

THE FIRST ANNUAL TRAHERNE LECTURE
 October 10th 2003 - In memory of Jeremy Maule
 SOLITUDE & COMMUNION:
 Readings in Thomas Traherne and R.S.Thomas
 By the Revd Dr Christopher Armstrong

Prologue: I have two poets to speak about. I should start by thanking the Thomas Traherne society for extending its hospitality to the XXth century poet I have asked to group with their poet, all the more so in that the two Thomases are in many ways so different. Yet both make demands upon their readers. Traherne because his language is not exactly ours and his thought-processes pre-scientific; RS [as I shall henceforth call him] because the language and style he adopts in his verse is often enough complicated, elliptical, paradoxical and even, dare one say it, 'offensive to pious ears.' Yet both are ordained ministers, priests, of the Church, trained in theology and dedicated to the pastoral care of fellow-Christians; Traherne a member of the Church of England during and immediately following the Commonwealth of the 17th century; Thomas ordained and serving in the recently dis-established Church of Wales, who died aged 87 in 2000. I succeeded him as vicar of Aberdaron, as well as other parishes, in 1993 though he had in fact retired from the benefice in 1978. Both priests used the liturgy of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and The Authorized Version of the Bible, in RS's case, of course, mainly in Welsh. The themes of the published writings which we shall consider, reflect their profession in common and shows them inevitably drawn to the transcendent themes which, mostly we must suppose, in very different guise, they handled in pulpit and church Sunday by Sunday and in their teaching. I want to suggest, as a preliminary introduction to my subject, that in both cases we are privileged to see behind the publications to the "working out", as it used to be termed in our maths classes, of particular themes and problems, not dealt with in public in their pulpits, or before their usual congregations, but emanating, admittedly with careful preparation, directly from their studies for a rather different public. In the case of Traherne, his writings appear to have been intended for select friends, keen to absorb his writings as teachings for the daily conduct of their lives; in the case of RS his poems speak, I would guess, to his age, to his fellow-Christians at large, to anyone prepared to buy his slim volumes and not normally living in Aberdaron or others of his parishes. I shall interweave each with the other, after establishing my main theme with Thomas Traherne. Yet I would wish you to think of whichever poet you know better, commenting, as it were, on the work of his colleague. It is the joint consideration that I, personally have found most stimulating.

Thomas Traherne

As with the other Thomas, I am especially interested in the way in which Traherne presents his **Select Meditations** and his **Centuries of Meditations** as a training for growth in the Christian faith of which he is a public 'professor', as George Fox would say. In what spirit should a poet set about such a labour? One is bound, I think, to answer that the very act of writing poetry implies a certain labour of faith, a labour, let us say, of imagination under the spur of faith. T.S.Eliot seems to have thought so in writing: *I cannot*

see that poetry can ever be separated from something which I should call belief and to which I cannot see any reason for refusing the name of belief unless we are to shuffle names altogether. It should hardly be needful to say that it will not necessarily be orthodox Christian belief though that possibility can be entertained. . . The majority of people live below the level of belief or doubt. It takes application and a kind of genius to believe anything; and to believe anything (I do not mean merely to believe some 'religion') will probably become more and more difficult as time goes on.¹

Eliot refers to a 'kind of genius' which is necessary if one is to believe. He has in mind, apparently, a firm adherence, which is in its way consistent and not patently absurd to a datum which of its nature transcends the experience of everyday, of common sense, and posits, as Thomas Aquinas might say, 'that which we call God'². On or through this datum, genius is nourished as it labours and genius is seen to have triumphed, at least poetically and imaginatively, when works of lasting worth are produced. But it follows that, since neither poets nor, on the whole, Christians, are gifted to the world as finished articles, trial and error, darkness and renewal, are the normal accompaniments of growth and progress, moral or poetical. It is all too easy to imagine Thomas Traherne perambulating the Herefordshire countryside in a steady state of ecstasy and then returning to his study to pour forth in writing the rhapsodic prose and verse for which he is famous. Afterwards, perhaps, or before as he readily admits, boring his neighbours with it. It is because I cannot readily accept this picture that I have set myself as a first theme for this poet, as well as RS, the heading of Solitude. Of course, one would naturally think of such a heading for RS; but Traherne? I offer an alternative reading for Thomas Traherne, if not for RS. It all begins, let us postulate, in Widemarsh Street as described in Centuries III: *Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and Curious Apprehensions of the World, then I when I was a child*. There follow the two great anthology pieces, and the poem introduced with the words: *Upon those Pure and Virgin Apprehensions which I had in my Infancy, I made this poem*.³

