid up in store for

me; / To which I shall, when that thin skin / Is broken, be admitted in."<sup>14</sup> The water doesn't offer a mere reflection; gnosis grants a view into another world. Through the barrier of the water surface's "thin skin," Traherne sees a Paradise that holds joys unknown in this life.

For Traherne, as with Blake, gnosis transforms ordinary sight into a faculty of divine revelation. That is, vision becomes Vision. Indeed, the two poets treat vision in strikingly similar terms. While it is imperative for Blake to "look thro [the eye] & not with it,"<sup>15</sup> Traherne strives to adopt an "infant-eye."<sup>16</sup> For both poets, such vision reveals the truly infinite nature of the world, down to the infinitesimal. Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" begins, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour."<sup>17</sup> Nearly 130 years before Blake wrote those lines, Traherne expressed a similar insight: "Sand is Endless, though most small. And every Thing is truly Infinite."<sup>18</sup> Everything is infinite because God is omnipresent. In the poem titled "An Infant-Eye," Traherne details how this spiritually awakened form of vision works. The first two sestets – of nine total – feature his speaker describing sight as "A beam that's purely spiritual."<sup>19</sup> The eye projects "visive rays" that enable vision, allowing the speaker to "see / Even like unto the Deity."<sup>20</sup> With the purity of an infant-eye, Paradise is perpetually new, visible here and now: "it shineth in an heavenly sense."<sup>21</sup> However, the third through eighth stanzas detail the loss the speaker suffers "being once debas'd": "A simple infant's eye is such a treasure / That when 'tis lost, w' enjoy no real pleasure."<sup>22</sup> It's not the case that an infant eye merely sees the same world differently. Far more is at stake. Rather, an entirely different world appears. The eighth stanza distills the difference perfectly:

A house, a woman's hand a piece of gold,  
A feast, a costly suit, a beauteous skin  
That vied with ivory, I did behold;  
And all my pleasure was in sin:  
Who at first with simply infant-eyes  
Beheld as mine even all eternities.<sup>23</sup>

The final stanza shifts masterfully into a mode of piquant urgency. The speaker does not recover his infant-eye or have his visionary powers restored. Instead, he is left pining ardently for their return

through a series of imperatives: "O die! die unto all that draws thine eye / From its first objects."<sup>24</sup> The poem leaves the speaker on the brink of redemption: "Return: thy treasures / Abide thee still, and in their places stand / Inviting yet, and waiting thy command."<sup>25</sup> The poem exhibits a hallmark of gnostic poetry: It does not offer closure but instead glimpses beyond its own bounds. The speaker is left looking for a way out of the world to which his unredeemed vision has confined him. The poem ends on the palpable cusp of a break.<sup>26</sup>

Although I hope Traherne's gnostic tendencies are apparent enough, a question may remain as to the payoff of reading his work this way. The advantage, for me, is somewhat of a personal matter. Poets, I believe, read slightly differently from either specialists or a general readership when they read *as* poets. One of the ways these peculiar kinds of reading happen is by charting poetic genealogies in relation to one's own. Indeed, the tracing of literary heritage is so habitual as to be constant and even, at times, beneath reflective awareness. I can't help but feel the tug of these distant relations, even outside of poetry. I love Charles Dickens, for example, but when I read him, I do not feel a spark of aesthetic kinship; with Herman Melville, however, I unflinchingly do. Margery Kempe is wonderful, but reading Julian of Norwich is like returning to an ancestral home. I could say the same about *The Cloud of Unknowing*. There is a long gnostic lineage, and Thomas Traherne is one of its earliest poets writing in English. If I were forced to pick four living poets who are the most important to me, I would choose Donald Revell, Susan Howe, Nathaniel Mackey, and Alice Notley—all gnostics.<sup>27</sup> Between Traherne and my four contemporary gnostic greats<sup>28</sup> a line runs through Blake, then through W. B. Yeats and H. D., followed by Robert Duncan and William Bronk. Traherne is a key point in the gnostic constellation. There might not be a great number of poets today concerned with this constellation, but there are enough that it matters. And for my part, I can orient my poetics upon it, fix my sense of where I come from, which, in turn, helps guide me whither I go. Traherne, for me, is like the star he mentions in "My Spirit": "The utmost star / Though seen from far, / Was present in the apple of my eye."<sup>29</sup>

## NOTES

1. Traherne also absorbed gnosticism and Kabbalist thought through Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. See: A. L. Clements, *The Mystical Poetry of Thomas Traherne* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 26.

2. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 3d ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 261.

3. Michael A. Williams, "Divine Image – Prison of Flesh: Perceptions of the Body in Ancient Gnosticism," in *Fragments for the History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher (New York: Zone Press, 1989), 130.

4. Jonas, 42.

5. Jacob Boehme, *The Three Principles of the Divine Essence*, trans. John Sparrow (Wisconsin: Kraus House, 2016), 47, Kindle ebook.

6. Clements, 33.

7. For Blake, the way to redemption is via the "Poetic or Prophetic character" and the imagination that lead one to discover Eternity, which is similarly discoverable here in the fallen world of Ulro. William Blake, "There Is No Natural Religion," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 3.

8. Thomas Traherne, "Meditation 43" of "The Third Century," in *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. Alan Bradford (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 248. Clements also discusses this trajectory in detail in chapters 1 and 2.

9. *Ibid.*, 248.

10. Traherne, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 74.

11. Traherne, "Shadows in the Water," in *Selected Poems and Prose*, 126–27.

12. *Ibid.*, 128.

13. *Ibid.*, 128.

14. *Ibid.*, 129.

15. William Blake, "A Vision of the Last Judgment," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 566.

16. So central to Traherne's system of belief is the infant-eye that it even makes it into the subtitle of *Poems of Felicity*, albeit likely placed there by his brother Philip: *Divine Reflections on the Native Objects of An Infant Eye*.

17. William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 490.

18. Thomas Traherne, *Christian Ethicks*, ed. George Robert Guffey and Carol L. Marks (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 349. Similarly, in the poem "[Finite yet Infinite]," in *The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne*, ed. Bertram Dobell (London, 1903), 121, Traherne writes, "He bounding

all, did all most useful make: / And which is best, in profit and delight, / Tho' not in bulk, they are all infinite."

19. Thomas Traherne, *Selected Poems and Prose*, 81.

20. *Ibid.*, 81. As Alan Bradford notes in his commentary, Traherne "depicts sight as an active faculty, not just as a passive receiver of sense impressions. According to one Renaissance theory of sight, the eye projects beams that illuminate the object on which they focus," 346.

21. *Ibid.*, 81.

22. *Ibid.*, 81.

23. *Ibid.*, 82.

24. *Ibid.*, 82.

25. *Ibid.*, 82.

26. The poem that follows is "The Return," wherein the speaker's hopes are fulfilled. The first line reads, "To infancy, O Lord, again I come . . ." *Ibid.*, 83.

27. Albeit to varying degrees throughout their careers.

28. These names are nowhere near comprehensive. Brenda Hillman would also have to be near the top of any such list. There is also a group that calls itself the New Gnosticism, which formed in 2013 and includes Norman Finkelstein, Peter O'Leary, Edward Foster, Ed Scroggins, Joseph Donahue, David Need, Robert Archambeau, and Patrick Pritchett. There is a special issue of *Talisman* devoted to them.

29. Thomas Traherne, "My Spirit," in *Selected Poems and Prose*, 27.