

Patrick Gill

Origins and Effects of Poetic Ambiguity  
in Dylan Thomas's *Collected Poems*

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Detail from the Muses Sarcophagus

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In loving memory of Terence Donald Gill



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## Introduction: Ambiguity and Dylan Thomas

Although the idea that a single word or phrase can be used to convey more than one meaning has long been one of the mainstays of literary interpretation and, indeed, composition, since, as Pound points out, literature habitually employs "language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (23), ambiguity in literature has been the object of systematic study for only a relatively short period of time (cf. Delabastita 55 and Su 4f.). Where the term *ambiguity* appears in various academic disciplines, it is frequently held to be self-explanatory, even though, on closer inspection, this usually turns out to be a false assumption (Su 1). The academic efforts undertaken regarding the phenomenon of ambiguity in literature in the course of the twentieth century, from William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (in three editions 1930, 1947 and 1953) to Soon Peng Su's *Lexical Ambiguity in Poetry* (1994) have yielded a number of highly interesting insights into the inner workings of literary language but they have thus far failed to result in any consensus as to what exactly constitutes ambiguity in literature and how different kinds of ambiguity are to be classified.

As the culmination of more than six decades of debate and controversy, Su's study can be taken as the starting point of the present endeavour, and her closing comments with their call for "a more detailed examination of the contextual conditions which tend to actualize potential ambiguity" and for an exploration of "the relationship of ambiguity to literary history" (172) are reflected in the approach chosen for the present study, the first section of which is concerned with the phenomenon of ambiguity in antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This circuitous approach is necessitated by the extreme dearth of any sustained accounts of the workings of ambiguity over several periods, the longest such account being Tom Tashiro's thirteen-page article "Ambiguity as Aesthetic Principle" in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (1973). While this opening section of the present study proceeds from a fairly general idea of ambiguity, the next section investigates the notions of several twentieth-century literary critics and arrives at a definition of *poetic ambiguity*, as it is termed here, and a typology of different kinds of this poetic ambiguity.

In the second part of the study, the concept of poetic ambiguity developed in the first is then used in a close inspection of the poetry of Dylan Thomas. Taking its cue from Su's call for the study of "contextual conditions" (172), this second part opens with a consideration of Thomas's techniques in both providing

and withholding contextual information. What follows is a detailed discussion of various types of poetic ambiguity and their concrete functions in Thomas's *Collected Poems*. Finally, the present study will attempt to trace two major influences on Thomas which inform his writing in general and his use of ambiguity in particular.

This final section is of particular interest due to the vexatious history of critical opinions on Dylan Thomas,<sup>1</sup> in the course of which it has repeatedly been proposed that the Welsh poet must have been under some kind of personal compulsion to write the way he did. Most notorious among those critics looking for a single cause of Thomas's poetic obscurity is Holbrook with his analysis of the poet as psychologically flawed to the extent that he wrote his poetry in a "false voice which he invented to hide from us and from himself the nature of his incapacities" (16). But more recent times have seen equally inadequate attempts to trace the very nature of Thomas's poetry to a single psychological or biographical source, such as the claim that the poet suffered from dyslexia (cf. Massie).

While individual commentators' personal literary preferences may have a bearing on this view of Thomas as a quintessentially flawed artist, the root of the problem facing Thomas criticism is to be found in the extraordinary discrepancy between the poet's standing in popular culture and his relative neglect at the hands of academic discourse. Thus Ferris points out that "Internet search engines offer 350,000 hits for 'Dylan Thomas' against 50,000 for 'Auden', his longer-lived contemporary and a more productive poet" ("Secret Lover"); one of Thomas's favourite watering holes in the town of Laugharne was recently sold to British TV star Neil Morrissey for £670,000 "[i]n an auction that was rumoured to have attracted interest from Rolling Stone Mick Jagger and 007 actor Pierce Brosnan" (Blackstock); and the year 2006 saw the inauguration of the Dylan Thomas Prize, offering a substantial sum for young writers.

This pre-eminence of Dylan Thomas as a literary figure in the public imagination seems strangely at odds with "the comparative neglect of his work by the critical mainstream" (Houston 333), and yet it is partly responsible for it. After all, both public persona and private life of the Welshman have been so thoroughly probed in biographies, anecdotes and newspaper articles for so long that it seems impossible for many of his critics to escape the trap of "read[ing]

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1     For a short outline of critical opinions on Thomas, see Goodby and Wigginton, "Introduction" 1ff. The most comprehensive critical history is given in James A. Davies 245-336.