

Thomas Traherne and the doctrine of felicity

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THOMAS TRAHERNE AND THE DOCTRINE OF FELICITY

In order to explain the swift rise to fame of Thomas Traherne whose fate it was to remain unknown for almost three centuries, we can but assume that he brings some message to meet the spiritual needs of our age. His life itself, in its peaceful ripening and unhurried evolution, perhaps awakens such dreams and aspirations as we may all harbour in an epoch of doubt, fear and instability. And yet this Caroline parson-poet lived through one of the most troubled periods of English history.

The date of Traherne's birth is still a matter of surmise, but it can probably be placed around 1633¹. Born in Hereford on the Welsh border, the influence of a beautiful and quiet countryside must have deeply penetrated his sensitive and poetic imagination. Although nothing can be definitely discovered with regard to his early life, it can be inferred that his first years were spent in poverty-stricken surroundings; his father was in all probability a shoe-maker and a ne'er-do-well, and died when Traherne was four years old. The child was adopted by his grandfather, Philip Traherne, a prosperous citizen, ex-mayor and innkeeper of St. Peter's parish in Hereford town. Thus at a most impressionable age the boy passed into a life diametrically opposite to that he had led in his parents' house; a new world of somewhat coarse well-being now surrounded him. In his *Centuries of Meditation* and in particular in the Third Century which is more especially autobiographical, Traherne gave in

¹ Gladys Wade, *Thomas Traherne and his Circle. A Literary and Biographical Study*. (Thesis: Ph. D. London University, 1933. In MS. S. Kensington University Library). The following biographical data are taken from this extensive study.

later years an account of his childhood, seen, it is true, through the prism of a matured and poetic imagination, which nevertheless allows the literary historian to build his hypotheses on solid foundations. Traherne speaks of "a little obscure room in my father's poor house"¹; and again of "the first time I came into a magnificent or noble dining room"¹.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Traherne was between nine and ten. The most important years of his spiritual and mental formation were spent in a period of profound social unrest, when men's minds were thrown hither and thither by conflicting opinions, instincts and ideas. Nevertheless, of political opinions we find no trace in any of Traherne's writings; it is impossible to gauge the measure of influence the Revolution may have had upon his intimate life. It is possible also that to the quiet town of Hereford, lying outside the immediate effects of the upheaval, the sound of discordant battlefields came only as a dulled and humming echo, which did not fundamentally disturb its daily activities. In 1652 Traherne was sent to Oxford. The Brasenose College register bears the following entry :

Thomas Traherne (Herefords) Adm. pleb. 1st March 1652-53, aged 15; matric. 2nd April 1653.

Of the years at Oxford little is known. The course of study at the University in the XVIIth century was still dictated by the Elizabethan revision, in 1564-1565, of the Edwardian statutes which had distributed the subjects as follows : first year, mathematics; second year, dialectic; third year, philosophy. "Three years more, including philosophy, rhetoric, perspective and Greek, qualified him (the student) for the Master's rank."² Elizabeth introduced grammar and rhetoric into the syllabus for the Bachelor's Degree; music was added to the curriculum while philosophy was entirely ruled out. The method of teaching

¹ *Centuries of Meditation*, III, 16, 22 Also "Solitude" in *Poems of Felicity*.

² Sir Chas. E. Mallet, *History of the University of Oxford*, London 1924. Also: C.-M. Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy*, Columbia 1938.

was based on “lectures” and “disputations”, the latter a medieval form of pedagogy which survived to the end of the XVIIth century. Traherne mentions his years of study at Oxford: “Having been at the University... There I saw that Logic, Ethics, Physics, Metaphysics, Geometry, Astronomy, Poesy, Medicine, Grammar, Music, Rhetoric, all kinds of Arts, Trades, and Mechanisms that adorned the world pertained to felicity; at least there I saw those things, which afterwards I knew to pertain unto it: and was delighted in it. There I saw into the nature of the Sea, the Heavens, the Sun, the Moon and Stars, the Elements, Minerals, and Vegetables... and those things which my nurses, and parents, should have talked of there were taught unto me.”¹ “Nevertheless some things were defective too... Nor did any of us study these things but as *aliena*, which we ought to have studied as our own enjoyments. We studied to inform our knowledge, but knew not to what end we so studied. And for the lack of aiming at a certain end we erred in the manner.”²

