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Heavenly Perspectives, Mirrors of Eternity: Thomas Traherne's Yearning Subject

[Holy Days] are Heavenly perspectives wherein we behold the Mystery of Ages, Mirrors of Eternity wherein we feed upon Revelations and Miracles.

—Thomas Traherne, "Book of Private Devotions"

The chance appearance in a London bookstall of Thomas Traherne's manuscripts of poems and meditations early in the twentieth century coincided with Modernist interests in seventeenth-century poetry. This coincidence naturally included Traherne in Modernist studies of lyric poetry. Modernist historicism, however, relegated Traherne to a secondary place among already established poets such as Donne, Herbert, and Marvell: his work did not conform to standards that established poetry as "classic," such as compressed metaphors, double entendres, "telescoping images," and formal unity. In his essay "Mystic and Politician as Poet" (Listener 3 [1930]: 590–91), T.S. Eliot exercises his Modernist detachment from cultural context, deeming Traherne "more a mystic than a poet," a writer attentive to contemporary religious and political ideology at the cost of language and form. Thus, Eliot dismisses Traherne from the pantheon of worthy poets. Ironically, while modernist requirements for inclusion into the canon eschew historical and cultural circumstance, the cultural circumstance of Traherne's discovery is the very criterion that placed him...
in Modernist sight lines. Further, precisely due to circumstance, and in spite of steady critical activity and the recent discovery of several new manuscripts, Traherne’s language and *ars poetica* remain among the most maligned among anthologized seventeenth-century poets.

A further irony encompasses the critical judgments expended upon Traherne’s œuvre. While Modernists found his work too imbedded in culture, attempts to place it specifically within that culture have proven difficult indeed. Comparatively little is known about situations in which Traherne wrote his poems and prose meditations, or about Traherne’s life. Traherne’s biographers have largely based their accounts upon readings of his poetry and prose, which seem ecstatic and childlike. Placing Traherne’s spiritual autobiography into biographical lacunae is one method of organizing the scant information that we have about him: he was born in Herefordshire in 1637, a shoemaker’s son; attended Brasenose College, Oxford, at 15, earning his B.A. at 18; was ordained in 1657 as a Puritan minister to the rectorship of the parish of Credenhill, near Hereford; earned his Oxford M.A. in 1661; became one of the conforming clergy in 1660; served as the Anglican chaplain to Charles II’s Lord Keeper of the Seal, Orlando Bridgeman by 1667; died in 1672 at Bridgeman’s house in Teddington. Yet, even these few biographical facts suggest that Traherne did not withdraw to the world of naive ecstasy that his biographers find in his spiritual autobiography, but that he engaged in the intellectual and political life of the period. A literal reading of the “I” in Traherne’s poems and meditations creates a tautology: critics build a fiction of Traherne’s life out of the fiction of his work in order to clarify the known facts about his life, which in turn will clarify his work. His biographer and editor Gladys Wade codifies this identification of cause and effect when she concludes in 1942 that ‘Traherne is “one of the most radiantly, most infectiously happy mortals this earth has known.”’ Recent articles have attempted to rescue Traherne from the legacy of his early biographers, placing him in a political context. Both N. I. Matur and Julia J. Smith connect Traherne to political events during his lifetime, and the recent discovery of Traherne’s long political poem sanctions such a reading. A political reading of Traherne however, remains somewhat problematic, since Traherne was in the employ of both Puritan and Anglican factions at different stages of his career. Because of these contrary loyalties, Smith deems Traherne a political “conformist,” one who wants to fit in and keep those around him happy, a position not so far removed from Wade’s diagnosis of a happy man. The benign view of a cheerful Traherne, then, remains largely unchallenged even now.

The obstacle to critical judgment created by the mixture of Traherne’s late discovery and his biographers’ over-determined reading of his work remains easier to diagnose than to cure. Traherne’s radical experimentation with language, coupled with our lack of information about his life, presents a reading
Thomas Traherne’s Yearning Subject

problem of greater complexity than almost any other in seventeenth-century studies. Each issue, the linguistic and the cultural, seems to require an individual methodology; one, a study of his language apart from Modernist assumptions, and the other, placement of Traherne’s work within a cultural context greater than those offered by theological debate or political struggle. Yet, while these two critical problems are distinct, they also are inextricably linked: language from Traherne’s culture organizes that of his poetry. One cannot be addressed without also addressing the other. To consider language and the linguistic culture it forms requires taking the kind of middle ground between fields of study common for a student such as Traherne in the mid-seventeenth century. Traherne received the standard Oxford education, studying “Logic, Ethics, Physics, Metaphysics, Geometry, Astronomy, Poesy, Medicine, Grammar, Music, Rhetoric, . . . Arts, Trades and Mechanisms.” As fluent in these subjects as poets such as Donne and Herbert, Traherne’s use of the language from these subjects nonetheless has seemed to many readers at best subdued or even absent. Yet I believe that his awareness of the history and development of “poesy” and the fine arts grounds Traherne as deeply in the theoretical issues of his art as he is grounded in Biblical exegesis and theology. Rather than writing a non-poetic verse in which he elaborates a personal ecstatic vision, Traherne attempts to write poetry that synthesizes poetic theory and painting theory. This synthesis, I argue, accounts for his abstract and non-metaphorical language, language that has seemed more like prose than poetry to his readers. His quest to strike a new kind of language from issues resonant in poetics and painting forms the extraordinary theoretical substructure of his work.

Uncovering that theoretical substructure is my task in this essay. I argue that Traherne engages poetics and painting at atypical theoretical angles. He addresses specifically the evolution and general use of metaphor in the tradition of Petrarch and the English anti-Petrarchan tradition, while also interrogating the technologies of three-dimensional perspective and the clear-reflecting mirror that dominate Renaissance painting. Examining both the Petrarchan construction of metaphor and Renaissance theories of linear perspective allows Traherne to engage in a discussion with a particular ideological issue that both share, the issue of subjectivity. This exchange with poetics and painting results in Traherne’s forging a unique poetic language, one predicated upon the non-representational metaphor, and one that attempts to devise a poetic middle ground between subjective and objective representation that maintains what he sees as desirable qualities in each. Such a conversation shows that Traherne’s obsession with vision is that of an intellectual visionary who attempts to reclaim poetry from its central role in a cultural narrative that mistakes subjectivity for objectivity. Despite his strong efforts, however, Traherne’s poetry represents a failed engagement with cultural hegemony. Ultimately, Traherne cannot redirect the powerful ideological trajectory that
would take western thought to the subjective idealism of Berkeley and Fichte and the subjectivism of Kant.  

Snapshots of the Petrarchan Past

Traherne claims ownership of a new kind of language in the preface of his Poems of Felicity, one that spurns the poet's most useful tools, the metaphor and the image.

No curling Metaphors that gild the Sense,
Nor Pictures here, nor painted Eloquence;
No florid Streams of Superficial gems,
But real Crowns and Thrones and Diadems!
That Gold on Gold should hiding shining ly
May well be reckon'd baser Heraldry.  
(“The Author to the Critical Peruser,”
lines 11-16)

Literally, Traherne's lines tell us that his poetry will not be representational in the usual sense: no metaphors, no “pictures” or descriptions, just the objects themselves. Such a verbatim reading, however, yields something fantastical: Traherne claims invention of an idealized unity between objects and the words that describe them. Because such poetry is obviously not possible (an ideal only approximated in ancient pictographic languages, where words literally were pictures), we must read these lines at less than face value, and within the context of the anti-Petrarchan movement that held that poetry in the tradition of Petrarch (1301-1374), particularly in its understanding of metaphor, had become confusing to the point of absurdity. Strong anti-Petrarchan sentiments were voiced in such works as Philip Sidney's simultaneously Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan sonnet sequence, Astrophil and Stella (begun in 1581), Shakespeare's Sonnets (1609), and George Herbert's The Temple (1633). Critics have put forward various hypotheses to explain the longevity and intensity of Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan rhetoric—politics, gender issues, and so forth—but at its core, anti-Petrarchan poetry vilifies the Petrarchan use of elaborate metaphor, and we must place Traherne's claim within this important context.

