

Restless longing, heavenly avarice: Merton and Traherne

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I came to Thomas Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, published in 1966, already a fan. I'd especially appreciated the way in which *The Sign of Jonas* had moderated and mitigated those elements of *The Seven Storey Mountain* which had grated on my sensibilities the most (even while I found Merton's spiritual autobiography enthralling and captivating), and revealed the slow work of grace which monastic life was accomplishing in him. I'd also tried to immerse myself slowly in *New Seeds of Contemplation* which I'd bought and first read while on a blissful holiday in Santa Fe, New Mexico. But *Conjectures* came as a dynamic new expression of his voice, and one which I instinctively and immediately loved. Its pages and its meditations are imbued with the agonies, the crises, the pains and the divisions and injustices of the age. He writes of the US's involvement in Vietnam, and of its folly, and its consequences on America's name and reputation. He decries the reality of racial segregation and describes some of the resistance to it, especially in Birmingham, Alabama. He speaks of how the Gethsemani community learned of the Cuban missile crisis, and of its resolution under Kennedy's leadership, the threatened nuclear war only narrowly averted. It's a remarkable book, full of prophetic, poetic, prayerful wisdom, against the backdrop of a world bitterly divided and seemingly hell-bent on self-destruction.

Merton described *Conjectures* as 'an implicit dialogue with other minds'. On the frontispiece to part one, he reveals one of those others, in quoting from Thomas Traherne:

But little did the infant dream
That all the treasures of the world were by
And that himself was so the cream
And crown of all that round about did lie.¹

For Merton's American readers in 1966, it must have seemed a strange and obscure reference. For Traherne is a very English figure, who himself had been rather unknown and certainly uncelebrated until the discovery

of his mature mystical writings, and their publication in the early 20th Century. Indeed, Merton's own access to Traherne's work seems to have come primarily through his friendship with Donald Allchin, who sent him a copy of *Centuries of Meditations* in 1963, during the genesis of *Conjectures*.² This was not his first encounter with Traherne – he mentions reading him in 1941, just prior to entering the monastery – but it does seem to have reignited his interest and reconnected these apparently rather different men.³

For all their differences – Traherne was born in 1637 and unpublished, except for some anti-Catholic polemic of all things, in his lifetime – there are profound connections which help us perhaps to see something of the ways in which Merton was finding resonance with Traherne's vision in the 1960s. Traherne's own theological work was also written against the backdrop of a world divided: he was born into the traumas and tragedies of the English Civil War, in Hereford, one of its most bitterly-contested battle sites, and raised amid the increasingly extreme and unyielding claims, both political and religious, of his peers. Even the execution of the King brought the nation little ease or sense of unity and purpose; Traherne thus began his own ministry, in the country parish of Credenhill, amid deep and shared anxiety, and a gnawing sense of fragility, impermanence and the threat of violence. The theology of many grew ever more fearsome in the face of such national crisis.

By contrast, Traherne cultivated a life of prayer amid the beauty of the Herefordshire countryside. And, out of this very personal commitment, probably increasingly shaped by the influence of the medieval English mystics⁴ and the emerging Anglican tradition of Hooker, Andrewes and Herbert, he fashioned something fresh and new and surprising in its generosity, eloquence, broad-heartedness and warmth. At the heart of his theological understanding lies a profound commitment to univocity: the conviction that all created things speak of, point to, share in the life of, God, who is all and in all:

God commandeth you to love all like Him, because He would have you to be His Son, all them to be your riches, you to be glorious before them, and all the creatures in serving them to be your treasures, while you are His delight, like Him in beauty, and the darling of His bosom.⁵

For Traherne, there is a particular emphasis in all this on the non-human elements of creation, in his lavish and ravishing descriptions of the trees, and of the seas, and the diverse and generous variety of all that speaks of God; and in his moving and haunting reflections on the awe with which he first encountered it all in childhood, and which must be recovered and

nurtured in adulthood too, if one is to know and see and hear the divine presence. But there is also a very careful emphasis on the duty we owe to other humans, on the need to see Christ in all others. For, as a wise mentor once explained to the young Traherne, 'Every man being the object of our Saviour's Love, was to be treated as our Saviour.'⁶ Small wonder that some see in these sorts of notions the kernel of Merton's Louisville 'epiphany', so remarkably described in *Conjectures*. Nor is Traherne's nature mysticism divorced from the realities of the violent, uncertain age in which he lived: in some reflections on the nature of sin which challenge some Augustinian ideas about the ways in which humanity becomes embroiled in violence and division at all, he remarks that 'it is not our parents' loins, so much as our parents' lives, that enthrals and binds us.'⁷

Looking out on the folly and waste of his own age, reaping the whirlwind of a half-century of aggression and belligerence, Merton agreed, pointing for hope to the gentle, pastoral, reconciling wisdom of Pope John XXIII. Now we, too, are drawn into this 'implicit dialogue', as we seek to point our broken, divided, violent, warring world to the only possible hope for its re-creation and renewal, and to the God who still speaks, not only through the prophets, but also in all that God has made and in every human longing for peace.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Doubleday: New York, 1966), Preface, p. v.
2. Manuscripts by Traherne, including that of *Centuries of Meditations*, were discovered on a London street bookstall in the late 1890s. *Centuries of Meditations* was first published in 1908.
3. I am grateful to Gary Hall for offering me a survey of Merton's own exposure to and appreciation of Thomas Traherne.
4. Merton also lengthily praised Julian of Norwich in *Conjectures*, recognizing that Traherne echoed her intuitions, though it is doubtful if Traherne was aware of her writings, which were only published 4 years before his death.
5. Thomas Traherne (ed. Dobell), *Centuries of Meditations* (Faith Press: London, 1960), pp. 18-19, echoing the sentiments of Merton's frontispiece.
6. *Centuries*, p. 180.
7. *Centuries*, p. 114.

The title of this reflection, 'Restless longing, heavenly avarice', is taken from Traherne's poem, 'Desire'.

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