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Introduction

This essay sets out to examine the problem of intertextuality in two poems written by the Welsh priest-poet Ronald Stuart Thomas (1913-2000). Since it harbours no ambitions of redefining the very notion of intertextuality or engaging with a critical polemic with its various postulates and problems, intertextuality is here defined simply as an interrelationship between one text and other texts. Although the following investigations (as almost any invoking the notion of intertextuality) are obviously greatly indebted to the work of founders of the discourse on intertextuality (most notably Bakhtin and Kristeva), this essay will leave aside their claim that all literature is inescapably intertextual. While recognizing the disputed validity of this claim itself, and acknowledging solid arguments which bolster it, it is clearly beyond the scope of a single article to address such enormously complicated questions of theory. Neither will I argue with the postmodern view that our understanding of the world is mediated through language to such an extent that our engagement with the

world is also of a distinctly textual nature. Although such ideas can be invigoratingly heterodox (or at least used to be when they were first put forward, but have since ossified into predictable clichés of critical apparatus), their relentless "all-inclusiveness" would render the study of intertextuality proper pointless by depriving language of any referentiality outside of its own linguistic matrix.[1]

One can find several forms of intertextuality in the work of Thomas. The first kind involves direct intertextual gestures addressing specific precursor texts either through total identicality of the title (as in the case of "Aubade" which immediately brings to mind Philip Larkin's poem) or through a playful reworking of the title as in the case of "Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man," which is bound to evoke associations with the famous poem written by Wallace Stevens. Such gestures immediately establish a relation with the originary textual field and it is clear that a comprehensive hermeneutical effort cannot ignore the texts to which later poems are so ostensibly related. Although, for reasons of time and space, this essay will analyse only this type of intertextuality, one should also acknowledge the presence of other varieties.

The second form of intertextuality does not reach out to the work of other poets, but occurs within the corpus of Thomas's poetry with certain poems relating back to earlier ones, not only through the use of the same tropes and motifs or engagement with the same issues and problems, which is a normal occurrence in any poet's career, but in a more unequivocal manner, i.e., also by signaling their kinship in the tile. One example of such "internal intertextuality" is the dyad of poems including "The Moor" and the much later "The Moorland." Such pairings provide the reader with an opportunity to see the

[1] Allen provides a lucid and well balanced account of this immensely complex phenomenon: "Works of literature, after all, are built from systems, codes and traditions, established by previous works of literature. The systems, codes and traditions of other art forms and of culture in general are also crucial to the meaning of a work of literature. Texts, whether they be literary or non-literary, are viewed by modern theorists as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. They are what theorists now call intertextual" (Allen 2000:1).

development of the mind engaged in a quarrel with itself, questioning its conclusions and probing its premises.

The third type of intertextuality refers to specific lines, images, metaphors and topoi which are suggestive echoes of those found in other poems. These are too numerous to list, and include allusions mostly to the work of Wordsworth, Eliot, Yeats, Stevens and Kierkegaard. Two brief examples will have to suffice. The third section of the long poem "Bleak Liturgies" speaks of the journey of the Magi, who find in the cradle once occupied by Jesus "(...) the lubricated / changeling of the machine." The Machine (usually capitalised) is the routine villain of Thomas's poetry, symbolic of everything he found detestable in the modern world. What is interesting about this poem is that Thomas seems to imply that the anthropomorphised Machine will not stop at mere physical subjugation of the human race, but with a grim determination will set out to rewrite the history of mankind. In order to do that the Machine will retrace its steps back to the foundational moment of the Western civilisation, thereby enacting a perversely grotesque travesty of the Incarnation. One is of course reminded of Yeats's "Second Coming" with its chilling vision of a sphinx-like beast slouching towards Bethlehem.

The second example is related to Thomas's openly acknowledged indebtedness to the work of the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. Thomas seems to have found Kierkegaard's metaphor of "seventy thousand fathoms of water" particularly fascinating.[2] It was used by the father of Existentialism to accentuate the risk involved in

[2] It appears several times in the corpus of Kierkegaard's writings, e.g. in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: "Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith" (Kierkegaard 1944:182).

one's commitment to Christianity, and Thomas used it for similar purposes, e.g. in his poem "Balance," from 1978 volume *Frequencies,* he writes: "No piracy, but there is a plank / to walk over seventy thousand fathoms." Thomas makes no secret of the fact that - as a mature poet should, at least according to T. S. Eliot's definition - he does not imitate but "steals" since the following line reads: "As Kierkegaard would say."

