'Inexpressibly rare', a pre-concert talk on Thomas Traherne and Gerald Finzi given by Richard Willmott, Chairman of the Traherne Association, in memory of Denise Inge at the Three Choirs Festival before a performance of *Dies Natalis* by Ed Lyon and the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Peter Nardone on 29 July 2017

Bishop John, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to start this evening by acknowledging a debt that is both a personal one and one owed by all who love Traherne. And that debt is to Denise Inge, whose familiarity with Traherne's more recently discovered manuscripts enabled her to lead the way in widening our understanding of a poet and theologian that we came to realise was far from being the simple, pre-romantic poet of happiness that Gladys Wade, Traherne's first biographer, created, but instead a serious scholar whose intellectual curiosity prompted an interest in science and philosophy, and a theologian who believed in the intensity of God's desire for us, but also in the horror of the sin that rejected that love. This new understanding Denise shared with a wide audience through her anthologies of Traherne's prose and poetry, especially the second one, *Happiness and Holiness*, with its perceptive introductions to different themes. If these anthologies smoothed the path towards a much broader understanding of Traherne, her substantial monograph, *Wanting Like a God*, offered the first book-length study to follow the discovery of so many more of Traherne's works in the latter part of the twentieth century. The debt is indeed a great one.

But my debt is a personal one as well. As Chairman of the Traherne Association I found Denise unfailingly generous with her time, giving talks to the Association on a number of occasions, suggesting speakers, and offering advice. Her death was a great loss, but she left us an enhanced understanding. We are honoured to have with us today her husband.

Let me now turn to some of the words set by Finzi in *Dies Natalis*: 'All appeared new and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful.'

Writing to the poet Edmund Blunden in 1952 Finzi said that he liked 'the music to grow out of the actual words and not be fitted to them'. It seems right, therefore, to look at the words out of which Finzi's music grew. Nor, indeed, would we be here this evening, I presume, if we did not value the ways in which words can inspire music and music illumine words and perhaps make the 'inexpressibly rare' expressible after all. When I talk about 'illumining words', perhaps I should add a caveat from Finzi's Crees lectures in 1955 where he says that: 'music can take words beyond themselves, but does not try to add to them.' – An interesting distinction, but one that I shall steer clear of this evening by concentrating primarily on the words themselves, and this study of the text I shall preface with a brief account of Traherne's life and some explanation of his ideas, especially in so far as they are relevant to the music we are about to hear. In particular I shall focus on Traherne's desire to regain the child-like clarity of vision that makes possible an appreciation of the wonder and significance of God's creation.

I say I shall start by looking at Traherne's life, although ironically, our most precise knowledge is about his death. That is, we know he was buried underneath the reading desk in St Mary's Teddington on 10 October 1674. Our knowledge of when or where he was *born* is much less precise, but on the evidence of his age at matriculation at Brasenose in 1653 he was born in either 1636 or 37, and very probably in Hereford.

His father was probably the John Traherne who bought property in Widemarsh Street in Hereford, in the parish of All Saints; certainly we know that Thomas left property in Widemarsh Street for charity and so it's a plausible hypothesis. His younger brother definitely *was* the Philip Traherne who edited (and some would say, damagingly emended) some of the poems, but never published them.

As a boy Traherne would have witnessed a series of Parliamentary sieges from 1642 onwards and the final capture of Hereford in 1645. There is surprisingly little evidence of this in his work, except perhaps for his stress on the importance of national unity in his writings at the time of the Restoration.

He was probably educated at the cathedral school; the evidence is circumstantial, but given the school's links with Brasenose, it seems highly probable. (The claim in tonight's programme note that he was a cathedral chorister is, however, implausible to say the least. Not only does Traherne's name not appear in the records of the Dean and Chapter, but in any case choristers were not normally recruited before the age of ten, by which time there was no choir for Traherne to join, the Dean and Chapter and the Vicars Choral all having been ejected from their posts during the Commonwealth period.)

