

Chapter & Verse



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Worlds Within Worlds: Thomas Traherne (1636 - 74)

All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. I was a little stranger, which at my entrance into the world was saluted and surrounded with innumerable joys. My knowledge was Divine. . . . All tears and quarrels were hidden from mine eyes. Everything was at rest, free and immortal. I knew nothing of sickness or death . . . All Time was Eternity, and a perpetual Sabbath. Is it not strange, that an infant should be heir of the whole World, and see those mysteries which the books of the learned never unfold? . . .

. . . our misery proceedeth ten thousand times more from the outward bondage of opinion and custom, than from any inward corruption or depravation of Nature: And that it is not our parents' loins, so much as our parents' lives, that enthrals and blinds us.

The writer of those words, Thomas Traherne experienced intense visions as a child and, to a much lesser extent, in adulthood. Not one of his poems was published in his lifetime. More than two hundred years after Traherne's death at the age of 38, manuscripts of his poems were discovered in a wheelbarrow outside a second-hand bookshop in London and a scholar bought them only because he thought they have been written by that other great visionary poet of the seventeenth century, Henry Vaughan. It was a later scholar who, after extensive research, found that the poems were written by Thomas Traherne. In 1903, two hundred and twenty nine years after his death, Traherne's poems were finally published. Five years later, his collection of thoughts and recorded visions was published as *Centuries of Meditations* which C.S. Lewis has described as one of the most beautiful books in the English language. The above quotation is taken from this book. Many of the poet's writings remain unpublished to this day.

Very little is known of Traherne's life and there is even some doubt as to what year he was born. Neither his birth nor baptism is recorded in parish registers.

Thomas somehow managed to enter Oxford University and after his graduation, he took Holy Orders. Although he wasn't actually ordained, he was installed as the rector at St. Mary's Church in the village of Credenhill, near Hereford and he remained there for some ten years.



A depiction of Traherne on a stained glass window in Hereford cathedral.

He was finally ordained as a priest when King Charles II was restored to the throne and he became the private chaplain to the king's Lord Keeper of the Great Seal in 1667. Just seven years later, Traherne, like so many people of his time, died of smallpox. In the words of a friend, Traherne *always led a simple and devout life; his will shows that he left little beyond his books, and thought it worthwhile to bequeath his old hat.*

One of the Traherne's best-known poems describes the world seen through the visionary eyes of a child:

from **Innocence**

But that which most I wonder at, which most
I did esteem my bliss, which most I boast,
And ever shall enjoy, is that within
I felt no stain, nor spot of sin.

No darkness then did overshadow,
But all within was pure and bright,
No guilt did crush, nor fear invade
But all my soul was full of light.

A joyful sense and purity
Is all I can remember;
The very night to me was bright,
'Twas summer in December.

cont'd

A serious meditation did employ
My soul within, which taken up with joy
Did seem no outward thing to note, but fly
All objects that do feed the eye.

While it those very objects did
Admire, and prize, and praise, and love,
Which in their glory most are hid,
Which presence only doth remove.

Their constant daily presence I
Rejoicing at, did see;
And that which takes them from the eye
Of others, offer'd them to me.

No inward inclination did I feel
To avarice or pride: my soul did kneel
In admiration all the day. No lust, nor strife,
Polluted then my infant life.

No fraud nor anger in me mov'd,
No malice, jealousy, or spite;
All that I saw I truly lov'd.
Contentment only and delight

Were in my soul. O Heav'n! What bliss
Did I enjoy and feel!
What powerful delight did this
Inspire! for this I daily kneel.

Whether it be that nature is so pure,
And custom only vicious; or that sure
God did by miracle the guilt remove,
And make my soul to feel his love

So early: or that 'twas one day,
Wherein this happiness I found;
Whose strength and brightness so do ray,
That still it seems me to surround;

Although Traherne was, by what few accounts we have of him, a shy and humble man, he was the most ambitious of poets in that he seeks to transform how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. He wants us to regain the sense of wonder that we experienced only too briefly as an infant. He thought that the fundamental problem in life is that humans have been blinded by custom and no longer realize that they are miraculous beings; that lack of true self-love prevents us from perceiving the miraculous nature of others and the extraordinary beauty of creation.

He wrote that:
You never enjoy the world aright, til the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world.

Like many Christians of his age, Traherne had a great interest in the latest scientific discoveries and theories. He loved the idea that there might be worlds beyond this one. What if beyond the heavens there were infinite numbers of worlds at vast unspeakable distances and all

those worlds full of glorious kingdoms? He believed that would serve only to increase the wonder of creation. If he had been alive today, he would have embraced the concept of parallel universes.

In one of his most deceptively simple poems, the childish act of gazing at the reflections on the surface of a puddle leads Traherne to speculate on worlds within worlds within worlds.

from **Shadows in the Water**

In unexperienced infancy
Many a sweet mistake doth lie:
Mistake though false, intending
true;
A seeming somewhat more than
view;
That doth instruct the mind
In things that lie behind,
And many secrets to us show
Which afterwards we come to
know.

Thus did I by the water's brink
Another world beneath me
think;
And while the lofty spacious
skies
Reversèd there, abused mine
eyes,
I fancied other feet
Came mine to touch or meet;
As by some puddle I did play
Another world within it lay.

Beneath the water people
drowned,
Yet with another heaven
crowned,
In spacious regions seemed to
go
As freely moving to and fro:
In bright and open space
I saw their very face;
Eyes, hands, and feet they had
like mine;
Another sun did with them
shine.