

A Mirror Containing All It Seeth:
Thomas Traherne's Contemplative Subject

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis surveys several works of 17th-century English cleric, theologian, and poet Thomas Traherne (1636 or 1637 - 1674) to consider Traherne's understanding of the contemplative self as formed in relation to a Divine Other, human Others, and natural objects. The paper focuses on Traherne's use of images of mirrors and reflection to illustrate the relationally developing self in primary works concerned with contemplative formation: the *Centuries of Meditation* and two poetic sequences describing the experiences and perceptions of the poet's infant persona, contained within the Dobell manuscript and the *Poems of Felicity*. Jacques Lacan's speculative theory of the *stade du miroir* is employed to illuminate Traherne's conception of identity as structured, reversible desire for a perceived Other or Others. The project situates Traherne within a contemplative tradition originating in the sixth century with Maximus the Confessor that includes sensory contemplation of material objects as well as spiritually or intellectually directed meditation. Finally, the paper considers the ethical implications of Traherne's relational model of dynamic mirroring exchange as grounded in mutual perceptions of the Divine-in-Other and suggests areas for further research.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2007, artist Thomas Denny installed a series of windows in the Aubrey Chapel at Hereford Cathedral, taking as his subject the writings of 17th-century cleric and poet Thomas Traherne, born in Hereford in 1636 or 1637. Cathedral visitors who approach the four windows, each set at an intimate and accessible eye-level, come face-to-face with the image of a living cross depicted as a beam of light forming a dynamic bridge between earth and heaven, mirroring the movement of a celestial river of radiance that pours down upon the figure of the poet, who opens his hands to receive and reflect it. To use a beloved number of Traherne's, ten thousand beams of light form the body of the cross, illuminating the shimmering and intersecting figures of the surrounding animals, humans, and insects. The striking installation provides an entry point for contemporary considerations of Traherne's writings: Why would a 21st-century community find it important to celebrate a relatively minor 17th-century poet in this way? What remains vital in Traherne's poetic or theological vision, often dismissed as naïve in its insistence on an ebulliently optimistic, almost childlike perspective?

In considering such questions, this paper explores Traherne's contemplative self—a self formed not in isolation, but in relation to Others. I focus on the mirror imagery used by Traherne to describe this relationally developed (and developing) self in primary works concerned with contemplative formation: the *Centuries of Meditation* and the poetic sequences that describe the experiences and perceptions of the poet's infant persona. I also employ Jacques Lacan's speculative theory of the *stade du miroir* to illuminate Traherne's conception of identity as structured desire with an Other or Others.

Within the Trahernian model of identity formation, the self's contemplative position is an ethical one, in which humble passivity prepares it for dynamic exchange with Other(s). In this exchange, mutual modes of perception/reception and participation/response constitute the contemplative act that culminates and infinitely repeats in enjoyment of the Other or Others with whom the self exists in relationship. As beautifully captured by Thomas Denny in the Hereford Cathedral windows, Traherne's enlightened subject takes in and reflects illumination from its surrounding community of spiritual and material objects, serving as illuminating object in turn.

II. MEDITATION / CONTEMPLATION

Louis Mertz argues that the Christian spiritual practice of “intense, imaginative meditation that brings together the senses, the emotions, and the intellectual faculties of man” flourished alongside and in conversation with English religious poets of the 17th century such as Thomas Traherne (1). Protestant authors such as Bishop Joseph Hall (whose *Art of Divine Meditation* was published in 1606), as well as Jesuit-influenced texts of the Counter Reformation, were in wide circulation by the beginning of the century among educated (especially High Church) English readers. Drawing on mystical traditions intended to guide the soul to transcendent contemplative experience and understanding of divine truths, meditative forms of writing such as the century reemerged in devotional practice and poetic expression. As Mertz observes, “writers of the seventeenth century imply that the state of meditation blends so easily, so gradually into that of contemplation that a firm distinction can be made only between the extremes of either state,” and this study (along with Traherne) uses the terms almost interchangeably throughout (20).

The century as a form originated in monastic writings during the fourth and fifth century as a devotional tool for meditative purposes, with the sixth century Greek philosopher and theologian St. Maximus the Confessor’s *Four Hundred Texts on Love* and *Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God* representing the most well-known contemplative expression of the form. As Jan Ross explains, the century consists of short, independent passages describing a spiritual experience or concept, “each with a logic and wholeness of its own but also related to the other ninety-nine texts” (xiv). These meditations are more than records of solitary spiritual considerations or devotions; rather, centuries were often written for others or with others in mind. Maximus the Confessor

addresses many of his centuries to his spiritual companions, while Traherne's *Centuries of Meditation* are also directed to an unknown friend. In his *Centuries*, likely written in the late 1660s or early 1670s, Traherne intends to impart "Glorious Principles" to a beloved addressee: "a clear Eye able to see afar off, A Great and Generous Heart, Apt to Enjoy at any Distance: A Good and Liberal Soul Prone to Delight in the Felicity of all, and an infinit Delight to be their Treasure" (CM I.38, 1:20). Traherne's frequent image of clear visual perception throughout the *Centuries* illustrates his understanding of the contemplative or meditative act as a kind of looking, encompassing both directed attention and right perspective.