It is certain that Traherne brought to his University life a mind fundamentally disposed to metaphysical speculation, a tendency already manifest in his early childhood, if we are to believe the evidence of the *Centuries of Meditation*: “Once I remember (I think I was about 4 years old) when I thus reasoned with myself... If there be a God, certainly He must be infinite in Goodness....”³ His writings reveal a constant preoccupation with the relation of the individual to the universal, of Man to God; his conviction that individual experience participates in universal reality is a manifestation of a poetic imagination concerned with the problem of the relation between mind and matter, between outer reality rooted in the concrete world and the inner reality, based on personal experience no less concrete to

¹ *Centuries of Meditation*, III, 36.

² *Ibid.*, III, 37.

³ *Ibid.*, 16 et seq.

the thinking mind. In later years, Traherne, while retaining the knowledge of a scholar, yet attained a real wisdom, founded on a unification of reason and emotion, on the realisation that both learning and experience must be welded into a harmonious whole as an expression of a unified and powerful personality. We shall see that the doctrine of Felicity is based on the apprehension of Self as the subject and object of wisdom, as the centre from which radiates an intuitive knowledge of the universe. Book-learning and academic knowledge are useful, but subsidiary, factors in the attainment of wisdom in the Christian life.

Traherne left Oxford on graduation in October 1656 and, in December 1657, was appointed to the living of Credenhill in Herefordshire.

Miss Wade affirms, and I think rightly, that during the interval between Oxford and Credenhill Traherne experienced a spiritual crisis, the result of the years spent at the University when he had attempted to conciliate faith and reason, science and religion. She implies that at this time he had the choice between a wealthy career, probably Law, and the Church. That Traherne was placed before a choice is undeniable; a passage in the *Centuries of Meditation* bears witness to this: "... I chose rather to live upon ten pounds a year, and to go in leather clothes, and feed upon bread and water, so that I might have all my time clearly to myself, than to keep many thousands per annum in an estate of life where my time would be devoured in care and labour."¹ However, I do not believe that the final decision was the result of an operation of the will; given his psychological make-up, the "form" of his inner being, Traherne had in reality no decision to take. During this crisis, there is no indication of a spiritual *conflict*. The renunciation of worldly success had been carried within him since childhood. The interval between October 1656 and December 1657 was rather a period of revelation, when, after searching for a medium

¹ *Centuries of Meditation*, 1, 46.

through which he might satisfactorily express the activities of mind, soul and body, he found it in the Self as both subject and object of knowledge, wisdom and experience. This period saw the ripening of a steady and progressive evolution, and not the climax of a complete revolution of the personality. An evolution which was, moreover, conditioned solely by psychological factors and childhood influences.

Thus it does not appear, as Miss Wade asserts, that Traherne deliberately rejected wordly prosperity and voluntarily consecrated himself to mysticism and to the "attainment of first-hand experience of union and communion with God". He withdrew into himself, shedding acquired social values in favour of personal values he carried within himself, so that from that core and centre he might the better seize and hold the truths which he already possessed through his intuition and emotions and which certain personal experiences had already confirmed. The mystic personality may be manifested in innumerable ways, and the definition of mysticism is the most difficult to establish. A mystic has no need to renounce the "world" in order to explore the narrow and often tortuous road which leads to God, and Traherne belongs to the army of those men who brought God into the world about them, instead of setting God apart from His creation in an awful and terrifying solitude. His main preoccupation was not that of union with God, but rather the method of living life as given to Man by God, the loving Father, Who created a wonderful universe in order that His creatures might attain Felicity. Traherne did not repudiate the creation, the sensual world ; on the contrary his warm and joyous acceptance and appreciation of the beauties of nature show a rich perceptive sensuousness which he never denied, as the following meditation can testify :

