2011

‘One Foot in Wales and My Vowels in England’: Double-Consciousness in the work of Dylan Thomas

Karl Powell
University of Notre Dame Australia

Follow this and additional works at: http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING
The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.
Do not remove this notice.

Publication Details

This dissertation/thesis is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.
‘One Foot in Wales and My Vowels in England’:
Double-Consciousness in the work of Dylan Thomas

Honours Dissertation
Bachelor of Arts (Honours)

of
Karl Powell

Supervised by
Professor Chris Wortham

Presented 27th October 2011
# Contents

Acknowledgement and Declaration  
Abstract  
Introduction  
Chapter One: ‘To Begin at the Beginning’  
Chapter Two: Bardic Echoes  
Chapter Three: A Burr of Modernity  
Chapter Four: A Copernican Revolution Near Milk Wood  
Conclusion  
Appendices  
Bibliography
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Chris Wortham, for all his patience, support and encouragement during this research program, and for all the enjoyment I have had working with him. I also wish to acknowledge Angeline O’Neill and Dawn Darlaston-Jones for all their kindness and selfless work dedicated to the Honours Program at Notre Dame University.

I would also like to thank Jo Furber (Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea) and Kirsti Bohata (Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales, Swansea University) for their time and help in my research of Dylan Thomas.

Finally, I wish to thank my family, especially my parents, Jeff and Jill Powell, for their unending love, support and belief in me. Diolch o galon.

——

Declaration:

I declare that this Research Project is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Signed: …………………………………………………… Date: ……………………………

Karl Powell

Abstract
Dylan Thomas once made a throwaway observation that he was a border case: regarded in England as Welsh and living in Wales as an Englishman. He claimed he was living with one foot in Wales and his vowels in England. The aim of this dissertation is to examine the phenomenon of double-consciousness arising in the work and life of Thomas. Based on W.E.B. du Bois’ theory of Double-Consciousness, it is argued that due to being raised to speak only English by Welsh-speaking parents, Thomas developed a cultural awareness to both cultures and found himself caught between identifying himself as either Welsh or English. To measure this a tripartite method of research is undertaken. First a double investigation into his mimicry of the two cultural traditions to which he felt aligned and in binary opposition to: the Welsh traditions of his upbringing, and the English traditions of his mother tongue. This will conducted using a selection of illustrative poems, drawn from his five volumes of published poetry. In this structural dichotomy it is hoped to witness his mimicry of the two literary traditions he had an awareness of, through his own literary output. The study concludes with an examination of *Under Milk Wood* seeking to discover the possible resolutions Thomas negotiated through his own fashioning of hybridity and anticipation of Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘third space of enunciation’ between such binary opposites.

**Introduction**
...and then madness was very near, as I believe it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments.

- The Seven Pillars of Wisdom (T. E. Lawrence)

In 1908, Cornish artist Sydney Curnow Vosper, painted the image of an elderly woman arriving for service at the Baptist chapel Salem Cefncymerau, in Llanbedr, near Harlech in North Wales. The picture, Salem, sought to represent pre-industrial life in Wales, with local villagers having posed as characters for Vosper’s tableau about faith and family.¹ The central character of the painting, modelled by Siân Owen, is shown taking her seat in a pew, as all other chapelgoers are already seated in silent contemplation.² A clock on the wall ticks – noticeably - towards ten o’clock. Against the sombre fashions of piety worn by the congregation, Owen’s character wears a brightly coloured, paisley shawl. Our eyes are drawn there; unwittingly, it becomes a focal point. Suggestions continue to speculate about the shawl - the most pertinent being as a comment upon the sin of vanity, with Owen’s character arriving deliberately late to ensure the whole community saw her garment.

Yet a deeper, more intriguing, proposition has endured: a possible representation of the omnipresence of evil.³ Over the left arm of Siân Owen and effortlessly folded within the intricate patterns of her shawl, there appears to be an image of the face of the Devil. Everyone in the painting appears unaware of this malevolent presence among them in the chapel. Even Vosper himself did not notice this apparent representation as he

---

² ibid., p.208.
³ ibid., p.209.
painted it, and vehemently denied any intentional depiction of doing so in his work. It is almost as if the motif or idea made itself manifest from out of the blurred edges of the artist’s subconscious into creative expression.

What this story seeks to illustrate is the way in which a duality of meaning can inhabit the physical world – simultaneously capable of catching our eye through a powerful contrast, while also existing undetected in the things we do or say. Exactly how these elements come to light differ with each individual case. In the example of a writer, their surviving works may suddenly reveal a previously unseen meaning, transpiring only when viewed through the lens of a theoretical framework. Each theory is unique in its particular sympathy and method when unearthing these hidden treasures – which, in some cases, the writer remains unaware of ever possessing. For the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, however, there is evidence to suggest that he displayed some sort of awareness of his.

Whilst addressing an assembly of Scottish writers in Edinburgh in 1948, Thomas made a throw away line, in which resides something worthy of more than a cursory glance. He claimed he was ‘a border case: regarded in England as a Welshman…and in Wales as an Englishman…[with] one foot in Wales and my vowels in England.’ The politics of language between England and Wales, that came to a head towards the end of the nineteenth century, eventually came to envelop him and countless others living in the Principality. Thomas had been in the first generation to have been brought up by Welsh-

---

4 ibid.
speaking parents and taught to speak only English.\(^6\) The vibrant show of bravado surrounding his statement acts like a veil, concealing something in the shadows between his words. Thomas may be hinting at a presence of alterity – a state of alienation, or otherness of the self.\(^7\)

"We sense someone aware he is caught between two conflicting cultures - a realisation of ‘belonging to neither rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo.’\(^8\) To paraphrase the social philosopher, William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois, we feel his ‘twoness…[his] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one… body.’\(^9\)

Du Bois described this phenomenon as ‘double-consciousness’ – characterised by a ‘sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity.’\(^10\) In its bleakest form, double consciousness may be attributed to those who feel marginalised in their own society, often caught between a Manichean structuring of binary extremes.

In Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, the view was forwarded that many African Americans experienced an uneasy allegiance towards their ethnicity and America - citing examples of being caught between having to choose one or the other to distinguish their

\(^10\) ibid.
cultural identity.\textsuperscript{11} Double-consciousness, however, comes in many forms. One version appears in David Remnick’s \textit{King of the World}, a narrative account of boxer Muhammad Ali’s ascent to winning the WBA Heavyweight title in 1964. At the time, the three leading heavyweight boxers were Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston and Muhammad Ali (then known as Cassius Clay). Ali felt Patterson identified himself as the \textit{Good Negro} – the integrationist, a symbol of passive resistance, civil rights, and Christian morality.\textsuperscript{12} Liston, convicted for larceny in his twenties, and connected to the Mob, seemed to accept the role of the \textit{Bad Negro}.\textsuperscript{13} Cornered by this dichotomy of stereotypes, Ali was determined to prove that he ‘could be a new kind of black man.’\textsuperscript{14} Part of this process would be Ali choosing neither the \textit{Good} nor the \textit{Bad}, but instead opting for \textit{something else besides} – and in doing so, almost anticipating the Poststructuralist hybridity of Homi K. Bhabha. Part of Ali’s \textit{something else besides} included a visit to Africa, and despite declaring he was proudly American, Ali had spoken of returning \textit{home}, describing Africans as \textit{my people}.\textsuperscript{15} For Remnick, Ali embodied Du Bois’ argument perfectly.\textsuperscript{16}

Although Du Bois’ theory referred to black Americans, it is by no means isolated to one community. Migrants, for example, often experience the phenomenon when oscillating between the cultural norms of the Old Country and the New. Writers like Salman Rushdie and David Malouf have written extensively on this - with the latter

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{15} Ali visited Egypt, Nigeria and Ghana during May 1964 and was overcome with emotion by demonstrations of affection from remote tribal villages chanting his name. See: \textit{ibid.}, p.278.
\textsuperscript{16} Remnick writes, ‘Ali may not have read W. E. B. Du Bois, but he was a living example of the “twinness,” the “double-consciousness,” described in \textit{The Souls of Black Folk.’ See: \textit{ibid.}}
capturing such a phenomenon from an Australian perspective in his short story, ‘Southern Skies,’ where a young migrants’ son begins to realise he belongs to two cultures. Jean Rhys presented her narrative of double consciousness from a Creole perspective – caught between both White and Black cultures - in Wide Sargasso Sea. The experience is also one that has impacted many Indigenous communities, such as those in Australia and North America. Yet what this investigation is concerned with is the possible effects such a double-consciousness had on Dylan Thomas – somebody alienated from his own language and literary traditions, yet also aware of another, to which he had access.

When reading the works of Dylan Thomas we almost sense someone who is experimenting in English and Welsh literary styles. We can’t help feeling that something is awry. We hear a wrongness sounding right. We know there is a devil in his shawl, but we can’t find it. This hunch appears validated when we consider the comments of critic T.H. Jones on the work of Thomas, ‘no native English writer could so creatively have misused the English language in the peculiar fashion that characterises Thomas’ poetry.’ This, it is argued, is the phenomenon of double-consciousness manifesting in Thomas, measurable throughout his literature.

In order to view what effect – if any – this sense of double-consciousness had on Thomas’ work, we would need to view his writing through the same kind of binary structure he would have been exposed to during his life time. This research proposes to

18 In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette Cosway (the prequel life story of the character Mrs Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre) suffers psychological trauma from an extreme experience of double consciousness, by being ostracised by both white and black communities. The protagonist, shared similar experiences to those of her author, Jean Rhys, who was the daughter of a Welsh doctor and a Creole mother. See: Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, Penguin Books, London, 2000.
examine Thomas’ writing through a tripartite enterprise: firstly, to examine his poetry for evidence of any residual influences or exposure from the Welsh literary tradition; secondly, to study his work for evidence of attempting to assimilate into the English literary tradition, through experimentation and mimicry; and thirdly, to investigate if any evidence survives of Thomas rejecting either of these dichotomies to attempt to discover his own notion of Bhabha’s hybridity, his own version of *something else besides*. To do this, it is proposed that a Postcolonial framework will be put in place, viewing the Wales in which Thomas grew up as having a claim to be considered as a colonised case study for this paper.

Although Postcolonial studies were initially devised to investigate questions of national and ethnic identity (by way of examining otherness, race, imperialism and language during and after colonisation), ambiguity continues to cloud the breadth of its scope – specifically ‘predominately white ex-colonies like Ireland, Canada and Australia.’ Any such reading of Wales in this instance must be performed with due sensitivity, as Chris Wigginton suggests, so as not to diminish the impact colonisation has had on more apparent considerations, such as countries like India. However, if it can be proved that any culture has had its indigenous language – and possibly linked within that, its cultural identity – suppressed by a Colonial force then, it is argued, such an investigation should be merited irrespective of skin colour. And yet Wales does have such a legitimate claim – one more striking than its potentially problematic ones.

---

concerning Roman occupation, and of Norman conquest, over its Celtic culture.\(^{22}\)

For if our study is to focus on the Wales of Dylan Thomas (1914 – 1953) then we need to search for evidence immediate to his time.

One particular vestige still visible as a scar in Wales is the 1847 *Report into the State of Education in Wales*. In Welsh it is known as *Brad Y Llyfrau Gleision* (The Treachery of the Blue Books).\(^{23}\) The Report published findings on Welsh education standards, detailing them as floundering in a ‘deplorable backwater.’\(^{24}\) Education commissioners from London had interviewed mother-tongue Welsh speaking children with a preconception that equated ‘literacy with facility of English… [interpreting] as crass ignorance inability to answer questions rapped out in an unfamiliar tongue and accent.’\(^{25}\) The Welsh language was viewed as a ‘vehicle of immorality, backwardness and obscurantism.’\(^{26}\) An article also circulated in the London press calling for its extinction.\(^{27}\)

During this zenith of British Imperialism, Matthew Arnold, who despite creating a Chair of Celtic Studies at Oxford in celebration of its culture, considered the Welsh language to be an impediment to both Wales and the Empire.\(^{28}\) By the time Thomas was schooled, he belonged to a generation who had seen a succession of Welsh teachers

\(^{22}\) Tyson, p.422.
\(^{25}\) ibid., p.145.
\(^{27}\) ibid., p.208.
\(^{28}\) Bohata refers to this as a stellar example of imperial discourse exoticising (and coveting) the artistic treasures of a colonised territory, while simultaneously constructing their people as uneducated and uncivilised - providing evidential instances of ‘othering,’ or the Orientalising of Wales. See: Bohata, p.9.
(themselves tortured with a sense of tribal self-contempt) believe it was ‘their duty not simply to introduce their students to the world of the English language, but to eradicate every trace of Welshness.’\textsuperscript{29} Introduced at some schools, the \textit{Welsh Not} was a piece of wood hung around the neck of any child caught speaking Welsh. It helped to demarcate the language as heinous in an act of ‘cultural genocide’ - the last child wearing it at the commencement of lessons was flogged in front of classmates.\textsuperscript{30} Though no evidence exists of Thomas coming into contact with the \textit{Welsh Not}, his father’s influence, however, was equally far-reaching: David John Thomas was the Senior English Master at Swansea Grammar School, where his son was to study.\textsuperscript{31}

To help illustrate this research into Dylan Thomas, a selection of poems will be drawn from his five volumes of published work. They are: \textit{18 Poems} (1934), \textit{Twenty-Five Poems} (1936), \textit{The Map of Love} (1939), \textit{Deaths and Entrances} (1946), and \textit{In Country Sleep} (1952) – all of which are housed in the anthologies, \textit{The Dylan Thomas Omnibus} and \textit{Collected Poems 1934-1953}. These, along with Thomas’ single great drama, \textit{Under Milk Wood} (1953), will be used as primary texts. Among the biographical material available on Thomas, perhaps the most comprehensive commentaries are those by authors Andrew Lycett, John Ackerman and James A. Davies, and will be used as secondary sources for this investigation. While critical readings will be taken from John Goodby, Chris Wigginton, Walford Davies, amongst others. In developing this argument within a postcolonial consideration, several key texts will be consulted - such as \textit{The

\textsuperscript{29} Gwyn A. Williams, \textit{When Was Wales?} p.208.

