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## Book Review

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## BOOK REVIEW

# Book Review

*The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* by John Goodby, Liverpool University Press, 512 pages, 2013

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John Goodby's *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* is one of those, probably rather rare, critical studies of a poet which is equally as strong on the internal machinery of the individual writings as it is on the literary, biographical and historical contexts. It's a dense, multi-faceted, piece of work; not for the dabbler, but at the same time extremely readable, full of beautifully inflected aperçus, often witty, and sometimes mischievous or downright rude, with an infectious, unflagging but never hagiographic enthusiasm for its subject.

The book commences with a brief survey of Thomas's critical fate from the time of his death in 1953. With the advent of the Movement – with the *New Lines* anthology of 1956 – his reputation took a brief critical dive as he became a kind of lightning rod for an anti-modernist neurosis, but swung up again in the liberal and experimental 1960s, only to plunge once more in the mid-70s as mainstream British critics sought to rebrand the 1930s as the Auden decade, bracketing Thomas off as an eccentric 1940s poet of the New Apocalypse. One of the many achievements of this book is its success in firmly re-establishing Thomas alongside Auden as the other most influential British poet of the 1930s.

Although the situation seems to be changing, Thomas is still under-represented in serious criticism. For Goodby the crux of the problem (at least for more traditional, humanistically centred forms of critique) is what he refers to as Thomas's hybridity – his work is 'an unstable conjunction [. . .] between "high" and "low" art [. . .] parodic modernism and romanticism, linguistic surplus and constraining stanza forms, biological determinism and relativity [. . .] which intensify its contradictions

to a paradoxical point at which the judicious balancing of liberal ideologies breaks down' (p. 36). In terms of a specifically Welsh reception, matters have often hinged on the fact that he is a very Welsh Welshman living in a mainly English speaking part of Wales, writing, in English, works that mine equally an Anglo-Saxon and a Celtic cultural heritage. For the linguistic culturalists he is beyond the pale, and for non-linguistically based Wales-centred canon-shapers, even for many who have championed his writing, he is hard to explain and hard to claim, because, perhaps, as Daniel Williams put it – his writings 'cannot be read as national allegories' (p. 31). To this last claim Goodby responds pungently that

the problem is not so much that Thomas fails as a national allegorist, but that he does not offer allegories which are comfortable to some kinds of nationalist *amour propre* [ . . . ] As an allegory of Wales's abjection as a metropolitan colony and the grotesque psychic deformations inflicted by Nonconformist repression, after all, Thomas's early work would be hard to beat. (p. 31)

Another factor working against Thomas's critical reputation is, of course, *the life*, or at least the legendary version of it, which, from some perspectives, has so completely overshadowed the poetry it becomes difficult to see it, let alone to take it seriously. Mainly for this reason, Goodby keeps the biographical content of this book to a minimum, but what we do get is plenty of context, historical and artistic, with a generous sprinkling of quotes from Thomas himself, from the letters, radio-scripts and so on. Unexpectedly we end up with a really vivid sense of the man himself, a portrait of the serious artist that he undoubtedly was, rather than the roistering overgrown school-boy the legend tends to revolve upon.

The book has a basically linear structure, following the evolution of the oeuvre over the course of the years, but hops back and forth freely between phases. Each chapter relates chiefly to one of these developmental moments, but Goodby shifts his angle of approach for each. Chapter one, for instance, examines mainly the notebooks, tracing the unfolding of the 'process poetic' (p. 8) of Thomas's mature style in terms of

the working-in of influences, both literary and more general, whilst the second chapter homes in on the actual mechanics of the language of that fully evolved style, in relation to the first two published books, thus simultaneously moving the narrative along in time. Later chapters explore the ongoing development of the writer in terms, amongst other things, of his treatment of the body, his relation to surrealism, the particularly Welsh characteristics of his 'gothic-grotesque' (p. 66) hybridity and, in the magnificent chapter on the war years, the apparent turn towards a more popularly amenable practice, before weighing up the later, more open-textured work in terms of a groping towards some new kind of pastoral in an era of cold-war, atomic-bomb-obsessed paranoia.

At the heart of the project, then, is the attempt to read Thomas more or less chronologically through the shifting mindscapes of the era he lived through. It's an eclectic approach, which places the poetry itself with all its time-embedded weathers at the centre of its concerns, exploring contemporaneous theoretical and literary critical positions along the way, then pushing on to examine aspects of the poet's ongoing influence and opening conceptual doors to possible future readings. Simply as an overview of evolving literary and theoretical attitudes from the thirties onwards, the book is a useful document, engaging with writers such as Eliot, Empson, I. A. Richards, the New Critics, the Russian Formalists, and with discourses associated with various forms of psychoanalysis, Feminism, Post-colonialism, Marxism, Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Eco-politics.

