Windmills around Haworth

Windmills around Haworth, The Royal Society of Literature, Singing Horace, etc

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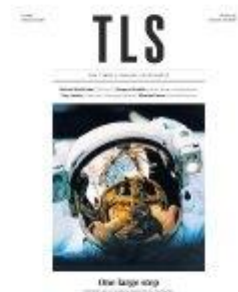

February 16, 2024
Read this issue

Thirty years ago Ted Hughes, Jeanette Winterson and sixty-two other signatories stood against an "assault on our literary and artistic heritage": a proposal to build forty-four wind turbines on the moors above Haworth, the West Yorkshire home of the Brontës (Letters, February 18, 1994).

We, the undersigned, are standing again – this time against an impending planning application for England's largest onshore wind farm on this area of international literary significance and ecological importance. At 655ft tall the 65 proposed turbines would be two-thirds the height of

the Eiffel Tower. They would be visible for twenty-five miles, and would be served by miles of access roads across fragile peat.

These are not just the wuthering heights written into immortality by the Brontës, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, or the wily, windy moors sung about by Kate Bush. They are a unique, highly protected priority habitat. The turbines would occupy eleven Site of Special Scientific Interest land units, which also have European Natura 2000 status (now transferred into UK law). The area is home to protected, endangered birds such as breeding merlin and golden plover, as well as other breeding bird assemblages, including curlews. The peat moors include significant areas of blanket bog – as the biggest natural storers of carbon in the UK, blanket bogs are known as the UK's Amazon rainforest. Their unique hydrology offers a protective barrier during extreme rainfall, which reduces peak flow during repeated floods in the Calder Valley and other areas. And they are loved, as a vital green resource for mental and physical health by inhabitants and visitors from Burnley, Bradford, Leeds and the industrial North, and by literary pilgrims from across the world.

Along with the RSPB, the Brontë Society, Lancashire and Yorkshire Wildlife Trusts, the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England and multiple other organizations, we oppose this proposal on the grounds of the profound ecological and cultural harm it would cause. In the movement towards net zero carbon we need long-term solutions which restore habitat and biodiversity; which are alert to the value of culture and community; and which enhance natural carbon storage in oceans, forests, peat and other soils.

Alan Ayckbourn, Frieda Hughes, Robert Macfarlane, Sally Wainwright, Jeanette Winterson and 351 others (see bottom of the page for the full list)

The Royal Society of Literature

We are a heterogeneous group of writers, loosely linked by professional acquaintance and in some cases friendship, but recently brought together by concern about reports that the Royal Society of Literature attempted to censor an article in its own *RSL Review* (see NB, February 2 and 9). All of us are Fellows of the Society, some elected in the past few years, others as long ago as the 1980s. Five have been members of its Council, some more than once. On January 26 we wrote privately to the Society's Director, Molly Rosenberg, asking for a confidential meeting to discuss our concerns. She declined to see us, saying that she couldn't discuss the matter before the Council next met. That meeting is scheduled for February 20.

Despite the Director's refusal, the Chair, Daljit Nagra, talked at length soon afterwards to a representative of the whole group. These illuminating, friendly but occasionally tough conversations were reported back to the rest of us. Among other things we learnt that the Chair intends to propose that the RSL refer itself to the Charity Commission. The issues to be investigated would have to include the censorship attempt, which we are quite sure occurred and which plainly contravened fundamental literary values. There have also been failures of governance, among them the extent to which some of the Society's directorate have tried to suppress criticism by members of Council and other Fellows. In all this money has been wasted on efforts to avoid reputational damage, which have backfired.

Bringing in the Charity Commission would go some way towards reassuring not only the Society's Fellows, but also the impressively large wider community of readers and writers today's RSL attracts to its activities, who must be puzzled by what they hear about its current troubles.

We value Council members' voluntary service to the RSL, understand the demands imposed on them by the Society's current difficulties, wish them well in their deliberations and urge them to support the motion for self-referral.

Fleur Adcock, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Susannah Clapp, Richard Davenport-Hines, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Geoff Dyer, Roy Foster, Philip Hensher, Alan Hollinghurst, Annalena McAfee, Ian McEwan, Andrew O'Hagan, Fiona Sampson, Jeremy Treglown, Frances Wilson

Thomas Traherne

Both Jean-Louis Quantin (January 26) and Alastair Conan (Letters, February 2) raise interesting questions concerning Thomas Traherne's literary standing and importance. While I hesitate to suggest any answer to Mr Conan's question about how far Q's 1934 observations about Traherne's temper and style chime with the views of present-day scholars, it is striking that one of Traherne's admirers is the writer and moving spirit in the formation both of the Inland Waterways Association and of the Talyllyn Railway Preservation Society, L. T. C. Rolt (1910–74).

