

Dr Julia Smith, general editor of the Oxford Traherne, discusses her thoughts and work on Traherne with Yehuda Vizan, Hebrew poet, translator, and editor of *Dehak*. The published interview (in Hebrew) can be read in the 2019 issue of [Dehak](#) (pp. 154–61).

Yehuda Vizan: In his essay ‘Mystic and Politician as Poet’ (*Listener*, 1930, 590–91), T. S. Eliot, a religious writer himself, describes Traherne as ‘more a mystic than a poet,’ and, as Harold Bloom puts it following Eliot: ‘a writer attentive to contemporary religious and political ideology at the cost of language and form’. As a Traherne scholar, a champion and defender of Traherne’s legacy and the General Editor of the Oxford Traherne – do you accept their assumptions? And if not, what would you argue in order to refute them? How do you value Traherne’s poetical achievements?

Julia Smith: There are a lot of assumptions in these quotations which I don’t agree with, and some of which Traherne would not have agreed with either. I don’t think there will be enough space to challenge all of them! Traherne was not inattentive to language and form, as is very evident from his working manuscripts, but as he discusses in his article on ‘Art’, he did not think that the form of the writing was an end in itself, and would probably have been very puzzled that the foregrounding of his spiritual vision could be perceived as a weakness. At the same time, I don’t think Bloom’s ‘ideology’ is an appropriate choice of word. Traherne was certainly acutely sensitive to contemporary religious and political discourse, to an extent which twenty-first-century readers are only just beginning to appreciate, but he lacked the ruthlessness which an ideologue needs to achieve intellectual consistency at the expense of the complexity of human experience. It is deeply characteristic of Traherne’s mode of thought to try to hold opposites and contraries in balance: spiritual freedom and ecclesiastical conformity; the infinitely small and the infinitely large; the new and the eternal; the human need to be alone, and not to be alone. I think this refusal to categorize is one of the strengths of Traherne’s literary achievement, and perhaps one which literary critics would do well to emulate.

Vizan: When reading Traherne, one often thinks of William Blake (and sometimes of Whitman and Gerard Manley Hopkins and all those early poets who used the biblical form of free verse) – the prophetic temperament, the presence of nature, a certain atmosphere of darkness (as in ‘Shadows in the Water’), and of course, the theme of *Innocence* which they both share. Blake obviously couldn’t read Traherne’s poetry and most of his manuscripts, but he could have read some of his ‘Thanksgivings’ (which I consider to be poetry) and some of his ‘Meditations’ (that one can also look at as early examples for prose-poetry). Do you know of any link between the two? Can we consider Traherne, to some extent, as a predecessor of Blake? Are there any other poets that you are aware of that were influenced by Traherne?

Smith: I think that Traherne like Blake did have a prophetic temperament, and also the ability to ‘see Invisible’; but there were also radical differences between them, not least Traherne’s strong desire for political and ecclesiastical conformity. I don’t know of any direct connections. Blake could in principle have read the three Traherne volumes published in the seventeenth century – *Roman Forgeries*, *Christian Ethicks*, and the ‘Thanksgivings’ (*A Serious and Pathetical Contemplation*), the last not known in Blake’s time to be by Traherne – but they probably aren’t the works most likely to have caught Blake’s imagination.

Since the publication of the first Traherne manuscripts in the early twentieth century, a range of poets, from Edward Thomas to Seamus Heaney, have been influenced by Traherne, or have written poems in dialogue with his. He is particularly important for poets like Anne Ridler and Elizabeth Jennings who were drawn equally by the beauty of his language and the insights offered by his distinctive spirituality. Anne Ridler described her discovery of Traherne as 'one of the formative experiences of my life', engaging directly with him in poems such as 'Deus Absconditus' and 'Traherne and the Long-Legged Spider'; and for Elizabeth Jennings, who devoted a chapter of *Every Changing Shape* to Traherne, he had 'lighted up my blackest night' ('Homage to Thomas Traherne').

Vizan: In his 'Commentaries of Heaven' Traherne dedicates an entire essay to Art – its place, nature, kinds and uses. Can one regard this text as Traherne's artistic manifesto? In your opinion, was he loyal, in his own poetry, to his definition of poetry? – 'Poetry is an Art of Representing Things in a Smooth and Lively Manner before the fancy, and indeed of speaking musically.'

Smith: Beginning with the definition of poetry which you quote, I think its emphasis on precise attention to language is very much reflected in what we know of Traherne's working practices: we can see both from his autograph manuscripts, and from the printing history of *Roman Forgeries*, the care which he took to find an exact expression or to adjust punctuation. But in terms of Traherne's artistic manifesto, I think the most important aspect of the article on 'Art' is its subjugation of form to a moral and didactic purpose, without which Traherne sees art as valueless. Artists should not 'rest Satisfied in their Skill and Science'; all arts are 'for som further End then their own Perfection', and that end should be to lead humanity to virtue and felicity. This is certainly how Traherne saw the purpose of his own work.

Vizan: What, in your opinion, motivated Traherne (was it a political or religious motive?) to publish his 'Roman Forgeries' ?

Smith: Traherne's motives were probably a mixture of the pastoral, political, and personal. The local context is important: he was an Anglican clergyman in Herefordshire, where there was a strong clandestine Roman Catholic presence, and he was one of a number of local clergy who saw a pastoral need to publish anti-Catholic works during this period. There was also a national context. In 1673, when *Roman Forgeries* was published, Roman Catholicism was the central issue of English politics, and popular anti-papist feeling had reached its highest pitch for thirty years. So the timing certainly suggests that Traherne intended it as a contribution to a highly charged current debate. He may also have hoped that dedicating the work to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, former Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, who was known to have strongly anti-Catholic views, would help him to obtain preferment, and indeed he had left rural Herefordshire to become Bridgeman's domestic chaplain by early the following year.