We are familiar with the passage beginning *The corn was Orient and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown ...*; but we are less familiar, I would suggest, with paragraph five in this Third Century, which begins: *Our Saviour's Meaning, when he said, He must be Born again and become a little Child that will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven*. . . Here Traherne develops the text in such a way as to generalize it and, quite deliberately, to deepen it. It is not 'I' but 'we' who soon take the stage; it is not he says, in a *Careless Reliance upon Divine Providence that we are to become Little Children, or in the feebleness and shortness of our Anger and Simplicity of our Passions*. No, there is a lesson to be learnt first, an essential preliminary asceticism. We must follow the Saviour's call by attending to the *Peace and Purity of all our Soul*. And, he continues, *this purity is also a Deeper Thing than is commonly apprehended for we must disrobe our selves of all false Colours, and uncliothe our Souls of evil Habits; all our Thoughts must be infantlike and Clear: the Powers of our Soul free from the leaven of this World and disentangled from Mens conceits and customs. Grit in the Ey or the yellow Jandice will*

¹ T S Eliot in F R Leavis - **The Common Pursuit** (London 1958) p.50

² Summa theologiae la qu ii art. 3 corp

³ Centuries III, 1

not let a Man see those objects truly that are before it. . . By paragraph seven Traherne confesses that that whither he exhorts us to go, he has already been. He puts his tale forcefully: *The first Light which shined in my Infancy in its Primitive and Innocent Clarity was totally Ecclipsed. insomuch that I was fain to learn all again... They vanished, he writes, and adds, My Thoughts, (as indeed what is more fleeting than a Thought) were blotted out. And at last all the Celestial Great and Stable Treasures to which I was born, as wholly forgotten, as it they had never been*⁴.

It is not as though this passage is unknown. Yet I wonder if it has been given the importance due to it. Traherne's 'lost' vision, vividly remembered, and yet said to be 'forgotten' by him, is often remarked upon and likened to a similar 'nostalgia' of William Wordsworth. Few seem to comment on the chronological absence of continuity between the former wonders and the descriptions which follow, to coin a phrase 'after the break'. Noting the hiatus, we cannot but observe, also, that the vision or visions, the insights, prayers, poems and sublime meditations of **Select Meditations** and **The Centuries**, as well as other writings, are the consequence of acquired, not congenital experiences. To revert to Eliot, Traherne, launched as it were, in childhood, needed, and indeed bestowed, 'application', as well as 'genius', on the expression of the faith he passed on to us. He never disguises this. Indeed, he emphasizes it, and it is as a Christian, persevering in this exercise, or should we say 'these exercises', that he offers his experience to his devout circle and, through them, to us. He does not ignore or neglect the conditions which apply in this great undertaking; and one of these is 'solitude'.

In para. 14 he does not disguise his former alienation from things divine: *Being swallowed up therefore in the Miserable Gulph of idle talk and worthless vanities, thenceforth I lived among Shadows, like a Prodigal Son feeding upon Husks with swine. A Comfortless Wilderness full of Thorn and Troubles the World was, or wors. As for Churches they were things I did not understand And Scholes were a Burden: so that there was nothing in the World worth having, or Enjoying ... So that I had utterly forgotten all Goodness Bounty Comfort and Glory...* He did have recalls; but they proved ephemeral.

