

Denise Inge, *Wanting Like a God: Desire and Freedom in Thomas Traherne* (London: SCM Press, 2009), pp. xii + 315. ISBN 978-0334041474 (pbk). doi:10.1017/S1740355310000197

In *Wanting Like a God*, Denise Inge has given us the first comprehensive study of Thomas Traherne's work and theological thought. It can be said to be 'comprehensive' for a number of reasons. First, the book touches on all the familiar themes previously dealt with by Traherne scholars: felicity, boundlessness, desire, sin, influences on Traherne, and so on. However, that all of these themes are integrated together into Traherne's overall theology is something new and provides a more complete assessment of Traherne's thought. Inge also is very comprehensive in her use of and references to previous scholarship. She knows the critical history of Traherne well and provides an immense stockpile of Traherne sources for readers (even though many of those sources are somewhat 'hidden' in the footnotes and not included in the book's bibliography). Also, and perhaps more important, Inge discusses these themes (with 'desire' as the central thread) in terms of all of Traherne's known work; she has the benefit of all the recent manuscript discoveries. That in itself makes this a new foundational work that Traherne enthusiasts cannot do without.

In the introductory chapter, Inge challenges the notion of Traherne as a 'simple' poet of felicity, a writer who simply has a desire for childhood innocence and therefore turns a blind eye to the troubles and debates of the *real* world. Inge — like other more recent Traherne scholars — sees Traherne's theology as a complex and well thought out system that takes into account the most intricate ideas related to God, humanity, theological dogma and contemporary debates about that dogma, and our relationship with each other and with God. Again, Inge views Traherne as a poet of desire, and that desire is set within a theological system that is far from simple. After supplying an overview of the fundamentals in Traherne scholarship — his life, associates, historical setting, and his primary influences — Inge explicitly states her key idea that Traherne is indeed a writer whose thought hinges on the desire for love and 'goodness continually supplied' (p. 24).

Chapter 1 establishes the first key element to Traherne's theology: want. Inge moves in and out of other Traherne themes, such as love and infiniteness, and demonstrates that for Traherne the idea of infinite want is balanced by the belief in an infinite capacity for God to satisfy that want. In a sense, infinite want exists only because there is also the possibility of infinite 'giving' (which is dealt with in more detail in the following chapter). Although the idea of want, and God supplying that which we do want, may seem like a simple idea, Inge admirably deals with the intricacies of what 'want' is. Desire is the beginning of want, and it exists because God also has want, the desire to meet His creation's needs, to love and be loved. However, mankind must negotiate the lack and longing that such a need creates (at least in the finite world). Using multiple texts (and most notably the newly discovered and little discussed *Kingdom of God*), Inge discusses the element of passion (including the use of sexual imagery at times) and Traherne's realization that we must truly 'want like a God' with infinite capacity. In other words, we must have infinite want in order to be spiritually satisfied infinitely.

Chapter 2, 'Discerning Treasure', explores what Traherne believes is the origin of our want: what do we want? Traherne, throughout his work, writes of treasure

and uses many images of treasure. However, Traherne's notion of treasure and prizing that treasure becomes somewhat complex. Ultimately, Inge notes that for Traherne treasure can be found in the most common of things and mankind's dilemma is that we often do not understand the worth of those things we see all around us. Inge returns to the idea of God's infinite ability to give us what we 'want': 'wherever a need arises a new treasure is waiting to be formed' (p. 122).

Chapter 3, 'Choice', turns to the notion of free will and responsibility in Traherne's theology. Using primarily *Christian Ethicks*, *Roman Forgeries*, and the new manuscript 'A Sober View', Inge looks not only at the importance of choice in Traherne but she also situates his views on the elect and free will in the 'middle ground' of that contemporary debate. Traherne recalls thinkers of the early church as much or more than contemporary arguments, but he seems to be very aware of the problems in theological extremism on either side. The Roman Catholic Church takes too much away from the individual by placing more emphasis on the church institution, and hardcore Calvinist doctrine strips away individual capacity and choice by placing more emphasis on the notion of pre-selection. Choice and liberty are keys for mankind's ability to demonstrate love for God.

