

## **Can You Take Too Much Delight in Your Father's Works? The Writing of Thomas Traherne**

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Long ago, far away, on a glad, green isle there arose a race of men whose kingdom and power were great, as the gods themselves account greatness. Of this race there arose a generation of craftsmen such as the world has seldom seen. Even their shops and tools were wondrous, and their works were among the greatest of their kind. Their age was called a Golden Age, and the gods themselves visited the island, at this time, to bestow on that kingdom three mighty books.

During this age there arose a generation of priests among the craftsmen, with smithies and workshops adjoining to their temples, for their craft and their temple-work were near allied. Two were very great, the chief among them. Three were of great renown but not as great as the first two, although their work was also cunning, elfin and enduring. The last of these craftsmen-priests was forgotten and his work languished in obscurity for two centuries, while the craft itself declined gradually, and irrevocably, with great autumnal splendor.

One day, about a hundred years ago, a man set out on the glad errand of shopping for old books. The land was England, that land to which God had given the King James Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and Shakespeare. In the bookstalls of London, at the turn of the century, when the works of George MacDonald (*Phantastes*) and Coventry Patmore (*The Rod, the Root and the Flower*) were barely a year old, when such treasures as these were first seeing the light of day, a diligent bookseller picked up an old collection of manuscript poems and prose. To his amazement he found these writings were preserved from the seventeenth century. By what meandering road the manuscript had come down to the bookshop in London we do not know. What is known is that the lost work of a man with no concern to make for himself a name was at last brought to public view.

A hundred years have past, and Thomas Traherne, that mighty and clerical word-wright remains too little known (although this might be said of many his tribe, try finding collections of the poetry of Richard Crashaw or Henry Vaughan). It is hard to outshine the splendors of a splendid age, especially if one comes late. Yet among the high, platonic, and baroque splendors of the Carolingian age, this English poet (O lofty title!) has no small place.

Traherne only published an anti-Catholic work in his day. Two more works were published posthumously, but neither of them poetical. His poetry, and his wonderful *Centuries* have been with us now for a century, and a century after the first discovery, two more works have been discovered. Most of what was found is unfinished, but none of it is worthless; it is all full of the curious wonder, of twilights and glimmerings, of the most compelling explorations of the uncharted, interstellar spaces of the soul, and of the tireless search for Felicitie.

If you follow the meandering paths through Traherne's *Centuries* you will find yourself sooner or later crossing over a way you went before. He circles around on himself, resumes a path he was pursuing earlier, and abruptly departs in a different direction. Eventually the way can be sorted out, but it is not the type of travel to please those who are impatient to reach their destination, not disposed to enjoy a lingering journey. Traherne will always follow the scenic, wandering dirt track rather than the straight, grey pavement.

He mentions early in the First Century how lightly he esteems silver, gold and precious jewels in favor of earth, air and greenery. “The World . . . is more your Treasure, then [*sic*] a Kings Exchequer full of Gold and Silver.” In the Third Century he comes back to this idea and works at it some more.

In III 52 he wonders, after he has come away to the country to think and study, what to study. There are, he reflects, so many interesting paths to pursue, so many winding ways full of wonder and the most unanticipated discoveries. So he prays God to guide him “to the fairest and Divinest.”

In III 53 he finds the way to go. “And what Rule do you think I walked by? Truly a Strange one, but the Best in the Whole World. I was guided by an Implicit Faith in God’s Goodness.” With this rule he reasons that God would not make the best things scarce; he would make them abundant. And God, in his goodness, will not make the most worthless things common, but will make them scarce. In this way Traherne arrives again at his delight in air, light, heaven and earth, and finds in them real valuableness. The value of gold, silver and pearls he realizes, must be a feigned value.

It is a very English turn of thought, it seems to me, not only to seize on the goodness of God (I think of Julian of Norwich especially), but also to find it better expressed in a common tankard of ale, a fair meadow, and the flowers in the window box, than in a sumptuously lavish banquet with expensive wine, silver cutlery and golden plates. Here we do not see an unbounded exuberance, a welter of rich luxury, but one more measured and sustained by a wealth of contentment that includes the intellectual component of reflection to make the whole complete, culminating it like a pipe out of doors after breakfast.

Yea, he says, “The services of things and their excellencies are spiritual: being objects not of the eye, but of the mind: and you more spiritual by how much more you esteem them.” It is an important passage. The ability to apprehend such things is an angelical quality of man. Traherne contrasts man’s apprehension of excellencies to a pig’s instinctive and unappreciating use of acorns.

So there is a distance, a seeing though, an apprehending through proper reflection that is necessary to proper enjoyment. “You never enjoy the world aright, till you see how a sand exhibiteth the wisdom and power of God.” “Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every morning you awake in Heaven.” And so the paragraphs of Centuries begin, and he describes the journey one might expect that man to describe who has escaped from the cave, like Socrates’ philosopher, and into real sunlight.

Traherne’s dislike is not for silver as silver either (he might have had worthwhile things to say about an unrefined and unworked lump of raw silver, for the mysterious, wandering vein hidden away beneath the soil), but for the works of man over the works of God, or for the prizing of the remote and rare simply because it is remote and rare over the close and common. For it shows ingratitude, an inability to think and to enjoy, a sort of spiritual blindness he also calls damned folly.