If the *Centuries of Meditation* serve an instructive purpose as a guidebook in spiritual discipline, the poetic sequences contained in the Dobell folio and the *Poems of Felicity*—both written from an infant perspective—illustrate the contemplative position necessary for life in accordance with its ultimate divine nature. In contemplating an Other, the soul reflects, operating from an infant-like position: open, responsive, and containing infinite potential within its nascent being. For Traherne, the work of meditation or contemplation is less of a single or discrete act than a continuous state of being in relation to the world of fellow subjects and objects; the creation and recreation of a relational self. "It is the creation of this self that a meditative poem records," Mertz notes, "a self that is, ideally, one with itself, with other human beings, with created nature, and with the supernatural" (322). The soul's task according to Traherne—the ethical imperative—is to maintain or regain this reflective position, resisting the misperceptions that cloud and blur the eternal perspective as that soul develops on earth in its embodied form.

III. FORMATION

Traherne grounds his conception of the human self in the *Imago Dei*, the fundamental tenet of Christian theology which establishes humanity as created in God's "own image" as described in Genesis 1:27, affirming that "man is made in the Image of GOD, and therefore is a Mirror and Representativ of Him" (CM II.23, V:59) and that "we were made in His Image that we might liv in His Similitud" (CM III.58, V:121). As A. Leigh DeNeef observes, the *Imago Dei* is an orthodox Christian belief; yet Traherne is unusual, even "disconcerting" in his insistence upon a "a literal and optimistic coordination of the divine and the mortal," concluding that "in fact, it often seems that, to Traherne, man is divine" (26). In noting Traherne's optimism, DeNeef identifies a key distinction of Trahernian thought, since "unlike most if not all of his seventeenth-century peers, Traherne seems never to be haunted by the radical otherness of God or the inescapable mortality of man" (26). For Traherne, the nature of humanity does not ultimately alienate the human self from God—rather, that self's relationship to the Divine, as typified in Traherne's "mirror" of the divine nature, provides ultimate joy understood and experienced through intimate understanding and satisfaction. The development of self-consciousness, understood rightly, "involves realization of the potential implicit in the soul as a teleologically oriented image of God" (Kuchar 175). Throughout both the *Centuries of Meditation* and poetic sequences, Traherne calls for a reorientation of corrupted or limited human perspective, urging his readers to view themselves as embodied representatives of the Divine and inheritors of the divine nature—to see themselves as God sees both them and Himself. He writes:

The Image of God is the most Perfect Creaure. Since there cannot be two GODs the utmost Endeavor of Almighty Power is the Image of GOD. It is no Blasphemy to say that GOD cannot make a GOD: the Greatest Thing that He can make is His

Image: A most perfect Creature, to Enjoy the most perfect Treasures, in the most perfect Maner. A Creature endued with the most Divine and Perfect powers, for Measure Kind Number Duration Excellency is the most perfect Creature: Able to see all Eternity with all its Objects, and as a Mirror to Contain all it seeth: Able to Lov all it contains, and as a SUN to shine upon its loves. Able by Shining to communicat it self in Beams of Affection, and to Illustrat all it Illuminats with Beauty and Glory: Able to be Wise Holy Glorious Blessed in it self as GOD is. (CM III.61; V:123)

The human soul seen (and seeing) from this perspective realizes its very “essence [is] capacity” (“My Spirit” VI:126). As the soul in its mirroring function “Contain[s] all it seeth,” it contains and enjoys within itself the Divine nature that it reflects. In accessing this divine perspective, the Trahernian soul can say with William Blake that once “the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite” (Plate 14). The soul achieves this infinite vantage point through active contemplation of Others (and eternal objects), understood by Traherne as less of a singular or temporally bounded act than a dynamic reorientation grounded in an intersubjective understanding of its significant relationships.

Traherne develops this reversible relationship of divine and human object and subject, seer and seen, reflection and reflected through the image of the mirror. Through mutual mirroring of one another, the Divine and the human relate, exist, and identify as interchangeable and reversible actors. While every human person is in their very origins as *Imago* a reflection or mirror image of the Divine, each intentionally operates within this identity when orienting their identifying sight accordingly, as Traherne writes in “The Odour”: “Talk with thy self, thy self enjoy and see: / At once the Mirror and the Object be” (58-60, VI:140). As the human person is a mirror, so is God: His “Bosom is the Glass, / Wherin we all Things Everlasting See” (“The Anticipation” 24-25, VI:53). As Carol Ann Johnston notes, “like the human soul, God’s soul is also a clear mirror. Each soul both

reflects and comprehends the other's mirroring soul" ("Heavenly Perspectives," 397). By looking at the other, each relational actor takes in and takes on some knowledge of self otherwise unperceived. This interaction transforms both parties, as intimated in one of Traherne's longer meditations on the nature of light and its relationship with the objects it illuminates:

For as the Sun Beams Illuminat the Air and All objects, yet are themselvs also Illuminated by them, so fareth it with the Powers of your Soul. The Rays of the Sun carry Light in them as they pass through the Air, but go on in vain till they meet an Object: and there they are Expressst. They Illuminat a Mirror, and are Illuminated by it. For a looking glass without them would be in the Dark, and they without the glass unperceived. There they revive and overtake themselvs, and represent the Effigies from whence they came; both of the Sun and Heavens and Trees and Mountains if the Glass be seated conveniently to receiv them. Which were it not that the Glass were present there one would hav thought even the Ideas of them absent from the place. Even so your Soul in its Rays and Powers is unknown: and no man would beliv it present evry where, were there no Objects there to be Discerned. Your Thoughts and Inclinations pass on and are unperceived. But by their Objects are discerned to be present: being illuminated by them. for they are Present with them and Activ about them. They recover and feel themselvs, and by those Objects live in Employment. Being turned into the figure and Idea of them. For as Light varieth upon all objects whither it cometh, and returneth with the Form and figure of them: so is the Soul Transformed into the Being of its object. (CM II.78, V:81)

Both human and Divine are unknown until they are perceived as object by an external subjective eye; that very perception and its circumstances fundamentally alter the nature of the perceived object. Even immaterial "Ideas" or spirits lack presence for Traherne unless they exist in relation to other objects.