The guileless hyperbole of poetry typical of the end of the Petrarchan era in the English Renaissance validates the poet's impulse to attack such poetry. Stock versions of late anti-Petrarchan poetry focus upon poetry written in the manner—but not with the style or dexterity—of Petrarch. In the hands of a Petrarch manqué, the startling metaphors that he used to introduce the sonnet form become comic in their over-ripeness. Much of this late Petrarchan
poetry is simply outrageous in its use of metaphor, and merits Traherne's description of its "curling Metaphors that gild the Sense." But anti-Petrarchan poets, too, are capable of making outrageous claims about what they will not do with metaphor. In one of the more famous of these claims, Shakespeare's speaker asserts, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun—" (Sonnet 130). While Shakespeare indicates here that he finds Petrarchan metaphor absurd in its hyperbole, his closing lines—that he loves his mistress more than those who write hyperbole love their mistresses—may in fact be the most hyperbolic claim of all. In a move typical of anti-Petrarchan poets, Shakespeare uses metaphor to spurn metaphor. Anti-Petrarchism uses metaphor to make a kind of understated overstatement. Yet poets claiming to simplify metaphor and structure do so with a wink and a nod; after all, if poets were to take anti-Petrarchism literally, they would deprive themselves of the variety available to them within complex metaphor and structure, and thus make writing poetry almost impossible.

The figurative strategy of anti-Petrarchism argues for metaphor with less distance between the subject of comparison and its analogy. Along the continuum of anti-Petrarchan contention, the extremity of Traherne's position is almost matched by George Herbert's in his two "Jordan" poems (The Works of George Herbert, ed., F. E. Hutchinson [Oxford, 1941]). Each of Herbert's poems exists vestigially in Traherne's poetry: Herbert's well-known phrase in "Jordan (II)—"Curling in metaphors a plain intention"—yields Traherne's "no curling metaphors that gild the sense;" in "Jordan (I)," Herbert's argument about poetic styles, rather than his language, prefigures Traherne's position. Traherne's use of Herbert in this instance, however, illustrates Harold Bloom's "map of misreading," a misreading understandable when we examine Herbert's rhetoric in "Jordan (I)." One of the few poets whom Traherne quotes in his notebooks, Herbert adopts in "Jordan (I)" a strategy of arguing for "truth," a condition that places the word as close to its referent as possible. He opens this first of his two famous *ars poetica* with an anti-Petrarchan claim that seems very close to Traherne's: "Who says that fictions only and false hair! become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty? / .... Must purling streams refresh a lover's loves?" ("Jordan I," lines 1–2, 8). Unlike Traherne's bald statements, however, Herbert asks rhetorical questions that imply his disgust with the tired aggrandizement of Petrarchan love poems: "Who says that exaggeration is the only way to praise?" and "Is there nothing beautiful in truth?" While it is always dangerous to ask genuine questions in poetry since the reader may supply the wrong answer, Herbert is the consistent master of this locution. He entices us to say to ourselves, "of course the simple truth is the most beautiful." Here, Herbert seems to dismiss the overwrought Petrarchan discourse; by the end of "Jordan (I)," however, he also dismisses the logical alternative to that discourse, the plain Puritan style of writing. When we try to make sense of these
opposing claims in "Jordan (I)," we see that Herbert actually has retained rather than purged the Petrarchan "winding stair," and exaggerated metaphor even while he claims to purge it. We must go around the block to cross the street in the poem, unwinding all the rhetoric to discover that Herbert does not want to be forced to use Puritan poetics (language exclusive to praising God, as he describes it) to write poetry. Like Shakespeare, Herbert only seems to reject Petrarchism, while retaining the essence of its strategy.

Given the complexity of Herbert's rhetorical scheme in "Jordan (I)," it seems possible that Traherne takes Herbert at his word, at least his word at the outset of the poem, and builds upon his anti-Petrarchan claim in his work. Or perhaps Traherne understands the seeming contradiction in the poem—Herbert's rhetorical rejection both of Petrarchan and of Puritan styles—as an attempt to compromise, or to develop a new kind of poetry. Either way, Traherne's reading of Herbert yields a pledge that neither Herbert, nor any representative anti-Petrarchan poet, has made. While Herbert initially argues for the plain truth to bring subject and object close together, and while Shakespeare claims to compare his mistress' eyes not to the faraway sun, but to themselves, Traherne argues for metaphor with literally no distance between subject and comparison. "Things" simply appear in his poems, he argues, in non-referential language. Although each poet's assertions about his use of metaphor are somewhat inaccurate, nonetheless the underlying claims are perspicacious in their recognition of the problems inherent in Petrarchan metaphor. Traherne pushes these claims to an extreme.

Petrarch, Thomas Greene explains, took metaphor in a direction radically different from its use in Classical and Medieval poetry, initiating a new way of reading (and writing) poetry in the early modern period, which Greene calls "the activity of subreading." Petrarch's method in effect invents a poetry that is about bridging space and time, rather than adhering to hermeneutic methods. Petrarch's new method concerns the poet's emphasis upon his subject position. Greene explains:

The older [medieval hermeneutic] method presupposed a fullness of knowledge awaiting the successful interpreter—knowledge that is whole and entire because it can be unlocked by a single operation of the appropriate intellectual key. This method aligned author and reader in a single universe of discourse wherein no cultural distance could exist because, with the sole exception of the Christian revelation, historical change was virtually unknown. The new "archeological" hermeneutic, on the other hand, presupposed a considerable distance and withheld a single all-divulging key. Instead of a relation between "veil" and "truth" that, once discovered, is easily grasped and formulated, there emerges an interplay of entities that resists total
description because it operates in the elusive domain of style. Style by definition cannot be described perfectly even if it can be categorized. And the poetic substance enmeshed in, or half-buried beneath, the verbal surface is now perceived as teaching the reader from far off, from a remote and prestigious world radically unlike his own. Greene's breakthrough here is two-fold: Unlike Medieval writers who wrote to add to texts and prevailing truths, and lacked a causal understanding of history, Petrarch discovers history and in so doing, also establishes a kind of subjectivity. Once Petrarch discovers the "ancient" aspect of historical texts, then he begins a process of imitating, rather than of adding to these texts. The subtle difference between imitation and addition gives us a Petrarchan text that is layered, rather than linear, in its use of influence. Thus the surface—the "style" of the Petrarchan text—emphasizes the individual writer, while the text taken as a whole alludes to an ancient precursor as it also highlights the individual imitator of that precursor. The nature of writing, according to Petrarch, is imitation, not addition: "A proper imitator should take care that what he writes resemble the original without reproducing it." Through this process of imitation, Petrarch self-consciously distances himself from the historical text, and thus establishes a unique concept of subject and object position. The writer imitating an ancient text buries that text as an object beneath his own subjective style. Reading Petrarch requires that the reader identify Petrarch's subjectivity, through his style, as well as the existence of an historical object, the ancient text, beneath that style.

