

Thomas Traherne's Language as loss of innocence: A Talk Given at the Traherne Festival. June 14th 2003.

Martin Corless-Smith

My initial interest in Traherne's poem "Dumbness" stems from its apparently paradoxical nature: A poem that endorses the virtues of silence, a piece of language use that suggests language use is a sin. In particular I draw attention to the opening of the third stanza:

*This, my dear Friends, this was my blessed case;
For nothing spoke to me but the fair face
Of Heaven and earth, before myself could speak.
I then my bliss did, when my silence, break.*

That zeugma, (a Zeugma is a device that has two separate subjects for the verb, for example, I left in a hurry and a taxi) that instant where Traherne's speaking (and I understand speaking really as using language, so that writing a poem might be seen as the same order of activity) - that instant where Traherne's speaking breaks his bliss seems to indicate a profound distrust in language and even more, it seems to announce that the very instance that Traherne uses language becomes the very instance he is broken away from his bliss.

His "bliss" in this context would seem to be an unmediated state of immanence with the world. This pre-linguistic state is akin to a state of innocence. If language is seen as the cause of Traherne's own personal "fall" then why perpetuate the sin by writing? We can approach a solution to this seeming paradox through a closer reading of Traherne's poem "Dumbness", and by attempting an understanding of Traherne's belief in personal salvation through meditation.

We shall see that for Traherne, meditation manages the job that language cannot, and provides a unity between self and object. Traherne's ambition to resolve the separation of selfhood from world is a particularly western dilemma stemming in part from Platonic dualism. Plato's system of Ideals posits the material world as a lower, lesser, physical version of an Ideal. When we see this church pew, we know it to be a pew because it exhibits *pewness*. It's not as perfect a pew as the ideal pew, but according to Plato it has more *pewness* than *bedness*, and so we know it to be such. What this means is that everything in the physical world is less perfect than that in the world of ideals. Much twentieth century theory has focused on the dualistic nature of western thought, such as the division between mind and body, between good and evil, between heaven and earth, between man and woman. In particular, post-structuralism and deconstruction have noticed such oppositions as constructions that imply hierarchies, and have tried to show that such hierarchies are often self-contradictory, that opposites exist in a necessary relation.

Traherne's sense of loss of bliss and of a fallen world is typically platonic. It also exhibits the very features that Georges Bataille regards as the impulse towards the need for religion.

Neo-Platonism and our Lack of Immanence

In his massively ambitious Theory of Religion, French Theorist and provocateur Georges Bataille speculates on the emergence of the phenomenon of Religion. He suggests that as soon as mankind developed the awareness and ability to utilize materials for specific aims he became separated from the world. For Traherne this event is recorded as the instance he begins to speak.

The instance of our awareness of the use of certain tools becomes the instance of our separation from the world. For example: as soon as we decide we want a pointed stick to kill wolves with we separate it from the rest of the world in our search for it. We have the forest and the stick. In this instant we realize that the tool is also separate from ourselves, and this constitutes a sense of our own separation from the world.

This might remind some of you of the post-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, which simply put, suggests that the beginnings of the awareness of the self as an independent being come from seeing the self as a unified other in a mirror. At that point the self is seen as something quite other than the mother, and thus the moment of recognition of selfhood is also the moment of recognition of separation from mother. Because this unified self is a reflection, even the constitution of selfhood is based on absence. And for Lacan this is the basis of anxieties of separation, and the beginning of selfhood are the beginning of our nostalgia for immanence with the mother.

There have been a number of critics that have noticed Traherne's striking use of the mirror in constructing the self (Traherne often regards the soul as a mirror that reflects the image of God) but I am slightly more interested

in the moment of rupture that Bataille and Traherne, three centuries apart, agree constitutes our birth as an independent separated self.

For Bataille the capacity for utilizing objects presents us with an anxiety of separation from the whole world. It is this loss of immanence in Bataille that leads us to desire reunion and immanence. And according to Bataille, for this purpose, we have religion. It is the job of religions to return us to a sense of immanent relation.

Now this is an extremely brief account of Bataille's theory, but it does defend an understanding of language, the uber-tool, as a device whose function manifests separation. In short, when we speak of something, we are separate from it, and this might and has lead to a desire for Union with the thing itself: to religious union.

For Traherne, the ideal state of immanence is pre-linguistic.

As he describes it, as he remembers it, his own life before language was edenic.

from "*Speed*":

*I was as high and great
As kings are in their seat.
All other things were mine.
The world my house, the creatures were my goods,
Fields, mountains, valleys, woods,
Floods, cities, churches, men, for me did shine.*

from the Centuries of Meditations: The second Century:

*I was an Adam
A little Adam in a Sphere
Of Joys -*

But as soon as we encounter the speech of the world:

from Centuries of Meditations: The First Century:

That made by God was great and Beautiful. Before the Fall, it was Adam's joy, and the temple of his glory. That made by men is a Babel of confusions: invented riches, pomps, and vanities, brought in by sin...

Here Traherne's focus on Babel reminds us of Genesis Chapter 11, verses 1 - 10:

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech ... And they said, Go to, let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven ... And the LORD said, Behold the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them ... let us confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

And as one who teaches poetry in America I can acknowledge that this scattering of confusion is alive and well today.