Another Herefordshire town by the way, Ledbury, has been known to lay claim to Traherne, but it's not only those of us who live in Hereford who think it's pretty clear from this passage describing his early childhood that he was brought up in a walled city with gates (in other words Hereford and not Ledbury):

> The Dust and Stones of the Street were as precious as *Gold*. The Gates were at first the End of the World, The Green Trees when I saw them first through one of the Gates Transported and Ravished me; their sweetness and unusual Beauty made my Heart to leap, and almost mad with Extasie, they were such strange and Wonderfull Thing … The Citie seemed to stand in Eden, or to be Built in Heaven. The streets were mine, the Temple was mine …

In that quotation from *Centuries of Meditations* III, 3 you will probably have recognised phrases that are set by Finzi, although he omits the words 'through one of the Gates', which are suggestive of Hereford. And this passage is not just of interest biographically. More

significantly, it and the lines that follow it show the importance of childhood to Traherne, not in a sentimental way, but because of the child's uncluttered vision before it is clouded by materialistic preoccupations and what Traherne calls 'the dirty devices of this world':

> The Skies were mine [he writes], and so were the Sun and Moon and Stars, and all the World was mine; and I the only Spectator and Enjoyer of it. I knew no churlish Proprieties, nor Bounds nor Divisions: but all Proprieties and Divisions were mine: all Treasures and the Possessors of them So that with much adoe I was corrupted; and made to learn the Dirty Devices of this World. Which now I unlearn, and becom as it were a little Child again, that I may enter the Kingdom of GOD.

By the way, Traherne can sound very self-centered and naïve when he talks about everything being his, but elsewhere he makes clear that it is everybody else's as well. Perhaps what he means could be simply illustrated by imagining that you are standing on the Malverns, enjoying a view over the beautiful Worcestershire countryside. If I come and stand beside you to admire the view as well, that doesn't halve the view for you. It is still entirely yours to enjoy, but it is entirely mine as well. When elsewhere Traherne says you may 'perceiv yourself to be the Sole Heir of the whole World', he adds that this enjoyment is all the greater 'becaus Men are in it who are *evry one* Sole Heirs, as well as you.' (my italics) There are no 'churlish Proprieties' (that is, property boundaries) to keep either you or me out.

To return to Traherne's life. Once he goes up to Brasenose in the spring of 1653 the conventional outward record becomes clearer: he takes his BA in 1656, his MA in 1661, and his BD in 1669.

When writing in *Select Meditations* III, 83 about his time at Oxford he describes how he was 'nourished at universities in Beautifull Streets and famous colledges', *but* he also laments that 'There was never a Tutor that did professely Teach Felicitie' (*Centuries of Meditations* III, 37).

Now 'felicity' is a key word for Traherne, but what did it mean to him? Well, 'felicity' is not only a key *concept* for Traherne, but a key *experience*. This is how Denise Inge defines it in her book *Wanting like a God*:

> Felicity is not about regaining childhood innocence, or about deferring happiness to an afterlife, or about negating or subjugating the plethora of human desires. Because desire exists in God, felicity is about living in lack and longing, being simultaneously needy and filled. Final fullness is this interplay of want and satisfaction, heaven here and hereafter, having and wanting from and into eternity. (p.246)

In other words, as Traherne puts it in *Centuries* I, 51:

> From Eternity it was requisit that we should Want. We could never els have Enjoyed any Thing … Wants are the Ligatures between God and us.

'Wants' are both needs and desires, and to be in a constant state of desire *and* fulfilment is constantly to preserve the intense pleasure that comes from the first satisfaction of a wish before its fulfilment starts to be taken for granted. Think, maybe, of the lover who continues to long for the beloved even while delighting in reciprocated love. I shall say more about Traherne's experience of felicity, but for the moment I want to return to his life.

We know that he was still in Oxford in Lent 1657 having graduated the year before, and then in December of that year he was appointed to be minister at Credenhill, just outside Hereford, 'a Little church Environed with Trees' as he describes it, where he saw his purpose as being to 'teach Immortal Souls the way to Heaven' (*Select Meditations* III, 83). He was appointed by the commissioners for the approbation of public preachers – what a splendid title for a committee that is! – but of course it is also a reminder that this was during the Commonwealth period when the Church of England had been abolished and there were no bishops.