In considering the nature of divine perception and perspective, Traherne returns to his beloved contemplation of the infinite. Johnston explains that the use of single-point or linear perspective as a technique in Renaissance painting served to focus an individual painting along a series of mathematically determined lines. This "vanishing point" technique allows for one correct perspective from which the viewer may see the painting accurately; "perspective, in its simplest terms, is about the relationship of one object to another in

space” (“Heavenly Perspectives,” 384). Exclusively available to a single individual viewer at any given time, this specific locational perspective allows that singular viewer to access the symmetrical and “right” image. However, this subjective viewer, by nature of their single viewpoint, necessarily loses sight of the unified whole. Traherne’s God, in contrast, observes the universe from an infinite number of positions, able to “see all” as Johnston observes: “Remarkably, Traherne’s God both moves beyond the piecemeal vision of pre-perspectival vision and beyond the subjectivity of linear perspective as well” (“Heavenly Perspectives,” 389). This paradoxical unity of vision is a quality of divine sight, yet accessible to Trahernian humanity through embodiment of the *Imago Dei*. When a finite human subject sees clearly in his capacity as an image of God, he sees individual objects entirely *and* relationally, viewing the world from the divine and heavenly throne, from which infinite perspective “all things [are] Treasures in their Proper places” (CM III.60, V:122). The Divine and self are thus both perceived in a unity of objectivity and subjectivity.

Traherne’s infant persona, appearing in the *Centuries of Meditation*, the Dobell sequence of poems, and the *Poems of Felicity*, inhabits and reflects the divine perspective as a nascent human. While this infant is often read as a representation of the prelapsarian soul in a state of sinless innocence, his nascent innocence points beyond a simplistic consideration of sin or even morality. In “The Præparative,” the infant’s consciousness—or rather, lack of self-consciousness—is described in the language of visual sensory perception:

Then was my Soul my only All to me,
 A living endless Ey,
 Scarce bounded with the Sky,
 Whose Power, and Act, and Essence was to see.
 I was an inward Sphere of Light,
 Or an interminable Orb of Sight,
 Exceeding that which makes the Days,
 A *vital* Sun that shed abroad his Rays:
 All Life, all Sense,

A naked, simple, pure Intelligence. (11-20, VI:99)

As Clements writes in his extended consideration of “The Præparative,” Traherne’s infant possesses “no self-consciousness, no self-awareness, no division between knower and knowing; being and seeing are one” (503). Human conceptions of object and subject exist “only as abstractions from the concrete experience of perception,” the “end limits of a single, integrated reality (505). The Trahernian infant, existing in a “non-intellectual mode of being,” does not abstract knowledge from sensory experience and divide or categorize that knowledge as subject and object (Clements 505). Traherne returns again and again to this distinction between a kind of “naked, simple, pure Intelligence” and a rational, linguistic mode of being, insisting that the human soul or mind prior to the impositions of custom, earthly systems of value, and even language itself understands the world “aright” (CM I.29, V:16).

The pre-natal Trahernian infant occupies a Divine position of unitive perspective in terms of the scope of its visual perspective and infinite capacity. At the opening of “The Præparative,” the infant’s lack of bodily or material self-consciousness denotes his unawareness of limitations:

My Body being dead, my Limbs unknown;
 Before I skill’d to prize
 Those living Stars, mine Eys;
Before or Tongue or Cheeks I call’d mine own,
 Before I knew these Hands were mine,
Or that my Sinews did my Members join,
 When neither Nostril, foot, nor Ear,
As yet could be discern’d, or did appear;
 I was within
A House I knew not, newly cloth’d with Skin. (1-10, VI:99)

Traherne here implies that the boundaries of the self are expressed and defined through bodily elements and their accompanying senses—a description which serves as an early

intimation of the psychology of perception, as Stanley Stewart notes, in which limitation is first experienced in the context of sensory experience at a moment of encounter with another: “In the infant’s mind no such boundaries exist. Freud would later make a similar point in declaring the existence of ‘oceanic’ feelings in the child before the synapses of the nervous system provide the means of distinguishing his body from any other ... The soul knows only “That first of Properties infinit Space,”” an undifferentiated and thus infinite perspective (Stewart 122). Paradoxically, Traherne urges a return to the contemplative state preceding sensory perceptions of the natural world—seemingly essential to the act of experiencing and enjoying the “Objects” the poet finds so essential. Yet as will be considered later, in Traherne’s conception of a reflective sensory and spiritual encounter with an Other, the fundamental nature of that Other is taken into oneself and becomes part of a relationally formed identity, returning both parties to the kind of unitive experience that the infant describes.