Yet further, you never enjoy the world aright; till you so love the beauty of enjoying it, that you are covetous and earnest to persuade others to enjoy it. And so perfectly hate the abominable corruption of men in despising it, that you had rather suffer the flames of Hell than willingly be guilty of their error. There is so much blindness and ingratitude and damned folly in it. The world is a mirror of infinite beauty, yet no man sees it. It is a Temple of Majesty, yet no man regards it. It is a region of Light and Peace, did not men

disquiet it. It is the Paradise of God. It is more to man since he is fallen than it was before. It is the place of Angels and the Gate of Heaven. When Jacob waked out of his dream, he said “God is here, and I wist it not. How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and the Gate of Heaven.”

The connection between humility and ensuing gratitude is something Traherne exploits, and suggests to me that C. S. Lewis was wont to read Traherne, which indeed he was.<sup>1</sup>

Traherne exhibits a tendency to favor the natural and original state of things over an artificial or developed state. It is because he is concerned to enjoy the works of God, which are absolutely original. But there is more. Because of this love for original things, he is accused of being a poet with no doctrine of original sin, but rather a doctrine of natural innocency. Detect in this, if you can, any notion of original sin,

The first Light which shined in my Infancy in its primitive and innocent clarity was totally eclipsed insomuch that I was fain to learn all again. If you ask me how it was eclipsed? Truly by the customs and manners of men, which like contrary winds blew it out: by an innumerable company of other objects, rude, vulgar and worthless things, that like so many loads of earth and dung did overwhelm and bury it by the impetuous torrent of wrong desires in all others whom I saw or knew that carried me away and alienated me from it: by a whole sea of other matters and concernments that covered and drowned it: finally by the evil influence of a bad education that did not foster and cherish it.

He speaks of childhood as if it were in pre-lapsarian Eden. In “Wonder” he compares himself with Adam:

Those Things which first his Eden did adorn,  
My Infancy  
Did Crown. Simplicities  
Was my protection when I first was born.  
Mine Eyes those Treasures first did see,  
Which God first made. The first Effects of Love  
My first Enjoyments upon Earth did prove.

One must not leap to make Traherne orthodox if indeed he is not. But it seems to me it is a clumsy use of poetry to disallow for a figurative comparison of childhood to Eden for the purpose of drawing out the parallels both original states have. There is, after all, a certain simplicity in childhood, a simplicity untainted by years of sinning and of perfecting the ways of sinning.

One may point out, that Traherne cannot have been ignorant of the theological distinctions he was passing over. He says, one stanza before the one above:

Only what Adam in his first Estate,  
Did I behold.

Which indicates he recognized, not that Adam owned property, but that he had

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<sup>1</sup>“Traherne's influence in the field of Christian spirituality has long been recognized. He was loved by C. S. Lewis, who described Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations* as ‘almost the most beautiful book in English,’ from which he ‘could go on quoting forever.’ Lewis's letters show he read and reread the *Centuries* over the space of ten years.”(Denise Inge, “A Poet Comes Home: Thomas Traherne, Theologian in a New Century,” *ATR* [Spring 2004]: 1).

subsequent conditions which in theological parlance were distinguished by the introduction of guilt at the fall. Of course, the lines above also contain the problem. But the question is, can Traherne have meant something other than to say he was as innocent as Adam at his birth? I think Traherne knew his doctrine (my confidence stems from his other orthodoxy, but mostly from all his orthopathy—fault, if you can, the feeling and theology of the Centuries), and that he wanted to make the comparison with pre-lapsarian man, not in order to dispense with original sin, but to show original wonder.

Original sin may stifle original wonder, but not altogether. Just as creation, cursed, groaning, and antagonized by our civilization still shows forth heart-piercing wonder and beauty, so our faculties, cursed, groaning and antagonized by our civilization, may still, as the tender shoots of spring, retain the ability to perceive mere but overwhelming inklings of the dazzling glory of God. It is like dim light to creatures used to living in almost utter darkness. Ah, but you say, we suppress it. Yes, I will say, that is the point Traherne is making. We suppress it, and as the years go by, we tend to get better.

Traherne wants us to see how much we degrade, compared to how much we are given. He wants to emphasize that good things are received as a gift, that they come to us better than we can make them, because he wants us to stop trying to improve on what God gives us. It is our perverse ability to make things dull, our artificial enhancement of nature which is a destruction of it, and we make much of jewels and gold, setting up contenders for the glories due to dew, the sunlight and the humble flowers. We suppress instinctively and with every effort.

Perhaps the whole thing might have been put otherwise, but it is not because that is not the sort of chap Traherne was. He went after original wonder with all the enthusiasm of a hobbit cooking breakfast. Traherne held his idea firmly and dispensed it undiluted, in a way which makes lesser men (the kind wont to bleat about balance and to write the pedantic articles that pass for scholarship because they quibble about problems created by their wooden minds so unmalleable and uncongenial to the wonders of the world, or they find things to work at because they imagine their stupid picking amounts to scholarship while they are nothing but career philistines, devoid of imagination and with only the meager intelligence enough to deceive the cunning and acquisitive barbarians with their hands on the funding) chide.

But we are not lesser men. Those pedantic men are teachers without souls. Away with them! You and I have better things to do. You too can read Traherne and with me say, *et in arcadia ego*. Traherne says, “we are Born to be a Burning and a Shining Light.” And he is right. “And whatever men learn of others, they see in the Light of others Souls.” These are the words of a wise teacher, are they not? “And whatever men learn of others, they see in the Light of others Souls.” Yes, for the quality of the instruction depends on the quality of the light of the soul, whether dim or bright. You may learn from Traherne. And he promises, this teacher, this wizard in the moonlight with wide eyes and unexpected words, “I will in the Light of my Soul shew you the Univers.”

For further thinking: Reflected light, mirrors, McDonald, Traherne, original wonder, universalism and the peculiar theological difficulties that accompany these ideas.