In clarifying Petrarch's achievements, Greene advances our understanding of Traherne, though he does not consider him directly. The contrast that Greene points out between subjective style in Petrarch's text and the objectivity of the texts that Petrarch imitates (objectivity still available to readers if they "sub-read" Petrarch's text) carries implications for all aspects of reading post-Petrarchan texts, most profoundly for the conception and use of metaphor. The essence of metaphor is comparison, and the more a comparison is infused with the writer's subjectivity, the greater the distance between the objects compared, as well as between the reader and the writer, both in experience and imagination. Before Petrarch, metaphors were not personal; after Petrarch, the only way to read poetry with precision and certainty is to be the poet. All other readers are disjoined from the writer's individual experience. Traherne, more than any other anti-Petrarchan poet, reacts against the polarities inherent in Petrarchan subjectivity; in fact, he tries to move poetry back to a pre-Petrarchan innocence.

For pre-Romantic writers, subjectivity holds a dual identity. Placement of the individual vis-à-vis the object of his writing (or for the reader, placement vis-à-vis both the writer and the object of the writing) remains primary. After
Romanticism, this aspect of subjectivity collapses into its secondary identity, that of personal emotions and feelings, so for modern readers, subjectivity indicates primarily the feelings of the writer about the material he addresses. For pre-Romantics, however, feelings were not necessarily thought to be "sincere;" rather, emotions simply added an intriguing and witty texture to the work. As he attempts to return the subjective to a state closer to objectivity, Traherne remains the pre-Romantic and concentrates on the placement of the writer and reader in relationship to the object of focus.

The Subject of Linear Perspective Is Subjectivity

In his attempt to reform the subjectivity he finds in Petrarchan metaphor, Traherne replaces the rhetoric of anti-Petrarchism that he alludes to in the introduction to his Poems of Felicity with the linguistic network of linear perspective and its subset, the trope of the mirror. Despite the striking anti-Petrarchan language of the preface, the Poems of Felicity do not themselves employ this language. The preface poem seems, rather, to be the strategy with which Traherne introduces us to his primary concern, but due to the excessive baggage of anti-Petrarchan poetry, he moves to another language and another strategy not only within this unfinished manuscript, but also within all of his work. Traherne's subject—the issue of subjective placement—dominates the conversation concerning the development of linear perspective in fifteenth-century Italy, while it is only one of a complement of issues that Petrarchan language engages. Perspective language thus brings to poetry fewer complications and associations than the Petrarchan. In all of his work, Traherne shapes perspectival language into the arena in which he engages with the troubling issues that he finds inherent both in subjective post-Petrarchan metaphor, and the subjective language describing linear perspective.

The invention of "linear" or "single-point" perspective in fifteenth-century Florence narrowed the way that viewers looked at painting; a series of mathematically placed orthogonal lines gives the illusion that the painting recedes into a single "vanishing point," thereby offering only one spot, the centrist point, from which an individual viewer may see the painting in perfect three-dimensional perspective. Perspective, in its simplest terms, is about the relationship of one object to another in space. Once vision becomes concentrated upon the relationship among objects, as perspective forces it to do, the emphasis falls upon the individual viewer who sees and organizes those relationships. The individual visual subject, when viewing a scene in perspective, can and must move around, to find the correct viewing position, the centrist point. By emphasizing the relationship between objects and this movement of the viewing subject searching for the "correct" view, perspectival painting lays bare the question of subjective placement. This subjective orientation is a product of
specific cultural forces. In *The Conquest of America* (trans., Richard Howard [New York: Harper Perennial, 1992]), Tzvetan Todorov points out how linear perspective informs the cultural narrative of subjectivity. Discussing the difference between European perspective and that of Aztec sculpture, he writes:

The Aztec sculptures are worked on all sides, including the base, even if they weigh several tons; this is because the object’s observer is as little individual as its executant; representation gives us essence and is not concerned with the impressions of any one man. European linear perspective may not have originated from the concern to validate a single and individual viewpoint, but it becomes its symbol, adding itself to the individuality of the objects represented. It may seem bold to link the introduction of perspective to the discovery and conquest of America, yet the relation is there, not because Toscanelli, inspirer of Columbus, was the friend of Brunelleschi and Alberti, pioneers of perspective (or because Piero della Francesca, another founder of perspective, died on October 12, 1492), but by reason of the transformation that both facts simultaneously reveal and produce in human consciousness.²¹

The invention of linear perspective stresses the shift from the seeming invisible objectivity of both artist and viewer. Todorov reminds us that the origin of perspective “validate[s] a single and individual viewpoint,” and as such informs the cultural narrative that equates subjectivity with objectivity. Like linear perspective, as I have discussed, Petrarchism also authorizes such singularity of vision, and as such both Petrarchism and perspective engage in a discourse concerning subjectivity.

Like Petrarchism and perspective in painting, the clear glass mirror also is a part of the cultural narrative of subjectivity. The language of the mirror is a subset of perspectival language, because mirrors are intimately linked to the development of linear perspective. In his theoretical treatise *On Painting* (1435–36), the Florentine humanist Leon Battista Alberti notes the use of the accurate glass mirror to show defects in a painting: “A mirror will be an excellent guide [to judging relief-effect]. I do not know how it is that paintings that are without fault look beautiful in a mirror; and it is remarkable how every defect in a picture appears more unsightly in a mirror. So the things that are taken from Nature should be emended with the advice of the mirror.”²² The invention of accurate glass mirrors, notably this ability of the mirror to expose faults in relief, enabled Alberti and his contemporary Brunelleschi in their invention of linear perspective.²³

Brunelleschi’s 1425 vignette of the Baptistery of Florence, though now lost, is recognized as the work generating linear perspective. On this panel, Brunelleschi painted a view of the baptistery from a representation that he had
traced on and over its mirror reflection. After determining the centric ray and the vanishing point, Brunelleschi drilled a hole in his panel at that exact spot. The viewer was to peer through the hole from the backside of the panel into a mirror, which reversed the image again, reflecting the view in the correct direction. The viewer could slide the mirror, which reflected the real sky, with moving clouds, to change the scale. In effect, the mirror proved that the artist's rendering of scale and proportion was accurate. By establishing the accuracy of scale and proportion, the mirror seemed to prove that a painting in linear perspective was also "true" and real. This important slippage from "accurate" to "true" could lead the individual viewer to assume that the painter had captured general—objective—experience, rather than subjectively reconstructed an imitation of such experience. Such a slippage could lead the viewer to imagine and even assume that his point of view when observing the painting could be objective. But in fact, the accuracy of perspectival paintings is available only to one person at any given time (hence, its importance to notions of the individual as a coherent and unified entity), since there is only a single viewing spot, designated by the individual painter, that reveals the correct scale and proportion of the painting. Assuming the objectivity of the experience when viewing a perspectival painting effectively masks the subjectivity intrinsic to the construction of linear perspective.