Then 1660 saw the Restoration of both Charles II and the Church of England. Although Traherne had accepted his appointment to Credenhill by the afore-mentioned committee of Presbyterian ministers, he went off quite promptly to seek episcopal ordination from Robert Skinner at Launton just outside Oxford on 20 October 1660, long before it was clear that this would be necessary if he wanted to keep his job. (Skinner was Bishop of Oxford and had been quietly ordaining clergy into Anglican orders throughout the Commonwealth period and there was no Bishop of Hereford at this point: Bishop Coke had died a couple of months after being deprived of his see at the start of the Commonwealth era and had not yet been replaced.)

What were his motives? Just to hang on to his living, or his admiration for 'the beautiful union of my national church' (*Select Meditations* I, 85)? I think primarily the latter. With painful memories of religious division and civil war he is critical of those he calls 'zealots', who are prepared to set aside unity for 'every trifle and every scruple' of private conscience. That everyone should be brought together by belonging to the one church was more important to him than private concerns about non-essential matters of doctrine. (Sadly, of course, the effect of the Act of Uniformity was subsequently to confirm the split amongst English protestants with almost 2,000 ministers being ejected from their livings.)

Traherne remains as rector of Credenhill until his death in 1674, but in the autumn of '73 he went up to London to see his first book through the press, and the next year is found at Teddington as private chaplain to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, to whom the book had been dedicated. Since Bridgeman had been told to stand down as Lord Keeper of the Great Seal by an irritated Charles II two years earlier, this was not an obvious career move, and in fact Bridgeman died a few months later. And in that same year Traherne himself also dies. It would

be possible, then, to see Traherne as a conventional Restoration clergyman who gets smartly ordained at the restoration, takes his BD, publishes his first book, *Roman Forgeries* – very much an establishment attack, after all, on the validity of the documents on which the Roman Catholic church based its claim to universal authority – and obtains the patronage of Orlando Bridgeman, a great man, even if one out of favour. However, a different picture began to emerge as his other writings were discovered.

Three of his books were published by the end of the seventeenth century, but then, after a 200-year gap, an enormous quantity of further writing was discovered between the 1890s and the 1990s. The works that Finzi draws upon are two manuscript collections of poetry – one of them edited by his brother Philip – and also *Centuries of Meditations*, so called because the meditations were grouped in sets of 100 paragraphs. Amazingly all three of these were discovered on bargain book barrows in London in the 1890s, and *Centuries* and the unedited poems were edited and published in the early 1900s by Bertram Dobell. And interestingly, it was Dobell's introduction to the poetry that drew Finzi's attention to Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality Ode', which he finished setting to music in 1950 after it 'had simmered sixteen years', and to which I shall later make cross-reference.

These books and the others discovered during the twentieth century have broadened enormously our understanding of Traherne's ideas. In one of them, *Select Meditations*, he wonders at the ability of the mind and soul to 'comprehend' God through creation (by 'comprehend' he means not just to 'understand', but to have a *comprehensive* response to God, not just through the intellect, but through the senses, the emotions and the spirit).

Elsewhere he writes of how this 'comprehension' is made possible by a child-like clarity of vision. In the innocence of childhood he believes it is possible to have an awareness of 'Eden' – i.e. of God's creation in its full glory as it was before the Fall – and to have such an awareness in *this* world despite original sin. Indeed he re-defines the way in which original sin works: '... our Misery proceedeth ten thousand times more from the *outward* Bondage of Opinion and Custom, than from any *inward* corruption or Depravation of Nature ... it is not our Parents *Loyns*, so much as our Parents *lives*, that Enthrals and Blinds us.' (my italics) Although – perhaps to avoid the charge of unorthodoxy – he adds, 'Yet is all our Corruption Derived from Adam: in as much as all the Evil Examples and inclinations of the World arise from His Sin.' – All the same this interpretation of original sin as being a matter of nurture rather than nature definitely differs from the conventional seventeenth-century understanding of original sin.