\textsuperscript{30} Williams refers to the implementation of the \textit{Welsh Not} as an act of ‘cultural genocide’. Its barbarity transpires to be more startling when we consider the children who received the cane for speaking Welsh in class, were using the language used at home. See: \textit{ibid.}, p.246.

Empire Writes Back (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin) and Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts (Ashcroft et al) – as well as a consideration towards the emerging study of Welsh writing in English by M. Wynn Thomas and Kirsti Bohata. Homi K. Bhabha’s The Location of Culture will also help comprise this dissertation’s main body of reference.
Chapter One: ‘To Begin at the Beginning’

Be thou silent,
As to the name of thy verse,
And to the name of thy vaunting;
And as to the name of thy grandsire
Prior to his being baptised.
And the name of the sphere,
And the name of the element,
And the name of thy language,
And the name of thy region.
Avaunt, ye bards above,
Avaunt, ye bards below!

- The Reproof of the Bards (Taliesin)

Sometimes it seems our lives are already somehow mapped out for us. Almost like Sophocles’ great tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, where we see the forces of Fate pitted against the human condition, it can feel as if external factors play a crucial role in determining who we are.\(^\text{32}\) Take for example the names given to Dylan Thomas. He was born in Swansea on 27 October 1914, and named Dylan Marlais Thomas.\(^\text{33}\) His names were drawn up from the depths of a Welsh heritage that Thomas was both alienated from, and posthumously intrinsic to. ‘Dylan’ had been a minor character appearing in the twelfth century collection of Welsh myths, the *Mabinogi*.\(^\text{34}\) These had been transcribed into English in 1846 by Ioan Tegis, and then edited by Lady Charlotte Guest – who on a misunderstanding of the text, titled them *The Mabinogion*.\(^\text{35}\) The narratives, poems and songs feature Arthurian myths, Celtic belief systems as well as the birth of the legendary


\(^\text{34}\) The *Mabinogi*’s full title is *Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi* (‘The Four Branches of the Mabinogi’) with the earliest surviving manuscript dating back to the fourteenth century. See: David Ross, *Wales: History of a Nation*, Waverley Books, Glasgow, 2010, p.32.

bard Taliesin (a sixth century Druidic figure).\textsuperscript{36} In the fourth section, or branch of the
*Mabinogi*, in the narrative, ‘Math fab Mathonwy’ (Math the son of Mathonwy) ‘Dylan’,
the son of Arianrhod, was a baby with fine, yellow hair and on being baptised in the sea
began to swim ‘as well as the best fish therein.’\textsuperscript{37} For that he reason he was called *Dylan Eli Ton* (Dylan Sea Son of the Wave), and ‘beneath him no wave ever broke.’\textsuperscript{38} If the
housing of Welsh myths into an English titled collection was not already an inkling of the
fate double-consciousness was about to play, things would become sealed for Thomas
with the Anglicanised pronunciation of his name: ‘Dillon’ – rather than the Welsh
intonation of ‘Dullon.’\textsuperscript{39}

If Fate is an interesting component in Thomas’ life, so are the parallels. Thomas’
middle name, ‘Marlais’ is taken from a paternal uncle who became a radical preacher and
a bard, some time around 1860.\textsuperscript{40} Originally a cobbler, William Thomas (1834-79) began
to write widely on religious and social reform when at Glasgow University - even
completing a book of verse.\textsuperscript{41} He adopted a bardic name, Gwilym Marles, and aside from
being a minister of three Unitarian chapels in Cardiganshire, also translated the works of
Tennyson, Browning and Pope into Welsh.\textsuperscript{42} While ‘Gwilym’ is merely the Welsh
version of William, ‘Marles’ is the name of a stream – also known as the Marlais –
running through William Thomas’ home village of Brechfa in Carmarthenshire.\textsuperscript{43} This

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{enumerate}
\item ibid.
\item ibid., p.10.
\item ibid.
\item ibid., pp.10-11.
\item ibid., p.10.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotes}
was a tradition Thomas himself continued. In 1943, when his wife Caitlin gave birth to a baby girl, they named her Aeronwy - after the River Aeron, which ran through the Aeron Valley (a place Thomas called ‘the most precious in the world’), and where the infant was allegedly conceived.\textsuperscript{44} In a further twist, Thomas’ parents – both Welsh speaking – had been given English names (David John and Florence).\textsuperscript{45} Despite bequeathing him such a rich inheritance of cultural identity through his names, Thomas’ parents decided he would speak no Welsh; his mother tongue would be English, and he was brought up to speak it as such - even accentuated with a plum-in-the-mouth.\textsuperscript{46}

At the time Thomas was born, faith in Welsh as a language had been obliterated. In the aftermath of the 1847 \textit{Report into the State of Education in Wales} (also known as \textit{Brad y Llyfrau Gleision} - the ‘Treachery of the Blue Books’), the attitude that Welsh culture and its people, were unquestionably inferior to England became ingrained into its society’s thinking.\textsuperscript{47} The teaching of any subject in Welsh (the language spoken at home for many children) was now banned – with many now suggesting that it can be viewed as an attempt to assert English authority over Wales, even constructing a Welsh identity from an exterior perspective (or ‘othering’) to thrust upon the nation.\textsuperscript{48} Welsh had always been seen as a peasant language.\textsuperscript{49} Yet, the subtleties of cultural difference previously portrayed by Shakespeare in Fluellen’s gentle mispronunciations of English in \textit{Henry V},

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{ibid.}, p.15.
\item \textit{ibid.}, p.2
\item \textit{ibid.}, p.13.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
gave way to a noticeable hostility.\textsuperscript{50} Professor of poetry at Oxford, Matthew Arnold embodied this mood in 1867 stating ‘The sooner the Welsh language disappears… the better.’\textsuperscript{51} From being espied as an eloquent language, intrinsic to family, community and religion, Welsh was now deemed as akin to a child’s babbling ‘with the usual connotations of immaturity and irresponsibility.’\textsuperscript{52}

Resistance bristled through political flames being stoked by Nonconformists and Dissenters, but already on the back foot the language’s credibility was dealt a body blow through the publication of Caradoc Evans’ \textit{My People: Stories of the Peasantry of West Wales} (1915). In a collection of short stories, Evans ridiculed rural Wales, and its language through mocking attacks in which fellow countrymen were satirised as ‘troglodytes.’\textsuperscript{53} Operating like a Fifth Column, Evans helped internalise a view about the limitations of the Welsh language and Welsh writers that persisted well into the 1950s, when Thomas himself became too readily misunderstood in London’s literary circles. As a reviled Caradoc Evans passed into infamy as the most hated man in Wales, Thomas grew to admire Evans’ work.\textsuperscript{54} He struck up a friendship with him in later life, and even drew inspiration from \textit{My People} when creating his own short stories and particularly his single great drama, \textit{Under Milk Wood}.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{50} Captain Fluellen (an Anglicanised mispronunciation of the Welsh \textit{Llewellyn}) is an officer in King Henry V’s army. He is one of four officers seen to represent the four British nations united under the banner of Henry: Gower (an Englishman), Jamy (a Scotsman) and MacMorris (an Irishman). Shakespeare brings our attention to the independent identities of each region through each character’s individual accent through a delivery of English.

\textsuperscript{51} Tyson Roberts, p.231.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{ibid.}, pp.197-231.


\textsuperscript{54} Lycett, p.115.

\textsuperscript{55} David N. Thomas, \textit{Dylan Thomas: A Farm, Two Mansions and a Bungalow}, p.43.
One can only speculate at what admirable traits Thomas had felt in concert with Evans. Perhaps it was the open embracing of the English language – at the time, seen to be the language of the future, of the emerging middle class, of scientific and economic advancement, and of Empire.\textsuperscript{56} Never more so was this pragmatism exemplified than in Swansea, an industrial port that in 1931 had seen its population almost double to 165,000 people in three decades, with a significant swell arising from English immigration.\textsuperscript{57} This was Thomas’ hometown, and having been raised to feel no loyalty to the Welsh language, he naturally developed an affinity to English.

In many aspects, had we attempted to find a place in which to cultivate double-consciousness in any individual, we could have found none better than Swansea. The city itself epitomises duality. When Thomas was born, it was seen to be a city that comfortably and ‘unself-consciously straddled several worlds: [where] English and Welsh were spoken almost equally.’\textsuperscript{58} The rural and the industrial co-existed side by side – coalminers, steelworkers and copper workers rubbed shoulders with farmers, fishermen and cockle-pickers.\textsuperscript{59}

Swansea remains both Welsh and English speaking, both modern and ancient, both isolated on the south west coast of Wales and still in contact with the world as a busy port.\textsuperscript{60} It is a fertile soil in which double-consciousness could take root. And always occupying the western hinterland, was Carmarthenshire – Thomas’ childhood eden;

\textsuperscript{56} Tyson Roberts, p.2.
\textsuperscript{58} Rowe, p.12.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{ibid.}, p.14.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{ibid.}
bathed in a kind of Celtic-twilight where Welsh was spoken, chapel attended and summer holidays were spent.\textsuperscript{61} When experimenting with realism in his short stories, Thomas faithfully recreated the sights, sounds and way of life he had known there — captured truthfully in stories about places such as Llansteffan in ‘A Visit to Grandpa’s.’\textsuperscript{62} But for Thomas, despite his ability to write and express himself in English, there was something missing. In an interview published in the Welsh periodical, \textit{Y Cymro}, in 1978, Thomas Herbert (a sometime acquaintance of the poet) claimed that Thomas had confided in him a deep regret in being isolated from the Welsh language — one he claimed he ‘loved [to hear]…being spoken.’\textsuperscript{63}

As Thomas began his literary career, not only would his work be met with resistance from London’s literary elite, but it would also find similar disdain from his own community. Thomas was committing the cardinal sin of being a Welsh poet writing in English. He was soon labelled ‘Anglo-Welsh’ — a cultural outcaste, a problematic hybrid of identity because of its connotations of having a mixed ancestry; the condition itself is that of a person who writes in English but considers him or herself to be Welsh.\textsuperscript{64} Like other twentieth century Welsh writers using English, Thomas was excluded from a sense of Welshness as a matter of class, background and language.\textsuperscript{65} Trapped in no-man’s land and being shot at by both sides, Thomas began to display inter-relational traits common to other Anglo-Welsh writers alienated in limbo: a hatred of Welsh-speaking

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{62} Lycett, p.190.
\textsuperscript{63} Thomas even asked Herbert’s mother to teach him Welsh. See: David N. Thomas, pp. 103-104.
\textsuperscript{64} In an interview Gillian Clarke (National Poet of Wales 2008 – to date) outlined its problematic nature: ‘The term Anglo-Welsh implies mixed ancestry, or it implies that there is an Anglo Ascendancy, which is not true of Wales, historically.’ See: David T. Lloyd, \textit{Writing on the Edge: Interviews with Writers and Editors of Wales}, Rodopi Publishers, Amsterdam, 1997, p.144.
Wales (including his ancestry in it), and an entire background of literary reference in English traditions. Attributed comments soon became linked directly to him, ‘Land of my Fathers! As far as I’m concerned, my fathers can keep it.’ Internally, he would have sensed the friction of cultural significance to being a poet – the Welsh poet was a craftsman, central to the community using his/her bardic gift to praise the land and people; the English poet was a bohemian figure, flirting with solipsism on the fringes of society. And yet despite this brooding fog of ambiguity, ambivalence and duality clouding the definitions of Thomas’ identity, he at least knew what he was.

Obsessed by writing, there was no vocation in his life he considered other than being a poet. Whatever influences tried to shape Thomas, he did at least retain faith in the wisdom endorsed but not practised by Shakespeare’s Polonius, ‘…above all, to thine own self be true.’ Perhaps here, in Thomas’ poetry more than anywhere else, we should begin our search for his synthesis of a double consciousness to two cultures.

---

66 ibid., p.84.
67 Land of my Fathers is the English translation of Mae Hen Wlad fy Nhadau – the Welsh National Anthem (written by Evan James 1856). Thomas never actually said these words instead they were spoken by one of his characters – Owen Morgan-Vaughan – in his uncompleted drama, Three Weird Sisters (1948). The unattractive qualities of Morgan-Vaughan (based in London) are contrasted unfavourably against the virtues of the indigenous Welsh. See: Lycett, p.298.
69 Rowe, p.22.
70 Polonius, Counsellor to Claudius, King of Denmark, is heard to give fatherly advice to his son Laertes concerning speech, friendship, quarrelling, judgement, dress, money and consistency. See: William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p.35 (1.3.78).
Chapter Two: Bardic Echoes

To live in Wales is to be conscious
At dusk of the spilled blood
That went to the making of the wild sky.

- *Welsh Landscape* (R. S. Thomas)

There are no sounds in Wales, only echoes. Sometimes clear, sometimes muffled – they can haunt the air like a fine mist. During a morning walk on 6 September 1874, the Victorian poet and Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins, possibly heard one. He had been walking alone through the Elwy Valley, close to his theological college of St. Bueno’s in North Wales. Something made him stop. The novice priest began to sense something welling up within. His journal that day records, ‘Looking all around but most in looking far up the valley I felt an instress and charm of Wales.’ It was during this Welsh sojourn that the sensitivity of Hopkins began to reach out and touch what he found of interest in his immediate surroundings.

The poet in Hopkins began to stir again, after an elected silence of almost seven years. What followed was a burst of creative energy in which Hopkins produced some of his most celebrated sonnets – almost all of which contain the peculiar internal rhyme associated with Hopkins: Sprung Rhythm. Described as a variation of normal meter, it accentuates strong stresses within a line - allegedly based on similar techniques found in

---

71 ‘Instress’ is a metaphysical term Hopkins developed from *haecceitas* (‘thisness’) - the philosophy of medieval theologian Duns Scotus (c.1266-1308). *Instress* describes the perceived divine energy both supporting the individual essence of a thing and bringing it alive to the senses of an observer. The individual essence of a thing is said to be its *inscape*. See: David A. Downes, *Gerard Manley Hopkins – A Study of His Ignatian Spirit*, Bookman Associates, New York, 1959, p.118.

