THE POET OF SUDDEN CLOUDBREAK

A COMMENTARY ON THOMAS TRAHERNE by *ALAN GOULD*

Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.—Einstein

THE POEMS of Thomas Traherne (1637—74), Anglican parson, mystic and enthusiast, present unlikely substance in our era of the God Delusion. In the more extravagant of his expositions on what it is to be blessed, the poet's inventory of joys, graces and virtues can be rather too ecstatic to quite persuade. Early evangelising pressures on my life made me wary of revelatory exclamation.

But equally I resist fundamentalist atheism's current impatience to finish with God's presence in The Creation altogether, because this is the triumph of debunking over intimation. I favour discourse where reason and intimation interact on the religious substance, as they do most closely in Traherne's finer work.

In this, uninhibited by doubt, cynicism or any sense of personal unworthiness, he illumines a compelling metaphysic for the dimension of spirit within The Creation, and the paradoxical privileges of existence entailed by that.

> The common Air and Light
> That shines, doth me a Pleasure
> And surely is my Treasure:
> Of it I am th' inclusive Sphere
> It doth in me entire appear
> As well as I in it; it gives me Room,
> Yet lies within my Womb.
> ("Misapprehension")

In the one hundred or so poems that come to us from Traherne's hand we encounter the visionary temperament where reason, imagination and morale have that self-possession of the intently focused. Like Blake, Traherne could formulate the disarming question. Where, he asks in "Salutation", out of the thousand thousand years of nonentity do his limbs, eyes and tongue come from, and then must observe his own perplexity in the matter:

> Strange all, and new to me.
> But that they mine should be, who nothing was.
> The Strangest is of all, yet brought to pass.

Indeed, were the reverend gentleman ever revived to face a quizzing from Professor Dawkins he would undoubtedly be placed among the quaintly as opposed to the dangerously credulous. Yet for Judith Wright, sanguine daughter of farming folk and poet attentive to both the exactitude of science and the perplexities of faith, Traherne was

> the man who knew
> how simply truth may come:
>
> who saw the depth of darkness

shake, part and move,
and from death's centre the light's ladder
go up from love to Love.
("Reading Thomas Traherne")

THE WORD *felicity* is one key that Traherne provides for the vision argued in his poems. "No more shall clouds eclyps my Treasures", he declares in "Hosanna" and expounds the exalted human status within Creation. Every reflective mind, he proposes, is endowed with immeasurable wealth because to perceive a thing is to possess it:

The Moon and Stars, the Air and Sun
Into my Chamber com:
The Seas and Rivers hither flow,
Yes, here the Trees of Eden grow,
The fowls and fishes stand,
Kings and their thrones,
As 'twere, at my Command
The Ages too, and Angels all conspire:
While I, that I the centre am, admire.

This is the human felicity, derived from proper- looking rather than personal acquisition. And his conceit, that to sense the Creation is to own it. far from being simpleton. I suggest. is reasonable, moral and more likely to find respect rather than contradiction within the findings of neural-science. Properly it places the human perceptive powers within the scale of all creation and identifies them as miraculous. When this is embraced as part of a personal creed one sees how readily it disarms covetousness without harm to self- possession.

There is no doubt in Traherne that "self" is intently self-regarding ("that I the centre am" but this is because the poet's buoyant egotism is vital to his project. which is to disclose how the essential wonder of Creation is the way the presence of the All comes to be concentrated in the attentive powers of the One. Here is one of the profound attractions of any faith, and at one level it little matters whether that One is Deity, or TT himself.

When all the Univers conjoynd in one.
Exalts a Creature, as if that alone.
("The Improvement")

AS I PICTURE HIM. Traherne stands as the poet of the sudden cloudbreak. "These Brighter Regions which salute mine Eys", he invokes that further prospect in "The Salutation". Characteristically, he attends at precisely that point where the overcast of a temporal outlook clears to illumine a world of spirit, tantalising because it offers to restore to the perception of Creation a sufficiency that has been distracted from childhood's originally sensed but inchoate view. I will return to childhood presently.

In the meantime, if we attend to the observer rather than the observed, what can we tell about the person who expounds to us this opening of vista?

In Traheme it is a particular kind of affirming morale we watch, morale uplifted in a surge of exaltation. It is a young sensibility, or rather, one so gathered

around its core of interest that the longueurs of a life have left it unmarked. Sometimes to my ear, the exaltation has the gloss of a rousing hymn ("Ease") or the crass exemplifying of a sermon ("The Dialogue"). But on those occasions where the poet argues most finely, in poems such as "Wonder". "Shadows in the Water", "Salutation", "My Spirit", "News". it is as if we watch how an x-ray of intimation itself might dawn upon the mind. He argues with the brio of a young mind, and the verse-form shadows the impetuous mental process. Those typical stanzas of juxtaposed long and short lines with interlacing rhyme seem to pulse with argument that is finding itself. The shortening in many poems of the intervals of rhyme towards mid-stanza constrict as though mimetic of the body's tension and the mind's racing, when mind and body are alert with the anticipation of an imminent recognition or sensation. The very titles of the poems monitor this physiology of a person- at-edge: "The Anticipation", "The Apprehension", "The Rapture", "Wonder". "Hosanna", "The Vision", "My Spirit", "Insatiableness".

