An Allusion to Herbert’s ‘Affliction I’ in Traherne’s Commonplace Book

Leila Watkins, Western Kentucky University
AN ALLUSION TO HERBERT’S ‘AFFLICITION I’ IN TRAHERNE’S COMMONPLACE BOOK

Notes and Queries 58, no. 3 (Sept. 2011): 376-377

We have long known that Thomas Traherne read George Herbert, but explicit references to Herbert’s poetry are rare in Traherne’s body of work. The Church’s Year-Book (Bodleian, MSS. Eng. th. e. 51) holds a transcription of ‘To All Angels and Saints’, and the Lambeth Manuscript, discovered by Jeremy Maule in 1997, contains several lines from ‘Longing’.1 But another of Traherne’s notebooks, currently held by the Bodleian Library (MSS. Eng. poet. c. 42), contains a previously unnoticed allusion to Herbert’s ‘Affliction I’.2 While the poems that occupy the first half of the manuscript have been published as the ‘Dobell poems’, the latter part of the folio notebook comprises a host of unpublished personal notes generally understood to be Traherne’s commonplace book. The notes are organized as alphabetically arranged entries in a similar fashion to Commentaries of Heaven. Traherne’s allusion to Herbert occurs under a short entry entitled ‘Grace’. Although Traherne does not cite Herbert by name, his slightly modified quotation is clearly recognizable as the last two lines of ‘Affliction I’. Hebert’s poem reads: ‘Ah my deare God! though I am clean forgot,/Let me not love thee, if I love thee not’ (ll. 65-6).3 Traherne quotes the lines as follows: ‘Tho I am poor O Ld & be forgot/Let me not lov thee if I lov thee not.’

Because the final couplet of ‘Affliction I’ has repeatedly resisted critical interpretation even in the twentieth century, a new seventeenth-century reading of this poem is an important find. As Robert Ray observes in ‘The Herbert Allusion Book’, seventeenth-century allusions are excellent tools for approaching an understanding of how Herbert was read by his contemporaries (iii). Traherne’s quotation of Herbert is particularly interesting because he uses Herbert to support his own definition of grace even as he creates a unique reading of ‘Affliction I’ by situating it within this specific entry. Since no existing editions of The Temple match Traherne’s variation on the lines, one might ask why he misremembers or re-visions the line as ‘Tho I am poor …’. Does this suggest that Traherne is preoccupied with connections between poverty and grace? If Traherne is indeed captivated by the idea of being ‘poor’, this allusion could help scholars determine whether he understands poverty as a spiritual or material condition, or whether the material and spiritual intersect in the identity of being poor. Might Traherne’s rephrasing of the line also indicate that a different agent is forgetting the speaker in his reading of the poem (i.e., the world instead of God)?

Traherne’s subsequent commentary poses the tantalizing question of whether contemporaneous readers of Herbert had as many problems with these lines as modern critics do. Although Ray’s study contains no negative seventeenth-century responses to ‘Affliction I’, Traherne writes as if he must defend the pious sentiment of the lines: ‘This Holy men speak, not as Hatred is wont to take/things, in ye worst sence; but in Acknowledgm’ y Sin/is ye greatest of punishm’, & y’ Want of Grace is the/most terrible of afflictions.’ Traherne’s interpretive intervention here suggests either that he himself initially had doubts about the meaning of these lines or that someone he read or spoke to did. If such an objection could be located, it would

2 For an extensive listing of such allusions, see Robert Ray’s excellent ‘The Herbert Allusion Book: Allusions to George Herbert in the Seventeenth Century’. SP lxxxvii (1986), i-ix+1-167+169-82.
suggest that the more worldly-wise readings of Herbert advanced by scholars such as Michael Schoenfeldt and Barbara Harman might also have been available to seventeenth-century readers.

This finding is part of an ongoing research project on seventeenth-century readings of Herbert, particularly Traherne’s own engagement with the poet. The discovery should also be of interest to scholars of early modern commonplace books and reading practices, as well as to scholars of Herbert and Traherne.

University of Michigan

LEILA WATKINS