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THE NEOPLATONIC PHILOSOPHY OF THOMAS TRAHERNE

[ΛΕΥΚΗ ΣΕΛΙΔΑ]

The seventeenth century in England saw a remarkable upsurge of interest in the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus, particularly among the group known as the Cambridge Platonists. Knowledge of these philosophers came to England through the translations and commentaries of Marsilio Ficino. But Ficino did not bequeath to the Renaissance a pristine knowledge of Greek philosophy. He attempted to reconcile the thought of Plato and Plotinus with the Christian religion, to create a Christian Neoplatonism, and he introduced Hermeticism to the Renaissance through his translation of the Hermetic texts. Renaissance Neoplatonism must therefore appear to the reader as a somewhat uneasy synthesis of widely divergent traditions held together with difficulty within a Christian framework.

We know that the English writer and poet Thomas Traherne studied Plato and had a knowledge of Ficino's epitomes and translations which would have conveyed to him the main doctrines of Plotinus which Ficino frequently refers to. A notebook survives in Traherne's own handwriting with lengthy notes from Ficino's epitomes of Plato, and Ficino's translation of *The Republic*.¹

Although he was interested in, and was influenced by the general Christian Neoplatonic tradition of the Renaissance, it is also possible to find in his work a clear cut use of philosophical concepts, which are plainly derived from Plato and Plotinus.

Traherne himself unequivocally stated the importance he attached to being a philosopher, speaking about himself in the third person:

He thought that to be a Philosopher a Christian and a Divine, was to be one of the most Illustrious Creatures in the World;²

1. British Museum MS. Burney 126.

2. Thomas Traherne, *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings*, Ed. H. M. Margoliouth (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), Vol. I, p. 169.

The desire to combine Christianity with philosophy is also typical of the group known as the Cambridge Platonists. At the time Traherne was writing an intellectual movement had already risen to prominence in Cambridge for whom a modern commentator states:

The Dialogues of Plato and the Enneads of Plotinus have gained an almost canonical validity; they are placed on a par with the books of the Bible and treated with an equal veneration as sources of religious knowledge.³

Why Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy should have held such an appeal for the Cambridge Platonists is suggested by Basil Willey:

Here was a system, essentially religious in spirit, which taught the sole reality of the spiritual world and the immortality of the soul, which pictured life as the soul's striving for heaven and prescribed a regimen for its upward ascent: a system too which was not only venerated on its own account by the cultured but which in its long and intimate association with Christianity had flowed into its stream and become part of it.⁴

This interest in the soul is shown in the large number of writings about its nature produced by the Cambridge men. Not only did they discuss the question of the soul's pre-existence, but also its immortality.

The reconciliation of Christian theology with Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy was accompanied by an appeal to Reason and a belief in natural reason and natural religion.

The central and most decisive influence upon the Cambridge Platonists was that of Plotinus, indeed Coleridge went so far as to describe them not as 'Platonists' but 'more truly Plotinists'. This can easily be proved by reference to their constant quotations from and use of ideas derived from Plotinus.

As Cassirer points out, their central doctrine is related to Plotinus.

3. Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettegrove (London: Nelson, 1955), p. 25.

4. Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (London 1934; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 126.

tinus's views concerning the soul. According to Plotinus the soul occupies a position midway between the material and the spiritual world. Only that soul which turns away from the sensible to the intelligible is able to contemplate the divine.

This is achieved by a pure perception:

Soul and mind as well as the body have their own perception... And this particular basic view of pure perception is maintained by the Cambridge men not merely in the sphere of the supersensible, but in experience of one's self. Such perception gives us access not only to the transcendent, to the being and nature of the Deity, but to our deepest immanent being.

There is no need of a special mystical cognitive organ by which we may commune with the supersensible; the ascent to the divine is accomplished rather by our own spiritual powers and the Logos which dwells within the soul... If perception were given only in the form of sensation, of an external impression affecting the senses, than all possibility of self-consciousness would cease to be.⁵

Clearly, perception assumed a special significance for the Cambridge Platonists and for them it could also lead to knowledge of God and of their own spiritual selves or souls. This notion of perception they derived from the mystical philosophy of Plotinus, via the translations and commentaries of Ficino.