‘nursery rhymes and [in] medieval alliterative meters.’

Hopkins, however, claimed that it came from another source: the Welsh language and in particular Welsh phonetics.

Able to read Welsh he became fascinated with the sound of *cynghanedd* occurring in the Welsh bardic poems called *englyns* (four line stanzas). Hopkins had heard ‘the echo of a new rhythm… haunting [his] ear.’

*Cynghanedd* is described as a set of phonemic patterns, or strict metre, deliberately crafted for Welsh poetry and imitated occasionally in spoken English.

Inelegant in its literal meaning, a more useful understanding may be ‘harmony.’ Immediately, we can recognise that this technique aims to create a sense of internal melody – somewhere between speech and song, between prose and music. We begin to recall the theories of Robert Graves who analogised the unique way Celtic metre sung to him as a harp would sing – internally – in contrast to the *ti-tum* sound of hammers on an anvil found in Chaucer’s hendecasyllabic lines, or the split rhythms common to Anglo-Saxon verse, based on the slow push and pull of oars from Norse boatmen. Understood this way, we can appreciate one of its central qualities; as harmony in music is able to move in two directions, so, too, a line written in *cynghanedd* aims to create a similar effect. Rather than being drawn from the beginning of a line to its end in search of a rhyme, we are asked, instead, to listen for patterns of rhyme, assonance, alliteration and

---

74 Mariani, p.81.
75 *ibid*.
79 *ibid*., p.2.
81 Hopwood, p.2.
consonance.\textsuperscript{82} And the use of the word ‘listen’ is deliberate here: when employing 
cynghanedd the poet’s target audience is imagined to be a listener, rather than a reader.\textsuperscript{83}
In much the same way as music can be read from a sheet, 
cynghanedd similarly comes alive when performed, transformed into something magical.

There are said to be four main branches of 
cynghanedd. Each version attempts to elicit a particular harmony through a precise choice of words from spoken Welsh, which, unlike English, is a heavily stressed language (like Italian or Spanish).\textsuperscript{84} These are:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Cynganedd Groes} (or Criss-Cross Harmony),
  \item \textit{Cynganedd Draws} (Bridging Harmony),
  \item \textit{Cynganedd Sain} (Sonorous Harmony) and
  \item \textit{Cynganedd Lusg} (Echoing Harmony).
\end{itemize}

The latter, for example, would end its line with a word of more than one syllable; the penultimate syllable in that word would then rhyme with the last syllable in the first half of the line.\textsuperscript{86} An example in English would be: \textit{A saint in an old painting}.\textsuperscript{87} Trace elements of these techniques can be found in the earliest surviving works of Welsh literature – some even claim the oldest living European literature - the sixth century \textit{Book of Taliesin} by Taliesin, and Aneirin’s seventh century \textit{Y Gododdin}.\textsuperscript{88}

Poetry was a skill that had long been revered before Christianity had entered the British Isles, with bards granted a prophetic, magus-like role on account of their magic.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{82} \textit{ibid.}, p.3
  \item \textsuperscript{83} \textit{ibid.}
  \item \textsuperscript{84} \textit{ibid.}, p.25.
  \item \textsuperscript{85} \textit{ibid.}, pp.31-32.
  \item \textsuperscript{86} Gwyn Williams, \textit{An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century}, Dufour Editions, Philadelphia, 1952, p.245.
  \item \textsuperscript{87} \textit{ibid.}
\end{itemize}
with words.\textsuperscript{89} Tacitus describes a memorable confrontation between a Roman army and Welsh Druids, in his 2\textsuperscript{nd} century \textit{Annals}, in which the druids terrified the Romans by lifting up their arms to the skies and invoked the powers of nature to curse the soldiers of Rome.\textsuperscript{90} Around the same time, Julius Caesar spoke of the lengthy education given by druids to younger initiates through the recitation of poetry.\textsuperscript{91} Perhaps this overlapping of poetry and possible spiritual connotations, which later saw a strong poetic tradition develop within the Christian church, appealed to the novice Jesuit, Hopkins, as he studied the Welsh language.

On hearing the tunes of \textit{cynghanedd}, Hopkins began work creating his own through Sprung Rhythm. The maestro in him set about orchestrating concerts of sound with his verse, favouring \textit{cynghanedd sain}.\textsuperscript{92} In its most fundamental rigour, the first stressed syllable rhymes with the second, then the second alliterates with a third; Hopkins chose his own phrase to illustrate this, ‘fall, gall and gash.’\textsuperscript{93} Other examples include, ‘The road with its load of lads,’\textsuperscript{94} and the wonderful example mentioned in Mererid Hopwood’s illuminating book, \textit{Singing in Chains}, Fred Flintstone’s renowned catchcry: ‘Yabba Dabba Doo!’\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{89} Ross, p.59.
\textsuperscript{90} ibid., p.41.
\textsuperscript{91} Caesar wrote in the \textit{Gallic War}: \textit{Magnum ibi númerum versum ediscere dicuntur. Itaque annos nonnulli vicenos in disciplina permanent} (It is said that they learn there a great number of verses. And some remain in this discipline for twenty years). See: Gwyn Wiliams, \textit{An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century}, p.3.
\textsuperscript{92} Gwyn Wiliams, \textit{An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century}, p.245.
\textsuperscript{94} Gwyn Wiliams, \textit{An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century}, p.245.
\textsuperscript{95} There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Fred Flintstone predates Taleisin and Aneirin in the use of \textit{Cynghanedd Sain}. See: Hopwood, p.85.
To train our ears to hear these chimes, Hopkins suggested speaking aloud the nursery rhyme, ‘Ding Dong Bell’:  

Ding, dong, bell; Pussy’s in the well;  
Who put her in? Little Johnny Thin.  
Who pulled her out? Little Johnny Stout.

Three distinct chimes can be heard internally within the first half of each line, before a softer one sounding at its end. Poetry, emphasised Hopkins, is not meant to be read ‘slovenly with the eyes but with [the] ears.’ Performative in nature, poetry must therefore be spoken, illuminated by the human voice. Spoken poetry, he argued, becomes a refined quality of speech – as an alchemist would purge gold of its impurities, so, too, Hopkins believed speech is purged of its dross when transformed into verse.  

Sprung rhythm, to him, was the artisan’s expertise in knowing how to generate a more lustrous shine of music from those spoken words.

Examples existing in the poems of Hopkins include ‘The Windhover,’ ‘Pied Beauty’ and perhaps most impressively in ‘God’s Grandeur.’ Impressive, because not only does Hopkins borrow the sound of cynghanaedd sain, but he does so while adhering

---

96 Mariani, p.331.  
98 ibid.  
99 ibid.
to the structure of a Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet.\textsuperscript{100} In the second quatrain of the sonnet’s octave we hear his chimes:

\begin{quote}
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.\textsuperscript{101}
\end{quote}

How fortunate we are that Hopkins broke his fast of composition. Fortunate, for the legacy of his work came to enrich English Literature so uniquely; fortunate, for he was able to show us that the sounds he heard singing in Welsh could also sing in English. Furthermore, the latter may suggest that those not directly connected to a tradition are able to grasp its essence, even if separated by language. Consider, for example, the observation of the American travel writer, Michael Wolfe - a non-Arabic reading Muslim – who claimed, ‘the bass notes of the Qur’an ring clear in any language.’\textsuperscript{102} Perhaps the bass notes of \emph{cynganedd} rang so clearly in the stanzas of the Welsh bards, the echo carried through the works of Gerard Manley Hopkins to reach the ear of Dylan Thomas.

When asked directly if the poetry of Hopkins had influenced his own composition, Thomas claimed he had read the Jesuit only lackadaisically and had never

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize\textsuperscript{100} The Petrarchan sonnet originated in the courts of Sicily before being developed by Francesco Petrarca (1304-74). It comprises of an eight-line octave of two quatrains, with a rhyming scheme of \emph{abba, abba}, whereby an argument is presented. The solution occurs with a turn, or volta, marked by a sestet of two tercets with a rhyming pattern \emph{cdc dcd}. See: \textit{The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms}, p.312.  \\
\end{flushright}
studied him. However, in 1929, when acting as sole editor for Swansea Grammar School’s academic magazine, Thomas wrote an article titled ‘Modern Poetry’ in which he praised Hopkins as an innovator of freedom of poetic expression and form. Furthermore, he had once given a list of his most treasured books to a friend, Pamela Hansford Johnson – included there amongst the names of Wilfred Owen, W.H. Auden and Edith Sitwell was Hopkins. A notoriously slippery barometer for truth, Thomas is also considered promiscuous in his borrowings; he published an article in the literary journal, Adelphi, in 1934, arguing that the future of English poetry lay with a mimicry of Celtic oral traditions – poetry should be read aloud.

When Thomas published his fourth collection of poems, Deaths and Entrances, in 1946 he was still only 32 years old. ‘Fern Hill’ – the final poem in the book – stands alone as a tribute to a childhood idyll, a pastoral of nostalgia, remembered among Thomas’ responses to the air-raid sirens and blitz bombings he witnessed living in London during the Second World War. The poems in this collection are noted for a perceived shift in Thomas. Perhaps a maturing, perhaps the change in values a war can elicit, Thomas is noted as having outgrown the blasphemous posturing of the enfant terrible to ‘advance in sympathy and understanding… [and write] generally in a mood of reconciliation and acceptance.’ Whenever faced with the harsh realities of life, Thomas

103 Lycett, p.196.
104 ibid., p.56.
105 James A. Davies, Dylan Thomas’ Swansea, Gower and Laugharne, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2000, p.27.
106 Lycett, p.117.
107 Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion, 2001, p.27.
108 ibid, p.106.
had always retreated to a summoned sanctuary in the paradise of his childhood. Fern Hill had been such a place, uncomplicated, unhurried – a farm in the Carmarthenshire countryside where Thomas’ Aunt and Uncle had lived, and where he had spent many holidays. There he had journeyed west from the city of Swansea towards the warmth and community of rural Wales, where the Celtic tongue predominated. He had already written about his experiences there in ‘The Peaches’ - one of a number of short stories published in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog (1940). Whatever it had meant to Thomas as a child, it clearly came to represent much more by the time he wrote ‘Fern Hill’. This can be witnessed in the poet’s careful nurturing of the finished poem through over two hundred drafted versions.

In many respects ‘Fern Hill’ is considered one of the most complete poems Thomas wrote, and remains popular with general readers. Put simply, it is a celebration of the innocence of childhood, surrounded by safety despite the absence of adults appearing in the verse. Structurally, its poetic form falls comfortably into the pastoral – following the traditions of Theocritus in singing the virtues of rural life. The pastoral appears to be artificial, or simple, on first impressions due to the rosy hue in which it paints the countryside and its people, a lament against urban hubris; we soon learn, however, that beneath its gleaming surface there are blisters of friction rubbing up against

\[109\] Rowe, p.19.
\[110\] ibid.
\[111\] ibid, p.12.
\[112\] Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion, 2001, p.125.
\[113\] Rowe, p.19.
\[114\] Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion, 2001, p.120.
the numerous questions concealed there.\textsuperscript{116} ‘Fern Hill’ is no exception to this deceptive form of poetry. Whereas Thomas does share the pastoral’s gleaming veneer in linking a sense of idealisation to the Welsh countryside – the questions that lurk beneath differ from the philosophical and religious concerns of his English predecessors. The poem’s complexities inevitably mirror those of the poet: a Welshman writing in English, rural Wales venerated in an English name, the double-consciousness of Dylan Thomas sensitive to the muses of two traditions calling to him.

As James A. Davies notes, the poem ‘is at once central and marginal to mainstream English literature, simultaneously inside and beyond it.’\textsuperscript{117} For all its merits of mimicking the pastoral, it cannot be fully absorbed into English traditions because of its Welshness.\textsuperscript{118} It is, in Davies’ understanding, an ‘interstitial’ poem - situated, as Bhabha would suggest, at the interface between one literary tradition and another.\textsuperscript{119} It exists on the boundary of two cultures, at the poetical marchland; adapting the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, Davies argues ‘Fern Hill’ has no sovereign internal territory.\textsuperscript{120}

The opening stanza, when recited, contains a mesmerical allure – we encounter a sense of a wrongness sounding right, we hear chimes and rhymes but labour to locate them:

\begin{quote}
Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{116} ibid., p.208.
\textsuperscript{118} ibid., p.165.
\textsuperscript{119} ibid., p.164.
\textsuperscript{120} ibid., p.169.
\end{flushright}
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,

The night above the dingle starry,

Time let me hail and climb

Golden in the heydays of his eyes,

And honoured among wagons I was the prince of the apple towns

And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves

Trail with daises and barley

Down the rivers of the windfall light.\(^{121}\)

We hear the poem accentuated in a predominantly iambic stress (the *ti-tum* of a short stress followed by a longer one) – but not the iambic of Chaucer. Occasionally, the anapaest seems to be heard (two short stresses followed by a longer stressed syllable) – but swiftly disappears from sight when attempted to be seen. At times, a lilted intonation rises to meet our hearing that cannot be accounted for in traditional scansion. Perhaps, then, what our ears are hearing are the internal chimes, the sprung rhythm of Hopkins, the *cynghanedd* of Welsh, manifesting intentionally, or unintentionally, all echoing in the poetry of Thomas.

Attempting to hunt for evidence of *cynghanedd* in Thomas’ verse is akin to the proverbial search for a needle in a haystack. Impossible? No, but a painstaking prospect looms. It is an enterprise made all the more daunting by Thomas’ claims that he knew no

Welsh, nor the metrical systems from its literary traditions. It is a task made even more vexatious when we learn of Thomas boasting to a prospective editor that some of his poems were based on bardic rhythms.

Fortunately, others have heard the internal chimes in his verse. Literary critic John Ackerman, claims ‘Fern Hill’ resembles a musical score, ‘following an already determined musical pattern, with a subtly increasing interplay of chiming consonants and vowels.’ Walford Davies, in highlighting the delight Thomas took in using words to create music in his prosody through internal rhymes, attributes this to a possible influence mediated by Hopkins. Thomas had sources close enough to the Welsh tradition – his friends, his father - to tell him all he needed to know about *cynghanedd*. Yet Thomas exhibits a blurred demonstration of these Welsh metric patterns in English, something Davies suggests is the poet paying his respect to the tradition of his native ancestors in his native language.