Until the seventeenth century, English artists and patrons could experience the illusion of perspectival painting only by travelling to the Continent or seeing the few perspectival paintings imported to England from the Continent. Likewise, the English did not begin to mass-produce glass mirrors until the beginning of the seventeenth century, well after their widespread use in Italy. Both Nicholas Hilliard, the English miniaturist, and poet Philip Sidney traveled to the Continent, but each came away with different ideas about perspectival reproduction. Hilliard eschews precise, mathematical perspectival painting in his treatise (ca. 1600), The Arte of Limning (Great Britain: Mid Northumberland Arts Group in association with Carcanet New Press, 1981). He argues that perspective is actually an "effect or judgment of the eye" which has the purpose of "deceiv[ing] both the understanding and the eye" (71). As Hilliard understands it, perspectival painting is misleadingly "real," offering a restrictive though seductive view of the natural world that takes the viewer away from experiencing nature objectively. Hilliard's dismissal of perspective raises issues parallel to the Puritan Stephen Gossen's attack on poetry in School of Abuse as "the mother of lies" that represents a copy of nature falsely as the truth. In response to this argument, Philip Sidney writes, famously, "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers [sic] poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden." Sidney argues here that the poet does
not conform to a mimesis or copy of nature as the Puritan polemicist would have it, but rather adheres to a mimesis of nature's internal virtues, to which he had access because of his own internal virtues. Nature's visible world is flawed, compared with its internal perfection. While Sidney attempts to argue for virtue within the self that gives the self contact with the objective virtues, this conception remains a sticking point in discussions such as Hilliard's about representation.\textsuperscript{31}

Unlike Sidney's rebuttal of Gossen that emphasizes the subject's ability to transmit objective virtues, Hilliard's treatise argues the opposite. He determines that by employing the technique of linear perspective to construct subjectivity, his art (painting) would "deceive" and mislead the viewer because the subjective point of view could only seem objective, and not actually be objective, as Sidney contends. Hilliard, Sidney, and Gossen's arguments anticipate the problematic issues of subjectivity inherent both in Petrarchan poetry and in perspectival painting. In spite of objections and holdouts by esteemed English painters such as Hilliard, perspective becomes the mode of painting in seventeenth-century England, enough so that Traherne's technical knowledge of the method matches his understanding of the argument about subjectivity that lies beneath the practice.

**Perspective in Traherne**

Compared to anti-Petrarchan rhetoric, perspectival language offers Traherne the relative isolation of his subject of subjectivity. Anti-Petrarchan rhetoric, as I have discussed, does not erase Petrarchan subjectivity; rather by employing the subjectivity of Petrarchan language in a more subtle form, anti-Petrarchan rhetoric heightens the importance of the individual. In order to attempt his project of moving poetic language to its seeming pre-Petrarchan objectivity, Traherne must move away from anti-Petrarchan language. Perspectival language provides Traherne with a cache of unique linguistic visual cues with which to make his claims about objectivity. Paradoxically, though the linguistic network of perspective is visual, it does not offer pictorial evidence for a poet to imitate in language in the manner of metaphoric writing; rather, it provides visual references that are not strictly imagistic in the sense that the metaphor itself is usually thought of as being imagistic. The language of linear perspective concerns the way that a painter establishes object relationships, not the specific objects themselves, and the mirror, of course, is merely reflective. Symbolically, there is no there, there. In using these two perspectival stores of language, Traherne must write about how they work and what they accomplish, rather than representing them imagistically as something only viewable by an individual subject. Thus with perspectival language Traherne may isolate subjectivity in order to attempt to erase, or at least reform, subjective assumptions.
Having noted that the subject of perspective is subjectivity, I seem to be arguing against myself when I say that perspectival language enables Traherne’s claims about objectivity. The perspectival and mirroring networks do in one sense exhibit in their performance the subjectivity that is their subject: a poet can use perspectival language to describe the actions and results generated by his particular—subjective—point of view. However, because perspectival language removes the need to depict actions metaphorically or imagistically, techniques that revert to subjectivity, the poet can over-ballast his subjective position with non-metaphoric language that can function objectively. However, while perspective and the mirror each have no visual antecedent, unlike individual subjective points of view, they are not indeterminate; their function is always uniform and technical. In this sense, both perspectival and mirroring categories are objective. By using the language of these networks, Traherne attempts to maintain a patina of the complexity and materiality of Petrarchan subjectivity, while he also strives to give his text the objectivity, stability, and inclusivity lost when subjectivity is constructed by the text. In a sense, then, Traherne agrees with Sidney’s contentions, that a poet can show an objective—golden and prelapsarian—world. Yet, in order to achieve Sidney’s purpose, Traherne negates Sidney’s Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan metaphors with his claims and with his language.

The following passage of poetry from *Commentaries of Heaven* offers an overview of Traherne’s use of the perspectival network, showing not only the language of perspective at the center of the passage (which I underscore) but also Traherne’s attempt to use the network to locate his poetry away from the subjectivity of the single viewer and of Petrarchan metaphor, and toward the objectivity that seems to disappear with Petrarchan emphasis on the individual.

But he that would enjoy the true Delight
Of all . . . must all unite.
For Beauty is the Soul, that Life inspires
Into the Faith, which evry Soul admires
Beauty’s a Thing resulting (as we see)
From many Parts in their full Unitie.
Broken in Pieces, they disorderd lie
Tho they are more exposed to the Ey:
Relation and Proportion is the Thing
From whence all Lovely Symmetry doth spring:
And one united fabrick when intire
Makes men the Beauty of it more admire
The Parts do justify each other, to
The Ey of him, that all at once doth view.
Searchd from the Bottom to the Top throughout
Thomas Traherne’s Yearning Subject

With in, in all its Intregues, round about,
Before, Behind, and evry where, Faith is,
Or sees, the very Masterpiece of Bliss.
All Its Materials are a Living Tomb
Of Glory, striking the Spectator dumb
And there our GOD is seen in Perspective
As if he were a BODY and alive.

(“Article,” lines 15–36)

As with his claims about metaphor, Traherne’s concern here is with division of subject and object, in which subjective vision stands in for objectivity. Making an assertion parallel to that about metaphor, Traherne nevertheless shifts from anti-Petrarchan language—“no curling metaphors to gild the sense”—to the language of linear perspective. Rather than description or metaphor, Traherne gives us the abstract language of the activity of seeing: “relation,” “proportion,” “symmetry,” “justify,” “viewing eye.” Unless vision organizes objects in the unified whole, “many parts in their full unity,” then vision is “broken,” and consequently, so is the soul and life. Faithless human vision, Traherne argues, is subjective and “broken,” yet perniciously, and as with perspectival painting, that subjectivity can seem objective. Traherne places God as a viewer of the universe who can choose to see from an infinite number of positions, similar to Todorov’s viewers of Aztec sculpture, moving around the object. Yet, while this kind of non-perspectival seeing does not mistake the objective for the subjective, it remains “broken,” with no sense of unity. To see “all,” however, the viewer must be where he can see in “Relation and Proportion,” in other words, in the perspectival “centrist” position. Remarkably, Traherne’s God both moves beyond the piecemeal vision of pre-perspectival vision and beyond the subjectivity of linear perspective as well: “The Parts do justify each other, to / The Ey of him, that all at once doth view.” Traherne’s God has the best of both kinds of seeing, a synchronicity of the partial vision of perspectival vision, with the intimacy and seeming objectivity of pre-perspectival vision. This combination of methods of seeing gives God perfect vision, seeing a “united Fabrick when intire,” as well as a universe “Searchd from the Bottom to the Top throughout / With in, in all its Intregues, round about, / Before, Behind, and evry where.”

Yet, Traherne does not leave us with a God that has perfect vision and a faithless human constituency who can see only bits and pieces. “Faith” is the vehicle by which individuals achieve this impossible combination of viewing positions, simultaneously allowing the viewer to see from the centrist position (symmetry and proportion) and from all possible angles (the whole). The faithful Christian gets the ultimate reward in Traherne’s universe: with his newly-constructed vision, he sees God and is struck “dumb” when “GOD is seen in Perspective / As if he were a BODY and alive.” Traherne insists that
faith in an objective God overcomes the limitations of human vision; faith reforms the subjectivity of linear perspective by giving Christians perspectival views of God from a truly objective point of view.

Traherne also voices the perspectival relationship with God through his "every Christian" speaker in the third meditation from his *Centuries of Meditation*. Here the speaker finds himself in the wrong viewing position, and expands upon this condition to draw out the comparison between perspective and faith. Like the speaker of the lyrics, the speaker in *The Centuries* compares his misguided spiritual condition to one of spatial imbalance and disorder. He himself is a piece "out of frame," out of proportion, which he must place back into proper perspective. He must occupy the place of central perspective and simultaneously must sit on the throne with God, in order to enjoy the spectacle both of God and his creation from the proper vantage point, where "all things [are] well in their proper places."

