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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

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.'[71] 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.[72] Described as a variation of normal meter, it accentuates strong stresses within a line - allegedly based on similar techniques found in

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[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.
[72] Paul L. Mariani, *A Commentary on the Complete Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Cornell University Press, London, 1970, p.81.

'nursery rhymes and [in] medieval alliterative meters.'[73] Hopkins, however, claimed that

it came from another source: the Welsh language and in particular Welsh phonetics.[74]

Able to read Welsh he became fascinated with the sound of *cynghanedd* occurring in the

Welsh bardic poems called *englyns* (four line stanzas).[75] Hopkins had heard 'the echo of a

new rhythm… haunting [his] ear.'[76]

Cynghanedd is described as a set of phonemic patterns, or strict metre,

deliberately crafted for Welsh poetry and imitated occasionally in spoken English.[77]

Inelegant in its literal meaning, a more useful understanding may be 'harmony.'[78]

Immediately, we can recognise that this technique aims to create a sense of internal

melody – somewhere between speech and song, between prose and music.[79] 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.[80] 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.[81] 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

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[73] *The Collins Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Edward Quinn (ed.), Harper Collins, Glasgow, 2004, p.315.
[74] Mariani, p.81.
[75] *ibid.*
[76] Graham Storey, *A Preface to Hopkins*, 2nd edn, Longman Group, UK, 1992, p.9.
[77] Philip Davies Roberts, *How Poetry Works*, Penguin, London, 1988, p.277.
[78] Mererid Hopwood, *Singing in Chains: Listening to Welsh Verse*, Gomer, Ceredigion, 2005, p.1.
[79] *ibid*., p.2.
[80] Robert Graves, 'Harp, Anvil, Oar' in *The Structure of Verse: Modern Essays on Prosody*, Harvey Gross (ed.), Fawcett Publications, Greenwich, 1966, pp.54-55.
[81] Hopwood, p.2.

consonance.[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.[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).[84] These are:

Cynghanedd Groes (or Criss-Cross Harmony), *Cynghanedd Draws* (Bridging Harmony),

Cynghanedd Sain (Sonorous Harmony) and *Cynghanedd Lusg* (Echoing Harmony).[85]

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.[86] An example in English would be: *A <u>saint</u> in an old <u>painting</u>*.[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 *Book

of Taliesin* by Taliesin, and Aneirin's seventh century *Y Gododdin*.[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

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[82] *ibid*., p.3

[83] *ibid.*

[84] *ibid.*, p.25.

[85] *ibid*., pp.31-32.

[86] Gwyn Williams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century*, Dufour Editions, Philadelphia, 1952, p.245.

[87] *ibid.*

[88] In Norman Davies' book, *The Isles: A History*, he attributes the quote of Taliesin's work being the 'oldest surviving literature in Europe' to John Morris, in *The Age of Arthur: a History of the British Isles from 350 to 650* (page 232). See: Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History*, p.893; See also: Hopwood, p.7.

with words.[89] Tacitus describes a memorable confrontation between a Roman army and Welsh Druids, in his 2nd century *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.[90] Around the same time, Julius Caesar spoke of the lengthy education given by druids to younger initiates through the recitation of poetry.[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 *cynghanedd*, Hopkins began work creating his own through Sprung Rhythm. The maestro in him set about orchestrating concerts of sound with his verse, favouring *cynghanedd sain*.[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.'[93] Other examples include, 'The road with its load of lads,'[94] and the wonderful example mentioned in Mererid Hopwood's illuminating book, *Singing in Chains*, Fred Flinstone's renowned catchcry: 'Yabba Dabba Doo!'[95]

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[89] Ross, p.59.

[90] *ibid*., p.41.

[91] Caesar wrote in the *Gallic War*: *Magnum ibi nnumerum 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, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century*, p.3.

[92] Gwyn Wiliams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century*, p.245.

[93] Philip Davies Roberts, *How Poetry Works*, Penguin, London, 1988, p.277.

[94] Gwyn Wiliams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century*, p.245.

[95] There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Fred Flintstone predates Taleisin and Aneirin in the use of *Cynghanedd Sain*. See: Hopwood, p.85.

To train our ears to hear these chimes, Hopkins suggested speaking aloud the nursery rhyme, 'Ding Dong Bell':[96]

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.'[97] 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.[98] Sprung rhythm, to him, was the artisan's expertise in knowing how to generate a more lustrous shine of music from those spoken words.[99]

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 *cynghanedd sain*, but he does so while adhering

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[96] Mariani, p.331.

[97] Cary H. Plotkin, 'Victorian Religious Poetry' in *The Columbia History of British Poetry*, Carl Woodring (ed.), Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p.471.

[98] *ibid.*

[99] *ibid.*

to the structure of a Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet.[100] In the second quatrain of the

sonnet's octave we hear his chimes:

> 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.[101]

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.'[102] Perhaps the

bass notes of *cynghanedd* 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

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[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 *abba, abba*, whereby an argument is presented. The solution occurs with a turn, or volta, marked by a sestet of two tersets with a rhyming pattern *cdc dcd*. See: *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, p.312.

[101] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur' in *Seven Centuries of Poetry in English*, 5th edn, John Leonard (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p.218.