In the first two lines of the opening stanza we can see evidence of *cynghanedd groes* (or cross harmony). It follows an arrangement of balanced alliteration, with stresses in exactly the same position in the two halves of the line. In ‘Fern Hill’ we see Thomas’ version use assonance (italicised) and consonance (underlined) in the following:

\[ \text{\textit{In the first two lines ... \textit{cynghanedd groes}}} \]

---

123 Lycett, p.117.
125 Walford Davies, p.97.
126 ibid.
127 ibid.
manner, *assonance...consonance : consonance...assonance*, in the first line and alliteration (highlighted in bold) in the second:

> Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
> About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green…

Again, they sound in the second stanza:

> And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
> Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold…

His use of internal rhyme also runs diagonally through the first three lines of the first stanza. No longer are we magnetically drawn to the end of a line, Thomas invites us to journey inside the body of the poem to search for the rhyme (underlined):

> Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
> About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
> The night above the dingle starry…

By the time we reach the fourth and fifth stanzas our hearing has relaxed, our ears are now sufficiently attuned to the subtle melodies Thomas has pitched behind his words – as

---

130 *ibid*.
if listening to the intimacy of a composition for clarinet and strings, suddenly from out of a slow and muted combination of sounds we hear individual notes from one instrument stir: we hear harmony merge with melody to form a multi-layering of sound. These patterns of rhyme ask us as listeners to hear in other directions.\textsuperscript{133}

Perhaps Thomas’ most impressive employment of cynganedd groes occurs in his poem, ‘The Conversation of Prayers’ also from Deaths and Entrances.\textsuperscript{134} Here, Thomas interweaves his rhymes in a criss-cross effect throughout each of the four stanzas. We find the end of one line rhyming with the middle of the following line and vice versa:\textsuperscript{135}

The conversation of \textbf{prayers} about to be \textbf{said}
By the child going to \textbf{bed} and the man on the \textbf{stairs}
Who climbs to his dying \textbf{love} in her high \textbf{room},
The one not caring to \textbf{whom} in his sleep he will \textbf{move}…\textsuperscript{136}

Whilst appreciation of Thomas’ crafting of cynganedd can be met with resistance – even scorn and scepticism – we must remember he has created another dimension for us to enjoy. Like the sonnets of Hopkins, Thomas’ poetry has been written with the aural experience in mind.\textsuperscript{137} Like the verse of Hopkins, Thomas wanted his poetry to be spoken. The composition of music in his poetry is an integral aspect of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{133} Hopwood, p.3.
\item \textsuperscript{134} Gross, p.269.
\item \textsuperscript{135} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Dylan Thomas, ‘The Conversation of Prayers’ in The Dylan Thomas Omnibus, p.72.
\item \textsuperscript{137} Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion, 2001, p.124.
\end{itemize}
Thomas’ craft, with words carefully chosen to link his ideas through sound and rhythm.\textsuperscript{138} An adherence to English structures within poetry is attempted, even imitated, but appears to be of a lesser importance when Thomas set about interplaying consonants and vowels to impose his music on the verse.\textsuperscript{139}

All six stanzas in ‘Fern Hill’, for example, are nine-lined stanzas. In some way they share a kinship with a stanzaic pattern found in the Spenserian stanza. Named after the English Renaissance poet, Edmund Spenser, who employed the nine-lined stanza form to tell his romance, \textit{The Faerie Queen} (1590-96), it is believed to have its origins in the \textit{ottava rima} stanza (a fourteenth century Italian form of narrative verse favoured by Giovanni Boccaccio).\textsuperscript{140} The Spenserian stanza had been used by Lord Byron, John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and is comprised of its first eight lines being iambic pentameters with the ninth being longer (either a hexameter or an alexandrine - twelve syllable stresses).\textsuperscript{141} The rhyming scheme it follows is \textit{ababcbcc}.\textsuperscript{142} Thomas’ stanzas adhere to neither the meter nor rhyme of the Spenserian format. Yet, to the poet, there was a strong narrative thread to the subject of the poem – albeit personally – which may have taken precedence over any English tradition. Put simply, Fern Hill had meant something to him. It had meant a lot. Aside from the childhood retreat it had been to him, it was perhaps where he first became conscious of his role as a poet, or a bard, in Welsh literary traditions.

\textsuperscript{138} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{139} \textit{ibid.}, p.125.
\textsuperscript{140} \textit{The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms}, p.314.
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{142} Philip Davies Roberts, p.288.
In February 1933 Thomas’ aunt, Ann Jones, died of cancer – she had been the owner of the farm Fern Hill in Carmarthenshire. Thomas had tried to grieve, but felt the proper literary response was emotional detachment. He tried to write, to little avail. Some five years later, finally he composed the elegy, ‘After the Funeral (In memory of Ann Jones)’ which appeared in *The Map of Love* (1939). ‘After the Funeral’ is in many ways an illuminating poem in which to view Thomas’ relationship with Welsh literary traditions. There is an obvious depth of feeling present that anyone would feel for the loss of an important figure from childhood. And from such moments, often we ourselves become reflective, turning our attentions to our place in this world. Tinged in his sense of loss we hear Thomas define himself:

…I, Ann’s bard on a raised hearth, call all
The seas to service that her wood-tongued virtue
Babble like a bellbuoy over the hymning heads,
Bow down the walls of ferned and foxy woods…

Thomas’ bardic tenor sounds as clear and majestic as that of Taleisin, with faint, early traces of *cynghanedd* sounding occasionally. In so readily acknowledging himself as a bard, Thomas would also take on the bardic responsibility that accompanied such an admission. In Welsh literary traditions, the poet was not only a craftsman, but was central to his community in honouring his land and his people. A sentiment echoed in Celtic literary concerns, where W. B. Yeats likened the role of the Celtic poet to that of a

---

143 Lycett, p.77.
144 *ibid*.
145 Dylan Thomas, ‘After The Funeral’ in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.64.
146 Hooker, p.13.
supernatural sanction, interweaving degrees of poetic mastery with that of a religious
prophet.\textsuperscript{147} It was a role that carried with it certain responsibilities. This in stark contrast
to the English poet, ‘an individualist, a bohemian playing his part on the fringes of society, a purveyor of essentially private experience.’\textsuperscript{148}

For Thomas, there is no doubt of which tradition he was attempting to mimic with ‘After the Funeral’ - particularly when we hear him offer up his eulogy in the form of, ‘this monumental / Argument of the hewn voice.’\textsuperscript{149} As M. Wynn Thomas suggests, he has become the bardic priest, seeking to transform his aunt from out of the drab respect offered by Nonconformist ministers (‘mule praises, brays’) into a pagan priestess at one with nature.\textsuperscript{150}

Like the many court poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Wales, required to produce an elegy for a former patron, Thomas possibly felt he owed this debt of versification to his Aunt. This, after all, was for a wealth of sunlit childhood memories that, like most joyful recollections, only increase in value. Fern Hill had bequeathed Thomas much bliss:

\begin{quote}
All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
And playing, lovely and watery
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{147} Gwyn Wiliams, \textit{An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century}, p.4.
\textsuperscript{148} Hooker, p.13.
\textsuperscript{149} Dylan Thomas, ‘After The Funeral’ in \textit{The Dylan Thomas Omnibus}, p.64.
And fire green as grass.\textsuperscript{151}

Her passing had given him, at the age of nineteen, an awful insight into the finality of death. It hit him, as it would hit anyone – in a blur of the senses:

The spitted eyes, the salt ponds in the sleeves,

Morning smack of the spade that wakes up sleep,

Shakes a desolate boy who slits his throat

In the dark of the coffin and sheds dry leaves...\textsuperscript{152}

Perhaps it was here, in the Carmarthen countryside, he truly sensed the depth of Welsh echoes rooted in the land. Carmarthen is, after all, named after a sixth century bard, called Myrddin who wrote mostly prophetic verse in the \textit{Black Book of Carmarthen}.\textsuperscript{153} Myrddin, pronounced in Welsh phonetics is \textit{Mer-thin}; in English the name translates to Merlin – the shadowy figure of Arthurian legend.\textsuperscript{154} The English form of Carmarthen translates to \textit{Caerfyrddin} in Welsh - what better place for Thomas to accept his bardic responsibility than in \textit{Caerfyrddin}, ‘Merlin’s Place’.

Other, lesser, examples exist of Thomas mimicking, or drawing from, these Welsh traditions. One such poem is, ‘This Side of the Truth’ from \textit{Deaths and Entrances} – written for his first son, Llewellyn. It was composed in 1945 when Llewellyn was aged six. The child had fallen and split his tongue in the months prior to Armistice, and

\textsuperscript{151} Dylan Thomas, ‘Fern Hill’ in \textit{The Dylan Thomas Omnibus}, p.118.
\textsuperscript{152} Dylan Thomas, ‘After The Funeral’ in \textit{The Dylan Thomas Omnibus}, p.64.
\textsuperscript{153} Gwyn Wiliams, \textit{An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century}, p.39.
\textsuperscript{154} \textit{ibid}.
perhaps for a father who had lived in London during the Blitz the sense of being powerless to protect one’s own child from not only a world ripping itself apart but also from the innocuous scrapes of childhood may have forced his hand. Part sermon, part paternal, he speaks to Llewellyn:

This side of truth,
You may not see, my son,
King of your blue eyes
In the blinding country of youth,
That all is undone,
Under the unminding skies…

After witnessing the fragility of life, even an indifferent universe to suffering, he tells the child about how Good and Evil are notions brought into that vale of neutrality by human intervention:

One gesture of the heart or head,
Is gathered and split
Into the winding dark
Like the dust of the dead.

Good and bad, two ways

---

155 Lycett, p.258.
156 Dylan Thomas, ‘This Side of the Truth’ in The Dylan Thomas Omnibus, p.75.
157 Walford Davies, p.61.
The poem has been interpreted as a statement about morality – an occupation of the *Prydydd Bardd* (poet or bard), to teach aright and to judge properly. In this passing of knowledge to his son, we sense Thomas understand a kind of existential progression. Much like Franciso Goya’s interpretation of the myth of Titan Cronus, in *Saturn Devouring His Son*, rather than hearing a father fearing usurpation by his children we hear in Thomas’ words his realisation of Time becoming the devourer of all things. He is aware of his own son’s mortality; Llewellyn, lost in the same childhood idylls his father venerated, remains in bliss. From child to father, from poet to bard, the rites of passage for Dylan Thomas echo here in English, as they did in the Welsh of his fathers.

---

158 Dylan Thomas, ‘This Side of the Truth’ in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.75.
159 Ross, p.131.
Chapter Three: A Burr of Modernity

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets.

- The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (T.S. Eliot)

In many ways, Dylan Thomas was a writer forever caught between worlds. Wherever his physicality, he always seemed to occupy somewhere else; the epicentre eluded him. Born in 1914, his formative years had been spent, and developed, between the Wars – the last days of an Imperial age. As a writer his reputation came to prominence during the tail end of the 1930s, between the pause of High Modernism’s final flourishing in the 1920s and the complex ascent of Post Modernism’s multi-stranded identity that began transforming European culture at the end of the Second World War.161

Between languages, between cultures, Thomas oscillated in a dangerous state of limbo. What literary aspirations he entertained were going to be tested, severely; he belonged not to Wales, nor England, and neither wanted to claim him as their own. To London-based literary critics he was viewed with contempt: a nobody from a provincial backwater; to Welsh-based literary critics, he was a deviant: somebody unable to use English correctly (judged so, because they had believed what they had read in London literary reviews).162 For Thomas to survive, to belong, it would take something more than mere grit and determination to step out of the circular reasoning surrounding him. He clearly felt he had the necessary accoutrements to succeed, boasting, ‘I hold a beast, an

162 Hooker, p.189.
angel, and a madman in me, and my enquiry is as to their working... and my effort is
their self-expression.”\textsuperscript{163} Well, even Seneca once observed, ‘\textit{Nullum magnum ingenium}
\textit{sine mixtura dementiae fuit}’ (There never was a great genius without a tincture of
madness).’\textsuperscript{164}

Thomas, it could be argued, was a victim of his own time. His was an era in
which support for binary structuring had begun to grow out of the Swiss linguist
Ferdinand de Saussure’s study of language.\textsuperscript{165} Saussure had been interested in revealing a
universal structure of language that, he felt, underpinned it in the shape of a constructed
system of rules.\textsuperscript{166} In his epoch-making publication, \textit{Course in General Linguistics}
(1916), Saussure’s central claim was to suggest that language was comprised of a system
of signs – each with a ‘signifier’ and a ‘signified’.\textsuperscript{167} In forwarding a theory for arbitrary
relationships between word and object, sign and signifier, Saussure helped lay the first
foundations for Structuralism.\textsuperscript{168} Central to its approach was the way one is able to
understand something once it is related to a wider structure; in essence, things were
defined in terms of their relationship with others.\textsuperscript{169} An analytic study in nature,
structuralism was less concerned with the unique qualities of an individual example but
more concerned with the structures that underpinned it.\textsuperscript{170} For someone in Thomas’

\textsuperscript{163} Lycett, p.197.
\textsuperscript{164} Adrian van Sinderen, \textit{Blake The Mystic Genius}, Syracuse University Press, United States, 1949, p.44.
\textsuperscript{165} John Peck and Martin Coyle, \textit{Literary Terms and Criticism}, MacMillan Education, Hampshire, 1987,
p.161.
\textsuperscript{166} Stuart Sim, \textit{Introducing Critical Theory}, Allen & Unwin, NSW, 2009, p.64.
\textsuperscript{167} A ‘Signifier’ was a sign’s sound or graphic image, and the ‘Signified’ was its concept or meaning. See:
\textsuperscript{170} Peck and Martin Coyle, p.161.
shoes, his individual plight would be irrelevant – what was of greater significance was his underpinning; did he belong to the Welsh or to the English?