So man's ambition to replace God with that which is manmade results in the mediated confusion of language, and language is seen by Traherne as a conveyor of sin, as a confusing babble that hides the real truth (from "The Third Century"):

Being swallowed up therefore in the miserable gulf of idle talk...

(notice how gulf implies a hellish fall, and indeed for Traherne Hell is the experience of loss of heaven here on earth)

... and worthless vanities, thenceforth I lived among shadows, like a prodigal son feeding upon husks with swine. A comfortless wilderness full of thorns and troubles the world was, or worse: a waste place covered with idleness and play, and shops and markets and taverns. As for churches, they were things I did not understand. And schools were a burden: so that there was nothing in the world worth the having, or enjoying, but my game and sport, which also was a dream and, being passed, wholly forgotten. So that I had utterly forgotten all goodness, bounty, Comfort, and glory: which things are the very brightness of the glory of God, for lack of which therefore he was unknown. (Centuries 111.14)

Traherne accuses his own teachers of passing onto him the sins and customs of his adopted world:

let nurses, and those parents that desire holy children, learn to make them possessors of Heaven and earth betimes, to remove silly objects from before them, to magnify nothing but what is great indeed. (Centuries III. 11)

He believes:

WHEN our own Actions are regular, there is nothing in the World but may be made conducive to our highest happiness (Christian Ethicks, page 30)

but when we encounter sinful others:

Souls to Souls are like Apples to Apples, one being rotten rots another (Centuries 1. 116) -and here the contiguity of rotten with rots shows physically how contaminating language is an idea reiterated in "Silence" the companion poem to "Dumbness":

No rotten Soul did like an Apple near My Soul Approach.

The metaphor of the rotten Apple is well chosen and deliberate. It is of course a reference to Adam, Eden and Original sin. The Apple is the acquisition of knowledge, in Eden from the tree, in Traherne's metaphor through language. Earthbound individuals communicate their sins through the commerce of language.

In his essay, Traherne's Apostasy, Michael Ponsford tracks Traherne's relationship with Adam and the concept of Original sin, and finds that although "there are some few examples of Traherne acknowledging Adam as the cause of all sin, as Centuries 111:8 shows

Yet is all our corruption derived from Adam: inasmuch as all Evil Examples and inclinations of the World arise from Sin ...

Adam is not the cause of Traherne's apostasy." (Ponsford 181-182)

Ponsford finds that Traherne never categorically denies the historical existence of Adam. Adam is rather an analogue, in that his Fall defines the fall within each individual ... the emphasis for Traherne (and his contemporaries) is not on the historical Fall, but on the fall within the individual." (Ponsford 183)

With its predominant guilt culture, the medieval world was thoroughly Augustinian. It is typical of Augustinian typology to see Old Testament events as prefiguring those that appear in the New Testament. Adam's tree, for example becomes the cross of Christ. Traherne takes such a view even further, seeing Christ's redemptive act as foreshadowing our own return to a divine nature. All history is filtered through each and every individual:

God gave me alone to all the world, and all the world to me alone. (Centuries of Meditations 1. 15)

which he later extends (in a very Blakean fashion) to: *everyone is heir of all the world (Centuries of Meditations 1.35)*

Traherne's understanding of individual inheritance is not straightforwardly Augustinian however, and represents a Pelagian replacement of the hitherto commonplace Augustinian belief that all men are inherently sinful. Traherne's positive conclusions on the freedom of the will place an emphasis on the self which would not have been acceptable in an earlier age, brought up on Augustinian teachings of inherited guilt. Pelagius directly opposed the Augustinian view that man was naturally inclined to sinfulness. Pelagius saw Adam's fall merely as a biological necessity – Adam, in order to propagate the human race, had to develop from his child-like state, and this development, the fall, had no causal relationship with the later sins of man, which are the responsibility of the free individual." (Ponsford 180)

Traherne believes we are born innocent, and we learn our sins from sinful others. Importantly, Traherne assumed that man could be good, and further that goodness was not goodness unless it was chosen, unless, in other words, man had free will, which he claimed was necessary for the "Kingdome of Righteousnesse ... So that all the Glory of the World depends on the Liberty of Men and Angles' (Christian Ethicks, XII.) (Carol Marks 525).

This focus on the individual was part of the intellectual shift of the middle of the seventeenth century, part of the Neoplatonic revival. According to Ponsford Traherne's notebooks demonstrate that the major influences on the intellectual standpoint of the poet were not so much contemporary poets, but the earlier philosophers of the Neoplatonic revival, writers such as Ficino of the Florentine Platonist Academy, Nicholas Cusanus, (or Nicholas of Cusa) and Pico della Mirandola...Cusanus postulates in *De Docta Ignorantia* that "every spiritual being has its centre within itself." Much has been made of Traherne's links to the Cambridge Platonists, and when Carol L. Marks in *Thomas Traherne and Cambridge Platonism* mentions how the Platonists "wished to clear the intellectual slate of mere verbiage, to discover by Cartesian analysis the reality of things we recognize something of Traherne's concerns about language and its tendency to obfuscate the truth." (Descartes (1596-1650) attempted to replace Aristotelian verisimilitudes with clear distinct proof).