Let all thy Creatures bless thee O Lord, and my Soul praise and bless thee for them all. I give thee Thanks for the Being thou givest to the Heavens, Sun, Moon, Stars, and Elements ; to Beasts,

*Plants and all other Bodies of the Earth ; to the Fowls of the Air, the Fishes of the Sea. I give thee thanks for the beauty of Colours, for the harmony of Sounds, for the pleasantness of Odours, for the sweetness of Meats, for the warmth and softness of our Raiment, and for all my five Senses, and all the Pores of my Body, so curiously made... and for the Preservation as well as Use of all my Limbs and Senses, in keeping me from Precipices, Fractures, and Dislocations in my Body, from a distracted, discomposed, confused, discontented Spirit. Above all, I praise thee for manifesting thyself unto me, whereby I am made capable to praise and magnify thy name for evermore.*¹

Nor did Traherne ever aspire to monastic retirement from society, and his acceptance in later years of the chaplainship offered by Sir Orlando Bridgeman was not a contradiction to his retirement of 1657. In his *Christian Ethicks* he wrote: " If not in Heaven, yet certainly on Earth, the Goods of Fortune concur to the compleating of *Temporal Felicity*, and where they are freely given, are not to be despised. "

There is an infinitely sane and well-balanced spirituality about Traherne which saves him from excessive or inhuman austerity and at the same time gives him a sublime capacity for living most fully and intensely in the midst of men and nature.

The period at Credenhill is marked by two important factors : Traherne's friendship with Mrs. Susanna Hopton, for whom it is probable that the *Centuries of Meditation* were written, and the acquiring of what was to become a constant habit — that of committing his thoughts and emotions to writing. Moreover, life at Credenhill was marked by a religious society, of which Traherne was probably the founder, one of the many which are a feature of religious life in the XVIIth century England, and of which so little is known. To this society doubtless belonged many serious-minded and pious parishioners, who met for the discussion of spiritual problems and endeavoured

¹ *A Serious and Pathetical Contemplation... : Thanksgiving for the Body.*

to lead a life as near as possible to that recommended by the Christian religion; by what vows or rule of life they were bound is not known, but there is sufficient evidence in the *Centuries* to believe that Traherne himself lived by rule: "I will in this century speak of the principle with which your friend endues himself to enjoy it (Felicity)." ¹ "Rather are they to be ashamed who have no glorious principles, or that are ashamed of them." ² The *Centuries of Meditation* may be considered as the matured fruit of the idea round which the society was built; they are in fact an *Imitation of Christ* written for Anglicans.

In November 1661, Traherne took his Master's degree at Oxford, and in 1667 left Credenhill to become the private chaplain of Sir Orlando Bridgeman, Lord Keeper of the Seal, living in Teddington in the County of Middlesex. He died there "on or about the Seaven and Twentyth of September 1674". ³

* * *

In Traherne's life we have an example of the very doctrine his writings expound. Here is a man who was able, by disciplined effort, to realise in fact the aspirations of his most intimate soul.

We have seen that Traherne at the turning point of his career was placed before a choice between worldly success and personal success, and that his decision was dictated by a principle or principles which he had always carried within himself. The central motif of an individual life is a component of factors which lie outside the scope of the will: hereditary characteristics, early influences are dynamic forces which may lie hidden for years, but which the individual must at one time

¹ *Centuries of Meditation*, IV, 1.

² *Ibid.*, IV, 30.