As had been prophesised in the *Mabinogi*, relations between these two cultures would always be fraught with problems. In the story, ‘Lludd and Llevelys’, there exists a wonderful, metaphorical narrative about the Red Dragon of the Britons and the White Dragon of the Saxons fighting annually for dominion of Britain. Each year their screams would terrify the inhabitants, causing men to lose their virility, women to miscarry and plants and animals to perish.\(^{171}\) After much consternation a solution was eventually found to end their polemics: both dragons were captured in a cauldron filled with beer before being buried at Dinas Emrys in Snowdonia.\(^{172}\) Aside from showing the sense of historical division between the two cultures, a genuine sympathy begins to emerge for Thomas the individual when we consider these two opposing tensions of double-consciousness fighting without resolve for his self-identity.

A reprieve of sorts inadvertently presented itself through Modernism. Though Thomas was not English, neither had been any of the four canonical authors of High Modernity: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were American, while W. B. Yeats and James Joyce were Irish.\(^{173}\) Moreover, when we consider other luminary Modern writers – Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Wyndham Lewis, Ford Madox Ford, Katherine Mansfield, D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf – only the latter two had been English by birth and upbringing (and both were marginal figures to its centre; Lawrence a working-class

\(^{171}\) ‘Llud and Llevelys’ in *The Mabinogion*, p.90.
\(^{172}\) ibid., p.93.
\(^{173}\) Wigginton, p.5.
writer from Nottingham, and Woolf a woman). If Modernity had meant, or offered, anything at all beyond a change of pace, then this was to be the star at which Thomas took aim from his Welsh periphery. The Modern artist was, after all, one who was in exile.

Perhaps it had been in the introspection following the death of his Aunt Ann of Fern Hill that helped propel a sense of wanderlust in him. Yet the ache to journey towards England’s literary traditions was one cultivated in him much earlier. Thomas had been brought up to regard the English language as superior to Welsh - his father’s influences had instilled that in him since childhood. D. J. Thomas’ chief concern for his son, Dylan, had been for his ‘getting on’ in life, through an education in English, and only English. Furthermore, Thomas’ father had paid for him to receive elocution lessons to further erase any trace of Welsh identity in his speech.

In 1933, aged only nineteen, he composed, ‘I Have Longed To Move Away’ informing us of the thorn in his side. With cultural identity being so tightly bound to language, Thomas can be forgiven for wishing to leave home: as the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty observed, although we may speak several languages, we can only truly live in one – the ‘mother-tongue.’ Since Thomas spoke only English, it

\begin{footnotes}
\item[174] ibid.
\item[176] M. Wynn Thomas, Corresponding Cultures: The Two Literatures of Wales, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1999, p.75.
\item[177] Walford Davies, p.96.
\item[178] ibid.
\item[179] ibid.
\end{footnotes}
would have made sense to him to live in a world where English was the predominate language. Although the poem can be read as the catharsis of a young adult wishing to step out into the world, underlying it we can also see Thomas taking the first steps towards what he thought was his other identity: English.

There can be few things in life as frustrating and challenging as biding our time, deliberately procrastinating a great leap forward. The decision is monumental, life changing; it cannot be rushed. Additionally, our choice has often already been made – long before the opportunity to act; we tell ourselves patience is the key, but nothing gnaws away at one’s integrity more than seeing another day of inactivity pass. For Thomas, his frustration in wanting to become part of England’s literary scene was apparent in his first stanza:

I have longed to move away
From the hissing of the spent lie
And the old terror’s continual cry
Growing more terrible as the day
Goes over the hill into the deep sea…

We hear the voice of youth preparing to break away through two ten-lined stanzas. But rather than try to prove its maturity through an imitation of Modernism’s literary traits – the deliberate structuring of impersonal dialogues through wordplay and poetic devices - this is almost a pre-cursor of Postmodernism. It matches theorist Charles Jencks’

---

summation of Modernism’s successor, the voice of a younger generation berating the immediate past in order to assert identity.  

Thomas rejects the Nonconformist religious beliefs of his Welsh background through a simple economy of poetics - the exhaustive lie of sin and salvation, the endless fire and brimstone of eternal damnation, all this has been found out.  

And in that knowing, Thomas sits and broods, waiting in his room, watching another sunset slip across the Gower coastline and out into the Atlantic.

Thomas tells us why he wants to leave:

I have longed to move away
From the repetition of salutes...

His ire is aimed at the community to which he belongs, fuelled by his sense of double-consciousness - Thomas felt Wales was stifling his literary aspirations. He describes his life in Swansea to his friend Pamela Hansford Johnson that October:

It’s impossible for me to tell you how much I want to get out… out of narrowness… out of the eternal ugliness of the Welsh people, and all that belongs to them, out of the pettiness of a mother I don’t care for and the giggling batch of relatives. What are you doing? I’m writing. Writing? You’re too young to

---

183 John Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.94.
write… And I will get out… I shall have to get out soon… this bloody country’s
killing me.\(^{186}\)

For all the melodramatics of teenage angst there remained a problem, Thomas was still
tied to the apron strings. If not to his mother’s, then certainly to the land of his fathers.
We hear this confusion of duality in his confession at the beginning of the second stanza:

\[
\text{I have longed to move away but am afraid;}
\text{Some life, yet unspent, might explode}
\text{Out of the old lie burning on the ground,}
\text{And, crackling into the air, leave me half-blind.}\(^{187}\)
\]

He was, after all, only nineteen, and the fear of leaving one’s home at such an early age is
only natural, however, he was mature enough to acknowledge that he might easily be
hoisted by his own petard. Although Wales appeared to him dead and buried, it was still
his home. He knew his decision to leave could blow up in his face. But Thomas was
adamant. He was going to London. As he later described in his short story, ‘The Fight’,
‘the future spread out beyond the window, over Singleton Park… and into smoky London
paved with poems.’\(^{188}\)

In 1934 *The Sunday Referee*, a London-based newspaper printed Thomas’ first volume of poetry, *18 Poems*. Thomas had won an annual poetry competition with the periodical that year, and his success as a poet in London was almost instantaneous. He went on to publish *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936), *The Map of Love* (1939) and *Deaths and Entrances* (1946). He was seen by many as an alternative to the poetry of Modernism, something buoyant to the technique and content of Eliot’s poetry, which had long abandoned Romantics concerns with nature and had instead been concerned with the realism of urban industrial wastelands. Eliot, and to an extent Ezra Pound, had been instrumental in driving poetry out of its ivory tower – rejecting iambic meters and the romantic cult of personality for the modern crafting of free verse and the distant voice within their monologues. Unwittingly, Dylan Thomas did just the opposite; he became cast in the image of the bard, the prophet, the seer – offering those in the wasteland of England during the Depression poetry with passion, praise and ‘ranting, visceral, excited rhythms.’

The young man from Swansea who had literary pretensions to make his mark in London was suddenly being lauded – albeit as a kind of noble savage. He became internalised, almost stereotyped, in the way he was viewed as an exotic ‘other:’ a druidic mystic from beyond the Celtic twilight. In hindsight, it is a perspective which becomes intriguing should we apply Edward Said’s theory of orientalising to Thomas’ treatment.

---

190 ibid.
191 ibid.
192 ibid.
193 ibid.
The writer who had once called himself the ‘Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive’ was now being fêted as a late romantic. No matter how much closer to the epicentre of English literature Thomas had journeyed, he remained at its margins.

Evidence for these romantic traits are sighted with ease in his verse. One of Thomas’ most celebrated pieces from his early years in London is the powerful, ‘And death shall have no dominion,’ from Twenty-Five Poems. Despite the shudders of profundity that can accompany one’s initial reading of the piece, it was conceived out of a friendly competition with a friend to explore immortality in verse. Thomas had attempted to contrast the light inhabiting our outer universe, with the dark fears that reside within. To do so he had to return to his understanding of religion, his Welsh Methodist roots, tempering the poem’s title from Paul’s First Letter to the Romans: ‘Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him’ (Romans 6:9):

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot…

---

195 Lycett, p.84.
196 ibid.
197 Dylan Thomas, ‘And death shall have no dominion’ in The Dylan Thomas Omnibus, p.51.
We are directed to something within the natural world that permits immortality.\textsuperscript{198} There in the night sky, facing out towards the Atlantic, the poet whispers prophetically, we can survive Death through unity with nature.\textsuperscript{199} Thomas conveys this through an evoking of the sublime. The word ‘sublime’ came into prominence during the eighteenth century, encapsulating a myriad of responses aroused by the forces of nature.\textsuperscript{200} When in its presence – such as beneath an empty, moon-lit sky – we are rendered into a deep and silent admiration, raising our soul, as Immanuel Kant claimed, ‘above the height of vulgar commonplace.’\textsuperscript{201} Thomas fuses the sublime in imagery derived from the ocean and of the eschatology of Revelations 20:13 – ‘And the sea gave up the dead which were in it’.\textsuperscript{202}

Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again…\textsuperscript{203}

Thomas goes on to offer our earthly bound fears further comfort through faith in a greater mystery:

Though lovers be lost love shall not;

And death shall have no dominion.\textsuperscript{204}

\textsuperscript{198} Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion, p.87.
\textsuperscript{199} ibid.
\textsuperscript{201} Kant says this in his aesthetic theory on the sublime. See: The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, p.353.
\textsuperscript{202} Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion, p.87.
\textsuperscript{203} Dylan Thomas, ‘And death shall have no dominion’ in The Dylan Thomas Omnibus, p.51.
\textsuperscript{204} ibid.
Love never fails, although it suffers long: Paul’s message of *agape* – the spiritual and selfless love - to the Corinthians sounds in his lines.\(^{205}\) Although the poem is more pantheistic than Christian in its sermon, it is nevertheless saturated with Romanticism’s faith in nature rather than in religion.\(^{206}\) This can be seen when Thomas tells us that resurrection will not occur through Faith, instead it comes about through nature – literally through the poet’s word play of ‘pushing up the daises.’\(^{207}\)

FAITH IN THEIR HANDS SHALL SNAP IN TWO…

THOUGH THEY BE MAD AND DEAD AS NAILS,

HEADS OF THE CHARACTERS HAMMER THROUGH DAISIES…\(^{208}\)

The Romantic’s enthusiasm for sublime landscapes had grown throughout Western Europe, as traditional beliefs in God appeared to wane with scientific progress.\(^{209}\) For those city dwellers numbed of an emotional connection to a greater power, the artists and poets of the Romantic era helped assuage and even resurrect their ability to feel.\(^{210}\) In England, this was transmitted by writers who now sought to align perceived forces within literature as having the potential to be as powerful as those in nature.\(^{211}\) One of the most beautiful examples of this is John Keats’ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ (1820). The whole poem concerns itself with the paradox of mortality and immortality, suggesting that

---

\(^{205}\) Paul’s message on love appears in Corinthians 13:1-8.
\(^{206}\) Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, pp.86-87.
\(^{207}\) *ibid.*, p.87.
\(^{208}\) Dylan Thomas, ‘And death shall have no dominion’ in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, pp.51-52.
\(^{209}\) de Botton, *The Art of Travel*, p.171.
\(^{210}\) *ibid*.
\(^{211}\) *The Collins Dictionary of Literary Terms*, p.326.
beautiful art is superior to us because while humans can appreciate its beauty, we know we cannot enjoy beauty forever due to our finite condition:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
Beauty is truth, truth beauty. – That is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.²¹²

This had not been an uncommon theme within English literary traditions – even Shakespeare, in Sonnet 18, had expressed his belief that the sole compensation for the pains of love and death was the immortality of poetry.²¹³ Compared to a summer’s day, poetry is more lovely and more temperate because:

…thy eternall Sommer shall not fade…

So long as men can breath or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.²¹⁴

When Thomas came to replicate this he did so in his own unique mimicry of these English literary traditions – composing poetry about poetry (or even, for that matter, about the poet as a subjective individual) was not something inherent to the traditions of

---

²¹⁴ William Shakespeare, ‘Sonnet 18’ in Seven Centuries of Poetry in English, 5th edn, p.196.
Welsh poetry. Perhaps as he wrote ‘In my craft or sullen art’ he had also already begun to parody himself to English notions of him as the romantic poet, carefully crafting his words, ‘When only the moon rages / And the lovers lie abed.’\footnote{Dylan Thomas, ‘In my craft or sullen art’ in The Dylan Thomas Omnibus, p.91.} He portrays himself almost in a hue of tragedy: solitary, isolated, working alone like a caricature of Minerva’s owl of wisdom, spreading his wings of understanding only after the day’s chaos had abated and all were asleep:

I labour by singing light
Nor for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms
On the ivory stages
But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.\footnote{ibid.}

For all the wonderful simplicity that exists in this poem, for all the pathos we are capable of feeling, as a reader, for the plight of any poet writing through the night for the lovers ‘who pay no praise or wages / Nor heed my craft or art,’\footnote{ibid., p.92.} this attempt leaves us underwhelmed, even disappointed.