I suggest that Traherne's choice of his Third Century of meditations to reveal the depth of his desertion of the primal vision is deliberate and strategic. It needs to follow the Second Century and the First which are full of his abundant piety and richly furnished with depictions of all the 'Services which the World doth you'⁵. Better, he may have reasoned, in his concern for his disciples, to display the great benefits of undertaking the path; then, to indicate something of the cost in his own history. Enough to recall quickly some of the 'Services' which have to this point been displayed before his readers/listeners: *'The Services the World doth you are transcendent to all Imagination 'it discovers the Being of God to you'. . . The Sun [at some length]. . . You shall be Glorified, you will live in communion with [God], you shall ascend unto the Throne of the Highest Heaven; You shall be Satisfied. . . No Beast can see what Righteousness is. Nor is any Bruit capable of imitating it. You are . . . The World serveth you abundantly in teaching you your Duty. They daily cry in a Living Manner, with a silent, and yet most loud voice we*

⁴ Centuries III, 7

⁵ Centuries II, 1

are all His Gifts: We are Tokens and Presents of His Lov. . . From paragraphs II, 31 - 61, he enumerates the benefits of the love of God in Christ, through the work of redemption and the manifold gifts of nature and grace: *'You are as Prone to lov, as the Sun is to shine. It being the most Delightfull and Naturall Employment of the Soul of Man: without which you are Dark and Miserable ... We are all Prone to lov, but the Art lies in Managing our Love to make it truly Aimiable and Proportionable⁶* Traherne keeps up the pressure until para 73 when, rather suddenly, he allows a glimpse of difficulties. He adverts to discontinuity. We cannot always live in a terrestrial world transformed by the heavenly world. *Here upon Earth perhaps, where our Estate is imperfect this is Impossible: but in heaven where the Soul is all Act it is necessary. For the Soul there is all that it can be: Here it is to rejoice in what it may be. Till therefore the Mystes of Error and Clouds of Ignorance that confine this Sun be removed.. it must be present in all Kingdoms and Ages virtually, as the Sun is by Night. If not by Clear Sight and Lov, at least by its Desire. which are its Influences and its Beams. Working in a latent and obscure manner on Earth, abov in a Strong and Clear.⁷*

This last paragraph is valuable in suggesting the inherent problems of the task set before his disciples by Traherne. But nothing daunts him and in Century III, paragraph 87, he clarifies the labour of visionary faith as a subjective endeavour beyond ambiguity. We must all endeavour, in an adult way, become the visionary child of his earliest years. Our task is no less than to sustain the creation and the Creator, heaven and earth, time and eternity, in parallel and perfectly reflective consonance with the being and creative activity of God. Small wonder if, after handing us this task for our 'application' (in Eliot's phrase) he should add, in para 89, *Being that we are here upon Earth Turmoiled with Cares and often shaken with Winds and by Disturbances distracted. It is the infinit Mercy of God, that we are permitted to Breath and be Diverted. For all the Things in Heaven and Earth attend upon us, while we ought to Answer and Observe them, by upholding their Beauty within: But we are spared and God winketh at our Defect, all the World attending on us while we are about some little Trifling Business.'* Traherne adds drily that in the after-life such an intermission of attention would be an 'Apostasie'. He also comments that by reason of our infinit Union with God [in that state] it is Impossible.⁸

By the Fourth Century Traheme has to some extent initiated his followers and he there stresses practicalities from the opening sentences. He can now return to the topic of the solitude of the dedicated life upon which his neophyte is embarking. He describes it historically with himself as the model. *One great Discouragement to Felicity, or rather to great Souls in the pursuit of Felicity, is the Solitariness of the Way that leadeth to her Temple. A man that studies Happiness must sit alone like a Sparrow upon the Hous Top, and like a Pelican in the Wilderness. And the reason is because all men praise Happiness and despise it: very few shall a Man find in the way of Wisdom.. and few indeed that having given up their Names to Wisdom and felicity, that will persevere in seeking it.⁹*

⁶ Centuries II, 69

⁷ Centuries II, 73

⁸ Centuries II, 89

⁹ Centuries IV, 13

We must leave Traherne but not before quoting from **Select Meditations** a passage parallel to others already mentioned or quoted, in which Traherne outlines as vividly as possible the programme for the loving person set upon building up her correspondence in mind, heart and imagination with the transfigured world as God sees it. *There is no Deceit in nature more Incident or hurtfull to a Brisk understanding then a little weariness or contempt of Apprehending things already known. Even by the change of a Thought is an Infinit Temple either Built or ruined And as God by a perpetual Influx of Beauty and power upholdeth the world: in which every moments conservation is fully stil'd [styled] a new creation: So will He have us by a perpetuall Conflux and Activity of thought maintain All Things and in our selves to uphold our Treasures: for they are no longer ours than they are within us. The World is in Him upheld by Him, the world in us is upheld by us.*¹⁰ We cannot follow Traherne in his further development of this idea. We may, however, add that in *Select Meditations* the 'feel' of many such assertions suggests a greater closeness than in *The Centuries* to the early stages of this phenomenal discipline and self-training in attention on Traherne's part; if only because he seems in them to be so sharply aware of the lapses that can occur.