Goodby's insights are rarely less than illuminating, but, for me, he's at his best when bringing together close reading and the particularities of context and intention. His studies of individual poems are little gems of imaginative engagement and research. His method is to trace out the semantic fields, to measure the resonance of crucial ambiguities, track the syntactical and grammatical jump-cuts and flows in the direction of certain plausible resolutions, whilst leaving their indeterminacies open. His brilliant reading of 'Today, this insect', for instance, weaves together Einsteinian relativity and Freudian castration complexes, Hamlet, Joyce, Don Quixote and Roland Barthes with popular bible tales in his attempt to get some sort of purchase on the

poem. He is not afraid to bend in the direction of particular options, though he never seeks to close off the alternatives, however multiple. On the vexed question of what Thomas means by 'insect', Goodby opines:

'Symbols', 'sentence' and 'sense' suggest that it is the poem itself which is likened to an insect because it is segmented. More literally, too, 'insect' alludes to Genesis's plague of locusts. It also has an archaic sense as the 'snake' and 'serpent' (and the Fall) figure in stanza two, as does the insectile 'chrysalis' – the metamorphosis of Old Testament Mosaic law, via the 'flying heartbone' of Christ, into the New Testament's gospel of forgiveness ('blow[ing] Jericho on [the expulsion from] Eden'). (p. 143)

That's just for starters.

In his search for concepts and terminologies with which to tackle the radical indeterminacies of the poetry under consideration, Goodby makes use of twentieth-century linguistic and philosophical theories which emphasise the play of difference within the sign or the linguistic term. Taking a post-structuralist slant on Saussure, he speaks of the tendency in the poems for signifiers, under extreme sonic and semantic pressure, to split off from their signifieds and pursue autonomous careers, whilst metaphors breed autotelically through the promiscuous confounding of tenor and vehicle. There's descriptive truth in this, of course, (although it could be argued that it's valid to some extent for any poetic reading – think of Valéry's characterisation of the 'poetic' as the utterance which does not simply disappear into the act or concept or perception it gives rise to<sup>1</sup>), but it has to be balanced against Goodby's insistence elsewhere on the sheer packed overdetermined *meaningfulness* of the language. As he continually demonstrates, Thomas is as much about the simultaneity of distinct semantic options as of semantic deferral or dissemination, and the poetry can be understood as itself already exploring these issues as much as simply enacting them. In his commentary on 'Today, this insect' (p. 143), for instance, Goodby draws attention to the way the term 'slapped down the guillotine' can be read simultaneously as bringing the blade down which divides 'trust and tale', and idiomatically as 'gave a

check to' that blade, which might – as I understand it – give us a simultaneous reading of 'trust and tale' as essentially undivided, with sense divided across them as a fluctuating and undemarcated potentiality.

Thomas himself considered that there are two kinds of writers: those who write *towards* the word, for whom the communication of pre-established realities is the driving principle, and those (amongst whom he counted himself) who work *from* the word, for whom reality is continually emerging from and feeding back into the chemical activity of words on the page. His description of his methodology, in a letter to Henry Treece quoted early on, refers to a kind of dialectical movement, whereby he lets

an image be 'made' emotionally in me then apply to it what intellectual and critical forces I possess – let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth and contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. (p. 8)

This is not, then, a description of a neatly synthesising dialectic but one leading to an explosive chain reaction of effects, contradictory or otherwise, perfectly suited to Thomas's vision of the interfluxive realities of self, body and universe. John Goodby, borrowing Thomas's own term, describes this 'process poetic' as one 'with an uncompromising focus on ultimate first and last things, which linked body and cosmos and understood the universe from a post-Darwinian, Einsteinian perspective as absolute flux' (p. 8). In such a vision, surface and depth, signifier and signified, sign and referent, object-world and language are imagined as completely interpenetrative, to the point where such terms cease to operate as distinct metaphysical or meta-linguistic categories, getting caught up in a general metaphorical space of reading, in which (to quote Goodby referring to the early stories, but which might equally apply to the poems overall), 'everything is "literal", because nothing is' (p. 152).

The great virtue of this book is its refusal to impose comfortably restrictive interpretative or conceptual limitations on its material. It takes the risk, too, of

according to the poet the compliment of attempting to see him whole, as a human being as well as a generator of texts. In the process he reveals a writer whose contradictions, though never less than contradictions, have mutually enriching shoots in common, far more so than are probably generally recognised. Whilst acknowledging, for instance, the shift from the fierce simultaneities of the earlier process poems to a poetic, in the later, more pastoral (more populist?) work, permitting 'a potential reconciliation of the patterns of life and death in terms of the past and present' (p. 380), Goodby underlines the radical continuities between these phases, and in fact between all the phases of the poet's moon. There is always the same 'sensual verbal excess and carnivalesque gusto' (p. 380), but strong similarities too in the way the poetic event is staged, revelling in the shifting liminalities of the performed self, but also in its subject matter, which remains that of the grand moments of conception, birth, procreation, supersession and death.

Above all, it is Goodby's notion of the 'gothic-grotesque' which brings all the various modalities into relation. In the light of that coining, what emerges from this book, for me, in fact, is the image of some utterly weird, perverse but magnificent cathedral studded not only with sacral glories, but with gargoyles, visual and sonic puns, graffiti and profane sculptural portraits of the artist and other animals. As a general survey of a writer's oeuvre, and its place in the world, both contemporaneously and ongoing, this is a fascinating and convincing piece of work. As a contribution to Dylan Thomas research, in its breadth, attention to detail and speculative energy it's a game changer, and I'd be surprised if it didn't remain a key text for a very long time to come.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> I am referring here to Paul Valéry's essay, 'Poésie et pensée abstraite', which appears in a translation by Denise Folliot, as 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', in *Paul Valéry: An Anthology*, ed. by James R. Lawler (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 136–65.

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