One could also point to another type of intertextuality, which is more controversial since it involves Thomas's ekphrastic poems; that raises problems of the legitimacy of treating plastic arts as textual. Since I will focus only on the first type, those thorny issues which lie somewhere in the contested territory between the theory of literature, literary criticism, comparative studies and aesthetic investigations, must wait.

Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and Thomas's "Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man"

As noted before, the aim of this essay is to examine two poems whose titles unfailingly evoke associations with other poems. At the same time, it should be stressed that despite frequent emphasis laid on the notion of free play and carefree *jouissance* often expressed in studies of intertextuality, for Thomas the act of writing is certainly much more than just playful moving between various texts. His customary earnestness is also tangible in his relatively infrequent forays into the world of intertextuality, and the resultant pairs of poems are much more than mere celebrations of plurality as they grapple with some fundamental questions of faith or humanity.

Bearing in mind his unrelenting seriousness, one is slightly surprised to find that Thomas's favourite poet of the last century was Wallace Stevens, whose playful coinages, eccentric metaphors and quaint verbal idiosyncracies, as well as irrepressible penchant for facetious titles seem to be worlds apart from Thomas's grim probings of human fate and bleak conclusions at which he generally arrived. Thomas himself paid homage to the great American both by writing poems about him, and, in a more circumlocutory manner, by writing a

poem whose title echoes Stevens's exhilaratingly baffling "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," which in Thomas's hands has become "Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man."[3]

First of all, one cannot help noticing the similarity of form: like the original, the poem consists of thirteen short stanzas, which constitute a series of enigmatic vignettes, slightly redolent of Buddhist koans. Also, like Stevens, the Welsh poet employs the device which Russian formalists called "defamiliarisation," whose main task is to remove the film of automatised perception from our eyes. The point of departure for Thomas's poem is relatively simple in its illuminating provocativeness - what are humans like from the point of view of blackbirds? In this way, the philosophical plurality of the original is superseded by the plurality of the speaking subject, while the scope of philosophical investigation is considerably reduced. While the precursor text often switches modes of utterance (direct, indirect, imperative, interrogative, etc.) and grammatical forms (past, present, future), in Thomas's poem the subject (in both senses of the term) remains the same throughout. At the same time, it seems that the birds have little autonomy, which would be granted to them more liberally if defamiliarisation was the driving force of the poem, but, as it is, the poet reduces the avian chorus to the position of a mouthpiece for his own misanthropy. In other words, although prosopopoeia, on which the poem is built, can be employed for a variety of disparate ends, this rhetorical gesture is usually undergirded by self-denying generosity on the part of the poet. In letting the other speak fully and freely in his own voice, the author must silence his own. One feels, however, that the unsparing denunciations expressed by the blackbirds communicate

[3] According to Davies: "What is perhaps most intriguing about this association is that Thomas, an extremely individual man and poet, at the height of his career, should so obviously indebt himself to any other poet, least of all to a poet as dominant and dominating as Stevens. The fact that Thomas's indebtedness to Stevens is often so subtle as to be easily missed suggests that "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," an atypical poem for Stevens, struck Thomas in such a way that—in his equally atypical poem—he gives us a somewhat disguised reference to a most important aspect of his work" (Davies 2007:147).

a thinly ventriloquised pessimism of the poet himself, which is to say that we never learn what we are like from a totally extraneous and exotic point of view, but we do learn a great deal about what Thomas thinks about the human race, and his thoughts on the matter are less than bracing.

Moreover, by focusing on one trope, Thomas evacuates from his poem the playful philosophies, vertiginous paradoxes and facetious *non sequiturs* of the originary text, while its tongue-in-cheek crypticity has given way to semi-theological earnestness. In the precursor text, the gaze of man was full of excited curiosity, here, by contrast, the attitude of the birds to human beings is that of disdain, occasionally bordering on revulsion.[4] Apparently, unlike the blackbirds, man is a far less interesting creature and is unlikely to provoke multiple interpretations.[5]

The first stanza sets the scene for the whole poem. The blackbirds are in some prelapsarian garden, which has not yet been contaminated by original sin and its baneful legacy. Of course, the word "garden" comes laden with mythic associations and is inevitably freighted with biblical references, even though the poet does not speak directly of the garden of Eden.[6] Although the garden is still pure and innocent, the

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[4] To use Kristeva's terminology: in the original, *genotext* is given more prominence, assuring the free play of association and a whimsical tessellation of ideas and sensations, which are barely distinguishable from each other. In the poem written (rewritten?) by Thomas, the discipling exigencies of *notext* come to the fore.

