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Only Connect

James Underwood

Rory Waterman, *Belonging and Estrangement in the Poetry of Philip Larkin, R. S. Thomas and Charles Causley* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 220pp. £60. ISBN 978-1-4094-7087-8.

Rory Waterman intriguingly combines discussions of Philip Larkin, R. S. Thomas, and Charles Causley, three poets who 'epitomize many of the emotional and societal shifts and mores of their age', in the hope of making possible 'new and persuasive readings'. Focussed conceptually on belonging and estrangement, the book's six chapters explore literary traditions and audience; geographical and cultural origins; relationships, particularly marriage; war; society and isolation; and faith and mortality.

Although such an underpinning does at times lead to somewhat pedestrian analysis, generally, it allows for insightful readings of their work. Waterman is at pains to show how belonging and estrangement are not oppositional and static experiences, but have shades and crossovers, as in the case of the 'man kicked out of his home' and the man 'who has chosen to leave his wife' – both are estranged, but in very different ways. When such thinking is brought to bear on the three poets, it reveals the tensions and ambiguities in their work. This is particularly true of Waterman's succinct and fascinating readings of Thomas's 'Iago Prytherch' works, a loose grouping of poems from across his career. The 'half-witted' Prytherch, a fictionalised peasant representative of the impoverished rural Welsh is often subjected to sneers of condescension – such emotional intensity reflecting back on Thomas, who felt deeply estranged from the communities he was supposed to know and serve as priest. But in 'The Peasant', an early poem, the experience of war shows him to have more in common with Prytherch; both remain at home, rather than engaging in combat, Prytherch preserving 'his stock' against 'siege of rain and the wind's attrition' – the poem's military language reflecting its composition during the Second World War. Prytherch is described as 'your prototype' – thereby bringing peasant, poet, and reader into a triangle of community and belonging.

The juxtaposition of these poets can be enlightening, particularly on questions of linguistic and geographical belonging: Causley felt no estrangement from his native Cornwall, despite not speaking Cornish; whereas Thomas felt dismayed by his inability to speak Welsh, viewing Causley's Cornwall as a warning to Wales regarding the dilution and Anglicisation of an historic vernacular culture. Perhaps more exploration of the connections *between* these poets would have been

fascinating. We learn from the beginning that Thomas was dismissive of almost all his contemporaries, while Larkin, a fan of Causley, once privately called the Welshman 'Arse Thomas [...] the bible-punching old bastard'. Yet Waterman informs us, at the end of his study, that Thomas admired Larkin's poem 'Faith Healing', while Causley treasured 'The Explosion'. This leaves one to wonder what kind of cross-pollination occurred between the three, though perhaps this would require a different kind of study.

Waterman, himself a poet, is especially strong on poetic forms and techniques. His interrogation of Causley's ballads finds allusions and formal subversions which undermine the common perception that his work is simple. However, Waterman perhaps misses two opportunities. The first is the general issue of who reads poetry. Waterman acknowledges this question, but his study of belonging and estrangement does pose the question of precisely who these poets' work belonged to, or was estranged from. The other question is more specific: Waterman asserts that 'with very rare exceptions his work eschews intertextuality, and shows little or no evidence of outside influence at all in anything but the broadest terms'. Such comments seem strange, given the clear influence of the Blake of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, or the Wordsworth and Coleridge of *Lyrical Ballads*. Despite his own claims, Waterman places Causley's war poems within a broader context of Second World War poetry; yet he misses some fairly obvious connections to Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' in his discussion of theism in Causley's 'At St Hilary'. Given the critical neglect of Causley's work, further excavations might help to stimulate more attention; however, Waterman's inclusion of Causley in this study makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of this particular poet. This is in part due to some extensive archival research in the Causley collections at the Universities of Exeter, and Buffalo, New York – scholarship which has truly benefited the study.

It is pleasing, also, to see extensive research done in the Larkin archives held by the University of Hull. However, Waterman's discussions of Larkin are problematic, particularly when it comes to the poet's relationship with place. Waterman insists on asserting Larkin's English rootedness and patriotism, despite all of the evidence to the contrary (though in his defence, he