I am sure Finzi would have regarded Traherne's modified attitude to original sin as a step in the right direction. Finzi certainly makes clear his disapproval of the traditional interpretation of the doctrine when he writes in September 1948: 'What a terrible doctrine is that of original sin to one who believes that perception starts at birth and constantly declines thereafter: and

how embarrassing to read Wordsworth's later apologetics for the 'Theology' of the *Intimations*.'

Traherne's understanding is spelt out in the poem 'Innocence' when he writes about his childhood experience:

1

But that which most I wonder at, which most
I did esteem my Bliss, which most I Boast,
And ever shall Enjoy, is that within
I felt no Stain, nor Spot of Sin.

No Darkness then did overshade,
But all within was Pure and Bright;
No Guilt did Crush, nor fear invade
But all my Soul was full of Light.

A Joyfull Sence and Purity
Is all I can remember.
The very Night to me was Bright,
Twas Summer in December...

'all within was Pure and Bright'. This, surely is as emphatic a rejection of Original Sin as Finzi could wish for. Later in the poem Traherne tries to explain this unorthodoxy:

4

Whether it be that Nature is so pure,
And Custom only vicious; or that sure
God did by Miracle the Guilt remov,
And make my Soul to feel his Lov,

So Early: Or that 'twas one Day,
Wher in this Happiness I found;
Whose Strength and Brightness so do Ray,
That still it seemeth to Surround.

What ere it is, it is a Light
So Endless unto me
That I a World of true Delight
Did then and to this Day do see.

And he goes on:

5
That Prospect was the Gate of Heav'n, that Day
The ancient Light of Eden did convey
Into my Soul: I was an Adam there,
A little Adam in a Sphere

Of Joys! O there my Ravisht Sence
Was entertaind in Paradice,
And had a Sight of Innocence.
All was beyond all Bound and Price.

An Antepast of Heaven sure!
I on the Earth did reign.
Within, without me, all was pure.
I must become a Child again.

The child's clarity of vision gives an 'antepast of Heaven' – a foretaste of heaven. If the adult can recover it, it becomes possible to see God's creation as a way to God, and a guide to understanding his love:

> You never Enjoy the World aright, till the Sea it self floweth in your Veins, till you are clothed with the Heavens, and Crowned with the Stars: and perceiv your self to be the Sole Heir of the whole World: and more then so, becaus Men are in it who are evry one Sole Heirs, as well as you. Till you can Sing and Rejoyce and Delight in GOD, as Misers do in Gold, and Kings in Scepters, you never Enjoy the World. (*Centuries of Meditations* I, 29)

But this necessary child-like and clear-sighted *comprehension* is not easily achieved. In a passage just two paragraphs after the ones Finzi selects from in 'Rhapsody' Traherne writes:

> Our Saviors Meaning, when He said, He must be Born again and becom a little Child that will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven: is Deeper far then is generally believed. It is not only in a Careless Reliance upon Divine Providence, that we are to becom Little Children, or in the feebleness and Shortness of our Anger and Simplicity of our Passions [in other words it is not a matter of reverting to childishness]: but in the Peace and Purity of all our soul. which Purity also is a Deeper Thing then is commonly apprehended. for we must disrobe our selvs of all fals Colors [all false pretences], and unclothe our Souls of evil Habits; all our Thoughts must be Infant-like and Clear: the

> Powers of our Soul free from the Leven of this World, and disentangled from mens conceits and customs. (*Centuries* III, 5)

Denise Inge comments on this passage as follows:

> Traherne's admonition … is a call to a new beginning; this is about letting our minds be renewed and our desire be educated so that we see the world not so much as a child but as an adult who has been challenged by a child's simplicity. The clear call to unlearn – to become, as it were, a child again – may not be a call to abandon the responsibility of the adult at all, but to regain the ability that the child has to see through the phoney and peripheral to the heart of things. (*Wanting like a God*, pp.248-9)

And 'seeing to the heart of things' involves, in Traherne's words, being aware:

> … of the Excellency of the Creation, for upon the due sense of its Excellency the life of *Felicity* wholly dependeth. (*Christian Ethicks*, last paragraph of 'To the Reader', p. 6)

With this awareness Traherne can see that although the world is not *God* – Traherne is *not* a pantheist – it is a manifestation of Him. And so in *The Kingdom of God* he writes:

> For the Wisdom and Goodness of God were not So much Seen in the wideness of Eternity, or in Creation of Illimited and Immortal powers, as in the Glorious Univers which is If I may so Speak the very centre of Gods omnipresence, and the Kernel of eternity. (Chapter XL)

In the words of Denise Inge again, Traherne 'figures creation as that body that God has assumed to make himself as visible as it is possible he should be, and a love letter from God to humankind, his beloved' (Denise Inge, *Happiness and Holiness*, page 65). – '… a love letter from God to humankind, his beloved.' – What a beautiful and sensitive summary.

To see creation clearly is to recognise the greatness of God's love, and so, Traherne writes, we have a duty to remember 'our Happiness in the Estate of Innocence. For without this we can never Prize our Redeemers Lov: He that knows not to what He is redeemed cannot Prize the Work of Redemption.' (*Centuries* II, 5)

But becoming again the inhabitants of Eden, we *can* appreciate what God has done for us, we can 'Prize the Work of Redemption' and all the gifts of creation. And in that case, he writes: 'Why should you not render Thanks to God for them all? You are the Adam; or the Eve that enjoy them' (*Centuries* II, 12).

And now to turn to the texts of *Dies Natalis*; but first a preliminary word of warning: Finzi is highly selective in his choice of texts – not to say ruthless – and given the lengthy material with which he was dealing, this was obviously necessary. I would disagree, however, with Diana McVeagh's strange assertion in her generally excellent biography that in his selection he omits 'any specifically religious references' – there are, after all, references to praising God as Creator, and to Eden, and to Adam, and in any case Traherne's faith permeates everything he writes and can't really be filtered out. Nevertheless, Finzi was not Christian and consequently it is reasonable to assume that his work, unlike Traherne's, does not have a specifically Christian focus. There is a danger of speaking of Finzi as if his ideas agreed with Traherne's – they obviously don't – and yet my contention is that an understanding of Traherne's ideas is far from being incompatible with appreciating Finzi's work and may, I hope, enhance your enjoyment of it.

1. Intrada

After all my discussion of words there is perhaps a certain irony that the opening movement is purely instrumental! The lyrical surges of the music with their gentle rise and fall are suggestive of the beauty of creation. The music builds to an intensity of feeling and then becomes quietly meditative. A reminder that you don't always need words.

2. Rhapsody

This is a setting of excerpts from the first three paragraphs of *Centuries of Meditation* III. They are written in prose, but nonetheless deeply poetic in the figurative sense.

Traherne writes of the innocence that enables him as a little child to appreciate the 'works of God in their splendour and glory': 'I was a stranger, which at my entrance was saluted and surrounded with innumerable joys; my knowledge was divine. I was entertained like an angel with the works of God in their splendour and glory. Heaven and Earth did sing my Creator's praises…' (NB Finzi's text sometimes omits individual words as well as longer passages.)

Unaffected as yet by 'the Dirty Devices of this World' he sees a paradisal vision, the description of which is sung in a hushed voice: 'The corn was orient and immortal wheat' – 'orient' means shining like the rising sun, or rich and exotic, coming from the east like the 'orient pearl' that Shakespeare has Antony give to Cleopatra.

To digress for a moment: Tom Denny captures this 'orient wheat' in both the left-hand light of the Traherne windows at Hereford and in the left-hand Finzi window at Gloucester, which is Denny's response to *Dies Natalis*. In the former we see Traherne running through the wheat towards the hill that is Credenhill; in the latter the 'orient and immortal wheat' is at Chosen Hill, where Finzi had his own moment of intense vision on the last night of 1925 as he looked

at the stars and heard the church bells ringing in the new year. Just as music can speak without words, so too can the artist's images.

