

Thomas Traherne. *The Works of Thomas Traherne*. Jan Ross, ed. Vol. 6. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014. 335pp. £75. Review by CASSANDRA GORMAN, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE.

In 1903, the antiquarian Bertram Dobell published a collection of manuscript poems by a hitherto forgotten seventeenth-century divine. He claimed in his preface to the edition that he was introducing the reader to a new metaphysical poet, comparable but superior to Henry Vaughan, and a forerunner of Wordsworth—for there was not, he claims, “a thought of any value in Wordsworth’s [Immortality] Ode which is not to be found in substance” in the works of the earlier writer (*The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne*, lxxviii). At times breathlessly excited, Dobell promised of this newly-discovered poet that “the long night of his obscurity is at length over, and his light henceforth, if I am not much mistaken, is destined to shine with undiminished lustre as long as . . . the English tongue shall endure” (xvii).

The poet and theologian was of course Thomas Traherne, and the very poems that inspired Dobell’s enthusiasm at the turn of the twentieth century are now the focus of the latest instalment of Jan Ross’s multi-volume edition, *The Works of Thomas Traherne*. Ross has single-handedly adopted the task of making all of Traherne’s texts widely accessible, many of which had languished in little-known manuscript sources for centuries, and are housed in special collections scattered across the world. Bertram Dobell’s introduction to Traherne turned out to be only the first in a series of astonishing rediscoveries that took place over the course of the twentieth century. Happily, in her set of the complete works Ross has made reproducing some of the more unfamiliar—and recently discovered—writings by Traherne a priority: the series kicked off in 2005 by revealing four obscure prose works (including one of Traherne’s most significant achievements, his ecstatic survey of heaven and earth, *The Kingdom of God*) which had only been discovered eight years previously, by Jeremy Maule at Lambeth Palace. This was closely followed by the two-volume publication of the *Commentaries of Heaven*, Traherne’s vast encyclopaedic study of “ALL THINGS,” alphabetically itemised (regrettably, in spite of producing a text in the region of 300,000 words, he only made it as far as the topic “Bastard.”) Although discovered in the 1960s—rescued, in

the most sensational of the modern discoveries to date, off a burning rubbish pile in Lancashire—the *Commentaries* was only identified and attributed to its author in 1980. Volume IV continued the introduction of previously unpublished material with the welcome appearance of the *Church's Year Book*, a gathering of Traherne's thoughts on the value of the church, both Anglican and universal, accompanied in Ross's text by the equally celebratory *Thanksgivings*, his only work of poetry to be published in the seventeenth century. In the two most recent volumes, Ross returned to more familiar ground and presented the writer's best-known, and most-loved, compositions: firstly the *Centuries* and the *Select Meditations*, and now the lyrical poems; the works that brought Traherne to recognition in the first place.

As a poet, Traherne has often been described as an "ecstatic" voice, reaching outwards into the world, gazing boldly into its mysteries and giving thanks for "*All Things*" (a recurrent phrase, quoted in this instance from his poem "The Vision"). The opening contents of Ross's volume, the "Poems from the Dobell Folio" and the "Poems of Felicity," introduce a poetic voice that is strikingly exclamatory, listing objects and reasons for thanksgivings in the torrents of enthusiasm that have become characteristic of Traherne: "O Nectar! O Delicious Stream! / O ravishing and only Pleasure!," he opens his poem on "Love"; in "The Estate," he gives thanks for the right of mankind to inherit the whole world:

We plough the very Skies, as well
 As Earth, the Spacious Seas
 Are ours; the Stars all Gems excell.
 The Air was made to pleas
 The Souls of Men: Devouring fire
 Doth feed and Quicken Mans Desire.
 The Sun it self doth in its Glory Shine,
 And Gold and Silver out of very Mire,
 And Pearls and Rubies out of Earth refine,
 While Herbs and Flowers aspire
 To touch and make our feet Divine.

The critic Robert Watson nevertheless had a good point when he argued we might just as easily call Traherne "instatic," rather than ecstatic; the object of Traherne's focus is consistently on the need for

every human soul to absorb the objects of its encounters (Watson, *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (2006), 305). He directs all of his writings at the obtainment of “Felicitee,” a state of spiritual perfection and omniscient knowledge, defined in “The Vision” as the wondrous ability “From One, to One, in one to see *All Things*.” His inclusion of “in one” here is key: the soul must remain insatiable and capacious, and thus receptive to the joys and natural virtues of creation. Far from vulnerable or problematic, insatiability is a state of being he associates with childhood innocence, a time when, as he expounds with wonder in “My Spirit”:

The Sence it self was I.
 I felt no Dross nor Matter in my Soul,
 No Brims nor Borders, such as in a Bowl
 We see, My Essence was Capacitie.
 That felt all Things

