Dennis Creffield

For seventy years, from his training with David Bomberg at the Borough Polytechnic to his late work on blazing, densely-worked paintings inspired by Jerusalem and made in the company of William Blake, Creffield expressed the joy, pain and beauty of life in a physical world. He was an artist of great conviction and imaginative power, an adventurer, a risk-taker. There was a wild energy in him as well as patience and discipline. He was a converted Catholic who sensed divine love in the touch of human bodies. Material things and metaphysical ideas were inseparable for him: revelations could come in the sudden apprehension of a flower or the gradual companionship of an ancient building.

His pictures work emphatically in the present tense. They do not settle politely in their frames but seem to pulse and breathe. They rouse the sensation that the charcoal might come off on your hands, or a baby reach out from swaddling that looks amniotic, or a flood of light overflow the bounds of *Petworth: Winter* and pour into the room. ‘Don’t say “were”’, Creffield corrected a friend who discussed the pictures for an exhibition as if they were finished: ‘say “is, are”’. Perhaps he meant he was going to have some late nights revising them, but ‘is, are’ persists even once they are mounted and glazed. These are active pictures, changing with each person who sees them. To look for any length of time is to be changed a little in turn.

Though the continuities and accretions of time are sometimes thick and rich in his work, Creffield is not an archaeological painter working back through strata. All history is contemporary and new born. The archaic Greeks and the Elizabethans jostle in the foreground of the paintings inspired by *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He drew himself as Nelson, he pitched himself into the sea-storms inhabited by Turner, he dreamt and prayed his way into the Annunciation and Nativity. His infants are already wise and he paints Shakespeare and Blake as if, with all their wisdom, they are embryonic.

When he toured the English medieval cathedrals in 1987, he was looking at centuries of human effort. He was deeply responsive to the work of the anonymous medieval craftsmen, but he paid tribute to them not by drawing history but by expressing the liveliness of these buildings in the present. Pevsner’s guide may make the architectural details legible (‘early Perp tracery which still contains Dec elements’ writes Pevsner of the clerestory arches at Norwich, for example, finely disentangling layers of building), and Creffield too let the observation of such details work on him. But his aim was to feel for the character and power of the whole, understanding the buildings as if they were living organisms.

His Exeter Cathedral is glittering, open and sunlit; Peterborough dark and spectral, the high arches of its West Front a hollow-eyed invitation to the interior. Canterbury, the beginning and end of his pilgrimage, best-loved cathedral of his youth in Kent, billows in his drawings with the purposeful pride of a galleon catching the wind in its sails. In *The West Front from the South-East* (Tate), the whole monumentally solid edifice appears as fabric filled out with life and spirit. In a lighter drawing of the West Front (also in Tate’s collection), the weight disappears completely behind sharp points of brightness, the giant building metamorphosing into something more like a crown we could carry, or an ice sculpture at a banquet. Would it be derogatory to call it a cake, a confection? On the contrary: Creffield noted that Canterbury’s pinnacles might be licked like Angel Delight.

Licking, holding, weighing these buildings in his arms, Creffield responded to them as lovers (and more than once compared his lovers to cathedrals). Part of what’s extraordinary about this is his understanding of the potential for vast structures, when they are feelingly crafted, to work on an intimately human scale. He draws the ribbed capitals at Rouen (20 metres or so above him) as if they were within reach; his towers duck amenably like tall men entering a homely room. The buildings which move him most are not those that look down from unreachable heights, but those which can be grasped whole while standing on the ground. There is a powerful sense of containment in his pictures of these places. Everything from cloister arches to spires fits, improbably, within his squares of canvas or paper.

Call me an impressionist, he said (in his introduction to *English Cathedrals*), but he didn’t mean to declare affinity with Monet or Pissarro. The Rouen paintings measure the great difference between them. Air in Monet is really air. Stone transfigured by light is just that, not a metaphor but the visual truth of sun on stone at that moment. Creffield is greedy not for the moment but for all time. He wants to sum up, to hold and encompass. A sudden shaft of sun matters to him not for the particular atmospheric effect that so ravished Monet, but as the revelation of something deep in a building’s character that was there all along and is now lit up. He wants to put his arms round things and people, to paint the whole of them. He aspired to inhabit his subjects rather than looking from the outside, wanting to feel with them. The light which flares and burns around Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary in *The Visitation* as their pregnant bodies meet each other – with utmost delicacy, heaviness, strain and hope – is not a bit of good weather.

