

Chad Michael Rimmer. *Greening the Children of God: Thomas Traherne and Nature's Role in the Moral Formation of Children*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2021. x + 265 pp. \$33.75.

Richard Willmott. *The Voluble Soul: Thomas Traherne's Poetic Style and Thought*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2021. xii + 270 pp. \$97.50. Reviews by CASSANDRA GORMAN, ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY.

Few prolific seventeenth-century poets have been as consistently misunderstood, and overlooked, as Thomas Traherne. His lyrics are still often neglected from student anthologies and verse collections, where they are overshadowed by the work of his contemporaries John Donne, George Herbert, and Henry Vaughan. On the other hand, his theology—which, as Richard Willmott claims in the preface to his remarkable book, is separated too often from his poetry—has at times been dismissed by critics as naive, unoriginal, or outdated, holding more in common with the Church Fathers and medieval mysticism than seventeenth-century scholarship. The past twenty years have seen critical attempts to dispel these assumptions, with significant work by, amongst others, Denise Inge, James J. Balakier, Elizabeth Dodd, and Kathryn Murphy.

These two recent publications from Chad Michael Rimmer and Richard Willmott, both from Lutterworth Press, continue the important endeavour to relocate Traherne within the pressing poetic, theological, and natural philosophical discourses of his age—and to emphasise his value and relevance to a twenty-first century readership. Willmott chooses to conclude his study with an extract from Traherne's poem "Walking," which summarises the belief that we should learn morality from direct engagement with the natural world, as children do:

A little child these well perceives,
 Who, tumbling in the green grass and leaves
 May rich as kings be thought:
 But there's a sight
 Which perfect manhood may delight,
 To which we shall be brought.

While in those pleasant paths we talk
 'Tis that towards which at last we walk;
 For we may by degrees
 Wisely proceed
 Pleasures of Love and Praise to heed,
 From viewing herbs and trees. (241)

These lines demonstrate Traherne's attention to the sensorial experiences of childhood, experiences that he argues teach the "Pleasures of Love and Praise" which, importantly, are fully recoverable for the adult seeking the principles of "perfect manhood." The immersive study of nature—"viewing herbs and trees"—teaches the community of individuals "by degrees": with this phrase, Traherne could be said to echo the inductive philosophical method of Francis Bacon, who argued in the *Novum Organon* that truths can be known correctly only if considered gradually by axiomatic points. This knowledge of the "new science" need not come as a surprise, following Traherne's notes on Bacon's *De augmentis scientiarum* in his "Early Notebook" (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Lat. Misc. fol. 45) and his praise of the philosopher in a major encyclopaedic work, *The Kingdom of God*.

Both the suggested Baconian parallel and the emphasis on learning from nature connect with the focus of Rimmer's study, which offers a rigorous reading of Traherne's understandings of the natural world and of childhood innocence. Rimmer's central argument is that the value Traherne places on childlike wonder and natural knowledge presents a solution to the ecological crisis of the twenty-first century. In establishing his focus, he claims: "This book will show how this sort of epistemological departure—disintegrating our rational selves from our ecological place in the web of life—has played a tremendous role in the ecological crisis of our age, and why it is important that we cultivate a childlike knowledge of creation in every age" (4). *Greening the Children of God* is bold and compelling in its mission and a significant contribution to Traherne studies, particularly in its strong claim that Traherne remains not only relevant but essential to the cultural and environmental concerns of the present day.

The opening chapters counter a longstanding assumption that Traherne's theological positivism underlies a spiritual naivety. With reference to *The Kingdom of God*—one of several texts by Traherne

discovered in Lambeth Palace Library in 1997—Rimmer explores the depth of the theologian's natural philosophical knowledge, developing along the way an argument for Baconian and Paracelsian influence in his writings. He shows how "Bacon's natural philosophy employed the senses for inductive reasoning, and ... that this epistemological method shaped Traherne's contribution to ethical theory" (32). Meanwhile, he detects Paracelsian influences in *The Kingdom of God*, arguing that Traherne applied "a Paracelsian empiricism that maintained an association between the embodied senses and metaphysical reality" (54). The combination of sensorial exploration and metaphysics is key and distinctively Traherne. Arguably, Rimmer understates the impact of Neoplatonism and hermeticism on Traherne's work—I would query the suggestion that "[Traherne] refers to Trismegistus very sparingly in his own writing" (29)—but *Greening the Children of God* contributes majorly to critical understandings of Traherne's natural philosophical principles and, crucially, how they were part of and inseparable from his Christian morals and metaphysics. In a chapter on the positioning of humanity "between ants and angels," Rimmer quotes a passage from *The Kingdom of God* in which Traherne recounts his personal experience "Upon Studying the Nature of Light":

For the Idea being in evry Part of the Beams of Light, and the Beams falling upon evry Part of the Glass; the Idea will in evry part be Expressed: But the Lines of Incidence being observed in the Reflexion; the Severall Beams com off Severall Ways, and are seen only by Severall Eys. Evry single Ey seeth but one Idea ... (70).