This spectacle once seen, will never be forgotten. It is a Great part of the Beatific Vision. A Sight of Happiness is Happiness. It transforms the Soul and makes it Heavenly, it powerfully calls us to Communion with God, and weans us from the Customs of this World[.] It puts a lustre upon GOD and all His Creatures and makes us to see them in a Divine and Eternal Light. I no sooner discerned this but I was (as Plato saith, In summâ Rationis Arce Quies habitat) seated in a Throne of repose and perfect rest. All things were well in their Proper Places, I alone was out of frame and had need to be Mended. For all things were Gods treasures in their proper places, and I was to be restored to Gods Image. Whereupon you will not believ, how I was withdrawn from all Endeavors of altering and Mending Outward Things. They lay so well methougths, they could not be mended: but I must be Mended to Enjoy them. (C 3. 60)

As in the previous passage, there are few specific objects here—the speaker sees only "things" for example—but while this passage is barren of description and of concrete and compressed images (Eliot's "telescoping" images), the network of perspectival language again functions as a substructure shaping and formalizing the speaker's relationship to God. Also consistent with the previous passage is Traherne's stress upon the simultaneity of viewing positions that faith allows; as an antidote to subjectivity, the speaker envisions himself as occupying the perfect viewing position on the throne with God, as well as remaining on earth, "mended" and enjoying the physical world in its proper perspective. Unlike the previous passage, this one is quite explicit here in its reference to Traherne's theory of metaphor. "A Sight of Happiness is Happiness," he writes, insisting as he does in his "Author to the Critical Peruser" that the faithful Christian will find no linguistic barriers of false subjectivity. Here, the language is visual, consistent with the perspectival structure of the passage.
yet, he insists upon calling attention to his non-metaphorical use of visual language: happiness is happiness, it is not "like" any object whatsoever. Further, he attempts within this framework to objectify experience. Happiness here is not an individual state; rather it is something objective, for all to see and simultaneously to absorb. What may seem tautological—happiness being happiness—epitomizes Traherne's use of perspectival language: to attempt to move from the subjective and to the objective.

In these two passages showing Traherne's use of linear perspective, we see also his understanding of the limitations that the centrist viewing position imposes on viewers. The isolation of the self offers a destabilizingly singular and fragmented view of the world, a view that Traherne associates with the individual who must be "mended" within through faith in God. Once faithful, the individual can then envision from God's point of view and, simultaneously, envision God. Not limited by the rules of linear perspective, this view also offers a picture of the world with the best characteristics of a perspectival painting, as if the vision were "real."

"At Once the Mirror and the Object Be"

While Traherne employs three-dimensional perspective in the passages above in his attempt to remove the flaws inherent in subjective representation, he suggests only in the vague phrase "beatifick Vision" how faith allows the believer to experience this reformed vision, or where he may see "our GOD . . . In Perspective / As if he were a BODY and alive." At this juncture, Traherne's transition from the visual may seem simply mystical, something only available in familiar non-material "visions." Certainly, this aspect of his attempt to create a non-visual visual language represents the most fraught and most demanding articulation of Traherne's project. To solve the puzzle of how one reaches this situation, he draws on the trope of the mirror. As with linear perspective, viewers of a reflection in a mirror can believe that they see something real, and as with viewers of perspectival painting, their experience is singular, particularly when viewing their own reflections. No individual can see another's reflection from the same point of view; this is an impossibly subjective experience. In the case of this clear mirror, as with the linear perspective that it enabled, one of the important results of technological development, then, is an emphasis upon subjectivity, rather than upon the objectivity that it comes to represent. In addition to its fundamental use in perspectival painting, the mirror may seem an especially fitting source for Traherne, for it has a long pedigree as an image for the Christian soul, rooted in the well-known passage from the book of Corinthians: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 12:13).5 The image of the soul as a mirror of eternity is well developed in patristic literature, most notably in Augustine.4 Indeed,
readers associating Traherne’s work with theological treatises have assumed that when Traherne writes of the soul as “The Mirror of an endless Life” (“Fullness,” line 5), he merely reiterates early Christian writers. I argue, however, that while Traherne certainly draws upon previous uses of the mirror trope in Christian texts, he departs from traditional uses of this trope at critical points. Both the technical development of the mirror and its use to confirm drawings to scale require these departures.

In significant ways, Traherne’s mirror trope remains congruous with early Christian definitions. For example, Traherne defines the reflections in the mirroring soul very strictly: they are “Ideas from the Skie.” God is in the sky, and ideas emanate from him. This patristic formulation had its beginnings in classical philosophy. Plato argues that ideas represent objective standards, outlining what is real more accurately than does the physical world. Drawing upon Platonic thought, Augustine argues that ideas are actually God’s objective pattern and as such exist in God’s mind. These ideas appear in the mirror of the soul. In the first stanza of “The Circulation,” Traherne both articulates the attributes of the soul as a mirror, and sets out the identity of the reflections in that mirroring soul:

As fair Ideas from the Skie,
Or Images of Things,
Unto a Spotless Mirror flie,
On unperceived Wings;
And lodging there affect the Sense,
As if at first they came from thence;
While being there, they richly Beautifie
The Place they fill, and yet communicat
Themselves, reflecting to the Seers By,
Just such is our Estate.
No Prais can we return again,
No Glory in our selves possess,
But what derived from without we gain,
From all the Mysteries of Blessedness.

(“The Circulation,” lines 1–14)

The first two lines balance “fair Ideas” and “Images of Things” on either side of the equation; both “Ideas” and “Images of Things” may “Unto a Spotless Mirror flie.” Further, both, when they “lodge” in the mirror, “affect the Sense.” “Images of Things,” it seems, would naturally affect the sense of sight, but it is less clear what “Sense” the “Ideas” affect, unless we take into account the history of the soul represented as a mirror, with ideas as objects reflected in the soul. The “Sense” that “Ideas” affect is the reflective “Sense” of the soul.

Building upon Neo-platonic conceptions of the soul, Descartes explains
this “sence” of the soul in his Opticks: “We know for certain it is the soul which has sensory perceptions, and not the body” (René Descartes, Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology, trans., Paul J. Olscamp [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965], 164). Descartes bases this conception upon the Platonic notion that ideas are more real than “things.” Descartes’ “soul” has a substance that is more “real” than the body. Traherne expresses a Neo-platonic view similar to Descartes’ formulation, giving the soul substance and sensory perceptions. His analogy of the soul with the physical body offers the soul by association physical (mechanical) attributes:

[God] Can make the soul by Sense to feel and see,
And with her Joy the Senses wrap’d to be.
Yea while the Flesh of Body subject lies
To those Affections which in Souls arise;
All holy Glories from the Soul redound,
And in the Body by the Soul abound,
Are felt within, and ravish ev’ry Sense,
With all the Godhead’s glorious Excellence:
Who found the way himself to dwell within,
As if even Flesh were nigh to him of kin.
(“Thanksgivings for the Body II,” lines 21–30)

This particular “Thanksgiving,” though it is dedicated to the body, saves its most eloquent praise for the soul, which takes on body-like senses when the divine is present: “[God] Can make the soul by Sense to feel and see.” Traherne here works from the commonplace that man is created in the image of God. He stretches this commonplace by placing God’s image within man, then stretches it again even further; God’s image in the soul has a particular form. The images in the soul, we recall, are ideas, or as Traherne designates them, “thoughts:”