Traherne himself had two general concepts of the significance of perception. One was a fairly simple one which followed the Christian framework of innocence, apostasy, fall and redemption which he relates in the *Third Century*. The other was a more sophisticated philosophical view of perception derived from Plotinus via Ficino. Traherne tried to reconcile the two in his doctrine of pure perception by the infant soul. Traherne's difficulty, and in some cases, inability, to reconcile his two views of perception: the Christian with the Neoplatonic, illustrates one of the fundamental conflicts of the Renaissance: that between Humanism and Christianity.

Perhaps the simplest way of demonstrating Traherne's affinities

5. Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, p. 27.

with the Cambridge Platonists is to compare him with the Cambridge Platonist with whom he has most in common, Henry More.

The resemblances in their thought and intellectual concerns are striking, indeed there is documentary evidence that Traherne read More. In a footnote in her article «Thomas Traherne and Cambridge Platonism» Carol L. Marks mentions that «Traherne copied from More's *Divine Dialogues*», in his «Commonplace Book».⁶ But perhaps the most interesting similarities in their thought is in their idea of the soul; both More and Traherne owe a debt to the thought of Plotinus in their belief in the part played by the soul in perception. One has only to compare Axiom XXXIII of More's *The Immortality of the Soul* which shows the influence of Plotinus in the idea that the purified soul perceives more perfectly and also that the soul has perceptive faculties, with a line from Traherne's «Thanksgivings for the Soul» to see the similarity in their thoughts about perception and the soul. Both show the influence of Plotinus's account of perception. This says that the soul is active and reads the sense-impressions which occur in the bodily organs by a kind of sympathy which exists between the soul and its objects of perception and then proceeds to an act of judgment of them.⁷

Axiom XXXIII

The Purer the vehicle is, the more quick and perfect are the perceptive faculties of the soul.⁸

But in thee, my Soul, there is a *perceptive Power*⁹
(«Thanksgivings for the Soul»);

As mentioned previously, there was a deep interest in the nature of the soul among the Cambridge Platonists, concerning the question of its pre-existence and its immortality. More wrote an extremely long philosophical poem about the nature of the soul, which examined these questions among others.

6. Marks, «Thomas Traherne and Cambridge Platonism», *PMLA*, LXXXI, 1966, p. 521.

7. See D. W. Hamlyn, *Sensation and Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 40.

8. More, *The Immortality of the Soul*, London: 1659, Axiom XXXIII; rpt. *The Cambridge Platonists*, Ed. Gerald R. Cragg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 345.

9. Margoliouth, Vol. II, p. 230.

The similarity in his treatment of this topic to Traherne's subject matter in some of his poems cannot be denied. This is not to suggest that Traherne was directly influenced by More's poem, but only to indicate that Traherne's intellectual preoccupations were similar to those of Henry More. The existence of the infant soul in a purer state forms one of Traherne's major poetic themes, as indeed does the subject of the soul's ability to perceive.

Traherne's major philosophical poems, «The Preparative», «The Vision», and «My Spirit» are all concerned with the ability of the soul to achieve pure perception in this lifetime. In those poems Traherne uses the metaphor of the purely perceiving infant soul before it has been corrupted either by matter or by the bad influence of other people. It is thus possible to appreciate Traherne as a poet with a distinctive and coherent philosophy and a deep interest in the intellectual problems that were discussed in his own time. This brings us closer to the meaning of his poetry and prose and also enables us to come to a more just assessment of his achievement.

In order to relate Traherne to his intellectual background we will briefly look at More's long poem about the soul which also reveals some of the intellectual influences operating on the Cambridge Platonists and Traherne.

The Cambridge Platonists, following Ficino, attempted to trace an intellectual tradition of divine wisdom which included Plato, Hermes Trismegistus, Plotinus and also Moses and Christ.¹⁰ Among this strange assortment of philosophers and religious figures, the most influential philosopher on the Cambridge School and Traherne, was Plotinus. The Cambridge Platonists made little or no distinction between the philosophy of Plato and the rethinking of it presented in the philosophy of Plotinus; to them it was all Platonism, and part of the tradition of early wisdom. This attitude is stated in the fourth stanza, first canto of More's poem «Psychozoia or The Life of the Soul»:

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So if what's consonant to *Plato's School*
(Which well agrees with learned Pythagore,

10. P. O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Virginia Conant (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 241.