Because he was a poet, Traherne was also deeply mistrusting of metaphors and flourishes as exemplified by his metaphysical forebears such as Donne and Herbert.

In his poem-preface to his *Poems of Felicity* "The Author to the Critical Peruser"

Traherne extols "A simple light, **transparent** words"...his desire is to find words that can be seen through, so that they do not obscure the truth he wishes to convey. He goes on to challenge the likes of Donne and Herbert and their metaphysical conceits:

*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 lie
May well be reckon'd baser heraldry.*

In "Jordan II", George Herbert complains of "Curling metaphors a plain intention" and in "Jordan F" rebukes verse in his own anti-Petrarchan request:

*Who says that fictions only and false hair
become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty?*

but as Carol Ann Johnston acknowledges in *Heavenly Perspectives. Mirrors of Eternity: Thomas Traherne's Yearning Subject* "Herbert has retained **rather** than purged the Petrarchan 'winding stair' and exaggerated metaphor even while he claims to purge it".

The same is true for other self-acclaimed anti-Petrarchans. Consider Shakespeare's famous Sonnet 130 "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun."

Here Shakespeare pretends that he finds Petrarchan metaphor absurd in its hyperbole. He ends the sonnet claiming that he loves his mistress more than those using hyperboles love theirs, which seems itself a rather hyperbolic claim. And of course, Shakespeare uses metaphor to spurn metaphor. As Shakespeare is wont to do he has his cake, and rather more cake than anyone else, and he eats it, with rather more relish than anybody else. He shows himself to be both inheritor of Petrarchan traditions of blazoning techniques and also to be above the tradition, beyond its confines. But he cannot pretend not to be playing the very game he ridicules.

But as Johnston again tells us: "Traherne claims invention of an idealized unity between objects and the words that describe them." (not written, but REAL crowns) But "such poetry is obviously not possible ... 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." (Johnston 382)

Of course there is an inherent absurdity in Traherne's own stanza. To describe metaphors as "curling" is to use metaphorical language, and as Johnston notes "poets claiming to simplify metaphor and structure do so with a wink and a nod; after all, if poets were to take an anti-Petrarchism literally, they would deprive themselves of the variety available to them within complex metaphor and structure, and thus make writing almost impossible." (Johnston 382).

I don't think many of us that have read Traherne can imagine him winking. He is far too earnest for such an ironic stance. Johnston is nearer the mark when she contrasts Traherne's *intentions* to those of Petrarch:

The surface - the 'style' of the Petrarchan text - emphasizes the individual writer,

Before Petrarch, metaphors were not personal; Traherne, more than any other anti-Petrarchan poet, tries to move poetry back to a pre-Petrarchan innocence.” (And I would argue that Traherne has more in common with the lyrics of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth century than he does with his contemporaries. I read him more as I read the thirteenth century mystical poet Richard Rolle of Hampole than almost any of his contemporaries, notwithstanding Henry Vaughan). (Johnston 385)

One can certainly see that Traherne is deliberately *trying* to use a language that is simple and direct or, as he would have it, “**transparent**”.

Traherne's desire for a transparent language is an attempt to avoid mediation between object and word, and stands in place for his real desire for direct union with God. As a medium, language, even when it manifests a desire to unite, prevents anything like a direct union. So we are left with the dilemma we started with. If Traherne wants unmediated union, why is he using a medium such as language?

The answer seems to be that Traherne is using language for our benefit, not his.

“Had any man spoken of it, it had been the most easy thing in the world to have taught me, and to have made me believe, that Heaven and earth was God's house, and that he gave it to me. (Centuries III. 8)

Traherne is providing us with the teacher he never had. He describes his responsibilities at the opening of his masterpiece, the Centuries of Meditations:

“An empty book is like an infant's soul, in which anything may be written. It is capable of all things ... I have a mind to fill this with profitable wonders ... communicating most enriching truths”

and later:

I will open my mouth in parable: I will utter things that have been kept secret from the foundations of the world ... making you possessor of the whole world ... Unless therefore I could advance you higher by the uses of what I give, my love could not be satisfied in giving you the whole world. But because when you enjoy it, you are advanced to the throne of God and may see his love, I rest well pleased in bestowing it,

This is followed by something rather unusual:

It will enable you also to contemn the world, and to overflow with praises,

This contemning of the world might seem to ring a rather negative note, but Traherne goes on to explain:

To contemn the world and to enjoy the world are things contrary to each other. How then can we contemn the world which we are born to enjoy? Truly there are two worlds

and here Traherne flies his neo-Platonic colours

One made by God, the other by men. The man made world is the Babel of confusions. The other world we can only access by **meditation**, which is how he begins the next section of the The First Century, section 8:

What is more easy and sweet than meditation?

The first line of our poem Dumbness also mentions meditation, and I'd like to quickly look at some historical aspects of meditation or private devotion, and return finally to meditation as the culminating experience for Traherne in his map of development from Innocence through Misery and Grace to Glory.