Thoughts are a kind of Strange Celestial Creature,
That when they’re Good, they’re such in ev’ry Feature,
They bear the Image of their father’s face,
And Beautifie even all his Dwelling Place:
(“Thoughts.” III., lines 29–33)

Each good “thought” is a “creature” bearing the image of God. Traherne emphasizes that these “thoughts” are “things” in their own right, and not representations. By exploiting the Augustinian tradition of the mirror to represent the soul containing ideas, or “thoughts,” Traherne strategically advances his quest for non-metaphoric visual language. Consistent with Descartes, Traherne argues that the soul’s images are more real than physical images. Unlike early
uses of the mirroring soul, however, Traherne's version of the reflective Christian soul must take into account the use of the glass mirror to verify the accuracy of perspectival paintings. The mirror evolved from a crude antique steel instrument that reflected a shadowy, ill-defined figure, to the silver-backed glass with a reflection that seems to duplicate objects. This technology renders the Pauline construction of the dark glass at best obsolete. The clarity of Traherne's mirroring soul reflects images sharply, not darkly, and thus these images are available to the faithful Christian at the moment he looks into his soul.

Turning what could be a heresy—a living Christian's seeing God—into an advantage, Traherne underscores the accuracy of the mirroring soul. Because of their clarity, reflections are, Traherne argues, more real than the physical things of the world. Yet crucial to Traherne's project, unlike material things, reflections have not been tainted by description or metaphoric comparison. Thus, Traherne emphasizes that reflections in the Christian soul are a meta-reality. By emphasizing the Cartesian notion that “ideas,” or “thoughts” are more real than “things,” Traherne creates another important place in which he can reform poetic language in describing these “things.” He advances his meta-reality in his series of four “Thoughts” poems.36 In the first of these poems, Traherne shows how he will use language non-metaphorically to give us “things” greater than those previously represented in language:

Ye brisk Divine and Living things,
Ye Great Exemplars, and ye Heavenly Springs,
Which I within me see;
Ye Machines Great,
Which in my Spirit God did Seat,
Ye Engines of Felicitie;
Ye Wondrous Fabricks of his Hands,
Who all possesseth that he understands;
That ye are pent within my Brest,
Yet rove at large from East to West,
And are Invisible, yet Infinite;
Is my Transcendent, and my Best Delight.

Ye Inward, and ye Living Things!
The Thought, or Joy Conceived is
The inward Fabrick of my Standing Bliss.
It is the substance of my Mind
Transformed, and with its Objects lind.
(“Thoughts. 1.” lines 1-12; 54-58)

Thoughts are “Machines,” “Engines,” “Fabricks,” “Objects,” all material and substantive entities, yet non-specific and abstract. No matter that the “images”
in the mirroring soul are "thoughts." Traherne continues to use the Cartesian understanding of "thoughts" as having material characteristics. Yet he makes a point neither to describe nor to compare "thoughts;" rather he asserts their existence and tells us how they function. With this important move, Traherne extends the non-visual, visual language he develops from the language of perspective. The Christian trope of the mirroring soul gives Traherne a further means to give the "reall" and "naked truth" in language, without giving objects or images specific, subjective identity. Thoughts, coming from God, are available to all, and simply are—Traherne refuses to subjectify these images through metaphoric or specific comparison.

Traherne's best-known poem, "Shadows in the Water," shows his most comprehensive thinking about reflection and subjectivity. Without the context of the mirror as a touchstone of accuracy, "Shadows in the Water" can be read as yet another version of the Narcissus tale, though one with a happier ending. A young boy peers into a pool, confused by the reflection or "Shadows" that he sees there. "In unexperienc'd Infancy," he believes that reflections in the pool show "Another World," beneath the pool. "Another World," "Another Sun," "other Worlds," "Another face," and so on; the repetition of "other" takes these various forms throughout the poem. The resolution of his "sweet mistake" occurs in stanza eight:

O ye that stand upon the Brink,
Whom I so near me, throu the Chink,
With Wonder see: What Faces there,
Whose Feet, whose Bodies, do ye wear?
I my companions see
In You, another Me.
They seemed Others, but are We;
Our second Selvs those Shadows be.

(lines 57–64)

The boy seems to realize that figures in the reflection are not inhabitants of "A new Antipodes," but are one and the same with the self. However, he seems to nullify his recognition at the end of the poem, and this seeming reversal clarifies the emphatic realization that the reflections are not "other." The speaker recognizes these reflections in the water as Heaven, and the beings there the better selves that he and his friends will meet/become in heaven:

... below the purling Stream
som unknown Joys there be
Laid up in Store for me;
To which I shall, when that thin Skin
Is broken, be admitted in.

(lines 76–80)
The problem that Traherne addresses here is the problem that the technically advanced mirror presents to Paul's "Now through a glass darkly; then face to face." Here, though looking in a pool, the speaker still sees clearly what is reflected there. Yet rather than the simple reflection of himself, which would show the speaker trapped in subjective vision, he sees rather a view of God's objective vision: he sees how his life will look in heaven. The barrier of darkness or "shadow" that separates the "now" and the Christian hereafter simply does not exist for this speaker; all that separates him from "then" is the surface of the pool, "that thin Skin." Traherne replaces the question of vision with one of meaning: yes, we can see clearly into the other world, the "then" of eternity, but what transpires there—the "joys"—remain "unknown." The Christian can see what awaits his reunion with God, but he cannot experience it. The fundamental aspect of that experience is suggested by the boy's view into the pool: the reflection seems to suggest to the individual what "being seen" is like. Yet, this is the supreme temptation offered by the mirror and its illusion of objectivity. The individual's view of himself is hopelessly subjective; the right view is the objective view, and one which only God with his truly perspectival and objective vision can obtain. "Shadows in the Water" proposes a replacement for the Pauline now/then—dark/clear construction, offering a vision of then, now, but one that remains subjective, as one's view of one's reflection is subjective. Traherne insists, however, that the Christian sees in his soul accurate images of his life in eternity; he simply must not mistake the felicity of those visions with the end itself.

The speaker in "The Odour," at the mid-point of the Poems of Felicity, suggests an organic unity between self and world as another means of envisioning the self as God objectively sees human beings:

Like amber fair thy fingers grow;
With fragrant Honey-sucks thy Head is crown'd;
Like Stars, thine eyes; thy Cheeks like Roses shew:
All are Delights profound.
Talk with thy self, thy self enjoy and see:
At once the Mirror and the object be.
(lines 55-60)

While this passage is often discussed in terms of Lacanian mirror/object separation, within the context of Traherne's perspectival language, this construction serves as an important segue to the final move in his resolution to the problem of partial and subjective vision. A few lines before the above stanza, Traherne indicates the direction of the poem: "But he that cannot like an Angel see, / In Heven its self shall dwell in Misery" (lines 40-1). Ultimately, of course, his solution is metaphoric: in order to "see aright," we must see ourselves as God and the angels view creation. Because he is doing his utmost to
write non- or pre-metaphorically, Traherne invents this Arcimbaudo-like technique of transforming the self into the world. Thus when one looks at the self, one sees both the human self, and the self as seen from heaven's perspective. This attempt at showing the limits of subjectivity without losing subjectivity does present a rather mind-boggling stretch of the visual imagination, yet this is the kind of mental stretching that Traherne expects of readers. Nothing naive or childlike here, but rather an attempt to solve the most vexing of cognitive problems: how do we perceive how we are perceived? How can a subject see objectively?