For it is the idea of *threshold* that Traherne takes for his underlying situation. Like the research scientist at the lens of his electron microscope, he has a mind thrilled by the process of apprehending an ampler sense of the real while remaining held by the temporal constraint. However habitual might be the liturgy in the services the parson conducted in the Credenhill church, his religious imagining sought restively within himself to find that high intimation of further or ampler being. Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey" confides to us the same tantalised

> sense sublime
> of something far more deeply interfused
> whose dwelling is the light of setting suns.

And while I mention Blake above, it is Wordsworth who, to my mind, is more directly along Traherne's metaphysical bloodline. Both poets centre an altruistic interest on the self, particularly the childhood ego. in order to unravel the growth of the poetic mind, Wordsworth in "The Prelude", Traherne in what appears to be a methodical ordering of his poems in favour of a progress of spiritual awareness. And while Wordsworth's seems to be the more seasoned voice, both poets ascribe their first sense of Creation's vibrancy to the inarticulate outlook of the child where the matrix of phenomena are perceived undistracted by words. Remembering the "ten thousand" things encountered in his early life, Traheme recounts how

> I knew not what they to me said.
> Before their Souls were into mine conveyd.
> ("Dumnesse")

Now this idea of the wise child has been a persistent one over the centuries, and in Australian poetry we encounter it in the young girl answering those callow, impertinent questions before Shaw Neilson's orange tree in his poem of that title. Of course the linguistic and neuronal science behind this idea of the child-mind imperfectly recalling a higher cohesion in Reality is clinically dubious; day-to-day infancy is more wont to spit the dummy. Nonetheless, the idea of the "soul" of a thing—its essence and presence—being communicated prior to an ability to account for it is an incisive image for sub-liminal perceptual process, particularly with respect to the human mind in its more tender phase of awakening. Shaw Neilson's intent girl

had a sufficiency in poetry long before cognitive science was equipped to help clinically explain her insistence on the is-ness of that orange tree.

"SHADOWS IN THE WATER" is one of Traherne's more intriguing poems. That threshold has now shrunk to a "chink", a "film" of water-surface, and, taking its cue from the whimsical misprisions of childhood, the poet discerns where daylight falls on a puddle to disclose the reflected world. In this reflection are the actual inversions of trees, human faces, sky, but to a rapt and devout sensibility such as Traherne owns, these inversions are the very quick of a further sublime. That is to say, his reflex is to look at Nature with a view towards discerning further-nature, to launch an image of the valid towards the sufficient. This momentum in his meditation is, I take it. the intellectual and passionate animus of his work.

It is that "very quick" in the thought that interests me about religious imagining, for I would note that an atheist astrophysicist or microbiologist would start from much the same premisses as the metaphysical poet; nature beckons further nature, the valid alludes towards the sufficient. And I suggest that much the same emotion as propelled the poet in that "very quick" would engage our scientists, a compound of intrigue and elation that pattern is hived with grander or finer pattern. Moreover, they would desire much the same result as the poet, namely an account of The Creation that has gained in its sufficiency.

Thus, however quaint its starting point, "Shadows in the Water" draws its power, in my view, not from the promise of celestial existence, but from how it configures that compound of intrigue and elation around the idea of natural pattern potent with further pattern.

SPRIGHTLY AS HIS sensibility appears. Traherne is never less than acute towards his own mental processes. In the above poem, or "On Leaping over the Moon" (its companion in the manuscript evidence) the child's whimsy is aired, set in perspective. and then elaborated, not in a tone of adult knowingness, but one where the pristinity of childhood perception is woven with mature argument. One has the sense that, where Wordsworth has put distance between himself and childhood, Traherne has absorbed its voice and outlook into his later self.

What wondrous things upon the Earth are don
Beneath and yet abov the Sun?
Deeds all appear again
In higher spheres; remain
In Clouds as yet:
But here they get
Another light and in another way
Themselves to us *abov* display.
("On Leaping over the Moon")

Here the poet narrates how his brother Philip, encountering a reflection of the moon in a puddle on the King's Highway, has sportively leapt over it. The physical event migrates to the above metaphysical consideration such that an ordinary occurrence is observed, accorded both its lowliness in actuality and its charge of metaphysical possibility. Constantly in Traherne one has the sense, as here, of how he has been alerted to the value of small events in the yield of encompassing meaning.

Here, at its purest, is the religious imagination in its dynamism, its finesse, its pressure upon the wondering human mind.

