

*Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought*. Edited by Elizabeth S. Dodd and Cassandra Gorman. Suffolk and Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2016. ISBN 9781843844242. Xx + 221 pp. HB £60.00.

This volume is groundbreaking, almost of necessity, because it is deeply informed by the recent publication of newly discovered work by Thomas Traherne (*The Works of Thomas Traherne*, edited by Jan Ross, Cambridge University Press, 2005- ), a writer and an Anglican clergyman of the seventeenth century. With only two prose publications published in the late seventeenth century, Traherne was of little interest to the scholarly community until the discovery and publication (in the early twentieth century) of devotional poems that led to frequent comparisons between Traherne and the Romantic poets. Then in the late twentieth century, additional Traherne works were discovered, re-energizing scholars: it is noteworthy that the 2012 academic conference that generated *Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought* was the first on this writer in fifteen years. Julia J. Smith's foreword, Jacob Blevins's afterword, and especially the introduction by the editors establish the significance of the most recent discoveries, including the evidence they provide that Traherne was not (as previously believed) detached from his culture.

The book is divided into two sections, the first dealing with 'philosophies of matter and spirit' (p. 29). Phoebe Dickerson opens this section by complicating the relationship between inward and outward in Traherne's poetry; she focuses on skin as a 'lanthorn', which simultaneously circumscribes the soul and makes the soul visible outwardly. Dickerson places his work in the context of earlier and contemporary writers and also employs the ideas of Jean-Luc Nancy, explaining that the twentieth-century French philosopher's 'paradoxical configuration of closure and openness stimulates a new reading of Traherne's contact between skin and soul' (p. 36).

In an article on Traherne's realism, Kathryn Murphy focuses on Traherne and 'thingliness', first addressing the peculiarly abstract lists within the poems, which feature she sees not as 'boring' and naïve but as a deliberate rhetorical choice reflecting Traherne's thinking about the nature of reality. Murphy places his thinking in the context of Aristotle, Francis Bacon, and the Royal Society, distinguishing Traherne both as more spiritual in his approach to realism and more prone to 'exploit the ambivalence of "things"' (p. 68).

For Cassandra Gorman, Traherne exhibits a deep knowledge of the scientific theory of atomism, an argument that bears ramifications for the usual view of Traherne's understanding of natural history. Not only Traherne but also others in the seventeenth century interpreted the atom spiritually, but while others viewed it as humble and frail, like an individual human, he saw it as stable and strong when united, like the Christian community.

Alison Kershaw concludes this section by connecting Traherne's Christology with his scientific understanding, in an argument for the 'implicit presence' of Christ in *The Kingdom of God* (p. 85). She places Traherne in the context of other divines, both those with similar views and those with highly differing views (such as Donne). Kershaw also finds that Traherne's 'easily overlooked' Christology permeates his poetry and other prose (p. 103). A comparison with the views of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is anachronistic but helpful.

The second section of the volume deals with devotional materials. Both Warren Chernaik and Carol Ann Johnston consider *The Ceremonial Laws*, a didactic narrative poem based on episodes from the first five books of the Bible. Chernaik discusses this poem as a series of private meditations based on typology and as a less-sophisticated work intended for an audience of ordinary readers such as Traherne's parishioners. He argues that unlike Milton and most other writers of the seventeenth century, Traherne sees both the Mosaic law and the gospel

as necessary for salvation, and the law as an expression of God's love. Johnston asserts that *The Ceremonial Laws* shows Traherne engaging in more radical political and religious work than has been traditionally thought. Typology was developed by medieval Catholics into a complex four-part allegorical form rejected by the more radical Protestants. Johnston argues that not only the way Traherne uses typology but also his poem's central topic (the exodus from Egypt) allies him with the more radical sectarians. She acknowledges that the poem's seeming radicalism exists in tension with *The Select Meditations*, which (written just after the Restoration) expresses Traherne's 'relief' at the return of the national church. Johnston offers some conjectures about this apparent contradiction, concluding that we should at least 'reconsider Traherne's sectarian explorations and loyalties' (p. 153).

In 'Thomas Traherne and the Pursuit of Happiness', Ana Elena González-Treviño argues that in many of his writings Traherne engaged in an early modern tradition of 'how-to' manuals, explaining how to study and learn happiness through the attainment of virtue. Such teachers of happiness saw atheism (and specifically the materialism of Thomas Hobbes) as their chief opposition; while rejecting the Hobbesian elevation of reason over belief, they used reason to justify faith. González-Treviño finds that Traherne's views in this area are 'complex', including a unique claim that he is a 'successful student' of happiness (p. 171).

Since the first publication of his poems a little over a century ago, Traherne has been associated with the Romantic poets, so that even recent studies must distance his writing from Romanticism. In this volume's final article, Elizabeth S. Dodd argues that although there are similarities (based on the influence of Christian Platonism on both Traherne and the Romantics), Traherne's poetry depicts not a yearning for childhood but an "innocency of life" that is part of

the life of faith' (p. 173). Moreover, this 'innocency of life' is based in contemporary ethics and devotional texts, and in Traherne's priestly vocation and in the life of the Christian church.

While this last chapter is perhaps the most obvious example, every part of *Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought* expands our thinking about a figure who deserves closer attention.