Traherne adopts in his oeuvre an elaborate theater combining seers, seeing, and reflections as he presents the penultimate move in his strategy to address this philosophical issue and "mend" the subjectivity of human perception. Trying to move beyond even the submerged metaphor of "seeing as seen." Traherne invents a scheme in which God is a "seer" as well as an image, who can see his image in its various forms in the soul of the believer. "Thoughts" imprinted with God's image are reflected back to God, the prime viewer. "While being there [in the mirroring soul], they richly Beautifie/ The Place they fill, and yet communicat/ Themelves, reflecting to the Seers ey" ("The Circulation," lines 7–9). Though the poem also asserts that "Only tis GOD above,/ That from, and in himself doth live" (lines 72–73), as we read in a subsequent poem, God the "Seer" is also God the reflector: "[God's] bosom is the Glass/ Wherein we all things Everlasting See" ("The Anticipation," lines 24–25). Like the human soul, God's soul is also a clear mirror. Each soul both reflects and comprehends the other's mirroring soul. Seeing the self as a part of the world external to the self allows a contiguous relationship with the external. The mirror in our souls allows God to see himself in his creation. And the mirror of God allows us to see ourselves in him. Thus for Traherne's speaker, the creation is no longer "other," nor does the speaker need to rely solely upon the strategy of seeing his limbs as those of a tree. The universe lies within the speaker, just as he simultaneously resides within God and his creation.

The "Circulation" in the title of the above lyric refers to the circulation of imagistic ideas between the mirroring souls of the Christian and God. The reflection of images between these reflecting souls elides into movement in subsequent poems. "The Vision," animates the mirroring soul: a "fountain"—a moving pool—becomes the "glass." The fountain, not surprisingly, lies somewhere between a mirror and a stream; it both moves and reflects, always leading back to its own beginning, or "Caus":

To see the Fountain is a Blessed Thing;  
It is to see the King  
Of Glory face to face: But yet the End,  
The Glorious Wondrous End, is more;
And yet the Fountain there we Comprehend,  
The Spring we there adore:  
For in the End the Fountain best is Shewn,  
As by Effects the Caus is Known.  
("The Vision," lines 41–48)

Traherne again addresses the potential heterodoxy that his hypothesis introduces: rather than seeing a dark and suggestive image in the mirroring soul—Paul's "through a glass, darkly"—the clear mirror yields a clear image of the divine. Similar to the relationship between clear vision and the hereafter in "Shadows in the Water," his transformation of the mirroring souls of God and man into a flowing fountain addresses both the subjectivity of the mirror, and the problem of seeing God's being. Even with his complex and elaborate uses of non-visual visual language, of course, Traherne cannot solve the problem he sets for himself. He must acknowledge that while Christians on earth have the ability "to see the King Of Glory face to face"; purely objective vision cannot exist: "But yet the End/ Of Glorious Wondrous End, is more." Even if we follow the steps of his invention, we are only ensured that "we also comprehend" that the "end is more." The image in the soul, while it is clear and accurate, is within a larger range of concomitant images that we "comprehend," but cannot freeze or possess. Faith, alas, remains the ineffable piece of the philosophical puzzle.

The problems inherent in our thinking in terms of subjectivity and objectivity continue to plague philosophers today. Traherne prophetically engages this important issue, though his solutions may seem both antique and untenable, and his cause, retrograde. Yet we marvel at the boldness of his enterprise: he attempts to undo 400 years of Petrarchan poetic practice, quite a risky undertaking in itself, but to do so he goes further out on a limb and employs the divisive technology of linear perspective. Combining the technology of the mirror as the enabling device for the development of perspective with the Christian symbolism of the mirroring soul, Traherne claims a metamorphosis of perspectival subjectivity into divine objectivity. This extraordinary amalgamation of elements reveals that Traherne himself embodies a rare alliance of attributes: conservative in his philosophical instincts, revolutionary in his use of poetic language and form, sagacious and forward thinking in his choice of means to achieve his end.

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Notes
1. The "Book of Private Devotions" is also called the "Churches' Yearbook." (Bodl. MS. Eng. th. e. 51).
2. Margoliouth details the familiar story of Traherne's discovery in the introduction.
Thomas Traherne's Yearning Subject

399

3. Listener 3 (1930): 590–91, 590. See, as well, T. S. Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets" in Seventeenth-Century English Poetry, ed., William R. Keast (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 23–31, 24. Because of Eliot's strong rhetoric, most readers attribute to Traherne the disinterested approach to the physical world of the via negativa mystic. Studies in the early years agree with Eliot's negative assessment of Traherne's poetry, offering instead discussion of his mysticism. See T. O. Beachcroft, "Traherne, and the Doctrine of Felicity," Criterion, 9 (1930): 291–307; Helen C. White, The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience (New York: Macmillan, 1936); K. W. Salter, Thomas Traherne: Mystic and Poet (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964). Until the sixties, most readers follow Eliot and White when applying mystical readings to Traherne's poetry, and, less frequently, to his prose; they find discussing his mysticism more intriguing than analyzing his literary achievement. (See also Walter Lock, "An English Mystic," The Constructive Quarterly, 1 [1913]: 826–36; Alison J. Sherrington, Mystical Symbolism in the Poetry of Thomas Traherne (St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1970). In the late 1960s, A. I. Clements in The Mystical Poetry of Thomas Traherne (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969) attempts a rereading of Traherne on the grounds that "discussions of Traherne's mysticism are general, superficial, and disappointing" (500) and do not address "the relation of content to form and style" in the poetry. Clements, however, still argues for Traherne's mystical quest for unity with God (500). Like Clements, Stanley Stewart in The Expanded Voice: The Art of Thomas Traherne (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1970), believes Traherne to have been slighted by critics (those still under the influence of Eliot's judgments) who use invalid criteria such as "organic unity" and "concrete diction" in evaluating his poetry. Stewart asserts that Traherne "make[s] language do the impossible" (198) by using his particular style to render his irrational experiences "transparent," because such experiences defy rational categories. Traherne's writing lies outside of logical progression as it dissolves or ignores all boundaries on an endless journey into the infinite. For Stewart, this quest for unity, coupled with a dual twisting of language—one that forces words to be both transparent and illogical—places Traherne in the category of the mystical poet. While both critics attempt to move Traherne beyond Eliot's poetic yardstick, both
Clements and Stewart maintain the traditional understanding of mystical literature as the via negativa, detailing a journey ending in a state of union with the divine. In Thomas Traherne: The Growth of a Mystic’s Mind: A Study of the Evolution and the Phenomenology of Traherne’s Mystical Consciousness (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg, 1982), Franz Wöhrer endeavors to correct these past “controversial” and “speculative” studies (7); he employs “an empirically substantiated ‘psychology of mysticism’” (5). Wöhrer’s attempt to shift the critical apparatus in Traherne scholarship incorporates the material aspects of phenomenological criticism. In doing so, he aspires to look at the way that Traherne discusses his world, rather than the fact that he denies his world. Wöhrer’s combination of psychology and phenomenology at times takes away from a discussion of Traherne’s language.


Stewart, *The Expanded Voice*, for discussions of Traherne's metaphors as "naked" or "transparent." My argument, while benefiting from theirs, shifts the term from "transparent" to "non-visual," and I believe that Traherne attempts to write non-metaphorically for reasons that I shall elaborate.


11. Throughout this essay, I shall use Traherne's poems, and in one case, his prose poems, in an order that reflects his development of the idea, rather than in any predetermined order or group. Traherne's work survives only in manuscript and in a collection (*Poems of Felicity*) that he seems to have begun, but not completed. Thus, the order of poems as he intended does not exist.

