

S. J. Perry. *Chameleon Poet: R. S. Thomas and the Literary Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. x, 312p., ill. ISBN 9780199687336. £55.00 (hardback).

S. J. Perry's *Chameleon Poet: R. S. Thomas and the Literary Tradition* rests its arguments on two principle claims: first, that R. S. Thomas's life and work have too often been considered in light of his insistent Welsh nationalism when in fact his poetry, which grows out of a much more hesitant, shifting sense of self, is better understood as a series of chameleonic reactions to writers from England, Scotland, Ireland, the United States and elsewhere; second, that Thomas's most significant poetic debts—and those that have been least explored—are to the English poetic tradition, especially to an “English line” of poetry that extends from William Wordsworth to Thomas Hardy, then through Edward Thomas to Philip Larkin. Perry borrows this idea from Samuel Hynes, who has argued for a “genetic” line of inheritance in English poetry. Even Thomas's nationalism, Perry argues, owes at least as much to his reading of English poetry and English cultural criticism as it does to any Welsh source. Thus, *Chameleon Poet* is, on one hand, a study in poetic response and, on the other, an argument for an “English” R. S. Thomas.

As a study of poetic response, *Chameleon Poet* is very good. While many of the influences Perry examines—including Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* and the poetry of W. B. Yeats, Edward Thomas and Ted Hughes—have been discussed elsewhere, Perry mines them more deeply, and he considers poetic models that others have overlooked, including Alfred Tennyson, Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins and George Herbert. However, as he illuminates Thomas's multi-layered responses to these and other writers, Perry's efforts to give primacy to English influences seem misplaced. While he is right, for example, to begin with the impact of F. T. Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* on the schoolboy R. S. Thomas, there is no reason to conclude that the English poets anthologized therein were any more central to his development than the Scottish and Irish writers he devoured soon after, among them Fiona Macleod, William Butler Yeats, Austin Clarke, Patrick Kavanagh and Hugh MacDiarmid. This is to say nothing of the many Welsh influences that, given his focus on “the literary tradition” (an exclusive, politicized, Anglocentric term), Perry disregards.

Perry is most convincing when he adopts what he calls an “archipelagic” model that refuses to define identity along national lines. He employs both Keats's notion of the “chameleon poet” and Yeats's theory of the mask to demonstrate how R. S. Thomas “inhabited” the lives of diverse writers, his poetry emerging from a quarrel with them as much as a quarrel with



himself. Perry takes this discussion beyond the British archipelago to include American poets, including Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams and the various voices Thomas encountered through his relationship with the journal *Critical Quarterly*. And, in his discussion of Seamus Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist*, Perry also shows how other poets benefited from their own quarrels with R. S. Thomas. These archipelagic and global assessments are almost always convincing, as are Perry's discussions of English writers — Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example — when considered within this context. But Perry's determination to see R. S. Thomas as the inheritor of an "English line" — most conspicuous, perhaps, in his unconvincing attempt to compare him to Philip Larkin — is at odds with the best parts of his book.

Rhetoric surrounding a reified "English tradition" has been used to marginalize or exclude too many Anglophone poets, including, ironically, R. S. Thomas, who puzzled and frustrated English critics when his philosophical proclivities and experimental prosodies led him beyond the small, Welsh, rural plot they afforded him. It could be argued that S. J. Perry releases Thomas from that narrow furrow by further excavating his significant debts to English authors, but as thorough and nuanced as his arguments are, Perry takes us a step backward by insisting on the very idea of tradition that has allowed some critics and reviewers to limit the breadth of Thomas's achievement. Rather than attempting to show how R. S. Thomas fits within "the literary tradition," a better end to this useful and thoughtful study would have been to fully embrace the "archipelagic" model that it offers and to show how the chameleon-like, mask-wearing R. S. Thomas, whose conflicted identity and polyphonic poetry shifted and evolved so much over time, challenges the very concept of such a tradition.

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