But to return to the words: 'The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting.' This is a vision outside and beyond time, and although described in the past tense, it still has a living power. Indeed Traherne confidently asserts:

'Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world than I.' – 'I knew not that there were sins or complaints or laws … I saw all in the peace of Eden. Everything was at rest, free and immortal.' – 'I saw all in the peace of Eden' – Consider those words I quoted before:

> That Prospect was the Gate of Heav'n, that Day
> The ancient Light of Eden did convey
> Into my Soul: I was an Adam there,
> A little Adam in a Sphere
>
> Of Joys! O there my Ravisht Sence
> Was entertaind in Paradice,
> And had a Sight of Innocence.
> (from 'Innocence', verse 5)

And this 'sight of innocence' saw paradise where 'everything was at rest, free and immortal'. And Finzi pauses before bringing in a pianissimo setting of these final words of the movement.

3. The Rapture

As its title suggests, this is the overwhelming emotional response to the vision of God's creation that Traherne experiences with such unclouded, child-like clarity of vision – both the sense of everything being made for him (not excluding others, of course, for there are 'no churlish Proprieties') – and also the sense of the infinite generosity of God. This is a re-creation of the ecstasy of the child, but nevertheless created by the adult and expressed in the present tense. It *still* has the power to work upon him:

> From God abov
> Being sent, the Gift doth me enflame
> To praise his Name;
> The Stars do mov,
> The sun doth shine, to show his Lov.

And so in the act of recreating his childhood rapture the adult Traherne is still 'enflamed' by his experiences to praise God's name. Not 'the Gift *did* me inflame', but 'the Gift *doth* me inflame'. The experience lives on in the present. And its purpose is to praise *God's* name. You may feel that at times Traherne seems very interested in him*self*, but the purpose of the autobiographical elements (as in St Augustine's *Confessions*, if I may follow the comparison made by the American critic, Louis Martz, in *The Paradise Within*) is to point beyond himself towards God in praise and thanksgiving.

4. Wonder, 'How like an Angel came I down!'

The opening words of this movement - 'How like an Angel came I down!' invite comparison with Wordsworth's new-born child 'trailing clouds of glory' in his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.* And I think it is valid to make the comparison since Finzi was already thinking of setting the Wordsworth by 1934 (inspired by reading Dobell's introduction to Traherne's poetry, which refers to Wordsworth's *Ode*), stating that he was 'driven to composition by the impact of the words'. Both Wordsworth and Traherne know the 'shades of the prison house', although Traherne is perhaps more blunt when he writes of 'the Dirty Devices of this World'; but while Traherne celebrates an escape from the prison house of worldliness, Wordsworth's happy shepherd-boy's cries are only partially successful in taking him back to the joys of childhood – it seems to me that he is engaged in a vicarious and not altogether successful attempt to recapture the kind of childhood that he nostalgically describes elsewhere. Later in the *Ode*, after all, he writes – 'Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?' – By contrast Traherne *does* retrieve the Eden he saw as a child, but moves on to a more mature understanding – finding a 'paradise within' as the Louis Martz calls it in his book of that name (pp. 38-9; 40-1).

Nevertheless, I would not wish to overplay this contrast: Wordsworth is not without some consolation, but it is a backward-looking one. Listen to Finzi's setting of 'Hence in a season of calm weather Though inland far we be, Our souls have sight of that immortal sea Which brought us hither.' Or the hushed poignancy of the tenor's words, 'Another race hath been, and other palms are won', after which the chorus join the tenor in singing at the very end of the work:

> 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.

There *is* consolation here, but both words and music are poignant, and the last word we hear is 'tears' as the music dies away. I think Finzi is true to Wordsworth here and the mood of the

music is rightly closer to Hardy's sense of something lost than to Traherne's sense of recovery. When I mention Hardy I'm thinking of two poems set by Finzi in *Before & After the Summer*. There is the plaintive question in 'Childhood among the ferns' – 'Why should I have to grow to man's estate' – and also the sense of loss in 'The Self Un-seeing' – 'Child-like, I danced in a dream; Blessings emblazoned that day; Everything glowed with a gleam; *Yet* we were looking away!' (my italics)

So there *is* a contrast – Traherne can see a way of recovering the vision of Eden, not by just trying to go back to childhood experience, but rather by using the child's insight with all its weaknesses as a springboard for a deeper understanding. The movement ends with the words:

> I nothing in the world did know
> But 'twas divine.