Such is the power of this motive that his poetry, if not quite as elegantly crafted as the lyrics of his predecessor George Herbert, blazes with joy and energy that cannot but be absorbed and shared in by his reader:

——— 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 becom a Child again. (“Innocence”)

In her work Ross presents the first reliable, full edition of the poems since H. M. Margoliouth’s flawed *Thomas Traherne: Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings* from 1958. While the poems of the Dobell folio are written out in Traherne’s hand, those from the “Poems of Felicity”—which include several alternative versions to the Dobell lyrics—were copied by his brother, Philip, and were subject to a significant number of his editorial changes. Whether these were changes Thomas intended to make or not is unclear, and the question of what to do with the variants remains a challenge for the modern editor. While Margoliouth,

“thinking Philip’s editing of Thomas’s text to be ‘a disaster’ ... took the original over Philip’s corrected version of Thomas’s poems, hoping to restore Thomas’s text” and, in so doing, made “changes to the text that were speculative and based on personal preference” (Ross, xvii), Ross has chosen to print the poems “in the order they appear in the manuscripts and in their final corrected form, whether changes to the text were made by Thomas in the Dobell Folio, the Early Notebook and *The Ceremonial Law* or by Philip in *Poems of Felicity*” (xix). Her faithful transcriptions offer her readers the experience of viewing Traherne’s works as though they were reading directly from his manuscripts, but without the hindrance of excessive annotation accompanying the poems themselves. In the concluding section on “Textual Emendations and Notes,” Ross provides detailed descriptions of the seventeenth-century edits supposedly contributed by the Traherne brothers and, in the cases where her edition differs, the previous editorial decisions made by Margoliouth, Dobell, Gladys Wade and others. Her edition is an excellent resource for those embarking on a comparative study of Traherne’s extant texts.

An additional strength to this edition is Ross’s combination of updated, accurate transcriptions of the familiar poems with previously unpublished, and little-known works. She concludes with a handful of short poems from what has become known as “The Early Notebook,” a manuscript collection of notes, largely on ethics and geometry, likely to have been compiled by Traherne while he was still a student. Perhaps the most important contribution of this volume, however, is its inclusion of the previously unpublished typological poem *The Ceremonial Law*. The latest in a series of exciting manuscript discoveries, *The Ceremonial Law*—based at the Folger Shakespeare Library—was identified by Letitia Yeandle and Julia Smith in 2000. Consisting of around 1800 lines in heroic couplets, the work is an unfinished typological poem based on events from Genesis and Exodus, with a didactic style and purpose that reveals another, less familiar side to Traherne’s poetical intentions. *The Ceremonial Law* offers greater insight into a social, worldly consciousness within Traherne’s theological practice that is all too often overlooked; the typological subjects of the poem are displayed plainly and interpreted for an entire Christian flock, an all-inclusive ‘we’, rather than reserved for the poet’s isolated medita-

tive purposes. Meanwhile, the biblical episodes that attract Traherne's focus in the poem—which include “Adams Fall,” “Abels Lamb” and “Moses Call”—offer new insights into his complex personal theology, as we follow Traherne “interpreting his own spiritual journey,” most notably his “personal call to enter the service of the Church,” in the “terms of the history of Israel” (Ross, xxx).

The triumph of Ross's edition is that, while undeniably a thorough work of scholarship—it is accompanied by a comprehensive introduction on the details and provenance of each material text, and extensive textual notes on each individual poem—her book is also delightfully readable, as suitable for the reader encountering Traherne for the first time as the researcher in need of a reliable commentary on the physical status of his manuscripts. She introduces the intimacies of Traherne's reading and writing practices—his habits and quirks, his methods of acquiring information and gaining inspiration—but the main body of her book presents Traherne's texts as they are. Any editor of Traherne is faced with the particular challenge of, on the one hand, preserving his characteristic sense of instinctive spirituality—his apparently intuitive methods of comprehension—and, on the other, justly acknowledging the evidence in his writings of his great, yet often subtle and all too frequently unmentioned, achievements as a theologian, philosopher and polymathic scholar. Ross strikes an excellent balance. Her edition is first and foremost a great book of poetry, carefully and lovingly edited, but its highly detailed scholarly apparatus will be invaluable to all those who wish to cultivate a specialist interest. Ross's *Works* will greatly benefit the advancement of studies on Traherne, and the remaining three volumes deserve to be awaited with eager anticipation.

Rebecca Herissone and Alan Howard, eds. *Concepts of Creativity in Seventeenth-Century England*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013. xviii + 354 pp. + 63 illus. \$99.00. Review by ANNA LEWTON-BRAIN, MCGILL UNIVERSITY.

While human creativity is arguably as old as consciousness itself, the ways we describe, evaluate, and understand our own artistic expressions have not remained constant over time. Rebecca Heris-