Traherne’s infant exists in a blissful state of pre-self-consciousness prior to the crisis of self-awareness and construction of self-identity described by Jacques Lacan as the *stade du miroir* or “mirror stage.” Lacan’s infant, upon catching sight of and becoming captivated by the mirrored reflection of itself, enters into a relationship of identification and misidentification with this image. The Lacanian infant perceives and presumes the mirror image to be a unified and capable entity, an entity somehow exemplary or superior to the infant’s own experiences of self (limited by its nascent physical development and subsequent dependence). The infant’s urgent desire to overcome its own lack or insufficiency and become a unified or integrated whole—as perceived by the infant regardless of reality—will shape its development from this point of “misrecognition,” locating the child in a position of alienation from itself. From this point on, the child develops and identifies in relation to

an “Other,” whether that Other is the misrecognized image of himself or another entity, in a “drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation” (Lacan 78). As DeNeef writes, “[w]hatever his subsequent development—constituting the other as an object, constituted as an object by the other, constituting himself as an object posing before the other—the human subject is always caught in an infinite dialectic of images which governs the processes of objectification and identification” (101). The Other becomes necessary for the “illusory construct” of the self, which attempts (unsuccessfully) to satisfy the perceived desires and demands of the Other’s imagined “corporeal wholeness” (Jay 348).

As Lacan’s theoretical child leaves the mirror stage of development, the structural necessity of the Other remains constant, even as that Other is no longer singularly constituted by the reflected image of the child itself. The necessary role of the objectifying Other is taken on, Lacan intimates, by the developing child’s perceptions of differentiated individual selves, who in turn cast the child and each other in the roles of Other(s) whose desires must be anticipated, felt, and met within the bounds of social norms and customs.

This moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one’s semblable ... the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations. It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge [*savoir*] into being mediated by the other’s desire (Lacan 79).

Lacan’s theory of structural relationships between self and Other runs parallel to Traherne’s conception of humanity in relation to the Divine. The primary social relationship between self and Other depicted in Traherne’s writings, according to DeNeef, exists between the human and God, humanity’s most “significant Other” relation (109). Lacan’s concept of human knowledge (of self) as mediated by the Other’s desire thus figures within the interchangeable specular relationship between the Divine and humanity (as image and

reflection of the Divine). The Trahernian subject knows or apprehends himself through the eyes or desire of God, the significant Other; similarly, the Divine knows or apprehends Himself through humanity. The participatory act of perception is essential for both identities.

IV. MISPERCEPTION

While for Lacan the developmental movement into the symbolic marks the subject's maturation via the acceptance of linguistic prohibitions of desire, Traherne laments the imposition of language upon the infant soul (Jay 352). For Traherne, the advent of language interrupts—and corrupts—the infant state of humble receptivity essential to contemplation, a corruption which the soul struggles to put aside in order to see things in their proper place once more. As Timothy Harrison notes, from Traherne's perspective, "once one has learned to speak, it becomes all but impossible to return to the state of passivity in which the world appears unsullied by the categories of culture" (198). "Sure Man was born to Meditat on Things," Traherne proclaims in "Dumnesse," made "Speechless" at his origin in order to best "Contemplat the Eternal Springs / Of God and Nature, Glory, Bliss and Pleasure" (1-5, VI:22). In an extended meditation on this nascent state, Traherne continues:

Then did I dwell within a World of Lght,
Distinct and Separat from all Mens Sight,
Where I did feel strange Thoughts, and such Things see
That were, or seemd, only reveald to Me,
There I saw all the World enjoyd by one;
There I was in the World my Self alone;

concluding that "It was with Cleerer Eys / To see all Creatures full of Deities; / Especially Ones self." Before the infant learns to speak, the objects within his illuminated field of vision communicate with their own true voices:

No Ear
But Eys themselves were all the Hearers there,
And evry Stone, and evry Star a Tongue,
And evry Gale of Wind a Curious Song.
The Heavens were an Oracle, and spake
Divinity: The Earth did undertake

The Office of a Priest; and I being Dum
(Nothing besides was dum;) All things did com
With Voices and Instructions; but when I
Had gaind a Tongue, there Power began to die.
Mine Ears let other Noises in, not theirs,
A Nois disturbing all my Songs and Prayers. (31-6, VI:22; 39b-41a, VI:23; 59b-69,
VI:23)

To return to the enlightened state to which he is born or intended, the now mature infant must perceive as he did when he was without speech. The meditative or contemplative practice, then, represents an attempt to return to pre-verbal perception, an experiential form that blurs sensory categories and untethers Traherne's visionary metaphors of enlightenment from their potential symbolic and linguistic significance. Unlike alternative orthodox Christian forms of meditation, in which the practitioner directs the mind toward passages of Scripture, Traherne urges contemplation of objects, rather than words. Critically, these objects are enjoyed and perceived rightly when perceived unmediated by cultural impositions grounded in human language; when they are perceived as they truly are, according to their true nature. "Traherne clearly suggests the way the acquisition of language replicates the fall from the Garden in each human life," Robert Watson observes, "casting an abysmal shadow—the rectilinear shadow of the dictionary—between that life and Creation in its primal innocence" (307). If Traherne's "Fall" is a fall into misperception, the mediation of language contributes to that misperception of the true nature or being of things.