Ronald Stuart Thomas

An often-quoted phrase of my youth, a cliché in conversation, was 'the loneliness of the long-distance runner'. One saw that it had a kind of sense but I only recently stumbled on the book which held the story. Traherne refers to 'solitude' which we may, I think, without quibbling, understand as 'loneliness'. May I attempt to bring Traherne and RS together in this respect, at least to begin with? There is a passage in **Centuries** III, 23, where Traherne reports *another time, in a lowering and sad Evening, being alone in the field when all things were dead and quiet, a certain Want and Horror fell upon me, beyond imagination. The unprofitableness and Silence of the Place dissatisfied me, its Wideness terrified me, from the utmost Ends of the Earth, fears surrounded me. How did I know but Dangers might suddainly arise from the East, and invade me from the unknown region beyond the seas ? I was a Weak and little child and had forgotten their was a man alive in the earth.* RS does not evoke agoraphobia and desolation in this way but he is a master at eliciting a kindred overwhelming sense of absence and want. For those prepared to investigate his verse, from *The Stones of the Field*(1946) to, say, *No Truce with the Furies* (1995), there is a rich mine of images of solitude. And, to crudely invert a well-know saying in spirituality [*nunquam minus solus quam cum solo*] RS is 'never more alone than in company with another person,' be that person Prytherch or Pugh, Cynddylan or God, - to name but four. RS, being a priest and ever engaged in ministerial offices, has a particularly sacerdotal type of solitariness. He epitomizes or condenses this style in an early poem *Country Cures*¹¹. After a searing description of 'lost parishes' where country ministers live, he adds, *I know these places and the lean men / whose collars fasten them by the neck to loneliness.* Such was RS himself and a possible clue to his early absorption in looming, unattractive figures of countrymen, presumably in origin his parishioners, is that they are as

¹⁰ *Select Meditations* III, 5

utterly closed to him and to his ministry, as he is to them. They move up lanes or around fields and hillsides, remorselessly, indifferently, sealed away from metaphysical angst, romantic longing, faith, grace, glory: everything, you might say that makes, or ought to make, RS tick. Take Cynddylan on a Tractor

Ah, you should see Cynddylan on a tractor, he begins, and later, *He is the knight at arms breaking the fields / mirror of silence, emptying the wood of foxes and squirrels and bright jays*. This, for RS, is solitariness as affliction, as a force. Cynddylan is not only impervious (his *din* is his shield !) to whatever the Church has to offer him, but is a wrecker of the divine voice in nature herself. Perhaps the most telling poem in the series is that printed in Complete Poems opposite Cynddylan's poem. Its title is The Hill Farmer Speaks¹². As I listen to RS himself reading this poem on the disc published by SAIN Recordings, I hear a particular resonance and finish by being haunted, at least temporarily, by the refrain, *Listen, listen, I am a man like you*. It is good to be haunted in this way by a living voice; it helps the penny to drop. In this case I have come to see that both RS and the 'hill farmer' are indeed meant to be seen as virtually interchangeable, each a prisoner in his harshly astringent world, more physical than spiritual in the one case, more spiritual than physical in the other. RS and Traherne lived and composed their worlds in very different times. The poet, our contemporary, is able to take stock of the difference and does so through a rare reference in his verse to Traherne himself, thus Resurrections.¹³ How typical, we may think, of RS to put Traherne in a poem with such a bitter ending! And to give it such a title ! RS also refers to Traherne in the Introduction of his Penguin Book of Religious Verse (1963). He writes that he does not wish it to be inferred from his omission of Traherne in that anthology that Traherne is "among the admittedly religious poets [who] have not moved me much." This is a somewhat back-handed compliment ! But one values RS's accompanying assertion that *The presentation of religious experience in the most inspired language is poetry. This is not a definition of poetry but a description of how the communication of religious experience best operates*¹⁴.