Meditation

Traherne is considered now as a unique mystic, whose devotional writings provide proof of an exquisite soul in ecstatic acceptance of his deity. Traherne is, however, quite of his time in producing books for use in private devotion. According to Richard Douglas Jordan, in his article Thomas Traherne and the Art of Meditation, in “about 1650 there began a new surge of interest in formal private devotion and the art of meditation, different in important ways from past practices”. (Jordan 381). Traherne's books were responses, in part hostile, to the radical Puritan establishment which had banned the Book of Common Prayer and which favoured extemporaneous devotion. To writers such as Traherne, this assertion of individualistic inspiration smacked of hubris. And perhaps more importantly Traherne was convinced that religious extremists had led to one of the bloodiest periods in English History, the Civil War. “The Civil wars seemed a dreadful exemplar of how

factions could threaten the foundations of the nation, and bring both church and government to what Gilbert Sheldon in his Dauids Deliverence an Thanksgiving (London 1660) described as “the very brink of a remediless confusion.”

In his Select Meditations Traherne rejoices in ‘such times as those were, wherof it is sayd, Then had ye churches rest, throughout all Judea & Galilee and Samaria’ (111.23). Liberty was not a private, but a public question. In Attitudes towards Conformity and Nonconformity in Thomas Traherne, Julia J. Smith notices “Clement Barksdale, a vicar in Traherne’s native Hereford before the Civil Wars, who saw the people as restlessly ‘tossed to and fro’ by the vagaries of religion under the Commonwealth.” Traherne thought that to have religion established by law was a means of securing religious liberty: As long as our Nation continueth in peace, under ye wings of Magistrates & Christian Laws thy people in peace may Celebrat Thee (1.86); ‘The Governement of a church Established by laws is a great fortress in wch ye welfare of Millions is concerned’ (111.24)” (Smith 27).

Private devotions were written in a spirit typified by “Daniel Featley, who, looking back on his often reprinted Ancilla Pietatis., or, the Hand-Maid to Private Devotion wrote how:

In the last dreadful visitation, when the wayes of Sion mourned, because none passed by them and the gates of the Sanctuary were desolute, because almost none entered them: Religion her self for the most part for bearing the Church, and keeping her Closet, and there finding sufficient employment to complain of, and bewail the danger and desolation of her solemnest Assemblies; I fell into a serious consideration of the use and most urgent necessity of Private Devotion.

Featley also saw himself in competition with Roman Catholic devotional writers who ‘for the most part exceed in bulk, but our divines [exceed] in weight’ (Jordan 382).”

Bishop Hall also found the unsettled times a spur to private devotion. This from the preface to his The Devout Soul or Rules of Heavenly Devotion (London, 1644):

That in a time when we heare no noise but of Drums and Trumpets, and talk of nothing but arms, and sieges, & battles, I should write of Devotion, may seem to some of you strange & unseasonable; to me, contrarily, it seems most fit and opportune; For when can it be more proper to direct our address to the throne of grade, then when we are in the very jawes of Death? or when should we goe to seek the face of our God, rather, then in the needful time of trouble?

So we have contemporary attitudes expressing the exigency of meditation, and we begin to see why writers such as Traherne thought it better to follow certain guidelines in our meditations, rather than be allowed to wander into falsehoods and sins.

Hall continues:

If you tell me ... that there is a gift of prair, and that the spirit of God is not tied to rules; I yeeld to both these, but withal, I must say there are also helps of prayers, and that we must not expect immediate inspiration ... We must digest our sutes; & fore-order our supplications to the Almighty, so that there may be excellent and necessary use of meet rules in our Devotion.

Richard Baxter, the moderate Puritan who was one of the major exponents of the late seventeenth century art of meditation, also took a stand against enthusiasm in devotion and saw meditation as involved with reason and the written word. In his Christian Directory he spoke of the Christian's delight in God as a “solid rational” experience rather than “an Enthusiastick delight, consisting in irrational raptures, and joys which can give no account of the Reason of them.” He advised meditation on the scriptures as one chief form of the art .

In The Saints Everlasting Rest Baxter assumes that meditation involves writing as well as reading and warns: “If thy meditation tends to fill thy Note-Book with notions and good sayings concerning God, and not thy heart with longings after him, and delight in him, for ought I know thy Book is as much a Christian as thou. Jordan notes that Attacks on enthusiasts who used only extemporaneous devotion continued in English devotional literature long after the Restoration:

“The heights and vehemencies of many warm people in their unpremeditated Prayers, have nothing in them supernatural of Divine, and consequently, of themselves, they are not marks of Godliness.” says Joseph Glanvill in his The Way of Happiness Represented in its Difficulties and Incouragements. And Cleared from many Popular and Dangerous Mistakes (London 1670)

The problem for those who did not wish to associate their devotions with those of the radical enthusiasts was to be able to recognize the genuine influence of the Holy Spirit. They did so by constant reference to Scriptures and by test of reason. The scriptures were not only the touchstone of private devotion, they established its form and content. The Psalms were seen as particularly appropriate:

Richard Allestree introduced his *Scala sancta* by saying: "I chose the Psalms of David for the platform of my Devotions, because nothing can be supposed more acceptable to God in duties of this nature than to follow his steps, who was a man after God's own heart." *Scala sancta: or the Exaltation of the Soul* (London, 1678). We shall see that this closely aligns to Traherne's own experience.

