

while it (ie the soul) looketh upon him, the love of God must needs issue from that soul; for God is love, and his love is in it. (Ethicks Chap. 32)

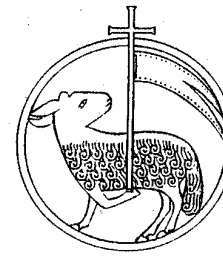
We are transformed even now into what we shall one day be, so that fear is transcended and the universe is no longer a place of terror which we seek to escape from in trivialities:

The impression of all his beauty swallows up the being of the soul, and changes it wholly into another nature. The eye is far more sensible of the day, and of the beauty of the universe, that it is of itself; and is more affected with that light it beholds than with its own essence. Even so the soul, when it sees God, is sensible only of the glory of that eternal object. All it sees is God; it is unmindful of itself. It infinitely sees him, but forgets itself in the rapture of its pleasure. (Ibid)

So be it.

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FAITH

praying and believing

ON THE EARTH

SPACE TRAVELLING

Thomas Traherene 5

How strangely paradoxical it is that the further we travel into outer space, and the more conscious we are of the vast aeons of time in which the universe has been in formation, so much the more insular we have become. Awe is replaced by cynicism, God pensioned off. Fear of the vastness of things turns us in on ourselves, while claims that humanity has come of age serve only to increase our isolation in the face of our perceived but unacknowledged inadequacy. We need the God we profess to deny. Not surprisingly, then, therapies and esoteric spiritualities multiply.

But these are not needed, since the Creator and Sustainer of all that is remains, all-holy, all-loving, all-powerful. He is ever at hand and in him all things are held together. Our Christian inheritance has assured us of this through the centuries and there is no need for us to backtrack now. Time and space should serve to draw us nearer to the majesty and mercy of God as it has done our forebears in the faith, the saints and mystics who have been allowed to glimpse the reality of both that majesty and that mercy.

Seventeenth century England, on the brink of the scientific revolution and the birth of modernity, was an epoch of intense intellectual and theological ferment. It was fertile ground and produced some of the greatest spiritual

and mystical writers of the English Church. Among these can be numbered Thomas Traherne c 1636-74. Most of his writings, including his well-known *Centuries*, have only come to light two to three hundred years after his death. But traces of the themes found there can be gleaned from his *Christian Ethicks*, the book he consciously left as his legacy at the time of his death.

Unlike our cynical selves, Traherne was obviously profoundly moved by the new space-science of his day - Galileo and the Copernican revolution, the invention of the telescope and the breathtaking vistas this opened up to the previously earth-centred understanding of the universe. But all this served to enhance and not shatter his awareness of the majesty and mercy of God, Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer as he is of all possible worlds. The wonders revealed scientifically were, it would seem, also 'experienced' by Traherne in the insights he received in mystical prayer.

Since, by comparison with the immensity of the heavens, the earth (as our travellers in space tell us too) is small and insignificant as a star viewed from a vast distance away, then we must get things in proportion. We must despise no part of creation, least of all ourselves, able as we are to travel from end to end of the universe at will with our intellect and in our imagination. Still less should we hanker after empty and frivolous things which pass away like smoke:

Contracted to a star, and lost into nothing, the whole earth is but one invisible point, when a man soareth to the height of immensity, and beholdeth and compasseth its everlasting circumference, which is infinite every way beyond the heavens. (Ethicks Chap. 28)

Traherne, we sense, has perhaps seen the cosmos through a telescope. The earthly is put in its place. But the soul is also seen for what it is, the image of the Creator, a sharer in the infinite:

It (ie the height of the immensity, the vastness of outer

every one, as if him alone; and love him far the more, by loving everyone; for his love being infinite, it is more expressed towards him in all the parts of his kingdom. (Ethicks Chap. 31).