³ The Will of Thomas Traherne, as registered in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and proved at London on October 22nd 1674 (Appendix to *Poetical Works*, edited by Gladys Wade).

or another obey. Whether this obedience becomes a mere anarchistic assertion of self, or is sublimated into a measured and disciplined evolution depends on moral and intellectual development. Traherne was able to translate into his daily life the aspirations and dreams of his secret self: therein lies the power of his radiating personality.

The foundation on which lies Traherne's doctrine is the belief that the birthright of man is Felicity. "But this was his principle that loved Happiness... I came into this world only that I might be happy. And whatever it cost me, I will be happy. A happiness there is, and it is my desire to enjoy it." ¹ "There was never a tutor that did professly teach Felicity, though that be the mistress of all other sciences." ²

What then is this Felicity which Traherne sought and found? His answer is very definite: "Whereby I perceived the meaning of the definition wherein Aristotle describeth Felicity, when he saith: *Felicity is the perfect exercise of perfect virtue in a perfect life.* For that life is perfect when it is perfectly extended to all objects, and perfectly sees them, and perfectly loves them; which is done by a perfect exercise of virtue about them." ³ Miss Wade has pointed out the similarity of thought between Aquinas and Traherne. There is certainly an analogy between the central principles of both: the belief that in the vision of the Divine Essence alone can lie final happiness and that this must be the goal of the reasonable life.

It is here, however, that intervenes Traherne's conception of the blessedness of childhood, of the state of "innocency". Certain childhood experiences must have remained extremely vivid within him. Both the poems and the *Centuries of Meditation* recall sensations and experiences which must have laid in his sensitive and impressionable imagination the foundations of this conviction ⁴.

¹ *Centuries of Meditation*, IV, 7.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, III, 68.

⁴ See, in *Poems of Felicity*, "Innocence", "An Infant-Eye", "Eden", etc.

In his search, therefore, it was to his childhood that Traherne turned. A child is able to enjoy the world of nature untrammelled by the false passions and values of men. He possesses a vision of the world.

*Then did I dwell within a World of Light,
Distinct and Seperat from all Mens Sight,
Where I did feel strange Thoughts, and such Things see
That were, or seemd, only reveald to Me,
There I saw all the World Enjoyd by one ;
There I was in the World my Self alone...¹*

*In unexperienc'd Infancy
Many a sweet Mistake doth ly :
Mistake tho false, intending tru ;
A Seeming somewhat more than View ;
That doth instruct the Mind
In Things that ly behind,
And many Secrets to us show
Which afterwards we come to know.²*

The smallest thing becomes to the child an object of great value, because he apprehends through the outer form the hidden essence, which the imagination and divine intuition can seize, possess and enjoy within the self. The child is simple, uncomplicated by false desires, spontaneous. "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, is deeper far than is generally believed. It is not only in a careless reliance upon Divine Providence, that we are to become as little children, or in the feebleness and shortness of our anger and simplicity of our passions, but in the peace and purity of our soul. Which purity also is a deeper thing than is commonly apprehended...."³

Unlike Vaughan however, Traherne did not attempt a

¹ See, in *Poems of Felicity*, "Dumnesse."

² *Poems of Felicity*, "Shadows in the Water."

³ *Centuries of Meditation*, III, 5.

'return' to a childlike state; he realised that life is a dynamic, progressive power, moving onwards, never backwards. The adult has lived, experienced, matured; he cannot shed his maturity. He therefore emphasises the necessity of a self-imposed, voluntary re-education; a casting off of false, acquired values, of insincerity, of "invented riches" in short, a simplification and a progression, so that the senses of both body and mind may be purified and made perceptive of the wealth of love and beauty in the natural world through which God manifests Himself¹.

There are two ways of apprehending God, ways which yet cross and intermingle and lead to the same end: through the self and through "the world".