"Meditation" could be used to describe both the practice of private devotion in general and the specific part of that practice limited to contemplation by the mind of some particular object of spiritual significance ... It is a conversation with God or with one's own soul which can liberate the individual from the limits of the body.

The art of meditation in the later seventeenth century relied heavily on a Neoplatonic conception of the infinite soul of man. Rather than contemplating his insignificance as a sinner in the hands of an angry God, the devout Christian now attempted to exercise the powers of his soul to encompass the universe.

In advocating or in employing methods for meditation, there was little consistency. One can, Jordan continues, nonetheless, make some generalizations about methods in the period. The preparation was usually described as a cleansing, an emptying out of the soul. This could be accompanied with a prayer for God's guidance in the work of meditation to follow. The preparation for meditation could also consist of reading the Scriptures or another suitable book. After such preparation came the meditation proper, a consideration of the subject that was according to Isaac Ambrose in his *Media: The Middle Things* (London 1650) "to begin in the understanding" and "to end in the affections".

The conclusion was always prayer, generally a thanksgiving to God. Jordan notices a close relation between these analytic, mnemonic, and rhetorical practices and those of the contemporary sermon, and many published meditations from the period sound very like sermons, the writers involved in what Richard Baxter described as "methodically and earnestly preaching to your own hearts, as you would do on that subject to others if it were to save their souls (*A Christian Directory*, 307)".

So this use of public rhetoric in meditations made the publications of private devotions something more than simply acts of self-expression or vanity, and we can see Traherne's motives and Traherne's writing style marrying in an attempt to circumvent the pitfalls of self-aggrandizement.

Writers of manuals on the art of meditation often gave lists of particular topics ... One important general area, which saw a major development of its importance in the art of meditation during this period, was meditation on the Book of Creatures. Turning away from the world during meditation now meant turning away from the problems of human society and of a fallen world to a contemplation of this world in the glory and harmony of its creation by God. Joseph Alleine's biography records how he would

often delight in his devotions to converse with the fowls of the Air, and the Beasts of the Field, since these were more innocent, and less degenerate than Man. With Streams and Plants did he delight to Walk, and all these did utter to his attentive Ear and Knowledge of his Creator (122).

Such a meditation on the creatures reinforces the literary character of the art of meditation, for such meditation almost always involved a consideration of creation as a book. "The World," wrote Richard Baxter, "Is Gods book, which he set man at first to read; and every Creature is a Letter, or Syllable, or Word, or Sentence, more or less, declaring the name and will of God." (*A Christian Directory*, 301)

This literary aspect of creation is endorsed by Traherne in *Dumness*:

*A temple, and a teacher I did find,
With a large text to comment on. No ear,
But eyes themselves were all the hearers there
And every stone, and every star a tongue,
And every gale of wind a curious song.
The heavens were an oracle, and spake
Divinity: The earth did undertake
The office of a priest.*

For Traherne, the world presents a divine book, which he read without the use of conventional language. Here, his eyes and not his ears receive the message, a clear indication that this is no ordinary sermon.

Unfortunately as we know and as the aptly titled poem tells us:

Mankind is sick ... The world's one Bedlam, or a greater cave Of madmen, that do always rave.

In this poem Traherne alludes to Plato's metaphor of the Cave in which various levels of Mankind are deluded and separated from the true light, watching instead shadows on the cave wall.

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. (Centuries 111. 8).

These are the same noisy gusts that Traherne mentions in the beginning of Dumbness:

And therefore speechless made at first, that he Might in himself profoundly busied be: And not vent out, before he hath ta'en in Those antidotes that guard his soul from sin.

The venting, from Latin, ventus, meaning wind, is literally the hot air of our own empty talking.

When I had gained a tongue

the powerful instruction of the divine world

began to die.

And so Traherne “was fain to learn it all again”

Again, it is important to remember that the child knows the Divine World, but as soon as the child learns to speak they partake of sin and lose sight of the truth:

When I began to speak and go nothing began to be present to me, but what was present in their [his teacher's] thoughts ... All things were absent which they talked not of. (Centuries III. 10)

Language is the vehicle of his fall

And so he must shut up. And listen not merely to his teachers, but to the world: Listen not to the language of man, but to what the world is saying:

because the nature of the thing contradict's (his teacher's) words (Centuries III. 11)

When I came into the Country, and being seated among silent Trees, had all my time in mine own Hands, I resolved to Spend it all, whatever it cost me, in Search of Happiness, and to Satiat that burning Thirst which Nature had Enkindled, in me from my youth. (Centuries III.46)

Away from the noise of men, and apparently silent himself, Traherne makes something of a pastoral retreat, itself a common literary device filled with Platonic nostalgia for a Golden age. Unlike the fantastic nostalgia of the shepherd romances of Sidney or Spenser, Traherne's project is to actually regain paradise. And it is Traherne's assertion that he has indeed managed such a reconstruction.