I think though that Traherne's early death may have distorted our view of the importance which he attached to *Roman Forgeries* over his other works. Although he chose to publish it first, he did not intend it to be the only work published in his lifetime: he initiated the publication of *Christian Ethicks* himself, although he died before printing was complete; and it's clear from the manuscripts that other works were being prepared for publication too.

Vizan: What was Traherne's attitude towards Jews/Judaism? It may be a bit of a peculiar question to ask, but after reading his essay (in the 'Commentaries of Heaven') of the Jewish influence on Aristotle, or after I read his great 'HOSANNA', and noticed endless quotes from the Old Testament in his poems and Thanksgivings – it seems to me like (a half) legitimate question.

Smith: I'm not an expert on this, but I do think it's a legitimate question. Intriguingly, Traherne had met and talked to one of the very small number of openly professing Jews resident in Restoration England after their de facto readmission from 1656. Discussing evidence for identifying Christ as the Messiah, he writes in 'Commentaries' that 'it is the Easiest thing in the World to convince and confound a Jew, as I my self have done, out of the Books of the Old Testament. which they reverence from their fore fathers, with so much Ardor and Devotion'. Who Traherne's acquaintance was, and where and how they met, is one of many unsolved biographical puzzles.

In common with most of his contemporaries, Traherne believed that Hebrew was the language spoken by Adam and Eve in Eden, and that but for the confusion of Babel 'Hebrew had been the Tongue / Of all the World'. He knew at least a little Hebrew himself, and identifies it as one of the languages needed by scholars 'before we can know the Wisdom and Beauty of other Nations'. He was also very interested in a work published by the Protestant nonconformist, Theophilus Gale, in the early 1670s, which argues that all ancient languages, religion, and philosophy are corrupt derivatives of Hebrew culture. Copious extracts from this work are copied into Traherne's Commonplace Book, and sometimes utilized in his original writing (such as the discussion of Aristotle which you mention), although Traherne himself was inclined to view pagan philosophers in a more favourable light than Gale did.

One might also look at the way in which Traherne identifies with the Israelites and speaks through their voice in his narrative biblical poem 'The Ceremonial Law', as for example in the journey through the wilderness:

Three Days we travaild o'er Barren Sands
And Squeezd the Clods for Water with our Hands
Or suckt moist stones.

Actually, I have more to say about this theme than I expected!

Vizan: Do you feel as if Traherne, to some extent, 'falls between the chairs'? Not exactly a romantic poet, not exactly a metaphysical poet; not, at least to the full extent, a part of English literature canon, and yet, thank god, not completely neglected. Do you believe that in the future, Traherne's 'standing' will be improved and he will be regarded eventually as one of the main literary figures of the seventeenth century?

Smith: It's difficult to overemphasize the extent to which the appreciation and interpretation of Traherne's works has been influenced by the way in which his manuscript writings were rediscovered. Readers readily respond to the thrilling story of how hitherto unknown autograph works were rescued from secondhand book barrows, or from a smouldering rubbish tip. But the way in which the texts suddenly appeared, completely divorced from the historical context in which they were created, has from the first promoted ahistorical readings. Traherne was not contemporaneous with either the earlier metaphysicals, or the

later Romantics, but is both chronologically and intellectually a Restoration author, whose writing is ineluctably shaped by the political and civil turmoil of mid-seventeenth-century England. I think that the first step towards fully appreciating his literary achievement is an understanding of the turbulent context which gave rise to it.

On a practical level, the fact that much of the manuscript material remained unpublished for decades after its discovery has also skewed interpretation of Traherne, which until very recently has largely retained an unbalanced emphasis on the poems and 'Centuries' which were first published by Dobell. Now that works such as 'The Kingdom of God' and 'Commentaries of Heaven' are readily available in print, I think that he will gradually take a more prominent place in the literary canon, a development to which I hope that the Oxford Traherne edition will make a significant contribution. Traherne is certainly more widely read and studied now than when I first began working on him in the 1980s.

Vizan: Finally, what brought you to dedicate your research (which includes some great and important discoveries) to Traherne? And what do you personally regard to be his greatest artistic achievement? (Which is a fancy way to ask: what is your favorite piece/poem?)

Smith: In the early 1980s, I bought a copy of the Margoliouth two-volume Oxford edition of Traherne in a second-hand book sale, and shortly after this I saw the discovery of the autograph manuscript of 'Commentaries of Heaven' announced in the *Times Literary Supplement*. I was equally excited by the beauty of Traherne's writing, and by the uncharted territory of a virtually unread work. I began working on an article on Traherne which I never finished, because it very quickly became clear to me that Traherne scholarship almost completely lacked the foundations, such as biographical facts, knowledge of the extent of the canon, understanding of the processes by which his manuscripts were compiled and the people who contributed to them, which we largely take for granted in studying other authors. I decided to tackle this deficiency, and that is what I am still doing!

I think 'Commentaries of Heaven' is my personal favourite. It isn't always as finely honed as some of the most memorable passages in the 'Centuries', but the combination of the grand scale with the particularity and minute observation of articles like 'Ant' and 'Ancestor', the idiosyncratic concept of an alphabetical encyclopaedia of felicity, and the ingenious linkage of apparently disparate subjects all appeal to me. It also acts as an encyclopedia of Traherne himself, encompassing all his characteristic themes such as infinity of space, the limitless capacity of the soul, abundance of treasures, free will, the joy of Adam in Eden; including both poetry and prose; and ranging in genre from religious polemic to autobiography.