Structurally the poem is unbalanced. The two stanzas each have differing line lengths, with the first stanza of eleven lines, and the second of nine. The rhyming scheme is peculiar, in that there occurs a regular, or corresponding, end rhyme between
the first five lines of each stanza, both adhering to a pattern of abcde. Thereafter each stanza obeys its own whim. Its metrical rhythm drifts through irregularity; there are the occasional beats of the iambic heard, but to locate any consistency is elusive. The poem also seems to lack sincerity in its mimesis; Thomas’ favoured time for composition was in the afternoon, finishing around early evening.\textsuperscript{218} When the moon was raging, his time was frequently spent in a bath ‘reading, eating sweets or pickled onions… until it was time for supper.’\textsuperscript{219} The images and emotions he had told friends that bred within him, that he struggled to overthrow into imposed limitations of self-expression, are not forthcoming.\textsuperscript{220} Put simply, we are denied access into the alchemist’s laboratory. Subsequently, we do not feel this is someone wishing to share his passion with us, rather he is asking for our attention in something else.\textsuperscript{221}

The sound and form of Thomas’ other forays into English traditions, such as his use of the sonnet, as found in the ten stanzas of ‘Altarwise by owl-light’ (from \textit{Twenty-Five Poems}) are even less convincing. Still reliant on the rhythm of his poetry to be sounding, rather than compliant to more conventional metrics, he often elicits a feeling of incompleteness even with (possibly even because of) his continued inclusion of dense imagery, occasional interior rhymes and alliteration of \textit{cynghanedd}, as exemplified in the first quatrain of the fifth stanza:\textsuperscript{222}

\begin{quote}
And from the windy West came two-gunned Gabriel,
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{218} Lycett, p.313.  \\
\textsuperscript{219} \textit{ibid.}  \\
\textsuperscript{220} \textit{ibid.}, p.182.  \\
\textsuperscript{221} Flanagan, p.111.  \\
\textsuperscript{222} Gross, pp.265-266.
\end{flushright}
From Jesu’s sleeve trumped up the king of spots,

The sheath-decked jacks, queen with a shuffled heart;

Said the fake gentleman in a suit of spades…

For this, Thomas is criticised for having foregone the logical structuring of this form for an inclusion of a surge of emotional content. Traditionally, the octave of a sonnet (the first eight lines) would present an argumentative problem, with a solution arising in form of a turn, or volta, in the sestet (the final six lines). Rhyming patterns of the sonnet vary but follow one of two primary forms: the Petrachan (abba abba cdc dcd), and the Shakespearean (abab cdcd efef gg). Neither are adhered to, nor even concessions made to the variations belonging to Sir Thomas Wyatt or Edmund Spenser. Possible interpretations of this poem in particular are considered arduous, even beyond any sensible exegesis. Despite his attempted inclusion of iambic metric structure, Thomas’ sonnet attempt falls quite a way short, with critic Harvey Gross concluding that the poem is clotted with surrealist imagery far too dense to be broken by rhythm. So much for sprezzatura: the art of saying much succinctly.

Other criticisms of Thomas were less charitable. English reaction to him during the 1930s often bordered on quasi-racist attacks, demonising him in displays of ‘excess and madness.’ He was portrayed as someone able to perform ‘conjuring tricks with

---

223 In the second line ‘Jesu’s sleeve’ can be interpreted as a wordplay on apostrophication of Jesus’ sleeve by using the Welsh for Jesus, Iesu. See: Dylan Thomas, ‘Altarwise by owl-light’ in The Dylan Thomas Omnibus, p.55.
224 Gross, p.267.
225 ibid., p.266.
226 ibid., p.267.
227 Wigginton, p.75.
words… [using] Welsh oral trickery." Many reviews romanticised him in a Celtic light, with W. H. Mellors claiming that Thomas’ ‘Welsh non-conformist background encourages bardic gesture, the rapture of hell-fire.’ Michael Roberts felt Thomas’ poetry to be a ‘mere riot of noise…[with] uncontrolled verbal associations.’ We begin to notice here the subtle appearance of orientalising: the irrational poet, using pagan magic to make his words rhyme, forever on the verge of a religious fervour. And in that ‘other’, in that binary opposite to the rational, urban Modern poet we encounter Thomas as a force of nature, the untamed Celtic bard, and the Romantic madman. It was here that French historian, Michel Foucault, believed the madman became aligned with the criminal. And it was here that Robert Graves described Thomas as ‘nothing more than a Welsh demagogic masturbator who failed to pay his bills.’ Such personal attacks on Thomas saw his literary standing suffer, with many clearly unable to distinguish between events from his life and the work he produced.

Worse was to come. Having lectured at the University College of Swansea from 1949 to 1961, Kingsley Amis, published a satirical novel, That Uncertain Feeling (1955), two years after Thomas’ death, in which he parodied the pretensions of a young poet, Gareth Probert in a Welsh seaside town. In private he lampooned Thomas as a

---

228 ibid.
229 ibid.
230 ibid.
232 ibid.
charlatan: ‘a dissolute… frog [who wrote] limericks.’ Further ad-hominem attacks appeared in *The Old Devils* (1986) - where a dead Welsh poet became revered more as a tourist attraction than as a bard - and in an essay ‘Thomas the Rhymer’ where not only was Thomas’ work dismissed but also those who wished to study it: they apparently ‘hanker after something sublimer than thinking.’

Amis, educated at Oxford University, established a lifelong friendship with fellow Oxford graduate and almost Poet Laureate, Philip Larkin. The pair became the centre of an established literary circle of English poets known as the Movement - rejecting both romantic and modernistic leanings, and favouring, instead, ironic detachment. Amis’ objections to the aesthetics of Thomas’ quasi-Romantic inclination is entirely justifiable as matter of personal choice. However, there did linger a sinister anti-Welsh odour within the Movement – particularly in their publication, *Poets of the 1950s* where Thomas was described as having a ‘deficiency in intellectual conviction’ and the use of ‘Welsh rhetoric [seemed] a deadly enemy to all varieties of logic, even the poetic.’

Part of Thomas’ automatic reversion, or unintentional leaning towards romantic elements in his writing may have arisen from his roots. He may have grown up in the port city of Swansea, but an urban metropolis it was not. Swansea was, as previously

---

235 Lycett, p.368.
237 Larkin was offered the post of Poet Laureate in 1984 but turned down the invitation – citing he felt he could no longer produce good poetry. It is often considered the death of his mother in 1977 curtailed his writing career (He only went on to write eleven poems until his death in 1985). See: *ibid.*, p.350.
238 *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, p.216.
mentioned, both ‘rural and industrial.’ The Carmarthenshire countryside, with its agricultural communities and age-old traditions, were minutes away from Swansea. London was an entirely different proposition.

Interestingly, the only poems of Thomas’ that could be said to be anchored in urbanity were those written during the Second World War when he acted as a war correspondent in London – avoiding conscription through being graded unfit because of his asthma, although not without the anguish of first contemplating objection and then personally petitioning Sir Kenneth Clark (then head of the Ministry of Information) for an exemption on artistic merits. These wartime poems – particularly ‘Ceremony After a Fire Raid’ and ‘Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred’ - are some of his most sincere. Despite his existential immediacy of speaking as a voice from within the Blitz, Thomas was still unable to thwart the celebration of, and reverence to, nature creeping in to them. Confronted with the sights and screams inhabiting Pablo Picasso’s own response to German bombers, Guernica, Thomas, like his thoughts, oscillated between London and Wales. The incendiary he prophesised as a youth, burning on the ground, eventually exploded: his hometown of Swansea underwent three successive nights of bombing in February 1941. Most of the city was destroyed.

---

240 Rowe, p.14.
241 ibid.
242 Thomas wrote two letters to Sir Kenneth during 1940 – the last dated March 25th asking for help in finding a job to avoid being drafted, as he had to register on April 7th. There was little Sir Kenneth to do to help Thomas, other than sending him a small cheque. Lady Clark suggested Thomas volunteer for an anti-aircraft battery, with other artists and painters. Thomas did but failed the medical. See: Selected Letters of Dylan Thomas, Constantine Fitzgibbon (ed.), pp.246-247.
243 Rowe, p.45.
After the war, Thomas lived a peripatetic existence with his wife, Caitlin, in England, but found himself unable to settle. In the words of Andrew Lycett, he had become tired after having successfully ‘carried off the role of a drunken Welshman adrift in the competitive world of Anglo-Saxon letters.’ Hiraeth soon came, that unique yearning the Welsh have for home. Thomas returned to Wales – to Laugharne – in 1949, where he lived until his death in 1953.

---

244 ibid., p.52.
245 Lycett, p.304.
246 ibid., p.305.
Chapter Four: A Copernican Revolution near Milk Wood

A bridge takes us somewhere, which is always on the other side. However, only some bridges can take us beyond their structure and pillars, where writers and dreamers and creators roam, where images of dreams and imagination are built.

- El Puento Nuevo, Ronda, Andalucia.

In 1962, some nine years after the death of Dylan Thomas, David Holbrook published a book on the poet, titled Llareggub Revisited. Holbrook - a critical protégé of the Cambridge don, F. R. Leavis, and an aspiring writer influenced by the Movement poets - had undertaken a psychoanalytic approach to Thomas’ work, and was able to surmise that Thomas, due to being psychologically arrested at an infantile level, had largely written meaningless poetry.247 Commenting on Thomas’ play for voices, Under Milk Wood, Holbrook opined that it failed to comply in being a drama: it lacked conflict, development and morality; its humour failed to operate on any other level than that understood by a child; and felt it was ‘a tedious piece of verbal “ingenuity”, “redeemed” only by its innuendoes and salacious jokes.’248 Around the same time, a wave of national resurgence was swelling in Wales.249 Within post-war Anglo-Welsh literature (or Welsh writing in English), these stirrings of Welsh nationalism found themselves embodied in the verse of R. S. Thomas – a clergyman who had supported the burning of English-owned holiday homes in Wales, and who had also learnt the Welsh language in his thirties.250 He reserved the bulk of his ire for fellow citizens who did not share his nationalist cause, accusing them of committing ‘cultural suicide.’251

247 Walford Davies, p.91.
249 Lycett, p.448.
250 Ross, p.243.
251 ibid.
Dylan Thomas, having spoken no Welsh nor shown any interest in Welsh politics during his lifetime, had become disowned and dismissed in the country of his birth. Even in death, he remained in limbo. Unwittingly, both parties of Thomas’ critics were mired in their binary opposition – aligned against each other in a structural dichotomy. There was no middle ground. As Walford Davies observes, this was an era in which so many questions were being asked of Thomas’ cultural allegiance, that in this polarity the crucial one was being overlooked: so what?²⁵²

To move beyond views of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ a fresh perspective can help bring new horizons into focus. This can be analogised with the completion of the first Severn Bridge, in 1966 – a suspension bridge that provided a direct road link between Wales and England.²⁵³ Previous views of the neighbouring countries could only be conducted from opposing coastlines along the Severn Estuary. Either we could look out from a Welsh perspective, or we could look back from an English one - each structured in opposition to the other. Now, a third space of observation could be employed, suspended high above each fixed binary point, to look out in any direction because all notions of what had once been defined as the centre or the margins had been deconstructed.²⁵⁴ This vantage point, in essence, is what became known within post-structuralist literary criticism as the decentred universe.²⁵⁵

²⁵² Walford Davies, p.90.
²⁵³ Ross, p.248.
²⁵⁵ ibid.
Previously, Structuralism had sought to examine the particular structures that had helped generate meaning within a body of work (rather than focusing on the inherent meaning itself). Post-structuralism attempted a different approach; its primary concern was to focus on the way literature itself subverted this enterprise, therefore challenging the notion of binary oppositions. Suddenly, the ‘so what’ questions were not only attractive: they had become relevant. Through this deconstructing process the polarity of common opposites could, for example, be reversed, allowing the second half of any polarity to be seen as ‘privileged.’

Previously marginalised ‘others’ – such as the perspectives of females, migrants and those colonised by Imperial powers – could adopt the central position once assumed by the ‘self.’ Language, and the way each of us uses it, it was argued, operated in this way – multi-faceted, slippery, unstructured, harbouring within each individual understanding a unique universe, reflecting our own existential reality.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein had also stressed that such variations were all equally valid, likening them to the games we play: sometimes there are rules, sometimes there aren’t, and sometimes the rules even become hybriddic, but due to the relational resemblances between all games, they each remain a game nonetheless.

While such a rewriting of literary criticism was still defining itself, Dylan Thomas had already addressed most of these concerns against binary opposition through his own experience. Not only that, Thomas had provided a resolution for this in the creation of a

---

256 Linda R. Williams (ed.), Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature: The Twentieth Century, p.258.
258 Barry, p.74.
259 ibid.
260 ibid.
‘third space of enunciation’ – Homi K. Bhabha’s place of ambivalence from which cultural identities can emerge.\textsuperscript{262} Borderline existences, such as Thomas’ own hybridity of identities, could fuse together here to bring about a new singular meaning.\textsuperscript{263} In essence, Thomas had somehow located his own vantage point, his own decentred universe, where he was neither ‘self’ nor ‘other’ and instead, had observed himself (and his world) as ‘something else besides.’\textsuperscript{264} In doing so, he had answered the ‘so what’ question that had never been asked: \textit{because his self-identity had become transformed through literature}. Thomas had mimicked what Welsh literary traditions he knew through his desire to write, and had mimicked the role expected of him by English society as a romantic, bohemian poet, because he himself had been lost somewhere in the blur of a linguistic hegemony forced upon him by circumstance. And despite this, despite his two souls of double-consciousness searching for an \textit{either/or} solution - Thomas finally arrived at his own place of concord, mapping it out in his drama, \textit{Under Milk Wood} (completed in November 1953). Through literature Dylan Thomas became the definer rather than the defined.

There is so much one can talk about – let alone speculate on – within Thomas’ play for voices, \textit{Under Milk Wood}. It allegedly germinated, slowly, growing over a period of some twenty years from an idea about a play about Wales that took place over the course of a single day.\textsuperscript{265} As far back as the 1930s Thomas had been speaking of his desire to write a Welsh \textit{Ulysses}.\textsuperscript{266} Pinning down what exactly Thomas meant by this can be

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{262} Homi K. Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, Routledge, Oxon., 1994, pp.312-313.
\textsuperscript{263} \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{264} \textit{ibid.}, p.313.
\textsuperscript{265} Rowe, p.68.
\textsuperscript{266} James A. Davies, \textit{Dylan Thomas’ Swansea, Gower and Laugharne}, p.103.
\end{flushleft}
explored when we consider just how complex James Joyce’s almost Heideggerean ‘destruktion’ of the novel genre actually was.\textsuperscript{267} Other than Joyce trying to condense the whole of human experience into a single day (16\textsuperscript{th} June 1904), there was no plot to *Ulysses*. The narrative voice following his main character, the anti-hero, Leopold Bloom, was expressed through a stream of consciousness.\textsuperscript{268} Furthermore, Joyce had drawn from established European cultural and literary traditions in an attempt to enrich his portrayal of ordinary life.\textsuperscript{269} All this against a backdrop of early twentieth-century urban life in Dublin, contrasted with a rural mentality embedded in a collective psyche still adjusting to life after the industrial revolution.\textsuperscript{270}

Many of these themes are mirrored in *Under Milk Wood*, albeit from Thomas’ own perspective: there is no plot to the drama, other than Thomas trying to condense the whole of his experience into a single day; there is no hero in the play; Thomas draws from Welsh and European cultural traditions; and, all this occurs within a twentieth-century rural village unaffected by the industrial revolution, contrasted by an awareness from an author exposed to urban living.