I knew by Intuition those things which since my Apostacie, I collected again, by the Highest reason. (Centuries I. 110)

This happens in a renewal of our pre-linguistic state, here a passage of poetry from Commentaries of Heaven:

*Before, Behind, and evry where, Faith is,
Or sees, the very Masterpeice 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,*

with our newly reconstructed vision we are dumb again. As Carol Johnston asserts, the viewer's new perspective is no longer the subjectivity of a single viewer. Our perspective had been the inherited Renaissance perspective of self as centre of the universe. But such a worldly focus limits man to his own body.

This spectacle once seen, will never be forgotten. It is a Great part of the Beatifick 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. (Centuries III.60)

Here a sight of Happiness is Happiness. Traherne indicates that mediation (and he uses the metaphor of sight though this is no seeing with the physical eye. This sight manages to see God “as if he were a BODY”. He isn't simply such a thing, and so our sight must be more than a mere eye directed. Instead of the senses indicating the distance between self and object, in the event of union our senses no longer prevent our unification.

Traherne continues to describe this moment:

*I no sooner discerned this but I was seated in a Throne or 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 withdrawn from all Endeavors of altering and Mending Outward Things.** They lay so well methoughts they could not be mended: but I must be Mended to Enjoy them. (Centuries 111.60)*

The senses are no longer separating Traherne from the world, because he has turned inwards to rectify his own house. Once here Traherne is in the realm of Thoughts. What was once managed by intuition is now effected by thoughts. It is worth remembering that Traherne saw fit to entitle four poems “Thought,” and a number of other poems such as “Ye Hidden Nectars” are clearly dealing with the same subject.

Thoughts are the wings on which the soul doth fly, (Thought IV)

but rather more than this:

*The soul is present by a thought; and sees
The new Jerusalem*

For Traherne, thoughts are the platonic ideals housed in ourselves

*Ye great exemplars, and ye heavenly springs
Which I within me see;*

And are invisible, yet infinite. (Thought I)

Thoughts, it appears, manage the task that language cannot. To be invisible and infinite. Language needs must be visible (or audible), discernible we shall say, and finite. By its very utile nature Language cannot manage the momentary event that Traherne's mystical union manages:

*This sight which is the glorious end
Of all His works, and which doth comprehend (that is take hold of)
Eternity, and time and space. (Thoughts II)*

Of course not all thoughts are good thoughts, but it is the joyous thought that is our salvation.

*Thoughts are the things
That us affect: the honey and the stings
Of all that is*

*Thoughts are the highest things
The very offspring of the King of Kings
When they're good, they're such in every feature
They bear the image of their Father's face,
And beautify even all His dwelling place:
So nimble and volatile, unconfin'd
Illimited, to which no form's assigned
So changeable, capacious, easy, free,
That what itself doth please a thought may be.
From nothing to infinity it turns,*

*Even in a moment doth become
Now all at once: now crowded in a sand,
Now fills the hemisphere, and sees a land
Now on a sudden's wider than the sky,
and now runs parile with the Deity.*

The right thoughts allow us to join with God.

*A thought can clothe itself with all the treasures
Of God, and be the greatest of His pleasures.*

The right thought is actually the highest culmination for God:

*Yea what were bliss without such thoughts to me,
What were my life, what were the Deity? (Thought I)*

A neo-platonic proof of God's existence is that he exists as a thought, a kind of maker's mark if you will.

The image of God planted in us, guided me (Centuries III.59).

*A delicate and tender thought
The quintessence is found of all He wrought (Thought II)*

He opens his Third century with a description of his first encounter with this divine signature:

*Will you se the infancy of this sublime and celestial greatness? Those pure and virgin apprehensions I had from the womb, and that divine light wherewith I was born, are the best unto this day, wherein I can see the universe. **By the gift of God they attended me into the world, and by His special favour I remember them till now.** (Centuries III. 1)*

His original understanding of the universe in a pre -linguistic state is proof of his original union with god. He remembers such a state, and this memory, however faint, is enough to draw him back after his fall into the world of language and mediation. In the third Century Traherne describes the fourfold Estates we must pass through to return to God:

We are to Contemplat GOD in the unity of His essence in the Trinity of Persons, in his Manifold Attributes, in all His Works, Internal and External, in his Counsels and Decrees, in the Work of Creation, and in His Works of Providence. And Man, as he is a Creature of GOD, capable of Celestial Blesedness, and a subject in His Kingdom: in his fourfold Estate of Innocency, Misery, Grace and Glory. (Centuries III. 100)

This classification of four stages of growth occurs in other writers of the period such as John Bartlett's The Practical Christian. The usual arrangement was tripartite, combining misery and grace into a transitional state of the world. These estates are most clearly outlined in the Third Century, stanza 43:

In the Estate of innocence we are to Contemplate the Nature and Maner of man's happiness, the laws under which He was governed, the joys of paradise, and the Immaculat Powers of His Immortal Soul. In the Estate of Misery we hav his Fall the Nature of Sin Original and Actual, His Manifold Punishments Calamity Sickness Death etc. In the Estate of Grace; the Tenor of the New Covenant, the maner of its Exhibition under various Dispensations of the Old and New Testament, the Mediator of the Covenant, the Conditions of it Faith and Repentance, the Sacraments or Seals of it, the Scriptures Ministers and Sabbaths, the Nature and Government of the Church, its Histories and Successions from the Beginning to the End of he World etc. In the state of Glory; the Nature of Separat Souls, their advantages Excellencies and Privileges, the Resurrection of the body, the Day of Judgement and Life Everlasting.