In the chapter 'Difference', Inge takes on the question of unity in Traherne by calling upon the complex notion of 'other' and 'difference' as found in the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, and A. Leigh DeNeef's excellent Traherne study, *Traherne in Dialogue* (1988). This chapter covers much, including a discussion of how new ideas and policies about land enclosures and physical boundaries might come to play in Traherne's notion of infinite capacity. She engages the fundamentals of Lacan's notion of other and 'self-knowledge', how it is through the gaze of the 'other' that self-knowledge is achieved. And she moves ultimately to the idea that the seeming contradiction or tension in 'unity' and 'difference' is for Traherne not 'a problem to solve but a paradox to explore' (p. 175).

Inge concludes with a final chapter entitled 'Communion'. Inge suggests that the ultimate end for mankind in Traherne's theology is a kind of communion with all things (with God at the top). However, we also seek a communion with other people, to the physical world, and it is love that drives us to these various communions. Inge believes that the heart of Traherne's 'felicity' is a 'cycle of desire' (p. 221), a never-ending process by which souls and God are infinitely joined in a 'continuum'. Once this process is underway, for all that we desire, for all the treasures we are given, for the communions we have with God and other souls, gratitude is our appropriate response to the entire process and, I suppose, what God himself ultimately needs for his own desire.

The book ends with an epilogue and a very helpful appendix that discusses the newer Traherne manuscript discoveries.

I leave Inge's fine work with the feeling that this *is* the first real attempt, with all Traherne's work available, to come to terms with the real complexity and paradoxes in Traherne's theology. But as all groundbreaking critical works do, *Wanting Like a God* does open up the door for questions and further discussion. I do wonder if 'Traherne the artist' still has a place in our discussions of him. This book is entirely devoted to Traherne's theological thought (Inge tells us that from the outset), but are there artistic principles at work in his poetry and prose beyond the theological? Also, despite the many complexities — all of which Inge handles very

well – Traherne's theology seems so well and intricately put together here, that there seems to be little room for true contradiction and real problems in Traherne's ideas. Inge demonstrates mostly that apparent paradoxes are really part of the overall system of thought. I find it hard to believe that there are not moments of real, unresolvable contradictions that cannot be neatly fitted into the system itself.

Related to this is the slippery nature of using Lacan in this study. Inge is absolutely right that Lacan's ideas about desire, the other, and difference are applicable to Traherne (DeNeef recognized the same thing). However, there seems to be a conflation between Traherne's enterprise and that of Lacan. Inge compares the two as if they are doing the same thing. The fact is Traherne's entire theological system would be viewed by a Lacanian as a construct to help alleviate the anxiety that stems from a desire we can never quench. In other words, Traherne uses God as the 'other' that stands in for the real, unknowable, unattainable 'OTHER' with which we will never be united. Inge also refers to Lacan's mirror stage as 'self-knowledge'; however, for Lacan, the mirror stage is really only a moment of *self-recognition*. Lacan's theory would suggest that from that moment we recognize we are our own selves, we begin constructing an illusory concept of ourselves. Lacan is relevant, but the Lacanian implications on Traherne would really deconstruct Traherne's theology as an intricate, but ultimately fragmented and illusory attempt to find solace in an artificial 'other'. Inge does not want to go there, nor should she, but once Lacan gets brought into the picture, there are certain theoretical problems that just cannot be avoided. I feel as though either a lot more or lot less Lacan needs to be invoked in this study.

But of course, all of this is exactly the reason this book is so good, so successful, so necessary. It will open up dialogues about Traherne in all kinds of new ways. This book gives us a well thought out, cohesive picture of Traherne's view of himself, of God, and of his world, using all the texts available and using a skilful critical eye. All future studies of Traherne will have to originate in some way with Inge's work. She has convincingly established herself and this work as the core text for the next era of Traherne studies.

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