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

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## 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.<sup>32</sup> Take for example the names given to Dylan Thomas. He was born in Swansea on 27 October 1914, and named Dylan Marlais Thomas.<sup>33</sup> 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*.<sup>34</sup> 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*.<sup>35</sup> The narratives, poems and songs feature Arthurian myths, Celtic belief systems as well as the birth of the legendary

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<sup>32</sup> Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety*, Penguin, Victoria, 2005, p.162.

<sup>33</sup> Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1986, p.1.

<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> Mike Ashley, *A Brief History of King Arthur*, Constable & Robinson, London, 2010, p.206.

bard Taliesin (a sixth century Druidic figure).<sup>36</sup> 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.’<sup>37</sup> For that he reason he was called *Dylan Eli Ton* (Dylan Sea Son of the Wave), and ‘beneath him no wave ever broke.’<sup>38</sup> 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.’<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> This

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<sup>36</sup> *The Piatkus Dictionary of Mind, Body and Spirit*, Paula Byerly Croxon (ed.), Piatkus, London, 2003, p.174.

<sup>37</sup> *The Mabinogion*, Lady Charlotte Guest (trans.), J.M. Dent & Sons, New York, 1937, p.69.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life*, Phoenix, London, 2004, p.17.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, pp.10-11.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p.10.

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.<sup>44</sup> In a further twist, Thomas' parents – both Welsh speaking – had been given English names (David John and Florence).<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup>

At the time Thomas was born, faith in Welsh as a language had been obliterated. In the aftermath of the 1847 *Report into the State of Education in Wales* (also known as *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.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> Welsh had always been seen as a peasant language.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the subtleties of cultural difference previously portrayed by Shakespeare in Fluellen's gentle mispronunciations of English in *Henry V*,

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<sup>44</sup> David N. Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: A Farm, Two Mansions and a Bungalow*, Poetry Wales Press, Wales, 2004, p.77.

<sup>45</sup> David Rowe, *Dylan: Fern Hill to Milk Wood*, Gomer Press, Ceredigion, 2006, p.12.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>47</sup> The Welsh language became the protruding marker of that inferiority. See: Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books: The Perfect Instrument of Empire*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1998, p.191.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p.2

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p.13.

gave way to a noticeable hostility.<sup>50</sup> Professor of poetry at Oxford, Matthew Arnold embodied this mood in 1867 stating ‘The sooner the Welsh language disappears... the better.’<sup>51</sup> 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.’<sup>52</sup>

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’ *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.’<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup> He struck up a friendship with him in later life, and even drew inspiration from *My People* when creating his own short stories and particularly his single great drama, *Under Milk Wood*.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Captain Fluellen (an Anglicanised mispronunciation of the Welsh *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.

<sup>51</sup> Tyson Roberts, p.231.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, pp.197-231.

<sup>53</sup> John Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, MacMillan Press, Hampshire, 2001, p.172.

<sup>54</sup> Lycett, p.115.

<sup>55</sup> David N. Thomas, *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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup> 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.’<sup>58</sup> The rural and the industrial co-existed side by side – coalminers, steelworkers and copper workers rubbed shoulders with farmers, fishermen and cockle-pickers.<sup>59</sup>

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.<sup>60</sup> It is a fertile soil in which double-consciousness could take root. And always occupying the western hinterland, was Carmarthenshire – Thomas’ childhood eden;

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<sup>56</sup> Tyson Roberts, p.2.

<sup>57</sup> Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History*, Papermac, London, 2000, p.805.

<sup>58</sup> Rowe, p.12.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

bathed in a kind of Celtic-twilight where Welsh was spoken, chapel attended and summer holidays were spent.<sup>61</sup> 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.’<sup>62</sup> 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, *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.’<sup>63</sup>

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.<sup>64</sup> Like other twentieth century Welsh writers using English, Thomas was excluded from a sense of Welshness as a matter of class, background and language.<sup>65</sup> 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

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Lycett, p.190.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas even asked Herbert’s mother to teach him Welsh. See: David N. Thomas, pp. 103-104.

<sup>64</sup> 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, *Writing on the Edge: Interviews with Writers and Editors of Wales*, Rodopi Publishers, Amsterdam, 1997, p.144.

<sup>65</sup> Roland Mathias, *Anglo-Welsh Literature: An Illustrated History*, Poetry Wales Press, Glamorgan, 1987, p.72.

Wales (including his ancestry in it), and an entire background of literary reference in English traditions.<sup>66</sup> Attributed comments soon became linked directly to him, ‘Land of my Fathers! As far as I’m concerned, my fathers can keep it.’<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup> 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.’<sup>70</sup> Perhaps here, in Thomas’ poetry more than anywhere else, we should begin our search for his synthesis of a double consciousness to two cultures.

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, p.84.

<sup>67</sup> 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.

<sup>68</sup> Jeremy Hooker, *Imagining Wales: A View of Modern Welsh Writing in English*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2001, p.13.

<sup>69</sup> Rowe, p.22.

<sup>70</sup> 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).