There was severity in Creffield, and willed renunciation. Visitors reported on the bareness of his studio, and a flat which suggested indifference to domestic possessions. He was drawn to some of the most ascetically extreme of the medieval mystics. He made Julian of Norwich his ‘travelling companion’ for the cathedral journey (along with Wittgenstein), reading her *Revelations of Divine Love* in the campervan at night. Julian herself had elected to see no cathedrals and to make no journeys, not even from chancel to nave: she took the vows of an anchorite and sealed herself into the semi-darkness of a cell so that all her sight was of God. In her abnegation of the world, she found spiritual freedom and Creffield felt the expansiveness of her vision.

But for Creffield, the sensations of physical life broke in upon bareness; he rejoiced in the plenitude of things seen and sensuously experienced. *The Lovers* is a blaze of colour, the paint thick and bodily. The rococo state bed at Petworth House with its scarlet canopy, an inert thing on the face of it, attracted him with such force that he painted it tossed and strewn in a tornado of velvet. Brighton Pier, watched day after day from his flat, presented him with fiestas of lights, flags, waves, tutti frutti, gulls picking in the shingle, first daters, lovers, holiday triumphs and disasters. He wanted to know all of it. He was attentive both to the nights of carnival and the grey light of a winter morning, alert to the rhythms of transition as to the liturgical rhythms of the church year in which the intensity of the feasts gives way to the steadiness of Ordinary Time.

Among the poems that meant much to him was Louis MacNeice’s ‘Snow’, a dazzled, blinking celebration of beauty revealed on a bare winter day. ‘The room was suddenly rich’, it begins: rich with snow-light and fire-light. ‘Suddener’, ‘crazier’, ‘more spiteful and gay’, the world surprises MacNeice by being, in every way, so much more than (on a cold afternoon) one might suppose. In his best pictures, Creffield surprises us with exactly this, and makes us feel, as MacNeice has it, ‘the drunkenness of things being various’.

He was an artist who cared about words, and whose faith showed him the possibility of words made flesh. He was a reader who climbed inside what he read or, depending on the kind of text, opened himself to let it in. To read seriously meant learning by heart (with the heart involved) and living with the words until they took new shapes in his dreams. It was not browsing but communing, as the medieval mystics read the psalms. He might have been a writer as well as a painter (though he said it was an agony to write, as it was to paint). We could have fed on erratic diary notes as on, for example, Derek Jarman’s *Chroma* or *Modern Nature*. His comments on the cathedrals are earnest, vehement, and very funny – a comedy we might not suspect from the pictures. Gilbert Scott is ‘the leading purveyor of dog biscuit’ (the indestructible sandstones favoured by Victorian restorers); the well-intentioned planting of trees around cathedrals is ‘like sticking a large pot-plant in front of a Giotto’.

Animal, vegetable, mineral: of these it was the animal that most possessed Creffield: the human animal, human creativity, animal in the sense of ‘anima’ and ‘animation’. His subject was the human spirit, the shapes it makes in the world, and its divine transformations.

He was not a seeker after vegetable secrets like Palmer or the Nash brothers, and not a Wordsworthian pantheist. Rolled round ‘with rocks, and stones, and trees’, one imagines he might be keen to get back to good company and a bottle of wine in Brighton. He was acutely responsive, certainly, to the material fabric of things; he understood the different languages of granite and sandstone. But it was the worked stone he cared about: worked by hands and pieced together to achieve a human vision. His argument with Ruskin was clear here as in all the matters they both touched. Ruskin peered into his flints for news of the universe and instructed his students to read ‘sermons in stones’. For Creffield it was the medieval builders who had made the stones speak in praise of God.

In his best pictures, each category is at the service of the others. The swaying vertical strokes of his Salisbury Cathedral drawings give the sensation of looking through a field of corn: is this a ripening crop, this insistently rural cathedral, most famously seen across water-meadows? He experienced the interior at Lichfield as something like a deep cobnut coppice, and saw Canterbury’s stone flickering with the airy fineness of silver birch. Not many people could confuse a cathedral with a woman. To confuse, to join together: this was for Creffield not a mistake but a triumph.

He painted industrial-sized cranes so that they seem to bend like soft human arms. His many views of Greenwich from the Observatory and Leeds from the University are landscapes ordered by crystalline, geological patterns of facets and faultlines. But most of all they are human shapes, the extravagant urban effusion of each city on a scale which is both immense and satisfyingly containable on canvas. His *Easter Lily* is a flower transfigured. Vegetable green has been changed to an electric blue that shines out of darkness with a clarity indicative of absolute certainty. The trumpet sends out its news of the resurrection with propellant force. A smudge of white pastel is all it is, bare, economical, and it carries the whole ecstasy of Easter fulfilment.