But the problem remains. How and where to find a spiritual idiom in a world where public consciousness is, from a spiritual point of view, carcase-like and infested, where 'Divine Apprehensions' and 'Treasures in Heaven and Earth' are fairy gold as remote and fictional as the treasure-trove of Smaug in **The Hobbit** For the wilderness is not just 'out there' but 'in here'. As RS puts it in A Thought from Nietzsche: *Ah, body, white body my poor pelt ... / you are betrayed by wilderness within, / That spreads upwards and outward like a stain*¹⁵. The minister is dispenser of the message of life-transforming love yet

*Beloved, let us love one another, the words are blown
To pieces by the unchristened wind
In the chapel rafters, and love's text*

¹¹ Complete Poems p.24

¹² Complete Poems p.31

¹³ No Truce with the Furies (1995) p.47

¹⁴ Pp. 7— 8,9.

¹⁵ Song at the Year's turning (1942-54) p.20

*Is riddled by the inhuman cry
Of Buzzards circling above the moors*

Yes, even the birds can let one down; and Wales has such sweet Christian birds,

*O but God is in the throat of a bird..
Ann ... Panlycelyn... Olwen ... Melangell
Wales in fact is his peculiar home,
Our fathers knew Him. But where is that voice now ?
.....
The moor pressed its face to the window.
The clock ticked on, the sermon continued.
Out in the fir-tree an owl cried
Derision on the God of love¹⁶*

I do not know for certain whether RS had a 'kenshō' moment, an instant 'in and out of time', when all became changed. Discussing this topic with a friend much better versed in these matters than I, we concluded that Traherne, on his own evidence, had this experience early in his life. In the case of RS, that it would be rash to conclude when, where and how he might have experienced such a turn-around, if he ever did. So we are left to work with the poetry and gleanings from the autobiography, and other works. Much of questioning and negativity therein chimes well with the point of departure (or arrival) of many in our time, especially ministers of religions, priests, the public 'professors' of faith. The verse of RS is eloquent of the impasse, the deadend, the *ne plus ultra* in this department of life, now, it seems, that we have moved from the 'infinite world' to the 'closed universe' (to invert a phrase of Alexandre Koyre)¹⁷. The poem Who? in the collection, Pietà, replaces 'loneliness' with 'loveliness', but ends in bathos, and reveals how this poet is not usually at his best with plain statements. In fact he can speak with several different voices, which may counter-poise each other or even cancel one another out, over time. Other attitudes are cast in verse such as that of Threshold in Between Here and Now (1981) where aloneness combines, not for the first or last time, with waiting.

*I emerge from the mind's cave
Into the worse darkness
Outside, where things pass and
The Lord is in none of them.
.....
I have lingered too long on*

¹⁶ Song...p.20

this threshold, but where can I go ?
To look back is to lose the soul
I was leading upward towards
The light. To lookforward ?
Ah What balance is needed at
The edges of such an abyss.
I am alone on the surface
Of a turning planet. What
To do but, like Michelangelo's
Adam, put my hand
Out into the unknow space,
Hoping for the reciprocating touch ?

But the Adamic gesture, - striking an attitude if ever there was such a thing! – is inadequate, a signal of readiness without commitment. It is struck aside by The Porch. Was this aphasic seizure God's reply to the languid gesture, a coup de foudre, a moment of 'kenshō', even, - where delivery of a decent minimum from on on high was all that was expected? We cannot say that a corner was turned at this time. The Bright Field appears in a collection several years before the appearance of The Porch.¹⁸

Yet illumination seems to gain in strength from the mid-seventies and ways are found to suggest presence where absence is the primary datum in the register of sensitivity, as though what Traherne calls 'an Implicit Faith in God's Goodness' is gradually asserting itself. In fact, the whole of Traherne's passage on this topic is worth citing, as he addresses his circle with, *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: and therefore led to the Study of the Most Obvious and Common Things.* . . . How natural it seems, after this, to find Traherne marvelling at what we call the Common House Fly (as Denise Inge has revealed this in her recently published anthology of Traherne's writings)!¹⁹ Of the sunnier poems by RS, relating to down-to-earth-experience, we will have our favourites. Mine would include The Other, Sea-Watching, Fynon Fair, Llananno Retirement. In the best poems, while he never ceases to tease us by denying us a straight-forward affirmation of faith, he manages at times to suggest the warmth of presence-in-absence with great economy of means, if not always without great complexity of syntax.²⁰

