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ODE ON IMMORTALITY

Will you see the infancy of this sublime and celestial greatness? Those pure and virgin apprehensions I had in my infancy, 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. Verily they form the greatest gift His wisdom could bestow, for without them all other gifts had been dead and vain. They are unattainable by books, and therefore I will teach them by experience. Pray for them earnestly, for they will make you angelical and wholly celestial. Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world than I when I was a child.

THOMAS TRAHERNE



INTIMATIONS OF
IMMORTALITY

AN ODE BY

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

PORTLAND MAINE
THOMAS B MOSHER
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Foreword

THIS *great Ode, composed during the period of 1803-06 while Wordsworth resided at Grasmere, was written with two years' interval at least between the first four and the seven remaining stanzas. First printed in 1807 it bore the simple title of Ode with a motto prefixed: Paulò majora canamus. Later on, in 1815, the title was enlarged with characteristic diffuseness to Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood. It then had for its motto three lines from an earlier poem on the Rainbow*

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(1802) which appears in all subsequent reissues of the poem.

I shall now touch upon one of the most remarkable literary discoveries of recent years. In 1903 Mr. Bertram Dobell put to press *The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne*, B. D. (1636?–1674), now first published from the original manuscripts. *Herein a parallelism of thought, if not an actual sequence of ideas and their expression, existing between the author of the Ode and a hitherto unknown poet of over two centuries ago was set forth as follows :*

“Another poet with whom Traherne has some remarkable affinities is Wordsworth—not the Wordsworth of later life, when his poetic vein, if not exhausted, had at least grown thin and unproductive, but the Wordsworth

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of the magnificent ode, 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.' . . .

*"It is hardly too much to say that there is not a thought of any value in Wordsworth's Ode which is not to be found in substance in Traherne. Of course, I do not say this with any view of disparaging Wordsworth, whose Ode, even if it had been, as we know it was not, derived from Traherne, would still have been a masterpiece. Its merit, like that of Gray's 'Elegy,' depends at least as much upon its form as upon its substance, and that, of course, was all Wordsworth's own. It is in a measure a testimony to the authentic character of their inspiration when two poets, unknown to each other, produce works which are so nearly identical in substance and spirit."*¹

¹ See *Introduction to The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne*, pp. lxxvii-lxxviii. Mr. Dobell within a few months has also published *Centuries of Meditations by Thomas Traherne, (1636?—1674)* now first printed from the author's manuscript. London, 1908. We cannot too gratefully acknowledge our sense of personal obligation to the editor of these fascinating volumes.

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It is possible that this view may not find ready acceptance with those who have been life-long adherents of the Wordsworthian cult. For myself I have no desire to minimise Mr. Dobell's discovery or its implications.

Far from lessening in my esteem the merit of what for most of the race has come to stand as the greatest Ode in the language this rehabilitation of Traherne whose name is restored to the world when it seemed extinguished for all time, leaves me with a renewed appreciation of Wordsworth's abiding achievement: with a deeper and, if that were possible, a more lasting hold upon the "truths that wake, to perish never."

T. B. M.

ODE ON IMMORTALITY

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. . . . I seemed as one brought into the estate of innocence. All things were spotless and pure and glorious; yea, and infinitely mine and joyful and precious. I knew not that there were any sins, or complaints or laws. I dreamed not of poverties, contentions, or vices. All tears and quarrels were hidden from mine eyes. Everything was at rest, free and immortal. I knew nothing of sickness or death or exaction. . . . 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?

THOMAS TRAHERNE

ODE on IMMORTALITY

*The Child is Father of the Man ;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

I

THERE was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore ; —
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

II

The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare,
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair ;
The sunshine is a glorious birth ;
But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.

III

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief :
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong :
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep ;

No more shall grief of mine the season wrong ;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
 And all the earth is gay ;
 Land and sea
 Give themselves up to jollity,
 And with the heart of May
Doth every Beast keep holiday ;—
 Thou Child of Joy,
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy
Shepherd-boy !

IV

Ye blessed Creatures, I have heard the call
 Ye to each other make ; I see
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee ;
 My heart is at your festival,
 My head hath its coronal,
The fulness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all.
 Oh evil day ! if I were sullen

While Earth herself is adorning,
 This sweet May-morning,
And the Children are culling
 On every side,
In a thousand valleys far and wide,
 Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:—
 I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
 — But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
 The Pansy at my feet
 Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

V

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,

And cometh from afar :
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But He beholds the light, and whence it flows
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

VI

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own ;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,

And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.

VII

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral;
And this hath now his heart,
And unto this he frames his song:

Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;
But it will not be long
Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little Actor cons another part;
Filling from time to time his "humorous stage"
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,
That Life brings with her in her equipage;
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.

VIII

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul's immensity;
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!

On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave ;
Thou, over whom thy Immortality
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,
A Presence which is not to be put by ;
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

IX

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!

The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction: not indeed
For that which is most worthy to be blest;
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:—

Not for these I raise

The song of thanks and praise;

But for those obstinate questionings

Of sense and outward things,

Fallings from us, vanishings;

Blank misgivings of a Creature

Moving about in worlds not realised,

High instincts before which our mortal Nature

Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:

But for those first affections,

Those shadowy recollections,

Which, be they what they may,

Are yet the fountain light of all our day,

Are yet a master light of all our seeing;

Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
 To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
 Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!
 Hence in a season of calm weather,
 Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
 Which brought us hither,
 Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

X

Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
 And let the young Lambs bound
 As to the tabor's sound!

We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts to-day
Feel the gladness of the May!
What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower ;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind ;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be ;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering ;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

XI

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Forebode not any severing of our loves !

Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might ;
I only have relinquished one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they ;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet ;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality ;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

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