An analysis of this passage reveals the inseparability of Traherne's natural philosophy from his moral theory. Rimmer connects the above with Christian atomism, explaining that "[b]y focusing on the lines of reflection, and the nature of individual beams, Traherne is operating with Gassendi's particle theory of light." For Traherne, particle theory is part and parcel of Christian metaphysics: he realizes that every individual ("Ey") has a direct, sensorial encounter with a beam, which conveys the original "Idea"—the origin, communicated by God—of the light. As Rimmer concludes, "Traherne believes that 'knowledge' of this idea has great theological significance for communing with God and perceiving goodness and wisdom" (70).

A strength of this monograph is its valuable readings of texts from the Lambeth Palace Manuscript, especially the important late work *The Kingdom of God*, but also lesser-read treatises that have so far attracted little critical attention: *A Sober View of Dr. Twisses his Considerations and Inducements to Retirednes*. Rimmer also brings fresh readings to Traherne's *Christian Ethicks*, a posthumously published work that he argues, correctly, has been underestimated by past critics who considered it to "lack ... ethical originality" (19). He counters this and gives an excellent overview of Traherne's understanding of "necessary" (amoral) and "living" (moral) beings (95–96). For the latter chapters of the book, Rimmer brings Traherne into conversation with contemporary psychologists including Colwyn Trevarthen and Darcia Narvaez, in a series of revelatory readings that introduce theories of inter-subjectivity and "other-mothering": the experience of care from other caregivers; "the notion that a broad network of relationships influences the formation of a child's moral identity" (187–88). Rimmer insightfully applies these theories to Traherne's accounts in the *Centuries* of his relationship with nature, arguing that his moral identity was structured on the notion of an "ecological self" (190), and reading his experiences as a model for present-day ecological consciousness.

There are some complications from the ambitious scope of *Greening the Children of God*. While Rimmer's arguments are important and timely, his monograph under-engages with existing Traherne criticism, especially the work of more recent studies: one significant omission from the analysis and bibliography is Elizabeth Dodd's *Boundless Innocence in Thomas Traherne's Poetic Theology* (2016), which explores the figure of the inquisitive, natural child in Traherne's writings at length. A few sections of Rimmer's book over-rely on the work of single scholars in their response to Traherne's philosophy and moral theory, such as Graham Parry and Allen G. Debus in the first chapter. There are some issues with missing or inaccurate references. Finally, the greatest strength and contribution of Rimmer's monograph is also one of its challenges: in a book that moves from the intricacies of seventeenth-century natural philosophy and theology to Immanuel Kant's disinterestedness and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, before concluding with recent anthropological theories of childhood

development, it is difficult to identify a specific, intended readership. Nevertheless, this breadth ultimately results in a rich, rewarding study for the seventeenth-century specialist, who will be led in remarkable directions to reconsider Traherne—and his writings of the natural world—in new, surprising ways.

Breadth of knowledge is likewise a feature of Willmott's impressive book on Traherne's poetic style and thought. In a study primarily aimed at the student of early modern literature and/or theology, Willmott introduces the historical figure of Traherne and proceeds to explore the poetic and religious contexts of his work from five significant texts: *Poems of Felicity*, *Dobell Poems*, *The Ceremonial Law*, *Thanksgivings*, and *Commentaries of Heaven*. Each chapter quotes generously from Traherne's text and brings his style and focus into close conversation with other writings, either contemporaneous or highly influential within the period. Willmott outlines his approach carefully in the Introduction:

... the comparison of Traherne's own poetry with a wide range of that of his contemporaries and predecessors provides an effective way of providing an introductory context not only for Traherne's poetry, but also for his ideas. It should be noted that making comparisons in this way is not the same as claiming that Traherne was directly influenced by the other poets.... It is rather a way of providing a context in which his works can be interpreted and can also be valued and appreciated as poetry rather than simply as an exercise in versified theology. (3)