With misperception comes alienation. As DeNeef observes, each person will inescapably construct their identity in relation to *some* Other—this Other is "a structural necessity for all human relations and for any consciousness of self. Or, in more elementary terms, all consciousness of self . . . is irreducibly grounded in the condition of recognizing and being recognized by some other" (110). If this relationship of recognition is not

developed appropriate to the human person's status as an infinite being—i.e. in relation to the Divine as fellow infinite being—it will form along lines of alienation and dissatisfaction. Traherne insists upon the critical nature of that perception of the self and its relation to the world (or the others who make up the world), writing that mankind's "Mistakes are Ocular. ... To mistake the World, or the Nature of ones soul, is a more Dangerous Error" (CM IV.15, V:147). Traherne describes this visual error of perception in the poem "An Infant-Ey," in which the infant laments the construction of his developing identity in relation to worldly images, rather than the infinite. The infant, formerly possessed of a clear perspective and eye that "Things doth see / Ev'n like unto the Deity" is captured by "distracting Objects" such as worldly vanities and treasures that serve to limit the scope of the infant's ability to see, replacing his formerly infinite vision with a "feeble and disabled Sense" (4-5, 15, 41, VI:96). As the human soul is infinite, the satisfaction it pursues must also be infinite. Natural objects as created by the Divine are infinite; human customs and mediations (the "distracting Objects") are finite. In pursuing that which is not infinite, the soul fails to engage its own capacity, experiencing frustration and misdirected desire as it misrecognizes its own nature and attempts to structure itself in anticipation of the finite expectations and value structures of the world. Inge notes that "[i]t may be more in this sense than in any other that Traherne's humanity has inherited the effects of the Fall of Adam. For Traherne's human being is split between an inherited unity and an inherited disunity. By the divine light within us we sense we belong to the unified divine, but by our experience and reason we know our loss" (187). Absent participation in a satisfying desire relationship with the significant Other, the human person constructs identity via desire relationships that cannot satisfy their infinite capacity. As Traherne writes, "we naturally expect infinit Things of God: and can be Satisfied only with the Highest Reason. So that the Best of all Possible Things

must be wrought in God, or els we shall remain Dissatisfied” (CM III.63, V:123). In this infinite creation, created objects are similarly infinite, as Traherne observes: “evry Creature is indeed as it seemed in my infancy: not as it is commonly apprehended. Evry Thing being Sublimely Rich and Great and Glorious” (CM III.62, V:123). The Fall, then, represents for Traherne less of a moral consideration of an individual’s essential sin nature (another way in which Traherne diverges from his Puritan theological contemporaries) and more of a misapprehension or misrecognition of the self’s own essential and infinitely capable identity existing in relationship(s) with an infinite world—a misapprehension that can be overcome by a reorientation of perspective through humble contemplation of Others, objects, and their true natures.

V. REFLECTION

Traherneian reflections are dynamic in nature, infinitely in motion, as the poet exclaims in “Circulation,” describing the act of communicating an essential selfhood as “reflecting to the Seers Ey” (9b-10, VI:45). He continues:

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 Glimps of Light,
 The Sparcle of a Precious Stone,
A virtue, or a Smell; a lovely Sight,
A Fruit, a Beam, an Influence, a Tear;
But they anothers Livery must Wear:
 And borrow Matter first,
Before they can communicat. (32-45, VI:46)

The “borrowed”—or freely given—light of others is necessary before a thing can show itself or materially communicate its essence. As previously explored, the Divine perspective is unified, viewing all things at once in proper relation while seeing each thing fully as a whole. Yet to access this perspective in a manner conducive to contemplative enjoyment—to fully know His creation and Himself—God must see Himself reflected in objects, seeing with Divine vision what humanity perceives with all its senses. Traherne explores this idea of human sensory perception of the natural world in “The Demonstration,” writing:

The GODHEAD cannot prize
The Sun at all, nor yet the Skies,
Or Air, or Earth, or Trees, or Seas,
Or Stars, unless the Soul of Man they pleas. (43-46, V:51)

The Divine takes on the natural or material world as a body both in the moment of the Incarnation and as Divine presence in its creation (the “Body which the Diety has assumed to manifest His Beauty”), but cannot appreciate or enjoy natural objects without human sensory perceptions (CM II.20). In a fascinating inversion of Traherne’s suspicion of cultural

mediations of human experience and knowledge, he argues that human perception of the natural world is a much desired, even necessary mediation between God and his creation. As Robert Watson notes of Traherne's theology of objects, "the divine vision of reality must be mediated through the human, because God's absolute knowledge precludes the pleasures of sensual apprehension" (316). In the act of mirroring as an image of the Divine, the human subject becomes the embodied Other in whose reflecting gaze the Divine experiences and knows Himself and his creation more fully. "God creates and looks upon the world—and especially man—so that He might see Himself reflected in the mirror-image that man, as image-of-God, is," DeNeef writes: "As object, man is effigy and mirror, that thing wherein God both expresses and surprises himself. As mirror or glass, man is that object which God's sight lets be seen and known, as well as the ground which lets God's sight be seen and known" (27). Enjoyment is also a form of knowledge—if God is defined by the desire that "makes all Treasure," then knowledge of this essential element of Himself necessitates that He participates in the relationship that allows Him to enjoy the created world ("The Anticipation" 76, VI:54). Traherne's commonality with Maximus the Confessor here extends beyond their mutual use of the century form, as the Greek saint also affirmed the goodness of material reality and humanity's role in reflecting back the experience of that reality to God. As Maximus writes, the human soul that has "received through natural contemplation an understanding of the nature of visible things" is then able to serve as a mediator between those things and the Divine, with the natural thing or object offering "as gifts to the Lord the divine essences dwelling within it" *through* the human act of contemplation and enjoyment (208). Within this contemplative tradition, humanity is created to help the rest of the created world fulfill its relationship purpose as much as the non-human creation is made for humanity.