In individual human lives it is the sins of ourselves and those we love that bring us to misery, and even Christ was made a man of sorrows through the sins that he took upon himself. Misery, however, is not static ... it is always coupled with some measure of Grace. Adam and Eve had their trial too, which they failed; but with the coming of Grace in the form of Christ, man has been “restored to a new Estate of Trial, and endued with Power to do new Duties, as pleasing to him, as those which he required us in Eden” (Christian Ethicks 105). You might recall that Herbert's poem Easter Wings shows us a concrete version of Christ redeeming Adam's sins, and the same needing to happen for each individual.

Thus, as the Second Adam went through Misery and by the Grace of God achieved Glory, so each of us go upward by imitating Him. This work is done in the realm of the soul. For Traherne Heaven is contained within the souls of Man:

Heaven and earth, angels and men, God and all things must be contained in our souls, that we may become glorious personages, and like unto Him in all our actions. (Centuries II.84)

God hath made it easy to convert our soul into a thought containing Heaven and earth ... If he would suspend His power, no doubt but Heaven and earth would straight be abolished, which He upholds in Himself as easily and continually, as we do the idea of them in our own mind. (Centuries II.87)

It is our act of sharing the thought of Heaven with God that actualizes Heaven. Without us Heaven would not be completed:

What would Heaven and earth be worth, were there no spectator, no enjoyer? ... God had rather you should think on this: thereby you are united to Him. (Centuries II. 90)

By allowing the thought of Heaven, in a meditation, to fill the soul, the individual becomes one with God:

This, according to Traherne is the result of a “voluntary act of an obedient soul” (Centuries II. 90) “The world within you is an offering returned,” We have, if you will, fulfilled our honest contract with the deity, and this is as much as achieving Heaven. And it is our duties to continue such thinking as it sustains Heaven:

because every moment's preservation is another obligation ... whereby we continue to uphold the frame of Heaven and earth in the soul towards God. (Centuries II. 91)

These illuminating thoughts are described as light

*Clothe yourself with light as with a garment, **when you become Him**; put on the greatness of Heaven and earth ... **when you prepare yourself to speak to Him**, be ... as great, as **clear**, and as perfect as is possible. (Centuries II. 86).*

and here we find Traherne's transparent language. Rather than an assertion of selfhood, in this instant the speaking is actually an absencing of all worldly matter, and we take on the deity “As light is in a piece of crystal (Centuries II. 76)

Rather than a mediated relation, Traherne's concept of thought provides an identity with that which is thought. To think of Heaven is to be in Heaven. This transparency is beyond the possibilities of any earthbound language. To Traherne, a word is a fallen, earth bound idea, not a measureless celestial thought. It is almost as if God is the letter T shaped like a Jesse tree which enters into mediation and produces meditation.

It is evidence that such a thought, such a state of being challenges the very abilities of language to convey it. But, there is evidently a role for language to play, a reason Traherne allows himself to write. For Traherne himself, although he mentions that:

“pure and virgin apprehensions ... are unattainable by book”: (Centuries III. 1) and observes how strange it is

that an infant should be heir of the world, and see those mysteries which The Books of the learned never unfold' (Centuries III.2)

yet he does acknowledge a seemingly natural desire for such a book:

“there befell me a most infinite desire of a book from Heaven” (Centuries III.27)

“This thirst hung upon me a long time” (Centuries III. 27)

and later:

“Having been at the University, and received there the taste and tincture of another education, I saw that there were things in this world of which I never dreamed, glorious secrets, and glorious persons past imagination ... those things which my nurses and parents should have talked of, there were taught to me.” (C III. 36)

So books did push him along, and reveal themselves even if that was only to reveal their limited nature:

“Nevertheless some things were defective too. There was never a tutor that did professly teach felicity” (Centuries III.37)

– and one can't help but feel a little sorry for his nurses and his tutor for the job required of them, was necessarily beyond them.

'We studied to inform our knowledge, but knew not what end we so studied' (Centuries III.37)

“The best of all possible ends is the glory of God.” (Centuries III . 39)

There was of course one Book that did fulfil his desires. The Bible, and in particular the Psalms.

Like Augustine, Traherne sees David's Psalms as a type of what will come in the New Jerusalem. To Traherne they are examples of the praises of a soul that has been transformed into an act of gratitude:

*“O that I were as David, the sweet Singer of Israel!
In meter Psalms to set forth thy praises
thy Raptures ravish me, and turn my soul all into melody* (Thanksgivings for the Body 341-343)

and in the centuries:

When I saw those Objects celebrated in His Psalmes which GOD and Nature had proposed to me, and which I thought chance only presented to my view: you cannot imagine how unspeakably I was delighted, to see so Glorious a Person, so Great a Prince, so Divine a sage, that was a Man after Gods own Heart by the testimony of God Himself, rejoicing in the same things, meditating on the same and praising GOD for the same. For by this I perceived we were led by one Spirit.. and that following the clew of Nature into this Labyrinth I was brought into the midst of Celestial Joys: and that to be retired from Earthly Cares and fears and Distractions that we might in sweet and heavenly Peace contemplat all the Works of GOD, was to live in Heaven and the only way to becom what David was a Man after Gods own Heart (Centuries III. 70).