12. "Gild" in its alchemical use means to infuse or to "impregnate" a body of matter with gold. One of the tenets of heraldry dictates that a metal must not be charged onto another metal. All quotations from *The Poems of Felicity* and from other Traherne poems are from the Margoliouth edition, *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings*, ed., H. M. Margoliouth, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), and will be noted by line numbers in the text.

13. In *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counterdiscourses* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), Heather Dubrow discusses the "layering of anti-Petrarchan and Petrarchan sentiments within the same sequence" (74 ff.).

14. Dubrow, *Echoes*, summarizes the critical discussion about gender and power in Petrarchism (3 ff.).

15. Anti-Petrarchan poets reacted strongly against these lesser poems, such as this by the anonymous author of *Zepheria* (1594), who perhaps provides Shakespeare, in his "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" with this muddle of Petrarchan metaphors to spurn:

Canzon 23

Thy coral-colored lips, how should I portray
Unto the unmatchable pattern of their sweet?
A draught of blessedness I stole away
From them when last I Kiss'd. I taste it yet;
So did that sug'ry touch my lips ensucket.
On them, Minerva's honey birds do hive
Mellifluous words, when so thou please to frame
Thy speech to entertainment.

Herschel Baker and Hyder E. Rollins, eds.,

The (presumably) unintended high comedy of these metaphors peaks with Minerva's "honey birds" building hives on the beloved's lips, though the real fun comes with imagining the lover kissing such an elaborate sticky mess.

16. In his "Church's Yearbook" (Bodleian MS. Eng. Th. e. 51) Traherne quotes Herbert's poem "To All Angels and Saints" in its entirety. As Clements (213) and others have noted, echoes of Herbert's poems appear throughout Traherne's work.


18. Ibid., 94–95.

19. Ibid., 95.

20. While discussions of autobiographical texts normally identify Augustine as the first writer to recognize subjectivity, Greene argues that Augustine practices a Medieval mode of rhetoric as imitation; thus he remains connected to the historical text. Further, as John Freccero has argued, Petrarch's use of the laurel tree compared to Augustine's use of the fig tree shows Petrarch's creation of an "autonomous universe of autoreflexive signs without reference to an anterior Logos," while Augustine's fig is an allegorical sign which "stands for a referential series of anterior texts grounded in the Logos." Augustine may have written personal episodes, but because his are "Christian revelations," he does not attempt the kind of disconnect from what has come before that Petrarch attempts in his metaphoric punning on Laura. Thus Petrarch's is a true subjectivity, in that it consciously attempts to sever connection with a prior object, or world (Freccero in Greene, 114–15).


24. To make these determinations, Brunelleschi used the principles of Ptolemy, who had shown how corresponding points could be traced on a mirror and had explained how to find intersecting points on a plane.

26. For Brunelleschi to produce a three-dimensional image on a flat surface, two elements were necessary: the clear, accurate crystal mirror and the mathematical calculations that allowed proportional dimensions to be rendered on a plane.


28. Nicholas Hilliard, The Arte of Limning (Great Britain: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group in association with Carcanet New Press, 1981). There were no practitioners of linear perspective in England during most of the sixteenth century other than Holbein, during his brief residence in the court of Henry VIII. (Holbein left Switzerland in the early sixteenth century because of the Iconoclasm associated with Calvinism). Theoretical texts describing perspective only began appearing in English in 1598 with Richard Haydocke’s translation and adaptation of Preface to A Tracte, Lomazzo’s treatise on painting and carving. This text, as well as others, had previously been available in Latin. Haydocke’s reason for translating Lomazzo, he says, was “the increase of the knowledge of the Arte, which . . . never attained to any great perfection among us (save in some feawe of late).” The Humanist movement in England assured that educated men would want to school themselves in the art of painting, and would bring continental notions about perspective into
dominance by the mid-seventeenth century. In 1606, Henry Peacham (author of The Complete Gentleman) wrote The Art of Drawing with the Pen, and Limning in Water Colours (London, 1606) hoping to create in England a knowledgeable group of art collectors among his former students and friends. Most important, the philosophical, Humanist underpinnings of perspectival theory were available to a variety of readers, not just painters, and these ideas rapidly became a part of the gentleman’s university curriculum. Robert Burton reflects this kind of education in The Anatomy of Melancholy, ed., Holbrook Jackson, 3 vols. (New York, 1932): “To most kind of men it is an extraordinary delight to study. For what a world of books offers itself, in all subjects, arts, and sciences, to the sweet content and capacity of the reader! In arithmetic, geometry, perspective, optics, astronomy, architecture, sculpiture, pictura, of which so many and such elaborate treatises are of late written” (88). The Earl of Arundel, listed as a patron in Peacham’s Art of Drawing, collected Italian painting and sculpture; John Donne apparently owned a small number of paintings. Prince Charles acquired a taste for Titian, Rubens, and Velázquez while visiting Spain in 1623; he later bought the private art holdings of the Duke of Mantua. During Charles’s reign, Van Dyck, Rubens, and Gentileschi were a few of many artists who spent considerable time in England (See Gilman, Curious Perspective 53 and Eric Aarcer. English Art: 1553-1625 [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962]). As Roy Strong details, Prince Henry was a great lover of painting and a student of the famous French perspectivist, Salomon de Caus, who designed anamorphic gardens in England. See Roy Strong’s Henry Prince of Wales and England’s Lost Renaissance (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1986).

29. Roy Strong (The English Renaissance Miniature [New York: Thames and Hudson, 1983]) asserts that Hilliard’s miniature of Christopher Hatton “establishes [Hilliard’s] total ignorance of the laws of perspective” (97). However, Hilliard’s treatise proves that he is not ignorant of these laws; he chooses deliberately not to practice them.


31. Sidney and Hilliard were acquainted; Hilliard recounts a conversation with Sidney in his The Art of Limning (83) in which Sidney seems to be goading Hilliard for not using the rules of perspective. Presumably, Sidney’s argument works better for poetry than for painting, which is, like nature, spatial. Leon Battisa Alberti’s treatise on painting, De pictura, makes similar mimetic claims for painting that Sidney makes for poetry. Both claims are essentially Platonic. Sidney traveled widely on the continent and spent enough time in Venice to sit for Veronese (See Hulse, Rule of Art, 117-119 for a discussion of Sidney and Hilliard’s continental travels). During his visit to Venice in 1574, Sidney could have read the Latin version of Alberti, translated by Lodovico Domenichi, ([Venice, Giolito, 1547]; thanks to Melinda Schliit for this information). There is an extensive literature on Alberti; the best place to start is with Cecil Grayson’s introduction to his translation of the treatise. See also Argan; Jarzombek; Kemp, 1990; Joel Snyder, “Picturing Vision,” The Language of Images, ed., W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 219-46; and Westfall.


33. From the Authorized Version. For commentary on the “glass” in Paul’s writing, see
Thomas Traherne's Yearning Subject


36. Several readers have noted the Lacanian implications in this poem. DeNeef, Traherne in Dialogue, addresses this issue.


38. These poems are the penultimate sequence in the "Dobell Manuscript." Had Traherne lived to finish the Poems of Felicity, the direction of his approach indicates that these poems would assume this position there, as well.

39. These two poems appear in the Dobell manuscript (Bodleian MSS. Eng. Poet. C. 42), which is written in Traherne's hand, with small emendations in another hand. The Burney manuscript (British Museum MS. Burney 392), the Poems of Felicity, contains many poems also in Dobell, though written in the hand of Philip, Traherne's brother. Traherne's intent in terms of ordering and organizing his lyrics can only be surmised through his numbered sequences (the "Thoughts" poems, for example) or with poems such as "The Circulation" and "The Anticipation," which form a sequence by virtue of content.

40. Augustine first used the image of the mirroring soul as a reflective pool.