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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 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

¹⁶¹ Linda R. Williams (ed.), *Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature: The Twentieth Century*, Bloomsbury, London, 1992, p.257.

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.'¹⁶³ Well, even Seneca once observed, '*Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae fuit* (There never was a great genius without a tincture of madness).'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.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.¹⁶⁶ In his epoch-making publication, *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'.¹⁶⁷ In forwarding a theory for arbitrary relationships between word and object, sign and signifier, Saussure helped lay the first foundations for Structuralism.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.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.¹⁷⁰ For someone in Thomas'

¹⁶³ Lycett, p.197.

¹⁶⁴ Adrian van Sinderen, *Blake The Mystic Genius*, Syracuse University Press, United States, 1949, p.44.

¹⁶⁵ John Peck and Martin Coyle, *Literary Terms and Criticism*, MacMillan Education, Hampshire, 1987, p.161.

¹⁶⁶ Stuart Sim, *Introducing Critical Theory*, Allen & Unwin, NSW, 2009, p.64.

¹⁶⁷ A 'Signifier' was a sign's sound or graphic image, and the 'Signified' was its concept or meaning. See: Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p.96.

¹⁶⁸ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, Pimlico, London, 2000, p.398.

¹⁶⁹ Mel Thompson, *Understand Philosophy*, Hodder Education, London, 2010, p.250.

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 prophesied in the *Mabinogi*, relations between these two cultures would always be fraught with problems. In the story, ‘Lludd and Llevellys’, 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 Llevellys’ in *The Mabinogion*, p.90.

¹⁷² *ibid.*, p.93.

¹⁷³ Wigginton, p.5.

writer from Nottingham, and Woolf a woman).¹⁷⁴ 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.¹⁷⁵ The Modern artist was, after all, one who was in exile.¹⁷⁶

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.¹⁷⁷ 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.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, Thomas' father had paid for him to receive elocution lessons to further erase any trace of Welsh identity in his speech.¹⁷⁹

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.'¹⁸⁰ Since Thomas spoke only English, it

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ William R. Everdell, *The First Moderns*, University of Chicago Press, London, 1998, p.9.

¹⁷⁶ M. Wynn Thomas, *Corresponding Cultures: The Two Literatures of Wales*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1999, p.75.

¹⁷⁷ Walford Davies, p.96.

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith (trans.), Routledge, Oxon., 2010, p.218.

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...¹⁸¹

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’

¹⁸¹ Dylan Thomas, ‘I Have Longed To Move Away’ in *Collected Poems 1934 – 1953*, Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (eds), J.M. Dent, London, 1994, p.53.

summation of Modernism's successor, the voice of a younger generation berating the immediate past in order to assert identity.¹⁸² 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.¹⁸³ 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.¹⁸⁴

Thomas tells us why he wants to leave:

I have longed to move away
From the repetition of salutes...¹⁸⁵

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

¹⁸² Richard Appignanesi and Chris Garratt, *Introducing Post-Modernism*, Allen & Unwin, New South Wales, 2007, p.3.

¹⁸³ John Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.94.

¹⁸⁴ James A. Davies, *Dylan Thomas' Swansea, Gower and Laugharne*, p.31.

¹⁸⁵ Dylan Thomas, 'I Have Longed To Move Away' in *Collected Poems 1934 – 1953*, p.53.

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:

I have longed to move away but am afraid;
Some life, yet unspent, might explode
Out of the old lie burning on the ground,
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

¹⁸⁶ *Selected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, Constantine Fitzgibbon (ed.), J.M. Dent & Sons, London, 1966, p.36.

¹⁸⁷ Dylan Thomas, 'I Have Longed To Move Away' in *Collected Poems 1934 – 1953*, p.53.

¹⁸⁸ Dylan Thomas, 'The Fight' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.195.

In 1934 *The Sunday Referee*, a London-based newspaper printed Thomas' first volume of poetry, *18 Poems*.¹⁸⁹ Thomas had won an annual poetry competition with the periodical that year, and his success as a poet in London was almost instantaneous.¹⁹⁰ 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.¹⁹¹ 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.¹⁹² 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.'¹⁹³

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 orientalisising to Thomas' treatment.