In the intimacy of solitude, of that solitude perhaps which only the courageous know, where the self is utterly depleted of acquired knowledge and apprehends itself in utter nakedness, the individual becomes aware of his wants and desires: of the wants and desires breathed into him by God. In that solitude the artificial world, man-created, will fall away, and the self can listen to its vague unhappiness, its dire thirsting after Felicity and love. Yet at the apex of solitude he will join again, intermingle with, the universal: "For if you know yourself, or God, or the World, you must of necessity enjoy it." "But it is a happy loss to lose oneself in admiration of one's own Felicity; to find God in exchange for oneself." "You never know yourself till you know more than your body. The Image of God was not seated in your face but in the lineaments of your Soul. In the knowledge of your Powers, Inclinations and Principles, the knowledge of yourself chiefly consisteth." "It is true that self-love is dishonorable, but then it is when it is alone. And self-endedness is mercenary, but then it is when it endeth in oneself... But as not to love oneself at all is brutish... so hath God by rational methods enabled us to love others better than ourselves, and thereby made us glorious creatures... So that self-love is

¹ *Centuries of Meditation*, I, 8-10; III, 67.

the basis of all love... So that God by satisfying my self-love hath enabled and engaged me to love others.”¹

Thus through the self one approaches humanity, one learns to love one's fellow-beings, for they too are heirs to God's gift of the world to Man. “He conceived it his duty and much delighted in the obligation, that he was to treat every man in the whole world as the representative of mankind, and that he was to meet in him, and to pay unto him all the love of God, Angels and Men.”² Nothing human is to be scorned or rejected; for by their bodies men have employed God's gifts and by their industry and intelligence have made them even more acceptable to Him:

And give me Eyes

To see the beauty of that life and comfort

Wherewith those by their actions

Inspire the Nations.

Their Markets, Tillage, Courts of Judicature,

Marriages, Feasts and Assemblies, Navies, Armies,

Priests and Sabbaths, Trades and Business, the

voice of the Bride-groom, Musical Instruments,

the light of Candles, and the grinding of Mills,

*Are comfortable, O Lord, let them not cease.*¹

Traherne stands out in his century for his pure and wonderful appreciation of the miracle of the human body, which is for him a vehicle of the soul, the outer shrine of the inner court which God visits, and therefore a necessary and beautiful instrument in the hierarchy of nature:

Thou hast given me a Body,

Wherein the glory of thy Power shineth,

Wonderfully composed above the Beasts,

¹ *Ibid.*, I, 16, 18, 19; IV, 55.

² *A Serious and Pathetical Contemplation...: Thanksgiving for the Nation.*

*Within distinguished into useful parts,
Beautified without with many Ornaments.
Limbs rarely poised,
And made for Heaven :
Arteries filled
With celestial Spirits :
Veins wherein Blood floweth,
Refreshing all my flesh
Like Rivers.*

.

*O blessed be thy glorious Name!*¹

The world or universe is a beautiful and harmonious whole. God created by Love, and He created the best of all possible worlds : “God’s bounty is so perfect that *He giveth all Things in the best of manners.*”² God created because “He wanted the communication of His divine essence, and persons to enjoy it”.³ Man is made in the Image of God ; he is the instrument through which God contemplates and enjoys His creation. Thus Man also possesses the creation and it is through the pure apprehension of the created world that Man can approach God and live in that state in which God intended him to be. “He that thinks the Heavens and the Earth not his, can hardly use them... But he that knows them to be instruments and what they are will delight in them, and is able to use them... Nothing therefore can be our happiness, but that alone which we rightly apprehend... All things are ours ; all things serve us and minister to us, could we find the way : nay they are ours, and serve us so perfectly, that they are best enjoyed in their proper places.”⁴ It is in the enjoyment of the natural world that man can serve God. Through nature, through the contemplation of the beautiful and harmonious objects of love which God has given us, can

¹ *A Serious and Pathetical Contemplation... : Thanksgiving for the Body.*

² *Centuries of Meditation*, I, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, IV, 15, 16.