Of course this mind is prone to unleashing substance that is silly or vicious. And yet it is where anciently has resided the human fascination with that intimacy between the One and the All. Could Einstein on his Zurich tram have imagined travelling on a particle at the speed of light had the antecedents of his imagining not furnished him with the idea that the powers of a God might be flexed within his own fancy? Traherne's case is this exactly. By recognising the human perceptive powers for what they were, encompassing, he could imagine one of the likenesses of God. "An Inward Omnipresence here," he describes the indwelling presence of the deity in his person in "An Hymne upon St Bartholomew's Day". And in his poem "My Spirit" he describes how that spirit part of him will

> Dilate it self even in an Instant, and
> Like an Indivisible Centre Stand
> At once Surrounding all Eternitie.

Howsoever we feel in a material age about "spirit" I find both these descriptions to be as incisive an account of the power and contradiction of human consciousness as any I have read, whether in art or science.

WE KNOW A LITTLE about how others saw Traherne and how he saw himself. His friend Susanna Hopton, to whom he dedicated his prose "Centuries", describes the poet as being "of a cheerful and sprightly Temper very affable and pleasant in his Conversation". Yet we know from his own unguarded writing ("Select Meditations", published in the TLS in October 1964) that he regarded his openness and proneness to speak in society as his "disease". These opposing assessments suggest the tension between a sociable nature and the visionary's overwhelming wish to be undistracted.

Like other metaphysical poets with whom he is classed, Traherne must argue in the same instant, with the same reflex, as he "sees". His piety has the vibrant texture of his spiritually galvanised era, he wrangles, yet when he wrangles it is not quarrel so much as exhilarated witness of that intimacy between the One and the All:

> He in his Wisdom did their use extend,
> By all, to all the World from End to End.
> In all Things, all Things do to all:
> And thus a sand is Endless, though most small.
> And every Thing is truly Infinite,
> In its Relation deep and exquisite.
>
> ("Christian Ethicks IV")

The art in Traherne's poems lies, I think, in how we accept a passage like this as innocence rather than naivety. For it is in his nerve to state the ingenuous observation on common, miraculous circumstance, to ask (elsewhere) the unabashed questions, that he preempts that same nerve in Blake, or Shaw Neilson, or frequently in D.H. Lawrence, those artists with nerve to make ingenuous statement.

As the above passage shows, the components of Traherne's "World" tend to be painted with a broad brush—"Stars, Skie, Sun, Earth, Stream, Field". I would be happier if his lines showed a more naturalist eye for the particulars of hedgerow and spinney, as for instance does Hopkins, who shares Traherne's sense of the world's charged presence, but achieves the same urgency in his relation to Nature by speaking of aspens, kingfishers and "rose-moles all in stipple upon trout". One notes how, apart from the mention of the deity, the above passage might be a modern ecologist speaking, wherein one sees another part of his appeal for Judith Wright.

Within the corpus of Traherne's poems we encounter those things that spoil the privileged place humanity occupies in the Creation, but there is no overshadowing sense of sin or human unworthiness as burdened the writings of other Christian authors of his time, and which surfaces, say, in the later work of Judith Wright where she rages against the spoilers of Eden.

TO CLOSE, I'll return to Judith Wright's tribute to the poet, "Reading Thomas Traherne". Brilliantly, in my view, she locates Traherne's essential insight as a movement from lower to upper case, of love moving upward from death's centre in its conversion to Love. By this I take the Australian poet to mean that behind Traheme's poetry' runs the idea of the love, which ignites as attraction, ends in identification, the love that is engendered as an aspect of the thing, consummates as the Platonic form of it.

The particularity of Judith Wright's twentieth-century viewpoint arises from how finely she glimpses the shift in three centuries of religious sensibility:

> Can I then lose myself,
> and losing, find one word
> that, in the face of what you were.
> needs to be said or heard?
>
> Or speak of what has come
> to your sad race
> that in your clear rejoicing
> we turn with such a face?

In her poem, she too is at a threshold. She frames questions as to her capacity to take up precisely that faith upon which she has meditated in poems like "Eli Eli", "The Forest", "Five Senses" and "Grace", and into which the seventeenth-century poet has felt and thought himself so confidently. She grasps the essence of the earlier poet's religious vision, yet remains irresolute as to her own capacity to lose the self within it.

She is right to be irresolute because her era, my era, has made deism an awkward conviction for the person who is scrupulous about the available resources of truth. Equally she is right in according honest homage to Traherne's vision of spirit because to do so is to acknowledge that religious imagining is communicable from one era to another. It is the instrument performing the work that deserves being cherished, not every detail of its substance.

Traherne was a visionary Anglican. Judith Wright was a spiritually conflicted secular intellect. Yet the work of both, their very sense of themselves on the planet, are in accord with the earlier poet's discovery of self in his poem "Wonder":

I felt a vigor in my sense
That was all spirit.

This essay was published in the March 2008 issue of Quadrant Magazine and is reprinted here in full with the permission of the author.

http://www.alangouldwriter.com/