[102] Michael Wolfe, *The Hadj: An American's Pilgrimage to Mecca*, Grove Press, New York, 1993, p.94.

studied him.[103] 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.[104]

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.[105] 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.[106]

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.[107] 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.'[108] Whenever faced with the harsh realities of life, Thomas

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[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.[109] 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.[110] There he had journeyed west from the city of Swansea towards the warmth

and community of rural Wales, where the Celtic tongue predominated.[111] 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.[112]

In many respects 'Fern Hill' is considered one of the most complete poems

Thomas wrote, and remains popular with general readers.[113] Put simply, it is a celebration

of the innocence of childhood, surrounded by safety despite the absence of adults

appearing in the verse.[114] Structurally, its poetic form falls comfortably into the pastoral –

following the traditions of Theocritus in singing the virtues of rural life.[115] 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

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[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.
[115] *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, Mark Strand and Eavan Boland (eds), W. W. Norton & Company, United States of America, 2001, p.207.

the numerous questions concealed there.[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.'[117] For all its merits of mimicking the pastoral, it cannot be fully absorbed into English traditions because of its Welshness.[118] It is, in Davies' understanding, an 'interstitial' poem - situated, as Bhabha would suggest, at the interface between one literary tradition and another.[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.[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:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs

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[116] *ibid.*, p.208.

[117] James A. Davies, 'Questions of Identity' in *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, John Goodby and Chris Wigginton (eds), Palgrave, 2001, p.165.

[118] *ibid.*, p.165.

[119] *ibid.*, p.164.

[120] *ibid.*, p.169.

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

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[121] Dylan Thomas, 'Fern Hill' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus: Under Milk Wood, Poems, Stories, Broadcasts*, Walford Davies et. al. (eds), Phoenix, London, 1995, p.118.

Welsh, nor the metrical systems from its literary traditions.[122] 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.[123]

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.'[124] 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.[125] Thomas had sources close enough to the Welsh tradition – his friends, his father - to tell him all he needed to know about *cynghanedd*.[126] 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.[127]

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.[128] In 'Fern Hill' we see Thomas' version use assonance (italicised) and consonance (underlined) in the following

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[122] Harvey Gross, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, The University of Michigan Press, United States, 1965, p.268.

[123] Lycett, p.117.

[124] Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, 2001, p.125.

[125] Walford Davies, p.97.

[126] *ibid.*

[127] *ibid.*

[128] Gwyn Wiliams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century*, p.245.

manner, *assonance…consonance : consonance…assonance*, in the first line and
alliteration (highlighted in bold) in the second:

> *Now* as I was yo<u>ung</u> and easy <u>un</u>der the apple *bough*s
>
> About the lilting **h**ouse and **h**appy as the **g**rass was **g**reen…[129]

Again, they sound in the second stanza:

> And **g**reen and **g**old*en* I was **h**unt<u>sman</u> and **h**erd<u>sman</u>, the calves
>
> Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked **c**lear and **c***old*…[130]

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):[131]

> Now as I was young and <u>easy</u> under the apple boughs
>
> About the lilting house and <u>happy</u> as the grass was green,
>
> The night above the dingle <u>starry</u>…[132]

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

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[129] Dylan Thomas, 'Fern Hill' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.118.

[130] *ibid*.

[131] Harvey Gross, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, The University of Michigan Press, United States, 1965, p.268.

[132] Dylan Thomas, 'Fern Hill' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.118.

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.[133]

Perhaps Thomas' most impressive employment of *cynghanedd groes* occurs in his poem, 'The Conversation of Prayers' also from *Deaths and Entrances*.[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:[135]

The conversation of **prayers** about to be <u>said</u>

By the child going to <u>bed</u> and the man on the **stairs**

Who climbs to his dying **love** in her high <u>room</u>,

The one not caring to <u>whom</u> in his sleep he will **move**…[136]

Whilst appreciation of Thomas' crafting of *cynghanedd* 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.[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

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[133] Hopwood, p.3.

[134] Gross, p.269.

[135] *ibid.*

[136] Dylan Thomas, 'The Conversation of Prayers' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.72.

[137] Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, 2001, p.124.

Thomas' craft, with words carefully chosen to link his ideas through sound and rhythm.[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.[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, *The Faerie Queen* (1590-96), it is believed to have its origins in the *ottava rima* stanza (a fourteenth century Italian form of narrative verse favoured by Giovanni Boccaccio).[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).[141] The rhyming scheme it follows is *ababbcbcc*.[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.

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[138] *ibid.*

[139] *ibid.*, p.125.

[140] *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, p.314.

[141] *ibid.*

[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.[143] Thomas had tried to grieve, but felt

the proper literary response was emotional detachment.[144] 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…[145]

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.[146] A sentiment echoed in

Celtic literary concerns, where W. B. Yeats likened the role of the Celtic poet to that of a

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[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.[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.'[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.'[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.[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:

> 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

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[147] Gwyn Wiliams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century*, p.4.
[148] Hooker, p.13.
[149] Dylan Thomas, 'After The Funeral' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.64.
[150] M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference – Twentieth Century Writing in Wales*, University of Wales
Press, Cardiff, 1992, p.33.

And fire green as grass.[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 spittled 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…[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 *Black Book of Carmarthen*.[153] Myrddin, pronounced in Welsh phonetics is *Mer-thin*; in English the name translates to Merlin – the shadowy figure of Arthurian legend.[154] The English form of Carmarthen translates to *Caerfyrddin* in Welsh - what better place for Thomas to accept his bardic responsibility than in *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 *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

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[151] Dylan Thomas, 'Fern Hill' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.118.

[152] Dylan Thomas, 'After The Funeral' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.64.

[153] Gwyn Wiliams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century*, p.39.

[154] *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.[155] 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…[156]

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:[157]

       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

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[155] Lycett, p.258.

[156] Dylan Thomas, 'This Side of the Truth' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.75.

[157] Walford Davies, p.61.

Of moving…[158]

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.[159] 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.[160] 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.

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[158] Dylan Thomas, 'This Side of the Truth' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.75.
[159] Ross, p.131.
[160] Stan Smith 'Dylan Thomas's Sour Grapes' in: *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, p.36.