As a participant in a reversible desire relationship, the Trahernian human also communicates something of their essential self in reflecting back the nature and love of God. Carol Marks considers this active bi-directional emphasis to be a distinguishing feature of Traherne's thought. "For nothing is so prone to communicate it self as that Active Principle of Love," Marks quotes from *Christian Ethicks*, describing the Trahernian soul as a "reflector-projector: a passive-active: the image a paradox, and as such eminently suited to an exposition of Traherne's ideas. For he delighted in contradictions, enjoying the spectacle of 'a strange Paradox' which nonetheless 'is infinitely true'" (533). Traherne's understanding of a human's active projection of self in correspondence with that self's reflection of the Divine departs from the role of the Lacanian image in alienation. The Lacanian child experiences alienation because its essential self is not what the image asks of it and thus not what it offers in response. As Phillippe Julien explains, the Lacanian

child does not exteriorise itself. It does not project itself in an image. Rather, the reverse occurs. The child is constituted in conformity to and by means of the image. ... There is transmission by means of identification, that is to say, by a passage from the outside to the inside. ... It is not an inside closed in upon the self, but an outside constitutive of an inside, an original alienation. (32)

In contrast, as a contemplator and enjoyer, a "reflector-projector," Traherne's human person actively participates with the Divine in a unitive specular experience, as "each soul both reflects and comprehends the other's mirroring soul" (Johnston, "Heavenly Perspectives," 397). This potential for active expression makes humanity the appropriate object of Divine desire. Describing the Trahernian self, Rosalie Colie writes, "his mind with its infinite capacity was the proper mirror of the richness and extent of God's continued act, that is, the mirror of the whole material and physical creation. Such recreation was 'the Voluntary Act of an Obedient Soul' (*CM*, II, 90) and could not fail to bring that soul to bliss" (165). The ceaseless dynamic reflection and projection communicated between the two mirrors, human

and Divine, locates and creates Traherne's infinite as a locus of enjoyment for all participants.

In order to inhabit this role of reflector and projector, the soul must enter a position of passivity, as experienced by the infant of "The Præparative." As Clements writes, "the 'humble' condition of the infant is precisely the most receptive one: minimal bodily state, non-intellectual mode of being, and simple—that is, not ordinary, conventional, conceptualizing—sensing concentrated in sight" (517). Clements here echoes Traherne's own connection between the infant's nascent position and its humility, a virtuous status Traherne identifies in *Christian Ethicks* as "a mirror lying on the ground with its face upwards; all the height above increaseth the depth of its beauty within, nay, turneth into a new depth ... Humility is the fittest glass of the divine greatness; and the fittest womb for the conception of all felicity" (Margoliouth 229). The infant inhabits this fittest state of receptiveness or humility—he is, as the title of the poem indicates, *prepared* for an initial mirroring relationship. As he matures, if he does so in mirroring relation with the infinite Divine and other infinite Others or objects, rather than in mirroring relation with the finite things of the world, he transcends the purely receptive "mirror" position to become a projector as well, realizing his own infinite capacity. Traherne describes this movement from reflector-only to reflector-projector in two concurrent passages in the *Fourth Centurie*.

[A]s a Mirror returneth the very self-same Beams it receiveth from the Sun, so the Soul returneth those Beams of Lov that shine upon it from God. For as a Looking Glass is nothing in Comparison of the World, yet containeth all the World in it, and seems a real fountain of those Beams which flow from it, so the Soul is Nothing in respect of God, yet all Eternity is contained in it, and it is the real fountain of that Lov that proceedeth from it. They are the Sun Beams which the Glass returneth: yet they flow from the Glass and from the Sun within it. The Mirror is the Well-Spring of them, because they Shine from the Sun within the Mirror. Which is as deep within the Glass as it is High within the Heavens. And this sheweth the Exceeding Richness and preciousness of Lov, It is the Lov of God shining upon, and Dwelling in the

Soul. for the Beams that Shine upon it reflect upon others and shine from it.” (CM IV.84, V:177)

The humble soul, initially dwelling in a state of emptiness or nothingness, receives and returns the beams shone upon it. Traherne expands this image, moving beyond the conception of the soul as pure mirror (or at least beyond any perceived limitations of that image):

That the Soul shineth of it self is equally manifest, for it can lov with a Lov distinct from GODs. ... it can lov regularly, with a Lov that is not meerly the Reflexion of Gods. for which cause it is not called a Mirror, but esteemed more, a real fountain. ... All this goodness is so like Gods, that Nothing can be more. And yet that it is Distinct from His, is manifest becaus it is the Return or Recompense of it: the only thing which for and abov all Worlds He infinitely desires. (CM IV.85, V:178)

Despite its initial emptiness, the relational act itself imbues the soul with a love unique to its individual qualities and potential. Passivity allows action; contemplation allows action. The mirroring self receives identity through the reflection of the other. The Trahernian contemplative subject assumes a silent or empty role in order to take in understanding of the Other and then give back that understanding in love.