In his essay "The Clouded Mirror" (1955), Rolt examines the works of Arthur Machen (1863–1947), Henry Vaughan (1621–95) and Traherne – all writers with an intimate knowledge of the southerly Welsh Marches and the Black Mountains. Here Rolt deals with matter close to his own heart; he enjoyed an enchanted childhood in the village of Cusop, just outside Hay-on-Wye, before his dispatch to boarding school at the age of ten to learn what, quoting Traherne, he terms "the dirty devices of this world". Of the three writers he examines, it is Traherne who interests him most. In Rolt's analysis Traherne's lifelong "search for happiness" was not so much a selfish quest for pleasure as a pursuit of "the felicity and certitude which comes from … combining … the child's clear eye for wonder with adult experience, to produce true understanding".

Like Vaughan Traherne recognized and relished the immanent presence of the divine within the natural world – "God manifest in creation", as Rolt expresses it. Like Arthur Quiller-Couch he has more time for Traherne's prose than his verse, and maintains that it is "in the *Centuries of Meditations*, with its measured cadences, its sustained periods and its haunting reiterations which chime like bells that Traherne's spring of joy finds its true voice". Like Q Rolt portrays it through water imagery, although he thinks of it less as a "clear and sparkling stream" than as an

impetuous … mountain torrent, gathering every runlet to itself [and] throwing up a spray shot through by sunlight with rainbow colours singing with the ecstasy of its own life …

It is, in other words, lively to the point of extreme boisterousness.

Rolt's literary reputation rests largely on his canal and railway books, and his biographies of I. K. Brunel, Thomas Telford and George and Robert Stephenson. His trenchant appreciation of Traherne rings with affection – a kind of across-the-years friendship springing from their shared fondness for the Welsh border country. May 2024 will witness the fiftieth anniversary of his death.

Victoria Owens
Long Ashton, North Somerset

Singing Horace

Little in the study of Greco-Roman antiquity – Peter Wiseman and I may even be in agreement on this point – admits of certainty. My view that Horace's references to his lyre are strictly conventional is not provable beyond question (see my review, January 19, and Letters, January 26, February 2 and February 9), but neither, for instance, is Professor Wiseman's stated contention that Ovid's poetic calendar, *Fasti*, was a performed text, the evidence for which most scholars would consider thin. On the question of *Tristia* 4.10, I am happy to interpret Ovid's reminiscences as indicating, no more and no less, that he met socially with Macer, Propertius, Ponticus, Bassus and Horace, and heard such passages of their poetry as they shared viva voce with their friends and fellow poets, but that he never enjoyed the same intimacy with the notoriously reticent Virgil or with Tibullus, because Tibullus had died too young. Can I prove that my understanding is correct? No, but it results in a broadly plausible picture of social relations between poets of the Roman leisured class.

As for the *Carmen saeculare*, nobody disputes that it was performed by a choir of twenty-seven girls and twenty-seven boys on the Palatine Hill and then the Capitoline on June 3, 17BC, though it has been suggested that departures in this composition from Horace's lyrical practice in the *Odes*, stylistic and metrical, reflect the requirements, unique (it is assumed) to this poem, of actual performance. If *Odes* 4.6, looking back at the *Carmen*, implies some role for Horace in training the choir to sing this poem in its unfamiliar lyric metre, that seems likely enough to me. But this still doesn't give us Horace strumming a lyre in front of the temple of Palatine Apollo while the choir sang.

Readers of the *TLS* will forgive me again for mentioning that my *Horace: A very short introduction* (2023) has a brief but informative account in chapter four of the *Carmen saeculare* and Horace's other lyric poetry in the *Odes*. The context of the performance of the *Carmen*, Augustus' Secular Games, was an elaborate sequence of ceremonies designed to set a capstone on the emperor's efforts to restore Rome to prosperity. The discovery in 1890, during work on the Tiber embankment in Rome, of an inscription known as CIL VI 32323 has allowed us unusually rich access to this event, as it proved to be the official record of the Secular Games later set up in a public place. Its description of the performance of Horace's poem runs as follows:

And when the sacrifice was completed, twenty-seven boys, previously designated, with living fathers and mothers, and the same number of girls, sang a song [on the Palatine Hill], and in the same manner on the Capitoline. The song was composed by Q. Horatius Flaccus.

This also is no proof of anything, or at least of anything that is in dispute, but it is at least suggestive that in this independent contemporary account of the only lyric poem by Horace for which incontestable evidence exists of its contemporary performance, the children sang it, while Horace neither sang nor accompanied, but simply composed it.

Llewelyn Morgan
Brasenose College, Oxford

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