[5] "Ultimately, Thomas's sequence lacks the austerity and tautness of Stevens's, having perhaps a rather narrower range of perspectives" (Brown 2009:125). Moreover, while Stevens usually begins with sensations which will then generate ideas, Thomas starts from the other end – he begins with ideas, which he subsequently cloaks with images and sensations. In the poetry of Stevens the alignment of the two is more multilayered, but also seems to come about more spontaneously and freely than in Thomas's work.

[6] As Ward suggests, "On one possible reading of the poem, there is an underlying mythical or historical movement. This would go from an opening section, in (...) the garden of Eden, to the final section questioning whether 'man' will be present when the birds return, 'man' having, perhaps, destroyed himself in nuclear war or some other holocaust" (Ward 2001:144).

birds are aware of the menacing presence of "a man," who seems poised to destroy its fragile innocence:

It is calm.

It is as though

we lived in a garden

that had not yet arrived

at the knowledge of

good and evil.

But there is a man in it.

There is no need to quote the poem in its entirety as the following stanzas consistently develop this idea and paint the picture of a malicious, self-involved and arrogant *anthropos*, who should be held responsible for the subsequent corruption of the garden. This unmitigated condemnation of humanity is evident in the whole poem, e.g. in stanza two, where man is shown as not only out of tune with nature but also given to petulant sulking:

There will be

rain falling vertically

from an indifferent

sky. There will stare out

from behind its

bars the face of the man

who is not enjoying it.

Stanza five shows man as greedy and possessive, his biblical mandate appointing him to the stewardship of creation already abused by him for selfish ends:

After we have stopped

singing, the garden is disturbed

by echoes. It is

the man whistling, expecting

everything to come to him.

The following stanza openly registers the loathing of the birds:

We wipe our beaks

on the branches

wasting the dawn's

jewellery to get rid

of the taste of a man.

At the same time, the birds' vehement disapproval of their human companions is alleviated by a few touches of wry humour. In stanza seven, Thomas plays on the semantic ambiguity of the word "bill," which demonstrates the birds' superiority stemming from their freedom from typically human concerns with money and payments:

Nevertheless,

which is not the case

with a man, our

bills give us no trouble.

In stanza eight, the birds denounce the silly superstition that number thirteen is unlucky as a typically human construct. At the same time, at least on the basis of this stanza, it seems that man has good reasons to question its neutrality, and his triskaidekaphobia is not entirely unfounded:

Who said the

number was unlucky?

It was a man, who,

trying to pass us,

had his licence endorsed

thirteen times.

Apparently, the slow, flightless biped had his license endorsed while trying to overtake the birds. Finally, in the last stanza (whose opening line may be a faint echo of Hopkins's "Hurrahing in Harvest") the blackbirds wonder whether a man will return at the end of the cycle of season, hoping that he will not, fearing that he will.[7] It is implied that only by eradicating man's presence from the garden, may it be restored to its prior perfection:

> Summer is
>
> at an end. The migrants
>
> depart. When they return
>
> in spring to the garden,
>
> will there be a man among them?

What is more relevant to the ends of this essay is not Thomas's bitter misanthropy, but his use of intertextual echoes in the text. As noted before, the most obvious reference is of course to Genesis. Like in many other poems, Thomas creates a mythopoeic space, which enables him to engage with questions of protology. This is further supported by stanza nine in which the poet speaks about "the cool / of the day," unambiguously drawing on his biblical source. At the same time, it can be half-jokingly claimed that Thomas's poem is a reworking of both Stevens's famous poem and Milton's *Paradise Lost* in that the poet is (unsuccessfully and half-heartedly) trying to justify the ways of man to the birds.

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[7] As Davies notes: "The blackbirds obviously fear that there will be, that the man-presence which has intruded upon their peaceful world is there to stay, that, indeed, this ominous presence will be there to usher in the new season when the year, in a world of blackbirds, begins again. The parable, then, is of an inevitably approaching apocalyptic era, an era which will put an end to the repose of all gardens, an era in which the "forked" man's presence intrudes into every stanza and cannot be eradicated, no matter how hard the blackbirds try. Furthermore, the man will be unable to "incubate a solution" to the problem he himself has created" (Davies 2007:150-151).

