TIME, THE 'FRONTISPIECE OF ETERNITY'

Sunday 5 May 2024

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The Works of Thomas Traherne, vol. I, 74 Revelation 21: 1–6, 22–27

One of the greatest of living British art historians, T.J. Clark, is a persuasive spokesperson for a resolutely atheistic art criticism; in this, we might say, he is paradigmatically modern. He reads sacred art with a rare feeling for its existential import and power to move, but he maintains a profound distrust of religious (more specifically, Christian) ideas, whether those ideas seem to be the subject matter of the works of art he examines, or are brought too decisively to their interpretation.

He thinks Christianity takes away our ability to love this world as we should. He thinks it undermines this world's call on us to enjoy its beauties and to repair its needs by directing our gaze from time to eternity. He identifies 'the wish for escape from mortal existence' (his words) as 'the religious impulse, or one main form the impulse [takes]'.[1] Instead of seeking immanent resources to repair its immediate environment, Christianity looks for alternatives to it in (and I quote again) 'a territory, a Truth, a kingdom come' beyond this present age.[2] The 'impulse' is, in his eyes, a betrayal of the world.

Along with Christianity's tendencies to sententious moralism (which I don't dispute), these future-oriented projections of transcendence are Clark's biggest bugbear when it comes to religion, for they are, he believes, fundamentally world-denying. And in this conclusion he leans heavily on citations from Revelation 21, which we heard as our second reading. In that passage, as he interprets it, 'a new heaven and a new earth' will displace or supersede this present one, and if that's going to be the case, why should we care about what's on the way out?

So we can be forgiven for assuming that Clark warns us against 'the religious impulse' in defence of a this-worldly life that is committed, rich, joyous and full. But is this in fact the case? Well here's the contradiction. For one of the deep themes of Clark's studies of European art across over five centuries is that—at its best—he thinks it shows us a world that eludes us; a world that is always in question. It tells us that we do not have (and I quote him) 'a palpable shared world'.[3] Perhaps we once did have such a world, and have lost it; or perhaps we thought we did, but it was an illusion all along. For Clark, the world testified to in the best art, especially the art that has gained strength as religion in the West has declined, is a world that is unstable and not obviously made for us to dwell and flourish in. Consoling thoughts of the world as our home have no legitimacy for him; they are mere 'bromides' (a bromide being a dishonest fiction designed to make you feel happier or calmer). The visual art that speaks most truthfully about our world (after the elimination of the 'other world' which

[1] T.J. Clark, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 110.

[2] Clark 2018, 25.

[3] T. J. Clark, *If These Apples Should Fall: Cézanne and the Present* (Thames & Hudson: London 2022), 50.

religion so damagingly dandles in front of us), must be what Clark calls 'non-committal'.[4] 'Better an infinite irony', he says, than misguided zeal.[5]

I think he has a huge amount that's very perceptive to say about the condition in which the late modern West finds itself. But it's a peculiar place to end up.

The cry of a modernity that has lost a 'palpable, shared world' (or the illusion of one) is well exemplified in a 1993 installation by the German artist Rosemarie Trockel, entitled *ICH HABE ANGST*. In literal translation, that means I HAVE FEAR.[6] Now viewable only in photographs, its three words were painted in black capital letters, 45 cm high, on the white wall behind the high altar of St Peter's Church in Cologne.

I think that a key aspect of the work's special effectiveness is its concise expression of a contemporary cultural condition like the one that T.J. Clark diagnoses. A Western viewer on first encounter with the work—and no doubt many non-Western viewers as well— is almost bound to read this short but complete sentence as culminating in the final word, *Angst*. *Angst* is the arrival point of the utterance, to which its impetus is directed and in which its intended meaning is disclosed. We are left with fear, so to speak. In these words, we hear the genuinely fearful cry of those who feel themselves at sea in a post-religious world.

But T.J. Clark's refusal of a future-oriented faith (which he regards as offering 'chiliastic'[7] consolations to the present at the price of uncompromised life in the world as it is) is overstated. It seems to me that he is working with a false assumption that belief in 'a future transformation […] where life would be raised to a higher power' is at odds with wholehearted presence to our present material and temporal surroundings, and to 'imagining (even making) the world otherwise' than it is.[8] Thomas Traherne, whom he quotes with deep appreciation, is (by contrast) evidence of the *compatibility* of these attitudes. In this, he is the almost perfect counterpoint to the peculiar contradiction in Clark's thought, with which I began, whereby a defence of this-worldliness (against religion's transcendence) goes along with the experience of the loss of that world: an ironising insecure, uncommitted loneliness.

'It is my design [to make] you possessor of the whole world', writes Traherne. Traherne is a paradigm of doxological love of the world; in other words, he delights in it all the more when he views it as divine gift. His celebration of its 'humble materials' is not *despite* but *because of* his belief in its infinite, ultimate end in redeemed relationship with God (tasteable both now and in eternity).

> To know GOD is Life Eternal. […] To know God is to know Goodness. It is to see the beauty of infinite Love: To see it attended with Almighty Power and Eternal Wisdom […] It is to see the King of Heaven and Earth take infinite delight in *Giving*. […] The WORLD is not this little Cottage […]. Though this be fair [that is to say, beautiful], it is too small a Gift. When God made the World He made the Heavens, and the Heavens of Heavens, and the Angels, and the Celestial Powers. These also are parts of the World: So are all those infinite and eternal Treasures that are to abide for ever, after the Day of Judgment. Neither are these, some here, and some there, but all everywhere, and at once to be enjoyed. The WORLD is unknown, till the Value and Glory of it is seen: […] When you enter into it, it is an illimited field of Variety and Beauty: where you may lose yourself in the multitude of Wonders and Delights. But it is an happy loss to lose oneself in admiration at one's own Felicity: and to find GOD in exchange for oneself: Which we then do when we see Him in His Gifts, and adore His Glory.[9]

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[4] Clark 2018, 135.

