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

Karl Powell
University of Notre Dame Australia

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...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

¹ Jessica Feather, *British Watercolours and Drawings. Lord Leverhulme's Collection in the Lady Lever Art Gallery*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2010, p.209.

² *ibid.*, p.208.

³ *ibid.*, p.209.

painted it, and vehemently denied any intentional depiction of doing so in his work.⁴ 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.'⁵ 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.*

⁵ Edna Longley, 'Poetry in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, 1930-1990' in *The Columbia History of British Poetry*, Carl Woodring (ed.), Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p.605.

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

⁶ John Ackerman, ‘The Welsh Background’ in *Dylan Thomas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, C.B. Cox (ed), Prentice-Hall Inc, New Jersey, 1966, p.28.

⁷ *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Simon Blackburn (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p.12.

⁸ Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 2nd edn, Routledge, New York, 2006, p.421.

⁹ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Fawcett Publications, United States of America, 1961, p.17.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

cultural identity.¹¹ Double-consciousness, however, comes in many forms. One version appears in David Remnick's *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 *Good Negro* – the integrationist, a symbol of passive resistance, civil rights, and Christian morality.¹² Liston, convicted for larceny in his twenties, and connected to the Mob, seemed to accept the role of the *Bad Negro*.¹³ Cornered by this dichotomy of stereotypes, Ali was determined to prove that he 'could be a new kind of black man.'¹⁴ Part of this process would be Ali choosing neither the *Good* nor the *Bad*, but instead opting for *something else besides* – and in doing so, almost anticipating the Poststructuralist hybridity of Homi K. Bhabha. Part of Ali's *something else besides* included a visit to Africa, and despite declaring he was proudly American, Ali had spoken of returning *home*, describing Africans as *my people*.¹⁵ For Remnick, Ali embodied Du Bois' argument perfectly.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

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero*, Picador, London, 2000, prologue (p.xiii).

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

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: *ibid.*, p.278.

¹⁶ Remnick writes, 'Ali may not have read W. E. B. Du Bois, but he was a living example of the "two-ness," the "double-consciousness," described in *The Souls of Black Folk*.' See: *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.¹⁷ Jean Rhys presented her narrative of double consciousness from a Creole perspective – caught between both White and Black cultures - in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.¹⁸ 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.’¹⁹ 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

¹⁷ David Malouf, ‘Southern Skies’ in David Malouf, *Antipodes*, Vintage, New South Wales, 1999.

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.

¹⁹ T.H. Jones, *Dylan Thomas*, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1970, p.5.

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.'²⁰ 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.²¹ 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

²⁰ *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Chris Baldick (ed.), Oxford University Press, Great Britain, 2008, p.265.

²¹ Christopher Wigginton, *Modernism from the Margins: The 1930s Poetry of Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2007, p.6.

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.

²³ Kirsti Bohata, *Postcolonialism Revisited*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2004, p.9.

²⁴ A.H. Dodd, *A Short History of Wales*, John Jones Publishing Ltd., North Wales, 1998, p.144.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.145.

²⁶ Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?* Black Raven Press, London, 1985, p.208.

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.’²⁹ Introduced at some schools, the *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.³⁰ Though no evidence exists of Thomas coming into contact with the *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.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: *18 Poems* (1934), *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936), *The Map of Love* (1939), *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), and *In Country Sleep* (1952) – all of which are housed in the anthologies, *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus* and *Collected Poems 1934-1953*. These, along with Thomas’ single great drama, *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 *The*

²⁹ Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?* p.208.

³⁰ Williams refers to the implementation of the *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: *ibid.*, p.246.

³¹ Bill Read, *The Days of Dylan Thomas*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, United States of America, 1964, p.22.

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.