RS builds his world of shadows, ambiguities, reflections and dubieties, together with momentous, if rare, obeisances, with deliberation. The *persona* of the poet is not artless; how could it be? But, as Traherne is a conscious and competent worker with his material, so is RS with that which he selects. The treatment of explicitly Christian themes they share in common, could be used to illustrate this. Alas, time does not permit. Enough to recall that it exists and that it includes the untenanted cross.

¹⁷ Alex. Koyre - From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe (1957)

¹⁸ Complete Poems pp. 203, 326

¹⁹ Thomas Traherne Poetry and Prose selected &c by Denise Inge (2002) pp. 111-112

I have said little about 'Communion'. This theme achieves transcendent heights in Traheme and one reason for neglecting it is that it would take us into unsoundable theological waters. He sums up his spiritual trajectory in **Select Meditations** III, 99, in a poem beginning in Hereford with *My growth is Strange! At first I onely knew / The Gates and Streets mine infancy did view / In these first walls...* and ends with an evocation of the infinite richness and depth, pleasure and delight, bestowed on him by God. Communion, for Traheme, is inseparable from partaking and passing on the goodness of God for, he asks, alluding to an age-old Platonic Christian axiom, 'bonum est diffusivum sui': *Is He not Infinitely communicativ? Is He not the more Good the more He is communicativ ?* (Select Meditations IV,8 Page 119). One could say that most, if not every one, of his writings spring from this axiom.

As for RS, alongside the fitfully appearing luminousness of his observation of nature, I should like to notice his winning sense of humour in various poems, including some quite autobiographical ones in The Echoes Return Slow (1988), together with his love poems, some of which are collected in a small paperback, Love Poems published by Phoenix (Orion Books) in 1996. Some readers might deduce from his descriptions of people and landscapes in Wales that he spent most of his life in a desert inhabited by disagreeable xenophobes, where he was for most of the time closed up and misanthropic. Such a picture is inaccurate, of course. As his own, A Year in in Lleyn [published in English in R.S.Thomas Autobiographies, 1987 bears witness, he enjoyed the scenery of the area known to local people as Pen Llyn. The same people are gentle and exceedingly hospitable. He revelled in his bird-watching walks along the coasts. Birds are one of his great themes, and we have not quite finished with them yet. I was told which were his favourite places. I have followed two predecessors in country parishes, of whom it was commonly said that 'he was so shy he would cross the road rather than talk to you'. Well, so be it. Yet RS was liked if not loved; he shared talk of great rugby matches and dropped in on nearby parishioners to see a big match, not having a TV set himself. His sermons could be interesting to the young. He was appreciated in times of bereavement. He baked the family bread. He was not known for his sociability with colleagues and deplored liturgical reform. I end this lecture with A Thicket in Lleyn (collected in 1986) which brings the two Thomases as close together as anything else I can think of, because it brings , dramatically to life 1) the communicative nature of God, 2) the idea of nature healed and a vehicle of grace, 3). the poet himself, receptive and alight with imaginative faith. I heard him read it in the Great Hall of the university of Wales in Bangor, before a packed and mainly youthful audience. It was the final poem in his programme of readings from his own verse. It was a fitting conclusion to a fascinating evening then, and I trust it will suffice to end this one.

NOTES to Solitude and Communion

Texts of Thomas Traheme are from Poems,Centuries and Thanksgivings edited by Anne Ridler, Oxford 1966; Thomas Traheme Select Meditations edited by Julia

²⁰ Complete Poems pp. 457, 306, 304, 503

Smith, Fyfield Books (Carcenet Press) 1997.

Texts of R.S.Thomas are fom the collections mentioned and from Collected Poems 21 COM

2. Summa theologic a la qu.ii,arL3 corp.p.Poems p.511