While Lacan’s conception of structural relationships of desire provides a useful critical lens through which to read Traherne’s depiction of the relationship between human and the Divine, the Trahernian person and the Lacanian diverge at their ultimate end. Lacan’s theoretical human subject can never reconcile himself with the image of his misrecognized self or projected Other(s) and thus exists in a perpetual state of lack or want. More optimistically, Traherne envisions a relationship of ultimate satisfaction between a human and their most significant Other, wherein both participants perpetually desire but are mutually satisfied. This distinction is explored by Denise Inge, who explains that the recognizing and recognized Lacanian Other is a “a structural necessity for the existence of a conscious self and for any and all human relations,” continuing, “there can ultimately be no

reconciliation between self and Other—the split or distinction, the separation between self and Other is the basic structure of the human being” (190). As there can be no reconciliation, there can be no ultimate satisfaction of the desire for the Other and for the Other’s desire. DeNeef argues that “neither the Other nor the subject is capable of satisfying this desire” in the structure of anticipation and demand capturing both parties, concluding “I cannot be loved for what I am; I can only be loved as a signifier of what you lack” (113). The Trahernian human’s relationship with the Other is structured along similar lines of desire, both as object of the Divine gaze and as the desiring perceiver, but this “desire is ever satisfied, issuing from a human self essentially unifiable, if as yet ununified, and toward a unified object. The Other is not only recognized as essential lack or abyss but also as essentially full” (Inge 190). The Divine Other whom the self perceives and reflects is not alienated and thus not alienating; the self recognizes itself rightly as a worthy object of God’s desire. This Divine Other perpetually desires and is perpetually satisfied outside of the human experience of linear time, as described in the third stanza of “The Anticipation:”

From Everlasting He these Joys did Need,
 And all these Joys proceed
 From Him Eternaly.
 From Everlasting His Felicitie
 Compleat and Perfect was:
 Whose Bosom is the Glass,
 Wherein we all Things Everlasting See. (19-25, VI:53)

And again in the ninth stanza: “He infinitely wanteth all His Joys; / (No Want the Soul ore cloys.) / And all those wanted Pleasures / He infinitely Hath” (73-76, VI:55). Crucially, Traherne here defines the human soul or self as the very enjoyment needed by God, possessing the perceptive qualities that bring joy to the Divine Other. When the soul looks in the mirror of the bosom of God, then, it sees itself as it truly is: everlastingly desired and worthy of desire. To return to DeNeef’s observation that Traherne is seemingly never

“haunted by the radical otherness of God,” it is in this ultimate conviction of his own essential desirableness to God that the Trahernian subject is unified with and reconciled to himself: loved for his essential Being.

The Christian theological conception of the Trinity or Godhead prefigures the infinitely satisfying relationship between the Trahernian human self and the Divine. In the structure of the Trinity as Traherne envisions it, the Divine preexists all things in the form of a mutual, loving relationship between three distinct and unified persons (Father, Son, and Spirit). Before God creates a human image and enters into a desire relationship with it, He dwells in a paradoxical relationship with Himself that prefigures human understandings of circulating desire and love. Traherne describes this circulation as “benevolent affection” between all parties—a love “Which is of it self, and by it self relateth to its Object. It floweth from it self and resteth in its Object. Lov proceedeth of Necessity from it self.” He continues: “The Lov from which it floweth, is the Fountain of Love. the Lov which streameth from it, is the Communication of Lov, or Lov communicated, and the Lov which resteth in the object is the Lov which Streameth to it. So that in all Lov, the Trinity is Clear” (CM II.40, V:67). The human soul, by participating in a similarly active reflector-projector relationship with God, mirrors the Triune relationship in which individual alienation from self and Other is subsumed or transcended by the unitive merging with the significant Other, described by Traherne as the place “Where Lov is the Lover, Lov streaming from the Lover, is the Lover; the Lover streaming from Himself: and Existing in another Person” (CM II.42, V:67). “In the Trinity the contrarities of expansion, statics, and contraction are reconciled and souls’ mysteries ‘unperplexed,’” writes Stewart, continuing: “What the ecstatic point of view seems to insist upon, however, is the basic incompleteness of the particular individual...in Traherne personal identity, like any other object, must be permeated,

extended, brought to its infinite center” (132). This “infinite center” of satisfaction opens the door to humanity’s infinite capacity as *Imago Dei*, as Traherne meditates in the *Second Centurie*:

But Man is made in the Image of GOD, and therefore is a Mirror and Representative of Him. And therefore in Himself He may see GOD, which is his Glory and Felicitie. His Thoughts and Desires can run out to Everlasting. His Lov can extend to all Objects, His Understanding is an endless Light, and can infinitely be present in all places, and see and Examine all Beings, survey the reasons, surmount the Greatness, exceed the Strength, contemplat the Beauty, Enjoy the Benefit, and reign over all it sees and Enjoys like the Eternal GODHEAD. (CM II.23, V:59)

Each human accesses this infinite relationship and fulfills their own capacity for understanding and enjoyment by participating in a relationship with the Divine Other (and all created objects) mirroring that which flows between the persons of the Trinity. Human participation in this relationship allows the Trinity itself to access a greater capacity than it could otherwise realize without humanity serving as object, subject, and mirroring vehicle of the Divine gaze. The conclusion of “The Demonstration” makes this clear:

In them he sees, and feels, and Smels, and Lives,
In them Affected is to whom he gives:
 In them ten thousand Ways,
 He all his Works again enjoys,
 All things from Him to Him proceed
By them; Are His in them: as if indeed
 His Godhead did it self exceed. (71-77, V:52)

As Traherne marvels, the Trinity itself, the perfect configuration of Divine love, is here understood as essentially incomplete and lacking without humanity.