Traherne's response to the text is to view it as a stepping stone, a “clew” into another labyrinthine realm. The text is infused with the inspiration of a man of felicity. It is telling that Traherne was “unspeakably” delighted. For Traherne is not describing an act of reading, but an activity which transcends the text, reaching to another realm, reaching to a place of transparency, where words are neither required nor sufficient.

It is Traherne's ambition to describe, in as simple a way as he can, the methods he has used to enter a realm beyond the descriptive powers of language. Traherne is only too happy to fail in his ability to recall the state accurately because is describing the very onset of an experience beyond language.

After extensively quoting Mirandola in the Fourth Century, Traherne goes on to describe his understanding of the true position of meaning in a poetic text:

*This Picus Mirandola spake in an oration made before a most learned assembly in a famous university. Any man may perceive, that he permitteth his fancy to wander a little wantonly after the manner of a poet; **but most deep and serious things are secretly hidden under his free and luxurious language.** The changeable power he ascribeth to man is not to be referred to his body; for as he wisely saith, 'Neither doth the bark make a plant, but its stupid and nothing-perceiving nature; neither doth the skin make a beast, but his brutish and sensual nature; neither doth separation from a body make an angel, but his spiritual intelligence.' So neither doth his rind or coat or skin or body make a man to be this or that, but the interior stupidity, or sensuality, or angelical intelligence of his soul, make him accordingly a plant, a beast, or an angel ...* (Centuries IV. 78)

The poem we read is only the skin of a thought that truly exists in the soul of the writer. The important message is always beyond the incidental language, which for Traherne is merely the evidence of a universal soul. The important aspect of all earthly work, and all writing is that they display evidence of spiritual work and not the linguistic flourishes of an ambitious author.

Traherne's writerly ambitions are to lead by example. To provide a transparent text that we can see through to a non-linguaged state of bliss. When in the final stanza of Dumbness he refers to “the first words mine infancy did hear” we know these are not of the same order as our fickle sinful language. These “words” are his thoughts in a prelinguistic state. And it is these “words” that haunt all Traherne's poems. These words “prevent” all the rest.

*Yet the first words mine infancy did hear,
The things which in my dumbness did appear,
Preventing all the rest, got such a root
Within my heart, and stick so close unto't*

Here Traherne puns on his earlier “venting” or sounding off. These pre-ventions, presoundings off manage to prevent (from the French *Prae* -before and *venire* to come, come before, intervene) -prevent the other words from causing too much damage, and despite the best efforts of noisy mankind:

and let mine enemies whoop, cry, roar, call, Yet these will whisper if I will but hear, And penetrate the heart, if not the ear.

The root, of course, is the thought of God, and we have the very beginnings of a tree that will hopefully blossom in the individual. The root is the offer of our own personal garden of Eden, which we as gardeners must nourish. It is not a metaphor that Traherne makes much effort to expand. We are also asked to imagine his early words as plants, and we must see how awkward, and deliberately awkward such an image is. He is also using language that is deliberately generalized. How many poets would be as satisfied as Traherne is with the continual use of the word “Thing”. It is very rare for Traherne to provide anything like a specific scene, or even to seem to recall a specific event. When he does it is remarkable:

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 (Centuries III. 23)

We can, if we wish, choose to see him seated in an actual field in Oxford, or as previously mentioned:

When I came into the Country, and being seated among silent Trees, had all my time in mine own Hands, I resolved to Spend it all, whatever it cost me, in Search of Happiness, and to Satiat that burning Thirst which Nature had Enkindled, in me from my youth. (Centuries III.46)

We might understand this as a description of his return to the Hereford of his childhood, and in particular to his beloved Credenhill, and we must also acknowledge that the language is not filled with any extraneous detail, and would not exclude a reader from filling the description with his own experience. Traherne's ambition is to notice the moment of his meditation and provide the reader with just enough material to begin his own. As Richard Jordan puts it:

“Traherne's voice, his style, is a distinctive one, but it is not a personal one. In being the voice of Man in meditation, it participates in the anonymity necessary to devotional works: it is a voice with which a reader may join his own.” (Jordan 403)

This aspect of anonymity is something Traherne was evidently fairly comfortable with. He made little effort to promote himself as an author. Christian Ethicks, published after Traherne's death, has his name on the title page, but the title page Traherne himself designed for “Commentaries of Heaven” does not include an author's name. Daily Devotions was published anonymously, as were the “Thanksgivings”. Traherne put neither a title nor name on the Centuries, and there is no author's name in the manuscript of the Dobell poems, the “Church's Yearbook”, or the “Select Meditations”. It is almost as if Traherne has written himself out of these works, and provided an example of language finally allowing the individual to become universal. The job of Traherne's words is not to protect his individuality, but to promote a unification between selves (his self and ourselves) and the world. Any assertion of authorial self, or of a deliberately personalized style would be a regression to singular assertion, and not the selfless act of union that Traherne is promoting.