But there are also other intertextual references in the poem. As I have mentioned before, perhaps the last stanza carries a faint echo of one of Hopkins's most exultant nature sonnets. Moreover, the final line of stanza three, which speaks about "shadow / here of the forked man" alludes to King Lear's incoherent ravings, where the insane monarch famously calls man "a poor, bare, forked animal" (Act III, scene 4). It seems, however, that these are mere intertextual embellishments, which – unlike the biblical references and the ostensible indebtedness to Stevens' poem – do not play a particularly important role.

Larkin's and Thomas's respective aubades

The second example of intertextuality is Thomas's poem "Aubade," which is an intriguing instance of double relationality since it establishes a connection not just with a precursor text (Philip Larkin's disturbingly honest account of his terror of death and dying) but also self-consciously relates to a whole genre. In other words, the title of the poem is a provocative generic gesture, immediately placing the text within the almost forgotten genre of aubade. In this way the setting of the poem is evoked not so much (or not only) by a set of textual operations within the text, but is signaled from the very beginning by its title, at the same time creating tension on the part of the contemporary reader, who - being aware of the current status of this genre - is unlikely to expect a rigorous endorsement of its obsolete tenets, but is yet uncertain as to what subversive strategy the poet has chosen. The field of reader's expectations may embrace a tongue-in-cheek polemic, a rollicking burlesque, a self-consciously naïve endorsement of sentimental love or its unsparing caricature, and so forth. Since the relation postulated by the title is of double character, it is also vital to bear in mind that the manner in which Larkin harnessed that genre for his openly avowed self-pity and crippling fear of dissolution indirectly questioned one of the main premises of the genre, i.e., its dialogical structure. Although Larkin's poem does take place at dawn (as any aubade should), it is not at all clear who is the addressee of his eschatological diatribe; consequently, the text opens

up many possibilities. It could be Larkin himself, the reader, or even Death and nothingness.

At the same time, this double relationality of Thomas's poem creates an interesting ambiguity since one does not know which relation should be given priority. As a result, the reader is caught in the cross-fire of interetextual addressivity as, on the one hand, he should bear in mind the generic position of the poem within the genre of "song of dawn," on the other hand, its relation to one specific text. Of course these two relations (generic and specific) are by no means mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they enrich the hermeneutical potential of the poem.

This augmentation of interpretative possibilities results from the fact that in the process of its historical development every genre gradually established a set of formal and thematic features which the text must observe in order to be recognised as belonging to that particular genre. Thus, an Elizabethan courtier who set out to please his audience by writing a sonnet, had no choice but adhere strictly to the sonnet form with its predictable themes and threadbare motifs (that is why, Shakespeare's sonnet 130 is such a shockingly audacious departure from the established norms of sonnet-writing). Consequently, writing a poem in the second half of the 20th century which does not merely belong to an obsolete genre, but explicitly manifests its adherence to it in the title is problematic in itself unless this anachronism is "redeemed" by sarcasm, or demonstrating why writing a conventional aubade with a straight face has become an impossibility. Thomas, however, does not need to undertake this task because the road was cleared for him by the precursor text, i.e., Larkin's "Aubade," which blazed a new, Angst-riddled, trail for those few who may wish in the future to walk down this long-forgotten, dust-covered path. Consequently, any well-informed reader of modern poetry who comes across a poem like this is much more likely to have in mind the despondent disillusionment of Larkin than the preposterously romantic posturings of Romeo at Juliet's window. Thus, the intertextual potential of the poem is more likely to be

activated through its reference back to Larkin's "Aubade" than to the whole genre. Whether it is really so remains to be seen.

The poem itself is quite short, and may be quoted in its entirety:

I awoke. There was dew,
And the voice of time singing:
It is too late to begin,
You are there already.

I went to the window
As to a peep show: There she was
All fly-wheels and pistons;
Her smile invisible

As a laser. And, 'No.'
I cried, 'No' turning away
Into the computed darkness
Where she was waiting

For me, with art's stone
Rolled aside from her belly
To reveal the place poetry had lain
With the silicon angels in attendance.

It seems that Thomas begins with a straightforward dialogical gesture by relating directly to the opening line of Larkin's poem. Both start with a subjective, first-person point of view, but there is a significant difference, a small grammatical change, which results in a major semantic shift – while Larkin employs the present tense ("Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare," l. 2), Thomas uses the past tense, thus reducing his text to one particular occasion. Moreover,

the time reference is absent from Thomas's poem, thus depriving it of the empirical concreteness of the original. In this way, what begins as a potential polemic with the "Aubade" of Larkin soon departs from the precursor text and revisits the familiar themes and problems of Thomas's verse.