And note the soaring exultant notes with which Finzi sets the word 'divine'.

5. The Salutation

And so we come to the final movement, a setting of four verses selected from *Philip* Traherne's edited version of the opening poem in Thomas's sequence on his childhood. Introduced with a lyrical caressing theme on the strings it begins with Traherne's exclamations at the mystery of the birth of a new creature:

> These little Limbs,
> These Eys and Hands which here I find,
> This panting Heart wherwith my Life begins;
> Where have ye been? Behind
> What Curtain were ye from me hid so long?
> Where was, in what Abyss, my new-made Tongue?

In answer to the question 'Where have ye been?', the next verse seems to hint at the neo-Platonic concept of pre-existence before birth, which although not orthodox, was being propounded by such thinkers as the seventeenth-century Cambridge theologian Henry More in his lengthy poem, *Pre-Existency of the Soul*. Regardless of how seriously Traherne intends this, what comes through clearly again is his wonder at the marvellous gifts of creation:

> When silent I
> So many thousand thousand Years
> Beneath the Dust did in a Chaos Ly,
> How could I Smiles, or Tears,
> Or Lips, or Hands, or Eys, or Ears perceiv?
> Welcome, ye Treasures which I now receiv.

It is through the gift of these 'treasures' – both the emotions ('Smiles and Tears') and the senses of the created body that taste, touch, see and hear – that he can fully 'comprehend' creation as both 'a Gift of God' and a revelation:

> From Dust I rise
> And out of Nothing now awake;
> These brighter Regions which salute my Eys
> A Gift from God I take;
> The Earth, the Seas, the Light, the lofty Skies,
> The Sun and Stars are mine; if these I prize.

There is an overwhelming sense of the greatness of the gift of creation for someone as insignificant as himself, and yet he (like everyone else) can claim all the 'Treasures' of creation:

> A Stranger here
> Strange things doth meet, strange Glory see,
> Strange Treasures lodg'd in this fair World appear,
> Strange all and New to me.
> But that they mine should be who Nothing was,
> That Strangest is of all; yet brought to pass.

And with these closing words of fulfilment the music dies away in delicate understatement. No dramatic repetition, but just a tuneful ebbing away that leaves us to reflect on what we have heard. Truly Finzi at his most sublime and subtle: How lucky we are to be looking forward to hearing *Dies Natalis* this evening!

Brief bibliography

Finzi, Gerald, *Dies Natalis*, op.8 (Boosey and Hawkes)
Hutchinson, Thomas (ed.), rev. Ernest de Selincourt, *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (Oxford University Press, 1936)
Inge, Denise (ed.), *Happiness and Holiness: Thomas Traherne and his Writings* (Canterbury Press, 2008)
Inge, Denise, *Thomas Traherne: Poetry and Prose* (SPCK, 2002)
Inge, Denise, *Wanting Like a God: Desire and Freedom in Thomas Traherne* (SCM Press, 2009)
McVeagh, Diana, *Gerald Finzi: His Life and Music* (The Boydell Press, 2005)
Marks, Carol L. and Guffey, George Robert (eds.), *Christian Ethicks by Thomas Traherne* (Cornell University Press, 1968)
Martz, Louis L., *The Paradise Within: Studies in Vaughan, Traherne and Milton* (Yale University Press, 1964)
Ross, Jan, (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Traherne* (D. S. Brewer, 2005—)
Smith, Julia J., (ed.), *Thomas Traherne: Select Meditation*s (Carcanet, 1997)
Smith, Julia J., 'Traherne, Thomas (*c.*1637–1674)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2010 (http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/38074)