The subject of these two poems is the pre-existence of the soul. They are both philosophical poems with ideas and images drawn from the philosophy of Plotinus. The imagery and even the language are strikingly similar. Both express the belief that the soul is like a sphere of light which perceives by sending out rays. This image is often used by Plotinus. More and Traherne have a great deal in common, both in their choice of subject matter for poetry and the kind of philosophical poem they write. More's «Philosophical Poems» and Traherne's major philosophical poems, «The Preparative», «The Vision» and «My Spirit» are all philosophical poems about the soul.

Yet another point of similarity between Traherne and Henry More is the presentation in their poetry of the belief that the purpose of the Creation is to make us aware of God's goodness to us and make us happy:

When nothing can to Gods own self accrew
 Who's infinitely happy. sure the end
 Of this creation simply was to shew
 His flowing goodness, which he doth out send
 Not for himself; for nought can him amend;
 But to his creature dothn his good impart.
 This infinite Good through all the world doth wend
 To fill with heavenly blisse each willing heart.
 So the free Sunne doth 'light and' liven every part.¹⁵

Similar sentiments are expressed by Traherne in several places. One example being in «The Improvement»:

His Wisdom, Goodness, Power, as they unite
 All things in one, that they may be the Treasures
 Of one Enjoy'r, shine in the utomost Height
 They can attain; and are most Glorious Pleasures.
 When all the Univers conjoynd in one,
 Exalts a Creature, as if that alone.¹⁶

Both More and Traherne claimed in their writings to have enjoyed

15. H. More, *Philosophical Poems*, p. 178.

16. Margoliouth, Vol. II, p. 32.

a childhood sense of God. In *Christian Ethicks* Traherne expressed his sense of the importance of childhood:

There is an instinct that carries us to the beginnings of our lives... and the memory of things past is the most advantageous light of our present condition.¹⁷

More for his part wrote:

Even in my earliest childhood and inward sense of the divine presence was so strong in me that I firmly believed that every act I performed, every work I spoke, and every thought I entertained, must be known to God... At that age neither reason, nor philosophical reflection, nor any instruction had taught me this belief. I knew it simply as a result of an inward perception with which I was originally endowed.¹⁸

Belief in the a priori and innate nature of religious belief is typical of the Cambridge Platonists. This raises the interesting question; to what extent did Traherne reinterpret his early childhood experiences to fit in with this belief, when he related them in the *Centuries*? It seems safe to assume that he was writing about extrovertive mystical experiences which he actually had as a child, but that he later interpreted them in Christian terms as God's approach to him.

To sum up; it is difficult to prove the direct influence of any of the Cambridge Platonists on Traherne. We can however detect certain similarities in thought, between them and Traherne. Both the Cambridge Platonists and Traherne, had a high regard for philosophy, and in particular the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus. They wished to combine Christianity with ideas drawn from Platonism and Neoplatonism in their desire to find a rational basis for religious belief. It is particularly in their idea of the soul that the Cambridge Platonists show the influence of Plotinus. One of their major intellectual preoccupations was the nature of the soul, and the possibility of it achieving pure perception. This too we find in Traherne.

17. Thomas Traherne, *The Way to Blessedness: Thomas Traherne's Christian Ethicks*, 1675; rpt. Modernised ed. Ed. Margaret Bottrall (London: The Faith Press, 1962), p. 282.

18. More, Preface to the Latin edition of his works. Quoted in Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, p. 59.

The Cambridge Platonists with whom he has most in common is Henry More. They share an interest in the nature of the soul and the question of its pre-existence. Both wrote philosophical poems about the soul, using imagery and ideas drawn from the philosophy of Plotinus. Both writers were interested in the question of the soul achieving pure perception. They present the belief in their poetry that the purpose of the Creation is to show God's goodness to us and to make us happy. Finally, both Traherne and More claim in their writings to have enjoyed a sense of God in their childhood.

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