we be happy and, through our felicity, add to God's happiness in his creation. "For while every one is Heir of all the World, and all the rest His superadded treasures, all the World serves Him in Himself, and He delights in them as His superadded treasures." ¹

Man is the most complete of God's creatures; he alone can commune with every sphere in the hierarchy of the universe. He is made in the Image of God, and he is the "sole heir" of the whole world. He must put away from him "fashions and tinselled vanities". He must purify his heart and mind and set value on those things only which God has given; and it is by right thinking that he will attain a true perception of the world:

Evil thoughts are full of discontent and trouble. ... For by nature nothing is so difficult as to think amiss. Is it not easy to conceive the World in your Mind? To think the Heavens fair? The Sun glorious? The Earth Fruitful? The Air Pleasant? The Sea profitable? And the Giver Bountiful? Yet these are the things it is difficult to retain. For could we be always sensible of their use and value, we should be delighted with their wealth and glory. To think well is to serve God in the interior court... For when you are once acquainted with the world, you will find the goodness and wisdom of God so manifest therein, that it was impossible another, or better should be made. ²

In this doctrine of Felicity Traherne proves himself to be primarily a practical moralist, preoccupied with Man and his position and duty in the created world. To his faith, to his mystical vision of God and nature, he brings the confirmation of reason. He puts his personal experience to the pragmatic test: Does it work? Has it a practical, workable value? He does not set out to prove that God exists or has such and such qualities, that man is so, or so. To the questions: Why is Man? Why is the world? What is Man's duty? his answer is simple and direct. Man was made to enjoy the created universe which God

¹ *Ibid.*, I. 35.

² *Centuries of Meditation*, I, 8-10.

has given to humanity and thereby to fulfil and complete God's own enjoyment of His creation. The greatest sin of Man is to refuse God's gifts and treasure vanities of his own creation: this is the true fall of Man. The world has been made for a purpose: to be used, enjoyed and possessed by Man and God. Only a lover can possess; therefore only through love can Man possess his rightful inheritance.

In his own life Traherne worked out his doctrine which is founded on the two-fold basis of Scripture and belief in the Absolute Goodness and Love of God. Delivering himself of worldly possessions he found great spiritual powers and the happiness which can only flow from a harmonious and unified personality.

RENÉE GRANDVOINET.

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Traherne's works have had a curious history. The only book which he saw in print was *Roman Forgeries* (1673). The text of *Christian Ethicks* he probably prepared for the press himself; the rare copies still extant bear the date of 1675.

The story of Traherne's MSS. is fully given in Mr. Bertram Dobell's Introduction to the first edition of the *Poetical Works* (1903). It is sufficient to say here that certain MSS. were bought from a London bookstall by Mr. William T. Brooke late in 1896 or early in 1897. These MSS. consisted of one folio and two octavo volumes: the first contained the poems as edited and published by Dobell in 1903 and also a large number of prose essays and memoranda forming a commonplace book. One of the octavo volumes contained the *Centuries of Meditation*, published by B. Dobell in 1908, and the other, private prayers and devotions. Neither the commonplace book nor the private devotions have yet been published. These MSS. were attributed to Thomas Vaughan on the authority of Dr. Grosart into whose hands they passed. On his death they came into the possession of Mr. Bertram Dobell who proved conclusively that the author was Thomas Traherne, until that time known only as the author of *Roman Forgeries* and *Christian Ethicks*.

Philip Traherne had prepared for the press a collection of his brother's poems which remained unpublished and eventually found its way into the British Museum Library (Burney MS. 392). From this manuscript, H. I. Bell published in 1910 the *Poems of Felicity*, about a third of which, found in the Dobell folio, had already been published in 1903.

Miss G. Wade's edition of the *Poetical Works* contains, besides all Traherne's verse previously published by B. Dobell and H. I. Bell, a selection of the poems to be found in the various prose works, as well as part of *A Serious and Pathetical Contemplation...*