This wise approach permits a sensitive, far-reaching exploration of the resonance of Traherne's work within early modern intellectual culture. Willmott stresses his focus on poetry—and poetic style is undeniably at the centre of his study—but the texts referenced alongside Traherne's writings are not limited to verse. The author is as confident and clear in responding to the texts and influence of Irenaeus, Boethius, Calvin and Hooker as he is in exploring parallels with Milton, Sir John Davies, Lucy Hutchinson and Anne Bradstreet. While his comparative examples are plentiful, Willmott takes care not to overcrowd the reader with too many specific analytical details. Instead, he reveals the deeper resonance of Traherne's observations and style of expression

within early modern culture, in terms of sympathies and similarities but also, where appropriate, how Traherne's voice is distinct. This has the great value of demonstrating Traherne's significance as an original thinker and poet even while proving his active engagement with the intellectual and cultural developments of his time. In the first chapter, Willmott reads the sacred blazon of the Dobell poem "The Person" ("Ye sacred limbs, / A richer blazon I will lay / On you, than first I found") alongside Donne's erotic elegy "To his Mistress Going to Bed" and Rembrandt's painting "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp" from 1632 (11). In the third chapter, on *Poems of Felicity*, he brings an insightful account of Margaret Cavendish's theory of mind into conversation—and contrast—with the "boundless distances" of Traherne's soul (59–65). A fascinating section in the fourth chapter explores different responses to "Infancy and Original Sin" across the poetry of Anne Bradstreet, Vaughan, Milton (*Paradise Lost*) and Fulke Greville (88–100). Such parallels have the potential to capture the imagination of a new generation of literature students and inspire renewed interest, and likely future scholarship, on Traherne and early modern literary culture.

Willmott's analysis of specific poetic extracts is often so exquisite that this reader, for one, longed for more. In his final chapter, on the poems from *Commentaries of Heaven*, he responds to a section from one of Traherne's "Atom" poems ("An atom is a firm material thing / The soul's a sacred incorporeal king; / Each soul's the crown and cream of all, O Bliss!") with the following:

Traherne's rhyming couplets certainly give a satisfying shape and reinforcement to his ideas, for all Milton's lofty dismissal of their use. The first couplet above provides a clear and satisfying antithesis between atom and soul, the material and the incorporeal, while the alliteration in the third line ("crown and cream") effectively stresses the key words expressing delight and the second couplet's rhyme emphasises that "this" (i.e., "Bliss") was indeed God's purpose in creating souls. The reference to "dropping myrrh" echoes the passionate feelings of the Song of Solomon, raising the emotional intensity.... There is also, maybe, a conscious echo of Herbert's verse in "The Banquet," describing the rapture which he feels on tasting the wine of Holy Communion (233–34).

The analysis above demonstrates Willmott's excellent ear for the techniques and nuances of Traherne's poetry. With sensitive attention to the productivity of his couplets and suggestive alliteration—a trope often favoured by the poet—Willmott provides an elegant, revelatory reading of Traherne's poetic style and his harmonisation of a natural philosophical subject, the atom, with passages from scripture (the Song of Solomon) and features of devotional lyric (Herbert's "The Banquet"). *The Voluble Soul* is highly refreshing in its concentration on poetic form. In an earlier chapter on the *Thanksgivings*, Willmott explores their striking appearance, with the introduction that "[t]he Thanksgivings are not written in conventional prose, nor are they written in a form that its first readers would have recognised as poetry" (173). He proceeds to trace stylistic parallels with work by figures as diverse as Henry Peachum, Francis Bacon, Lancelot Andrewes and Traherne's friend, Susanna Hopton; another influence worth considering would be that of Petrus Ramus, the logician whose structural diagrams have been compared with the *Thanksgivings* by Jane Partner (whose work Willmott cites, 186). From the *Thanksgivings* to the little-read—and most recently discovered Traherne text—*The Ceremonial Law*, Willmott's study will bring new readers and new ways of reading to Traherne's poetic works.

Read together, both books present an outstanding contribution to Traherne studies and seventeenth-century scholarship. Willmott and Rimmer's monographs are poised to introduce a new generation of readers to Traherne, and indeed to influence new readings that will challenge longstanding assumptions about the poet and theologian's contributions. Their work deserves enduring, wide recognition from those working in seventeenth-century literature and theology.