joins a long line of critics before him who would agree). As evidence of Larkin's fundamental Englishness, Waterman cites several times the line from 'The Importance of Elsewhere', 'These are my customs and establishments', but fails to consider the subsequent lines, 'It would be much more serious to refuse. / Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence'. A key poem about estrangement from England, then, is cited as evidence of 'an innate sense of belonging' to England. This misreading comes just after an inaccurate discussion of Larkin's posthumously published poem, 'March Past'. In his introduction, Waterman rightly claims that his is one of the first books on Larkin to appear since the publication of Archie Burnett's *Complete Poems*. However, Waterman ignores Burnett's re-naming of the poem, from 'The March Past' to 'March Past'. Although Waterman does catch the pun in the former title, and does disagree with Tom Paulin's analysis of the poem as evoking British superiority, his claim that the poem is about 'a Protestant Orange parade' cannot be justified by any evidence from the text itself. Indeed, the anti-militaristic final stanza, which he acknowledges, undermines his claim elsewhere about Larkin's desire 'to reinforce the military deterrent' (Waterman's italics). Mistakes like these lead Waterman to assert that anything which encroaches on or threatens Larkin's 'trenchant' Englishness 'is to be shunned and even vilified'. Whether intended or not, here Waterman reinforces the views of critics like Lisa Jardine, who find (at best) xenophobic and (at worst) racist attitudes present in Larkin's work. This ignores the multitude of contradictory evidence – what about the 'Polish airgirl' of 'Poem XII' in *The North Ship*, whose foreign voice waters 'a stony place'? Or Katherine, in *A Girl in Winter*?

Problems occur also in the chapter on society and solitude. Larkin is said to have a 'sweeping distaste' for the working-class – 'his is clearly a very middle-class sensibility'. Yet Waterman himself describes 'Vers de Société' as 'anti-middle-class rhetoric', and one thinks of lines from other poems like 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad', or 'Wanking at ten past three / [...] Someone else feeling her breasts and cunt' – not exactly the patter of respectable middle-class suburbanites. This preoccupation results in yet another class-conscious reading of 'The Whitsun Weddings' (a journey that 'really happened' – we know from Burnett it didn't), ignoring the extensive revisionist work done on this poem by John Osborne and Gillian Steinberg. Indeed, part of the problem seems to be the persistence of biographical thinking, and the conflation of poet and narrator, which both Osborne and Steinberg have so persuasively critiqued. And yet, an anecdote which Waterman recounts, seems instructive. A decade after the end of the Second World War, Causley (a veteran of that conflict) visited the British Cemetery in Bayeux. Waterman's research has unearthed a leaflet for a nearby

tourist attraction, on the back of which Causley scribbled an early version of his poem, 'At the British War Cemetery, Bayeux'. Initially the poem was to have a narrow focus, on the grave of one unknown British sailor seen in the cemetery. But by making the poem less specific, 'Causley shifts the emphasis to a sense of belonging, of unity, among the war dead of all ranks and occupations'. The specific biographical occasion is only the chrysalis from which a more beautiful entity eventually emerges. Waterman understands that to read the event and the poem in parallel is to miss the point of the poem. In his reading of Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb', Waterman comments that the effigy is not a truthful representation, but rather 'a symbiosis of art and artifice'. This is a good point, but the same could be said of any work of art, Larkin's poems included. Despite the stated aim of providing 'new and persuasive readings', it will be difficult to say anything substantially new about Larkin from now on without engaging with the work of anti-biographical scholars like Osborne (whose 2008 monograph is fleetingly dismissed as 'protestations') and Steinberg (whose book is cited only in the bibliography), and without properly incorporating the revisions to Larkin's corpus made by Burnett's edition of the *Complete Poems*.

Not all of Waterman's readings of Larkin are problematic, however. His discussions of 'An Arundel Tomb' and 'Aubade' are excellent, and truly benefit from his archival research. Reading the former, Waterman corrects Andrew Motion's description of Larkin's qualifying comment in his workbook that 'Love isn't stronger than death just because two statues hold hands for six hundred years'. This statement is not jotted at the end of a full draft (as Motion says), but rather *before* Larkin writes the final stanza. This is noteworthy, because it changes the relationship between poem and comment: rather than the comment being Larkin's belated critique of the entire poem's potential triteness, it shows the poet deliberately setting up the final stanza as a bleak qualification of its previous stanzas. If we then, as Waterman suggests, read the word 'love' as a pun on 'nil', then there 'is a case to be made' that this famous love poem 'is actually considerably less consoling than "Aubade"'. Revisionist thinking like this is most welcome, and leaves one wishing there were more.

So although this book would benefit from an engagement with the drastic changes within Larkin scholarship which have been taking place since 2008, it does partly achieve its aim of presenting new readings of these three poets through the juxtaposition of their work. The work on Larkin is less fresh and more problematic, but there is much to celebrate here, not least some incisive readings of Thomas and Causley, some superb archival research, more critical attention for Causley, and the odd flash of astuteness when it comes to Larkin.