Nor is this essential relationship extending from the Godhead limited to the scope of a singular Divine / human reflection. The mirroring effect spills over and expands into the relationships between an individual human and their fellow humanity, between God and the community of Christian souls who infinitely reflect God back to Himself, and between all created things. Johnston describes this conception of infinite unique reflections in her second consideration of perspectival language in Traherne’s works, in which “Traherne

paints a picture of a cosmos crisscrossed with centric rays, emanating from the creator, and from every single object, because God is the focus of a Christian's vision, and he exists in each object" (Johnston, "Masquing / Un-Masquing" 44). As individual souls reflect their unique perceptions of the Divine nature, God perceives, understands, and enjoys Himself according to this composite field of vision. As Johnston concludes, the Divine vision "depends on human agency" (44). The ten thousand ways in which God enjoys His works are reflected in Gerard Manley Hopkins' description of the "just man" in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" who "Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is — / Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces" (11-14). This "just man" is not singular, but one of thousands reflecting the nature of Christ back to God in a similar participatory fashion. An infinite God desires, even requires, an infinite community of "reflector-projectors" to see and know Himself. Humanity, in its infinite capacity, can relate to one another along similar lines of desire and satisfaction when these specular relationships reflect the spiritual vantage point, seeing each human other as the Divine sees them. Traherne frames these relationships in the familiar terminology of need, writing, "We need Spectators, and other Diversities of Friends and Lovers, in whose Souls we might likewise Dwell. ...And as in many Mirrors we are so many other selvs, so are we Spiritually Multiplied. when we meet our selvs more Sweetly, and liv again in other persons" (CM II.70, V:77). As DeNeef comments on this passage, "[h]ere the specular capture within the gaze of the Other reconstitutes the self in defense against its own absence and lack. Dwelling in the Other's gaze, the self can meet or see itself, come to life in full and appropriated presence" (128). Rather than differentiated relationships of alienation, marred by misapprehension and suspicion, these spiritual friendships increase the self's own knowledge and capacity as they mirror heavenly structures of love.

VI. CONCLUSION

Rosalie Colie observes that Traherne’s “enlightened soul ‘by Understanding becometh All Things’ (CM, II, 78) and so united with the deity; and all the emotions become identified in one transcendent human act, imitative of the divine act: love is perception and understanding, and both are impelled by aspiration, desire” (164). This state of unitive enlightenment, satisfaction, and enjoyment is accessed through the very mirroring structure of perpetual desire between self and Other that Lacan describes as inescapable and ultimately alienating. In contrast, Traherne’s consideration of the human self as rightly perceived through the eyes of the Divine positions humanity as infinitely desirable and thus infinitely worthy of desire—infinately necessary but also infinitely satisfying to the demands of the most significant Other. By constructing self-identity in relation to this significant Other, the Trahernian self is unified and secure, free to participate in the circulation of reflecting love prefigured in the heavenly image of the Trinity. Traherne’s misunderstood optimism or “felicity” is thus rooted in a radical affirmation of humanity’s essential and divine identity. From and alongside this affirmation flow the ethical implications of Traherne’s vision: the intentional act, positioning, or reorientation of contemplation allows for the relational satisfaction with the Others (and objects) in whose presence the individual soul perceives itself. It is worth noting—though beyond the scope of this project—that Traherne does not limit the contemplative act to humans, but extends his notion of the contemplative subject or ego as an “Heir of All Things” to all living creatures, opening up further potential for interspecies understanding and relation that could be a subject of future work (I:422). From Traherne’s own perspective, all living things participate and enjoy divine being as perceiving

objects in relation to one another. This universal mirroring contains infinite capacity for new worlds.

I suggest, then, that the answers to the question of Traherne's enduring vitality and ethical urgency lie within his conception of divine/human relationship, a paradigm in which mutual modes of perception (reception) and participation (response) constitute the contemplative act (reflection) that produces enjoyment: first in the Divine Other, and continuing "with clearer eyes / To see all creatures full of Deities; / Especially one's self" ("Circulation," 39b-41a). These mirroring dynamics contain the potential of infinite illumination, interaction, and generation of new worlds, as figured elsewhere in "Leaping Over the Moon" and the reflecting pool captured in the Hereford windows. Traherne's contemplative dynamics originate in a divine relationship (the Trinity) and infinitely reflect and repeat between humanity and God, humans and the natural world, individual human and fellow human. What we might call a Trahernian system of ethics is grounded in mutual perceptions of the divine-in-other. When rightly perceived and perceiving, Traherne's subjects are illuminated, reoriented from an alienated or fragmented sense of identity structured in response to a misapprehended desire of the Other toward a relationship of mutual desire, contemplation, and enjoyment—satisfying to both participants, mirroring the divine joy experienced by the relational Godhead in infinite time and space, and containing the potential for unitive, loving, and joyous modes of relation between fellow creatures on earth.

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