[5] Clark 2018, 238.

[6] Idiomatically, a better English translation is I AM AFRAID, though for my purposes, the literal translation needs to be kept to the fore.

[7] Clark 2018, 248.

[8] Clark 2018, 8.

[9] Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, The First Century, 18; in Thomas Traherne, *The Works of Thomas Traherne. Vol. I-III*, ed. Jan Ross, vol. 1–3 (Cambridge [England]; Rochester, N.Y.: D.S. Brewer, 2005, 2007).

Of all the seventeenth-century English devotional writers, he is the one who most celebrates the availability of glory in the present moment to those with eyes to see it. But the world is so illuminated because there is 'another realm' (my inverted commas) from which luminous grace radiates. In Traherne's own words '[t]ruly there are two worlds',[10] one made by the sinful hands of men and one by God. And his description of the latter is very close in spirit to that of Revelation 21; it is one 'where all envy, rapine, bloodshed, complaint and malice shall be far removed; and nothing appear but contentment and thanksgiving'.[11]

I put 'another realm' in inverted commas because eschatological realities are only ever described—even in Scripture—in the provisional and metaphorical language available to us in our present condition. (This does not require the conclusion that there is no reality but that of our present condition.) It is not only heaven's *realm-likeness* but also its *otherness* that requires a proviso: it is not a kingdom like other kingdoms, and—by the same token—its otherness from this world is not the sort of otherness we habitually invoke to distinguish things *within* this world. Likewise, it is a mistake to set too much store (as Clark does) by one passage from the book of Revelation (21:1–4) as though it were both self-evident in its meaning, and a synopsis of Christian eschatology. On one reading, yes, it might suggest that the new creation is a 'displacement' of the old; but surely not in any absolutely oppositional way. This would be thin exegesis. For instance, whose tears exactly are being wiped away in v.4? And where do the 'kings of the earth' come from who enter into the New Jerusalem that has descended from above? There is more complexity (and continuity) here than meets the eye.

Moreover, Revelation's pictures of how the new creation will come about ask to be read alongside other images, which both qualify and enrich it. It is like dawn (Isaiah 9:2; 60:1); it is like spring in the desert (Isaiah 35:6; 41:17; 44:4); it is like childbirth, in which the old world labours in travail to bring the new to light (Romans 8:20–23). For Traherne the present world is intimately related to what it opens into. It is 'the beautiful frontispiece of Eternity'.[12] A frontispiece in books is a decorative or informative illustration facing a book's title page, and in architecture is the face of a building, through which we pass to discover its interior. In both cases, the frontispiece is not in competition with what it fronts. It is in the deepest continuity with it; the first fruits and overture to its glories and delights. The beginning of the adventure.

There is a second way of reading Trockel's *ICH HABE ANGST*, as the art historian Deborah Lewer has rightly discerned.[13] It is as a sort of triptych. Thus part of what Trockel does in this work is to pitch two time-honoured patterns of reading against each other. We've already considered the obvious one: the movement from left to right. But the second way of reading the work is precisely that intimated by its triptych-like form and position, for an altarpiece is semiotically structured from its centre, and the outer sections ask to be understood with reference to the middle. Approached in this way, 'fear', far from being a last word, is a penultimate one. Like the 'I' who stands vulnerably at the left, this 'fear' is referred inwards to a verb of both bestowal and reception. 'Have' is centrally placed above the gifts of the altar, the very spot at which their 'possessability' is made possible for people who are invited to 'Take, eat' and to 'Drink this all of you'.

Can we imagine a condition (*Ich habe…*) in which *angst* is truthfully acknowledged but not given the status of the very ground of our being, while holy possession of the world (both now and to come) is affirmed as our true and common end? This would at the same time be a magnificent safeguard against the unholy acquiescence in contemporary evils which is the consequence of thinking we have nothing better to hope for than what we now endure. If you think this is it, then there's little reason to believe that things could be other than they are.

In prising this world apart from the eternity which it is made to proclaim—ostensibly to save it from a competitor who will steal its resources—we destroy its very essence, and find that its glory departs from it. We lose not only the next world, eternity, but this present one too, as time becomes empty, meandering, scarce.

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[10] Traherne I, 7.

[11] Traherne I, 4.

[12] Traherne I, 20.

[13] Deborah Lewer, 'Art, faith and fear', in *Art + Christianity* 102 (Summer 2020).

It is in seeing this world as the face of eternity, looking at us in unimaginable fullness of promise, that we truly possess it.

For Traherne, the 'friendship of God' meant two things simultaneously: 'the hope of Eternal Glory' *and* 'the enjoyment of the World'. Each is the condition, not the enemy, of the other.

> Here is love! Here is a kingdom! Where all are knit in infinite unity. All are happy in each other. All are like Deities. Every one the end of all things, everyone supreme, every one a treasure, and the joy of all, and every one most infinitely delighted in being so.[14]

[14] Traherne I, 74.