

# Expansion And Intercession

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Thomas Lynch, *The Sin-Eater: A Breviary*, with photographs by Michael Lynch, Paraclete Press,  
\$22.99, ISBN 9781557258724;

Tony Williams, *All The Rooms of Uncle's Head*, Nine Arches Press, £6,  
ISBN 9780956551474

These two slim collections are both bursting with ideas and possibilities. Each focuses on a distinctive outsider – in Lynch's collection *Argyle*, the eponymous sin-eater, in Williams's the unnamed inhabitant of an unidentified asylum – and frames their portraits or monologues with accompanying materials which enhance the reader's experience.

Lynch, famously also a Michigan undertaker of Irish descent, juxtaposes his accounts of *Argyle's* travels and travails with images by his sons: mostly photographs by Michael Lynch. These have a curious effect on the poems: on the one hand 'setting' them in the distinctive landscape of the West Clare Peninsula, where the Lynch family came from; on the other creating a narrative reliance on the image to illustrate or amplify each particular text, which is not always met.

Meanwhile, Williams constructs an ingenious and elaborate imitation of Outsider Art: his protagonist has made a series of ceramic tiles on which the poems – essentially a sonnet sequence about his incarceration and psychosis – are framed by a running commentary, on several levels, which requires the reader to rotate the page to keep up. The text is literally unsettled by the act of reading. To add to this physical deranging, the 'tiles' have apparently been 'smashed' at some point, and their reconstruction is not always complete: cracks run across the pages and jagged sections are blacked out here and there, leaving us to guess at occasional phrases.

These are complementary but contrasting ways to augment the act of reading a poem, and carry the risk of overwhelming the text – if the proper centre of our attention is accepted as being that text. If it is not, then these collections should be understood as repositioning the reader's experience as something balanced between text and image, or between text and concept.

In Thomas Lynch's case, the presence of an 'Introit' discussing both the poet's relationship to Catholicism and to County Clare, and the concept of the sin-eater, makes it clear that there is a metaphoric relationship between the Irish-American undertaker-poet and the scapegoat figure he introduces via *The History of American Funeral Directing* and its magnificent "Puckle tells of a curious functionary, a sort of male scapegoat called the 'sin-eater.'" Lynch emphasizes his character's outsider status by giving him a definitively Scottish name: "after the socks, of course, the only thing I knew that was reliably Scots, apart from whiskey, and the acoustic resemblance to 'our guile'". Of course, "whiskey" is exactly not "reliably Scots"; Scotch is, in Scotland, spelled "whisky", but these tiny shibboleths are part of the estrangement *Argyle* experiences. He is precisely a secular paraclete, forgiving those the priesthood cannot bring themselves to forgive:

[...] *Argyle* refused their shilling coin  
and helped them build a box and dig a grave.  
'Your boy's no profligate or prodigal,'  
he said, 'only a wounded pilgrim like us all.  
What say his leaping was a leap of faith,  
into his father's beckoning embrace?'

This of a suicide. In another passage, he lambasts the clergy as “red cassocked dandies and mitred wankers, / the croziered posers in their bishoprics” before letting rip with a graphic comparison neither narrowly: “For all their vestiture, rings and unctions, / preaching to bishops, like farting at skunks, was / nothing but a mug’s game to the sin-eater.” In skunkless Clare, this little Lowellesque incomer can only have a metaphoric existence, one more readily available to an American audience than to an Irish or British one.

There is, then, a type of cultural gap over and beyond the space Argyle occupies between the sacred and the sacerdotal; this being the gap in the poet’s own identity between Irish and American. The book’s photographs usually bridge but sometimes emphasise this gap, as in the picture of Thoor Ballylee which accompanies the poem just discussed. For many, the Yeats tower plus the castigation of bishops equals Crazy Jane and those magnificent, disturbing lines, “Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement”. But, although Argyle reflects in a similar mode elsewhere, here image and text and allusion feel separate rather than synergistic, as though we’re simply being shown an image from the environs of the verse. Elsewhere, however, glimpses of low stone houses and elemental landscape, memorials and votive shrines, serve to position the fugitive insights of the troubled shamanic figure of Argyle, perpetually on the move between villages and between worlds:

Outstretched on the strand, his body’s immersion  
in the tide was not unlike a christening:  
two goats for godparents, two herring gulls  
perched in the current his blessed parents,  
a fat black cormorant the parish priest [...]

Williams’ speaker seems to have taken too much to heart Michael Donaghy’s remark in *Wallflowers*, “consider how any printed page of verse or prose, with all its paraphernalia of paragraphs, running heads, marginalia, pagination, footnotes, titles, line breaks and stanzas, can be understood as a diagram of a mental process.” His poems are accompanied by just such a paraphernalia of devices, each with their own internal laws, which have to be granted (almost) equal status to the poem itself. There is a border text, running around the four sides of the page, often containing a quoted passage along the bottom and left margins. The title is given in a very large font split equally above and below the poem, and the stanzas of the poem itself (often an inverted sonnet running 3;3;4;4) are gathered in braces (those curly brackets), with descriptors or comments written at ninety degree angles to accompany each. The effect is of a text exploding beyond the limits of the poem but just being contained by the further frame of the tile/page.

Each element therefore plays a role in this mysterious speaker’s narrative. He is locked in a battle, of and for his wits, with the recurrent figure of the ‘Professor’ (“Professor Bloodless nodding, poking through / My things”), reflecting angrily on his ‘Uncle’, who may be responsible for his incarceration (“A straggle of ivy / Turns grey in the dusk. He is smoking merrily”), and dreaming of the lovely inhabitant of cell 36:

The gravestones are covered in violet flowers –  
Her pubis is covered in violet flowers –  
The pastures are covered in violet flowers –  
I would prefer not to talk about her ankles.

This is a hugely complex apparatus to bring to bear on a relatively short sequence of poems, and

it is a considerable achievement on Williams's part that it never overwhelms the human matter at the heart of his sequence. Indeed, the effect is rather like that of reading the nineteenth century artist Richard Dadd's poem which attempts to explain his painting, 'The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke', painted while in Broadmoor for murdering his father. You feel compassion for the person trapped at the heart of his own unresolvable convolutions of thought.

Of course a great deal of careful artistry has gone into creating this illusion – we catch the little echo of Rilke's first Duino Elegy in one of the framing fragments, 'IF I SCREAMED', and the use of insect imagery to embody the nadir of his psychosis cannot help but recall Kafka:

BLACK-FIGURED. Chitinous of thought,  
 Love-fearing. So I am. And from each wound  
 I bear, exude a hæmolympinous spit,  
 Simple and inhuman [...]

The difference between Williams and Lynch is more a matter of contrasting goals than one of methods. Each seeks to augment the poem with the presence of other elements, but Michael Lynch's photographs confine themselves to being, beautifully, illustrative. Williams' marginalia, on the other hand, appear to have a more radical goal. Not made in a different medium from the poem they frame, they seem to deepen our understanding of how a poem works, bringing to the surface those phrases that, we suspect, always haunt the phrases that we read on any page.

That it takes the device of a madman's smashed tiles to make these darker subtexts visible points to something you feel both poets would accede to. It remains the poem's task to intercede between that which can and that which cannot be said.

W.N. Herbert's latest collection is *Bad Shaman Blues*, shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize.