In our alienation we can take comfort from Traherne's view of the truth of things. We *can* never be outside God's love and care, however immense the universe, or abysmal our sinfulness - 'If I climb up into heaven thou art there; if I go down to the depths thou art there also'. Space-travel reveals God, it does not annihilate him.

The very fact that we are each loved by God with the totality of his love means that we are all in that love together, all identified. We cannot be cut off and isolated. All we do for one another becomes one total act of love within God's love - 'Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me':

As every thought is seen throughout all eternity, and every word that is spoken here on earth heard in the utmost extents of immensity, so there is a kind of omnipresent greatness in the smallest action, for it is virtually extended through all the omnipresence of Almighty God . . . It is dilated in a moment, and fills the immensity of God with its nature. According to its kind, it affecteth all his essence in all spaces whatsoever. (Ethicks Chap. 30.)

Are we overawed by telephones, television, faxes and internets? Something greater is here, the universal presence of God who is *LOVE*, and our dwelling place is in him. Traherne glories in the sun as an image of God, the sun one might say of an expanded universe with its centre somehow now shifted away from the earth. There is danger of losing bearings, but God, like the sun, is everywhere and we are known of him and know him. We radiate his love:

If God dwelleth in the soul as the sun in a mirror,

death and burial and that's that. But have we not also an image here of the Christian life, of the adventure of prayer and its hazards - the dark nights and the dangers?

Traherne has not finished yet, however. Perseverance in the way of humility doesn't only lead to a renewal of life in the world as we know it, even if we end up in the antipodes. He continues his space-travelling and takes us up to the heavenly heights again, to the immensity which is God and where we find ourselves in him:

By passing on still through those inferior regions that are under his feet, but over the head of those that are beneath him, (he) finally comes to another sky: penetrates that, and leaving it behind him sinks into the depths of all immensity. (Ibid)

Lest we be totally bewildered, Traherne remarks that of course no-one can do this literally in the body. The soul, the imagination, can however travel there. There's nothing to stop it. In fact it is all an image of what humility does for the soul - 'He who humbles himself will be exalted . . . '.

This local descent through all the inferior space and immensity, though it bring us to God, and his throne, and another heaven full of angels, on the other side of the world, yet is it but a real emblem of the more spiritual and mysterious flight of humility in the mind. (Ibid)

This clever spacial imagery might leave us cold however if Traherne didn't also show us something of God other than simply his immensity. He is mercy as well as majesty. The God who is omnipresent is also a God of personal LOVE:

As God is wholly everywhere, and the more here for being in other places; and infinitely here because he is omnipresent; so does he wholly see and intend

space) is the true and proper immensity of the soul, which can no more be contented with the narrow confinement of this world, no more rest in the childishness of all the noise of the interests of men, be no more satisfied with its earthly glories, than the sun can be shut up in a dark lantern. (Ibid).

It's not a question of asking Where God is, since the heaven he is supposed to inhabit has proved empty, or rather seems ever elusively outside our vision. In outer space there is neither up nor down. God, heaven and all that, we say in our scepticism is merely illusion. But for Traherne it is not at all the case that God is *nowhere*. Instead he is *everywhere* and we with him.

Moreover, we find Traherne, metaphorically speaking, travelling down as well as up. Speaking of humility he says in Chapter 26 of his *Ethicks*:

A man would little think that by sinking into the earth he should come to heaven. He doth not, but is buried, that fixeth and abideth there. But if he pierceth through all the rocks and minerals of the inferior world, and passeth on to the end of his journey in a straight line downward, in the middle of his way he will find the centre of nature; and by going downward still, begin to ascend, when he is past the centre. Through many obstacles full of gross and subterraneous darkness, which seem to affright and stifle the soul, he will arrive at last to a new light and glory . . . breathing-space and fresh air among the antipodes.

There are layers of meaning here. Firstly the glorious prosaic discovery that a round world means a coming up again eventually to the light and air, albeit upside down, if we persevere, that is, with the descent to the end. Humility, then, leads to eventual renewal of life, while pride bodes