Since, as has been noted before, one of the formal requirements of aubade is that it should display a dialogical structure – whether by an actual incorporation of two voices, or by implying the presence of an addressee – Thomas pays allegiance to the generic connection of the poem by inserting into the text a personified "Machine," which plays the role of the female partner-adversary of the speaker. That, however, apart from the setting, is the only concession the poet is prepared to make, while any semblance of love or lovers is conspicuous by its absence. Larkin frankly confesses his horror of dying, but he never really engages in a disputation with the enemy. Thomas, by contrast, is arguing with the ominous Machine even though he resignedly knows that his heroic expostulations are vain. Moreover, we find a cursory allusion to the Resurrection, followed by yet another damning indictment of modern civilization. As a result of the presence of all those forces pulling the poem in various directions, it becomes a rather vague meditation on religion, art and materialism. Unlike the precursor text, Thomas's poem does not commit itself to developing one idea, but cursorily registers the intrusive presence of manifold factors responsible for the speaker's feeling of *Angst.*

Interestingly, "Aubade" belongs to a fairly small group of poems for which Thomas, prompted by an inquiry from a reader, provided a commentary. His words bear out the claim that the precursor text for his poem was Larkin's "Aubade":

> How irksome to have to explain my poem when I don't know what it means either. This is the trouble with analysis in search of a prose meaning for what is not prose. I imagine I had Larkin's *Aubade* in mind. The standing ruefully at the window at dawn. The 'she' is the Machine, that which time makes it impossible to escape. I remember also the story of the peepshow where there was one hole giving on the Venus de Milo. But nobody looked because she was beautiful.

> The 'No' is the rejection of the Machine. The computed darkness means there is no escape, even in nature. The end is, of course, ironic. Playing on the idea of the empty tomb we find that, whether resurrected or not, poetry is no longer there, and that even the angels have become technological. (Rogers 2007:275)

While this is not directly related to the question of intertextuality, one may note in passing that appealing to the authority of the author solves some problems, but raises other questions and doubts, including the validity of this interpretative gesture in itself. One does not need to reiterate the deconstruction of the authority of the author or appeal to the authorial intention carried out by Barthes, Foucault, Wimsatt and others to see that very few problems of interpretation are in fact overcome in this way. After all, the author himself candidly admits that his hermeneutical position is by no means superior or privileged.[8]

At the same time, there is no need to dismiss the authorial elucidation of the text as overly intrusive and endangering free interpretation. Such anxieties are banished by recognition of the fact that the authorial comment is one among many points of view, which does enjoy a certain privileged status only thanks to its chronologically prior intimacy with the text. While the author's commentary will always remain the best exposition of the genesis of the poem at a given historical moment, it does not need to determine the shape or direction of the hermeneutical process itself. As we can see, the poet's brief commentary focuses more on the actual inception of the text and free play of associations without trying in any way to delimit interpretative possibilities for the critic. Although Thomas explains what some things "mean" in the poem, he never claims that his reading of the poem is exhaustive, and that other readers are not entitled to their own interpretations.

[8] That raises interesting, and most probably irresolvable, questions of human agency, (divine) inspiration, etc., which are beyond the scope of this essay.

Conclusion

The two poems are instructive examples of intertextuality. The link between them and their originary texts is quite explicit, especially in the case of the first one. At the same time, even though Thomas's poem structurally resembles Stevens's, its overall tonality is very different. While the poem written by Wallace Stevens was a delightfully puzzling mini-catalogue of seemingly unrelated vignettes, given a semblance of unity by the presence of the blackbirds, Thomas's rewriting of the poem considerably limits its philosophical range, and turns it into a vehicle for venting the poet's own pessimism.

In the case of Thomas's "Aubade," the correlation between the precursor text and his own poem is far more complicated since the latter relates not only to a specific poem but also to a whole genre. What is more, both of these relations are established in a single rhetorical gesture in the title of the poem. The identicality of the title brings out in sharper relief important differences between the two poems. While Larkin imaginatively explores the awfulness of being dead with an unflinching focus which is almost catatonic in its concentrated intensity, Thomas pays brief and inconclusive visits to his customary concerns. Although the reader might be excused for expecting Thomas's "Aubade" to engage with the mournful themes of the other highly unconventional aubade, the Welsh poet merely acknowledges the precursor text as a point of reference, then hastily departs to wrestle with his own fears, not Larkin's.

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