¹⁸⁹ Thomas B. Flanagan, *An Outline of British Literature Since 1900*, Forum House, London, 1970, p.108.

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.¹⁹⁴ 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.¹⁹⁵ Thomas had attempted to contrast the light inhabiting our outer universe, with the dark fears that reside within.¹⁹⁶ 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...¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) was a French poet who, in his book of poems *The Illustrations* (1886), reveals his longing for spiritual values in a materialistic world. See: *The Literature Lover’s Companion: Who Wrote What When*, Nancy E. M. Bailey et. al. (eds), Geddes & Grosset, New Lanark, 2005, p.515.

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.¹⁹⁸ There in the night sky, facing out towards the Atlantic, the poet whispers prophetically, we can survive Death through unity with nature.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.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.’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’.²⁰²

Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again...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.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁸ Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.87.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel*, Penguin, Victoria, 2002, p.161.

²⁰¹ Kant says this in his aesthetic theory on the sublime. See: *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, p.353.

²⁰² Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.87.

²⁰³ Dylan Thomas, ‘And death shall have no dominion’ in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.51.

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

²¹² John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' in *Seven Centuries of Poetry in English*, 5th edn, p.291.

²¹³ Robert C. Solomon & Kathleen M. Higgins (eds), *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*, University Press of Kansas, United States of America, 1991, p.73.

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.'²¹⁵ 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.²¹⁶

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,'²¹⁷ 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

²¹⁵ Dylan Thomas, 'In my craft or sullen art' in *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus*, p.91.

²¹⁶ *ibid.*

²¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.92.

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.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.'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.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.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 *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 *cynghanedd*, as exemplified in the first quatrain of the fifth stanza:²²²

And from the windy West came two-gunned Gabriel,

²¹⁸ Lycett, p.313.

²¹⁹ *ibid.*

²²⁰ *ibid.*, p.182.

²²¹ Flanagan, p.111.

²²² Gross, pp.265-266.

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...²²³

For this, Thomas is criticised for having foregone the logical structuring of this form for an inclusion of a surge of emotional content.²²⁴ 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 Petrarchan (*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.²²⁵ 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.²²⁶ 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.'²²⁷ 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.’²²⁸ 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.’²²⁹ Michael Roberts felt Thomas’ poetry to be a ‘mere riot of noise...[with] uncontrolled verbal associations.’²³⁰ 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.²³¹ And it was here that Robert Graves described Thomas as ‘nothing more than a Welsh demagogic masturbator who failed to pay his bills.’²³² 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.²³³

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.²³⁴ In private he lampooned Thomas as a

²²⁸ *ibid.*

²²⁹ *ibid.*

²³⁰ *ibid.*

²³¹ Foucault examines the ‘monsterring’ of criminals in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) pp.100-101. See: *ibid.*

²³² *ibid.*

²³³ Garrod Roberts, Harri, *Embodying Identity – Representation of the Body in Welsh Literature*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p.97.

²³⁴ James A. Davies, ‘Questions of Identity’ in *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, John Goodby and Chris Wigginton (eds), Palgrave, 2001, pp.160-161.

charlatan: ‘a dissolute... frog [who wrote] limericks.’²³⁵ 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.’²³⁶

Amis, educated at Oxford University, established a lifelong friendship with fellow Oxford graduate and almost Poet Laureate, Philip Larkin.²³⁷ 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.²³⁸ 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.’²³⁹

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.

²³⁶ James A. Davies, ‘Questions of Identity’ in *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, p.161.

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.

²³⁹ James A. Davies, ‘Questions of Identity’ in *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, p.160.

mentioned, both ‘rural and industrial.’²⁴⁰ The Carmarthenshire countryside, with its agricultural communities and age-old traditions, were minutes away from Swansea.²⁴¹ 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.²⁴² 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 prophesied as a youth, burning on the ground, eventually exploded: his hometown of Swansea underwent three successive nights of bombing in February 1941.²⁴³ 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.²⁴⁴ 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.’²⁴⁵ *Hiraeth* soon came, that unique yearning the Welsh have for home.²⁴⁶ 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.