

## Preface

When Thomas Traherne is mentioned in casual conversation, the reply is often, 'Ah, yes, the poet.' Very often this is followed by an apologetic smile and the observation, 'I don't really "do" poetry.' If, on the other hand, you speak to a student of English literature, they are often quick to say that they don't 'do' theology. There is, however, no studying of a vast swathe of English literature without getting to grips with Christian ideas, just as there is no satisfactory way of tackling the key ideas of this important Christian philosopher and theologian, without looking at his poetry. My aim in this book, therefore, is to introduce Traherne's thought and poetic style, by offering a commentary on some of his verse in the context of his other writings and the poetry of the early modern period, while endeavouring to avoid undue literary-critical or theological jargon. Much of the other poetry quoted will not have been known by Traherne, and therefore cannot be considered to have influenced him, but is offered to illustrate the intellectual milieu of the early modern period in which he was writing and to place him firmly in the English poetic tradition where he belongs.

### **The Texts Quoted**

In pursuit of this aim I shall quote liberally and, since this book is intended as an introduction and not for specialists, I shall modernise the spelling and presentation of my chosen passages. This needs to carry a serious health warning, especially in the case of Traherne, since his heavy use of capitals is an integral part of his style, which he uses to emphasise key ideas. He does so with such frequency, however, that it can be a distraction, and I have followed his practice sparingly. There are in any case places in his

manuscripts when it is very hard to be sure whether a letter is a capital or not. Furthermore, the idiosyncrasy of his spelling (particularly the omission of the final silent 'e' in words such as 'Lov') can be off-putting to the modern reader. I have trodden more cautiously in the matter of punctuation, since a change of punctuation can lead to a change of meaning, or the exclusion of alternative readings, but at times Traherne's omission of any pointing, or placing a full stop where we would expect a comma, can cause confusion to the reader unfamiliar with early modern pointing.

I have not, however, modernised spellings in cases where it would change the pronunciation and in some cases the scansion or rhythmic pattern (e.g. 'parile' has not been altered to 'parallel'). The exception to this is that I have always altered 'then' to 'than', where the latter spelling represents the intended meaning to the modern reader. Where an apostrophe replaces an omitted vowel, I have usually restored the missing letter on the assumption that, when reading aloud, the modern reader will elide naturally. This includes the ending '-ed' which should always be pronounced the modern way. Since it was normal custom in poetry of the period to pronounce or not pronounce this ending as the rhythm of the verse required, I have alerted the reader by putting an accent over the 'e' where it would not normally be pronounced in modern usage. Thus, 'pronounced' should be two syllables (and will not be printed 'pronounc'd') and, if the extra third syllable is required, it will be printed 'pronounced'. I have also indicated where the final syllable of the '-ion' ending needs to be pronounced separately by placing a diaeresis over the 'o' (e.g. 'pronunciatiön' is six syllables). One matter on which I have been completely inconsistent is in the 'st' or 'est' ending of the second person singular; this can be a mouthful to pronounce at the best of times and I have chosen which ever form seems easiest to speak without betraying the scansion.

In other words, the texts that I quote have no authority; those who need to see the original spelling and pointing will find references in the footnotes to Jan Ross' edition of Traherne and will find original-spelling texts of most of the other poets quoted in the bibliography.

I refer throughout to the Tanakh, or Jewish Scriptures, as the Old Testament, since this is how Traherne looks at its books, reading them for foreshadowings of the New Testament message. No slight is intended.

### Organisation of the Book

In the opening chapter a brief introduction to Traherne and some key theological ideas is linked with a consideration of how helpful it is to call Traherne a 'metaphysical' poet. Chapters 2 and 3 consider *Poems of Felicity* but also

serve as a further introduction to some important concepts. Thereafter, two chapters are devoted to the *Dobell Poems* and then a chapter apiece to *The Ceremonial Law* and *Thanksgivings*, followed by two chapters considering some of the poems from *Commentaries of Heaven*. This apparently systematic approach inevitably means that, like Traherne himself, I keep returning to certain themes, a process that I hope will aid understanding rather than provoke irritation. Almost all of Traherne's prose works include some poems and there are cross-references to these throughout the book.

The biographical paragraphs at the end of the book are necessarily brief and only intended to provide an immediate context for the reader coming across an unfamiliar name.

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