And yet, there is still more, much more, going on beneath the surface. This is a play about hybridity, where we see the cross-pollination of Thomas’ cultural sympathies to both the Welsh and English traditions merge together in Bhabha’s cultural third space to

\textsuperscript{267} Martin Heidegger sought to re-interpret traditional understandings of Aristotle, by ‘destroying’ established Scholastic interpretations through a process of destruction. This procedure had a celebrated after-life as a similar manoeuvre adopted by post-structuralist Jacques Derrida in his term, *deconstruction*. See: Jeff Collins, *Introducing Heidegger*, Allen & Unwin, New South Wales, 2010, p.47.

\textsuperscript{268} Everdell, p.301.

\textsuperscript{269} Day, p.89.

\textsuperscript{270} ibid.
produce something original. Just as heteroglossia describes the complex interweaving of dialogue and description common to the novel genre, Thomas deliberately employs this technique throughout *Under Milk Wood*. It is a play intended to be heard, rather than seen (like so many of the radio broadcasts Thomas wrote for the BBC), and encapsulates cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the multivocal narrative. There is a polyphony of voices in this depiction of life in Wales, each voice engaged in a dialogic exchange with the other and with the listener, and presented through the subtle use of parody and humour - as seen in the *carnivalesque* of Medieval laughter - and set in an insular, fictitious village. And there is also Thomas’ precursory solution to the structural opposition of being either centred or marginalised, through the simultaneous reversing of both perspectives through his characters in the decentered universe of Milk Wood. With such a myriad of activity gesticulating for attention in *Under Milk Wood* this investigation requires a point of origin from which to depart – for this, I turn to the author for his advice.

The play opens - we are told – from out of silence, very softly with the First Voice:

To begin at the beginning:

It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched, courters’-and-rabbits’ wood limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea.

---

271 Bhabha, p.312.
Immediately we are taken to the small seaside places to which Thomas had access.  Whether or not the fictitious town of Llareggub (a word play across two languages: read backwards the apparently Welsh named ‘Llareggub’ translates into ‘bugger all’) was based on one actual place remains unclear. However, what seems more likely, is that Thomas drew from his rural experiences of Welsh coastal towns, from places where he’d grown up along the Gower coastline, such as Mumbles (which in Thomas’ day was inhabited by a quota of retired seamen and other characters), and New Quay (where he lived with his family during 1944 & 1945) and, of course, to his home until he died, Laugharne. Sketches of the imagined town in Thomas’ notebooks have their topography firmly based on New Quay. While his descriptions of Laugharne also share similarities, ‘a timeless, beautiful, barmy [both spellings] town… a legendary lazy little black-magical bedlam by the sea.’

The First Voice speaks from the authorial vantage point of omniscience. It can see in the dark, it can observe the passing of Time, it can view rural life from a perspective more informed, and more understanding, than any binary opposite:

The houses are blind as moles (though moles see fine to-night in the snouting, velvet dingles) or blind as Captain Cat there in muffled middle by the pump and the town clock, the shops in mourning, the Welfare Hall in widows’ weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound town are sleeping now.

---

274 James A. Davies, *Dylan Thomas’ Swansea, Gower and Laugharne*, pp.103-104.
275 *ibid.*, p.104.
276 This description appeared as a broadcast titled ‘Laugharne’ and was recorded by the BBC, and broadcast on November 5th 1953 – the day Thomas collapsed in New York. See: *ibid.*, p.102.
Crucially, the First Voice also wishes to impart, with us as an audience, what insight it can:

Listen. It is night moving in the streets, the processional salt slow musical wind in Coronation Street and Cockle Row, it is the grass growing on Llareggub Hill, dewfall, starfall, the sleep of birds in Milk Wood…

Look. It is night, dumbly, royally winding through the Coronation cherry trees; going through the graveyard of Bethesda with winds gloved and folded, and dew doffed; tumbling by the Sailors Arms.

Time passes. Listen. Time passes.  

Then, as a listener, as a participant, as a ruralist or an urbanite, one is invited to join the First Voice at a privileged vantage point and step outside of our structured lives to experience something unique:

Come closer now.

Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night. Only you can see, in the blinded bedrooms, the coms and petticoats over the chairs, the jugs and basins, the glasses of teeth, Thou Shalt Not on the wall… Only you can hear and see…”

---

278 *ibid.*, p.2.
279 *ibid.*, p.3.
And what is it one can hope to hear and see from this perspective? Is it, ‘the movement and countries and mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes and flight and fall and despairs… [of other people’s] dreams?’\textsuperscript{280} Or could it be something less dramatic – perhaps, only the gentle whispers of awareness that should ever we be asked to see in dichotomies of daylight or darkness, in binaries of light and dark, of only black or white, to always remember there exists a third space we can aim to find: Bhabha’s ‘something else besides’? Little wonder Thomas came to describe this character as ‘a kind of conscience, a guardian angel.’\textsuperscript{281}

The First Voice is one of a trio of characters in Under Milk Wood who live at the margins of the drama, unattached to the collective narrative focus. While the First Voice can be said to occupy an entirely metaphysical existence beyond life in Llareggub, the other two – Captain Cat and the Reverend Eli Jenkins – live alongside the town’s other characters, yet are clearly not aligned with the communal insularity, through either their past experiences or present outlook; it is as if each character has his own condition of double-consciousness. Moreover, it is as if there are two worldviews co-existing in the text. As a listener, we hear the everyday concerns of the inhabitants of Llareggub centre around the town itself. Characters such as Mrs Ogmore-Pritchard, Polly Garter, and Nogood Boyo, for example, demonstrate no interest, no knowledge of anything outside the known world of Milk Wood. We know this through being able to hear their dreams. The First Voice grants us access to each character’s innermost thoughts, whereby we

\textsuperscript{280} ibid.

\textsuperscript{281} Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion, p.242.
learn exactly what they dream of: two dead husbands, babies and nothing, respectively.²⁸² It is almost as if Thomas has fated his characters to live in the same kind of dichotomy that tried to govern him. Either his characters have a parochial sense of existence localised to Llareggub, or they have an awareness of life outside the Welsh town.

We could Analogue this by suggesting that those who are insular in their worldview exist in a Ptolemaic system - their understanding of the universe resembles the second century geocentric model developed by the Alexandrian Ptolemy in his *Almagest*, who argued that the Earth was at the centre of the universe with everything else orbiting it.²⁸³ For those characters, Llareggub becomes that Earth and their lives revolve around that centre as if each were a circling planet or star. This is Thomas’ satirical caricature of the small-town mentality he knew and would have come up against in South Wales (with the author’s own satirical take on such an outlook probably influenced further through his joy of reading Caradoc Evans’ *My People*).²⁸⁴

In comparison, both Captain Cat and the Reverend Eli Jenkins appear aware of a different gravitational effect operating in *Under Milk Wood*. Their worlds orbit a greater sun. In much the same way that Nicolaus Copernicus changed our perception of the universe, replacing the geocentric view with his heliocentric hypothesis, so, too, Thomas has allowed these figures a similar perspective. He does this by letting the audience know that Captain Cat has travelled the world, and the Reverend Eli Jenkins has a deep

²⁸² Mrs Ogmore-Pritchard dreams of ordering her two dead husbands, Mr Ogmore and Mr Pritchard, to perform household chores. See: Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, Dent, London, 1983, pp.13-15. (We hear the dreams of Polly Garter and Nogood Boyo on page 21 of the same text.)
²⁸⁴ Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.207.
and commanding knowledge about Welsh culture. No other character appears interested in seeking an alternative world-view, and no other character from Llareggub engages in conversation concerning the Copernican paradigm. Moreover, much like the Copernican supporters during the Renaissance, such as Giordano Bruno, Johannes Kepler and Galileo, who were forced to safeguard their understanding of such a system for fear of persecution, Captain Cat and Reverend Eli Jenkins do not share their knowledge either. Both characters already inhabit the fringes of Llareggub, marginalised from the centre, with the sea captain only able to talk about his travels with ghosts, while the bardic scholar confines his consciousness of Welsh history to journals and poems. Such a depiction of the two demonstrates Jacob Bronowski’s observation that the cast of temperament and mind that underlies any culture can be found in its astronomical outlook.285

Captain Cat, is described in *Under Milk Wood* by the First Voice, as a ‘retired blind sea-captain, asleep in his bunk in the seashelled, ship-in-bottled, shipshape best cabin of Schooner House.’286 Despite his lack of sight, Captain Cat is able to chart the first stirrings of morning by counting the steps of Willy Nilly the postman, who walks along Coronation Street:

One, two, three, four, five… That’s Mrs Rose Cottage. What’s to-day? To-day she gets the letter from her sister in Gorslas. How’s the twin’s teeth?287

---

287 *ibid.*, p.37.
Sitting at an open window, Captain Cat is able to observe the whole town’s morning unfold, literally with his eyes closed:

There goes Mrs Cherry, you can tell her by her trotters, off she trots new as a daisy… Mrs Floyd and Boyo, talking flatfish. What can you talk about flatfish? That’s Mrs Dai Bread one, waltzing up the street like a jelly, every time she shakes it’s slap slap slap… Can’t hear what the women are gabbing round the pump. Same as ever. Who’s having a baby, who blacked whose eye… who’s dead, who’s dying, there’s a lovely day, oh the cost of soap flakes!\(^\text{288}\)

We also learn through a conversation he has with the ghost of Rosie Probert, that in his younger days, when he had vision, he had sailed ‘On the blubbery waves / Between Frisco and Wales.’\(^\text{289}\) It is as if the Captain’s eyesight has failed him only on returning home. The character’s experience evokes parallels with Plato’s allegory of The Cave. In *The Republic*, Plato tells us that what we believe is the real world, is in fact illusory – we mistake shadows for reality.\(^\text{290}\) Only when one miraculously breaks free of accepting these illusions, and steps out of the world of shadows into the light of the sun, can we be said to have seen the true nature of existence.\(^\text{291}\) Yet, there comes a price with such a discovery. The person, who having beheld such an illumination, returns to the cave to share his discovery of the ‘real world’ with others, but is scorned. With eyes now accustomed to sunlight, this person now struggles to see in the darkness, and is therefore considered blind by those unwilling and unable to see beyond shadows. The one wise

\(^{288}\) *ibid.*, pp.39-40.

\(^{289}\) *ibid.*, p.64.


person among the fools is shunned. Evidence of this is clear in Under Milk Wood, when after being told by Rosie Probert’s ghost to remember her, because she is ‘going into the darkness of the darkness forever,’ Captain Cat is seen crying by a child but the child’s mother does nothing to comfort him:

CHILD: Captain Cat is crying
FIRST VOICE: Captain Cat is crying
CAPTAIN CAT: Come back, come back,
FIRST VOICE: up the silences and echoes of the passage of the eternal night.
CHILD: He’s crying all over his nose.
FIRST VOICE: says the child. Mother and child move on down the street.

If Captain Cat can be understood as some kind of blind seer, a mouthpiece for Thomas’ literary understandings of other blind kinsmen common to English classical traditions – such as T. S. Eliot’s ability in persuading Tiresias, the blind prophet of Ancient Greece, to guide us through ‘The Wasteland,’ or even the poet John Milton (who lost his sight during work on Paradise Lost) – then the Reverend Eli Jenkins can be said to represent those of the Welsh. The poet and preacher dreams of ‘eisteddfodau’ – the plural form of the Welsh eisteddfod, which originally was part of the cultural and religious life in sixteenth century Wales, providing a forum through either music or poetry for those in the bardic profession. Where Captain Cat has left Llareggub to develop his other awareness, Eli Jenkins has not; he has stayed in Wales but is culturally

---

292 Law, p.79.
294 Ross, p.130.
aware of a heritage that all other characters remain ignorant of. He is the sole character who uses Welsh words. He is the only voice to speak of Welsh history. He occupies the role of the bard, reciting verse each morning and evening, even addressing his morning service to ‘Gwalia’ – a medieval Latinised version of the English word for Cymru, ‘Wales’:

Dear Gwalia! I know there are
Towns lovelier than ours,
And fairer hills and loftier far,
And groves more full of flowers…

By mountains where King Arthur dreams,
By Penmaenmawr defiant,
Llareggub Hill a molehill seems,
A pygmy to a giant.295

Each afternoon in his poem room, Eli Jenkins writes in ‘the White Book of Llareggub.’296 This, as John Ackerman notes, bears more than a passing resemblance to the early Welsh manuscript of Myrddin: the Black Book of Carmarthen.297 Furthermore, through this character, Thomas is able to bring elements of Welsh literary traditions into an English

---

296 ibid., p.68.
297 Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion, p.255.
Perhaps the best example is when the Reverend writes his final comments for the day, concluding:

Llareggub Hill, that mystic tumulus, the memorial of peoples that dwelt in the region of Llareggub before the Celts left the Land of Summer and where the old wizards made themselves a wife out of flowers.

The wife made out of flowers refers directly to Blodeuwedd, a female character from the *Mabinogi*. In the story of ‘Math fab Mathonwy’ (the same narrative in which Thomas’ own namesake is born) Blodeuwedd is created from the ‘blossoms of the oak, and the blossoms of the broom, and the blossoms of the meadow-sweat…[producing] a maiden, the fairest and most graceful that man ever saw.’

Thomas’ use of humour is similarly couched between two cultures. We see him engage in a word play with Welsh names for an audience with some awareness of both languages. The most obvious example is the most celebrated: Llareggub. Yet, another name that becomes lost in pronunciation is that of Cherry Owen. After an evening of inebriation, he and his wife – Mrs Cherry Owen – recall drunken antics from the night before in their home at Donkey Street. Although only a minor character in the drama, Cherry Owen highlights one of the most common – and naturally humorous - mispronunciations in English of a Welsh name. The male Welsh name of Ceri translates in English to ‘Kerry’ and is pronounced as such in the Brythonic tongue. However, when

---

298 ibid.
300 Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.256.
301 The *Mabinogion*, p.74.
encountered in English it is frequently mispronounced as ‘Cherry’. It is almost as if Thomas has intended to parody both an English speaking audience and the error itself – with the joke only apparent to those with some minimum form of exposure to Welsh and English.

T. H. Jones is another to comment on Thomas’ nimble application of humour, particularly in his application of parody. Jones comments, ‘The characters are admittedly drawn by a caricaturist’s rather than a portrait’s hand, but that hand is skilful and incisive.’ Thomas has drawn on the techniques of Caradoc Evans in providing us with characters we are able to laugh at, but has parodied their innocence with such tenderness and compassion that they become much closer to the originals as a result. Again, the Reverend Eli Jenkins exemplifies this when he stops outside the Welfare Hall and listens to Polly Garter singing as she scrubs the floor for the Mother’s Union Dance. The song she sings is a lament, appearing honest in its sincerity for sexual longing and her reminiscence about past lovers. Seemingly oblivious to its content, we hear the minister exclaim with unbridled joy, ‘Praise the Lord! We are a musical nation.’ The parodying is complete when we are informed that he then ‘hurries on through the town to visit the sick with jelly and poems.’

Despite such precisions of comedic timing, Thomas’ craftsmanship was not universally appreciated. After the BBC had first broadcast the play on 25th January 1954

302 T. H. Jones, p.92.
303 ibid., p.93.
304 Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion, p.254.
306 ibid.
– with Richard Burton reading Thomas’ role of the First Voice – the Welsh Home Service refused to broadcast it again, citing the play was not suitable ‘for family of home listening.’\footnote{Lycett, p.442.} As Andrew Lycett observes, little had moved on since the days of Caradoc Evans: those chapel-goers affronted by Under Milk Wood rejected all suggestions of Welsh hypocrisy and instead chose only to see malicious satire.\footnote{Ibid.} Similarly, David Holbrook believed it bore no realistic or moral resemblance to any town or village, projecting, instead, a kind of Toy Town fabrication from an artist lacking skill in his art.\footnote{David Holbrook, ‘A Place of Love: Under Milk Wood’ in Dylan Thomas: A Collection of Critical Essays, C.B. Cox (ed.), Prentice-Hall Inc, New Jersey, 1966, pp.116.} This stemmed, according to Holbrook, from Thomas’ inability to understand what ‘genius’ meant; such aspirations were for people like Joyce who could concentrate expression into a single word, hitting the target once rather than peppering it with clichés such as ‘fishingboat-bobbing sea.’\footnote{Ibid., p.106.} For all the sensitive affection that Thomas used in creating his drama, only the hindrance of prejudice – either through insularity or pedantry - could have overlooked such craft and subsequently miss what potential was possibly living beneath the surface of his text.

And there is still so much happening there. If we look closely enough we can find a set of variations on the theme of love. Arguably, the drama can be read as a Welsh interpretation of Plato’s Symposium. Just as Plato’s dramatic dialogues concern themselves with a series of speeches in praise of love, the same could be said of Thomas’ characters. We can witness such variations in the way Captain Cat remembers Rosie Probert, we can see maternal love in the way Polly Garter feels for her babies, we can
hear the lascivious yearning Sinbad Sailors has for Gossamer Beynon.\textsuperscript{311} The erotic and the idealised forms of love – \textit{eros} and \textit{agape} – are very much alive in the lives of the characters of Llareggub, along with their varying understandings of the appreciation and desire of beauty.\textsuperscript{312} Even the prickly marriage of Mr and Mrs Pugh finds itself underpinned by the notion of \textit{philia}, the fondness in friendship and desire for the good of another – each needs the other in order to remain unhappily married; her nagging and his plotting could not endure otherwise.\textsuperscript{313}

Even Aristophanes’ famous dialogue on the quest for the soul mate is present. In the Platonic dialogue, Aristophanes argues that those in love often feel complete, as if they have found their other half.\textsuperscript{314} This feeling of wholeness results from human beings searching the world for their missing soul mate – punishment from Zeus who decided to splice in half primal forms of humanity in order for them to learn humility.\textsuperscript{315} We are told these humans were separated from their mirror image, ‘having one side only, like a flat fish.’\textsuperscript{316} Their desire in life is to reunite with their other half, making one of two, and thus healing the human condition.\textsuperscript{317} In seeing the love affair of Mog Edwards and Myfanwy Price play itself it out, we know despite their mutual longing for each other they will never be in union. Perhaps this is the conversation about flatfish Mrs Floyd and Nogood Boyo had around the pump, as Captain Cat strained to overhear.\textsuperscript{318}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item\textsuperscript{311} T. H. Jones, p.95.
\item\textsuperscript{312} Ackerman, \textit{A Dylan Thomas Companion}, p.263.
\item\textsuperscript{313} T. H. Jones, p.95.
\item\textsuperscript{314} Plato, ‘Symposium’ in \textit{The Dialogues of Plato}, Benjamin Jowett (trans.), University of Chicago, Chicago, 1952, p.158 [§192].
\item\textsuperscript{315} \textit{ibid}., pp.157-158 [§190].
\item\textsuperscript{316} \textit{ibid}., p.158 [191].
\item\textsuperscript{317} \textit{ibid}.
\item\textsuperscript{318} Please refer to the passage concerning Note 288 above.
\end{thebibliography}
even mentioned Shakespeare’s similar incorporation of Plato’s graduations on love in his play, *Twelfth Night*.

It was T.S. Eliot who once described a great poet as someone who, in writing their own experience was able to write the experience of their time. ³¹⁹ In *Under Milk Wood* Thomas not only captured his own position of being caught between cultures of Wales and England in his drama, he also managed to recreate the state of confusion many of his generation felt in searching for their own cultural identity. Neither truly Welsh, nor truly English they became labelled ‘Anglo-Welsh.’ Like Thomas, these were people of Wales living in the language of England. Yet, to Welsh language writers such as Saunders Lewis they were inauthentic people – the ‘un-Welsh product of English linguistic colonisation.’ ³²⁰ Furthermore, they had been accused of turning their backs on the Welsh language, which contained the essential core of Welsh identity. ³²¹ This puritanical attitude to national identity was encapsulated in Lewis’ grand damnation - Thomas, and those like him, had no claim to hyphenated identities: they belonged to the English. ³²² Lost in the dispute of splitting hairs, little wonder Thomas found solace in writing.

*Under Milk Wood*, Thomas’ play for voices, represents so much more than a day in the life of a rural Welsh town. In the darkness of listening to the narrative, we hear the polyphony of voices speaking to us, over each other’s dialogue, making us aware of the confusion of sound common to any form of double-consciousness – exemplifying the

---
³²¹ *ibid.*
³²² *ibid.*
theories of Bakhtin in highlighting the multi-layered discourse within narratives.\textsuperscript{323} We also see Thomas’ careful parody of stereotypes elevate his characters out of one-dimensional figures of ridicule, making them, as Bhabha suggests, distinctive: they alert us to an anxiety existing behind them.\textsuperscript{324} Such stereotypes remind us of our own growth, our ability to shed the various layers of perceived and borrowed self-identities in order to discover one’s self.

By the time Thomas reached \textit{Under Milk Wood} his career (like his life) had journeyed from solipsism, mimicry, modernism, realism and isolation towards this final place of communal warmth.\textsuperscript{325} All these voices, all these caricatures are in essence Dylan Thomas’ unique vision of the human condition.\textsuperscript{326} A perspective which possibly appeared as a result of his own awareness of having one foot in Wales and his vowels in England. This familiarity of the linguistic and literary traditions of Wales and England have seen him occupy the margins of the English Literary canon, without ever being fully central to it, or even truly accepted into it. An oversight which possibly requires a more detailed investigation, or a new spirit of consideration - especially with the enterprise of post-colonial criticism being able to reveal so much to us that has been hitherto hidden. Nevertheless, hope remains for further recognition of Thomas with Harold Bloom’s inclusion of him, on merit of his poetry, on his list of Canonical prophecies – a speculative list of writers who may yet become considered central to English Literature.

\textsuperscript{323} John Peck and Martin Coyle, \textit{Literary Terms and Criticism}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edn, MacMillan Education, Hampshire, 1993, p.179.
\textsuperscript{325} \textit{ibid.}, p.214.
\textsuperscript{326} Ackerman, \textit{A Dylan Thomas Companion}, p.265.
Alongside Thomas, as equals, in Bloom’s pantheon are R.S. Thomas, Philip Larkin, James Joyce and Robert Graves.  

Despite some critics of contrary opinion, the body of writing produced by Dylan Thomas remains something special, something unique - existing as a testimony to a contribution made from the viewpoint of ‘something else besides.’ He was able to celebrate something few other writers torn between two cultures have been able to do.

Conclusion

I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on in the world between the covers of books, such sandstorms and ice blasts of words… such staggering peace, such enormous laughter, such and so many blinding bright lights… splashing all over the pages in a million bits and pieces all of which were words, words, words, and each of which were alive forever in its own delight and glory and oddity and light.

- Notes on the Art of Poetry (Dylan Thomas)

One of the most iconic portraits of the writer Dylan Thomas hangs at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. Indeed, it is perhaps the most famous. Painted in the autumn of 1938 by Welsh artist, Augustus John (a name that later became entangled with the legend that came to surround Thomas’ private life), it has been described as portraying Thomas as a ‘narrowed-faced Renaissance courtier.’ 328 In fact, this was John’s second attempt to capture an impression of Thomas. The first version had lacked something, bringing the artist a measure of dissatisfaction and causing him to try again.329 It is difficult to speculate on what it was that John felt he had initially missed. Perceptive artists are gifted not only in their ability to recreate images of others, but also in their sensitivity to perceive a true likeness for an individual. As Kenneth Clarke once observed, art has an almost prophetic nature to it – and maybe for an artist as talented as John he was able to sense the severity of oscillations brewing within Thomas.330 Trying to define the essence of Dylan Thomas, however, was never going to be easy because Thomas himself didn’t really know, and the society to which he belonged wasn’t quite sure either.

329 ibid.
It wasn’t until after the end of the Second World War, sometime in those transitional years when a waning of Modernism began to subside into the first tides of Post-Modernism, that Thomas was able to recognise and define himself in his own terms. He did this through a long, and possibly painful, process of mimicry. A time in which he compromised his true self, possibly even elements of his art, through a discourse of ambivalence – evident in the body of writing which remains today. In his poems we are able to see the two cultures to which Thomas experienced a belonging: those literary traditions of both Wales and England.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha claims that in order to be authenticated, mimicry must produce a kind of excess - almost an exaggeration of what is being mimicked, thereby making it different. In the poetry of Thomas we are able to see his attempts to follow the two cultures he felt adrift from, producing notable differences as a result. This alienation, as Bhabha suggests, is the partial and conflicted presence of those two cultures, giving the work an appearance of being incomplete. Thomas’ attempt to assume the bardic role of a community commentator, often incorporating Welsh metrics of *cynghanedd* to English verse, is impressive. Yet it is not exact. This inexactitude may be due to either an unyielding form of fabric within the English language itself, or of Thomas’ borrowed understanding of the fixed metrical pattern from Welsh speakers, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins. Similarly with an errant desire to align himself to literary London, Thomas managed to alienate himself from his

---

331 Bhabha, p.122.
332 *ibid.*, p.123.
333 Linda R. Williams (ed.), *Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature: The Twentieth Century*, p.314.
Welsh upbringing and came to mimic a self-promoting image of the Romantic poet in English society. 334 This posturing, in part, was due to his inclusion of the natural world in his work (unintentional or not), at a time when the urban realist was seeking meaning in the material settings common to cities like London. As in the paintings of Edward Hopper, a Modern audience was invited in to the cold isolation of contemporary urbanity, to search, with the artist, for possible solutions to life there. Alas for Thomas, all the songs for the countryside had already been sung. But sing them he did.

It was the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who claimed that ‘freedom is always a meeting of the inner and the outer.’ 335 In the case of Dylan Thomas, this seems to have occurred when he embraced his own hybrid nature, and transformed it into something which distinguished him as a unique voice: the drama Under Milk Wood. The ambivalence he seemed to display towards both Welsh and English literary traditions earlier in his career later mellowed and harmonised. What he produced was a narrative providing a solution to his double-consciousness, through a precursory negotiation of post-structuralism using the heteroglossia of voices sounding within him, in between the strain of binary tension. As an audience we are able to experience this sense of being marginalised as well as being central to society: the peculiarity of all borderline existences. 336 As a person, Thomas was able to express this duality because literature provided such a space. As he said, it became ‘the record of my individual struggle from

334 ibid., p.314.
335 Merleau-Ponty, p.528.
336 Bhabha, p.312.
darkness towards some measure of light…[even] useful to others for its individual recording of that same struggle.\textsuperscript{337}

The work of Dylan Marlais Thomas endures as more than a memoir to this struggle. To recapitulate W.E.B. du Bois’ comments about double-consciousness, we are able to see and feel his twoness, his two souls, his two thoughts, his two unreconciled strivings.\textsuperscript{338} The achievement of Dylan Thomas was in preventing that duality from tearing him apart.

\textsuperscript{337} T.H. Jones, p.20.
\textsuperscript{338} See note 9 above (Also: Du Bois, p.17).
Appendix A

*Dylan Thomas* (1935), Augustus John
The National Museum of Wales, Cardiff
Appendix B

Salem (1908), Sydney Curnow Vosper
Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool.
Dylan Thomas’ Writing Shed,
The Boathouse, Laugharne (July 2011).
Bibliography


[Accessed 7th February 2011]


Retrieved from: http://www.credoreference.com/entry/sageukrace/double_consciousness  
[Accessed 17th March 2011]

Retrieved from: http://www.credoreference.com/entry/jhueas/double_consciousness  
[Accessed 17th March 2011]


Thomas, M. Wynn, *Corresponding Cultures: The Two Literatures of Wales*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1999.


