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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 Four: A Copernican Revolution near Milk Wood

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

- El Puento Nuevo, Ronda, Andalucia.

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

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<sup>247</sup> Walford Davies, p.91.

<sup>248</sup> Holbrook wrote these words in an essay, 'Metaphor and Maturity: T. F. Powys and Dylan Thomas,' in the 1961 *Pelican Guide to English Literature*. See: T. H. Jones, p.91.

<sup>249</sup> Lycett, p.448.

<sup>250</sup> Ross, p.243.

<sup>251</sup> *ibid.*

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

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

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<sup>252</sup> Walford Davies, p.90.

<sup>253</sup> Ross, p.248.

<sup>254</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2002, p.62.

<sup>255</sup> *ibid.*

Previously, Structuralism had sought to examine the particular structures that had helped generate meaning within a body of work (rather than focusing on the inherent meaning itself).<sup>256</sup> Post-structuralism attempted a different approach; its primary concern was to focus on the way literature itself subverted this enterprise, therefore challenging the notion of binary oppositions.<sup>257</sup> Suddenly, the ‘so what’ questions were not only attractive: they had become relevant. Through this deconstructing process the polarity of common opposites could, for example, be reversed, allowing the second half of any polarity to be seen as ‘privileged.’<sup>258</sup> Previously marginalised ‘others’ – such as the perspectives of females, migrants and those colonised by Imperial powers – could adopt the central position once assumed by the ‘self.’<sup>259</sup> Language, and the way each of us uses it, it was argued, operated in this way – multi-faceted, slippery, unstructured, harbouring within each individual understanding a unique universe, reflecting our own existential reality.<sup>260</sup> The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein had also stressed that such variations were all equally valid, likening them to the games we play: sometimes there are rules, sometimes there aren’t, and sometimes the rules even become hybridic, but due to the relational resemblances between all games, they each remain a game nonetheless.<sup>261</sup>

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

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<sup>256</sup> Linda R. Williams (ed.), *Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature: The Twentieth Century*, p.258.

<sup>257</sup> Gary Day, *Modernist Literature 1890-1950*, York Press, London, 2010, p.191.

<sup>258</sup> Barry, p.74.

<sup>259</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe et al (eds), 4<sup>th</sup> rev edn, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., United Kingdom, 2009, p.36 [§66].

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

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

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<sup>262</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, Oxon., 1994, pp.312-313.

<sup>263</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>264</sup> *ibid.*, p.313.

<sup>265</sup> Rowe, p.68.

<sup>266</sup> James A. Davies, *Dylan Thomas’ Swansea, Gower and Laugharne*, p.103.

explored when we consider just how complex James Joyce's almost Heideggerean 'destruktion' of the novel genre actually was.<sup>267</sup> Other than Joyce trying to condense the whole of human experience into a single day (16<sup>th</sup> June 1904), there was no plot to *Ulysses*. The narrative voice following his main character, the anti-hero, Leopold Bloom, was expressed through a stream of consciousness.<sup>268</sup> Furthermore, Joyce had drawn from established European cultural and literary traditions in an attempt to enrich his portrayal of ordinary life.<sup>269</sup> All this against a backdrop of early twentieth-century urban life in Dublin, contrasted with a rural mentality embedded in a collective psyche still adjusting to life after the industrial revolution.<sup>270</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>268</sup> Everdell, p.301.

<sup>269</sup> Day, p.89.

<sup>270</sup> *ibid.*

produce something original.<sup>271</sup> Just as heteroglossia describes the complex interweaving of dialogue and description common to the novel genre, Thomas deliberately employs this technique throughout *Under Milk Wood*. It is a play intended to be heard, rather than seen (like so many of the radio broadcasts Thomas wrote for the BBC), and encapsulates cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the multivocal narrative. There is a polyphony of voices in this depiction of life in Wales, each voice engaged in a dialogic exchange with the other and with the listener, and presented through the subtle use of parody and humour - as seen in the *carnavalesque* of Medieval laughter - and set in an insular, fictitious village.<sup>272</sup> And there is also Thomas' precursory solution to the structural opposition of being either centred or marginalised, through the simultaneous reversing of both perspectives through his characters in the decentered universe of Milk Wood. With such a myriad of activity gesticulating for attention in *Under Milk Wood* this investigation requires a point of origin from which to depart – for this, I turn to the author for his advice.

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

To begin at the beginning:

It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the  
cobblestreets silent and the hunched, courtiers'-and-rabbits' wood limping invisible  
down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Bhabha, p.312.

<sup>272</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Michael Holquist (ed.), University of Texas Press, Austin, 1996, p.72.

<sup>273</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, Dent, London, 1983, p.1.

Immediately we are taken to the small seaside places to which Thomas had access. Whether or not the fictitious town of Llareggub (a word play across two languages: read backwards the apparently Welsh named ‘Llareggub’ translates into ‘bugger all’) was based on one actual place remains unclear. However, what seems more likely, is that Thomas drew from his rural experiences of Welsh coastal towns, from places where he’d grown up along the Gower coastline, such as Mumbles (which in Thomas’ day was inhabited by a quota of retired seamen and other characters), and New Quay (where he lived with his family during 1944 & 1945) and, of course, to his home until he died, Laugharne.<sup>274</sup> Sketches of the imagined town in Thomas’ notebooks have their topography firmly based on New Quay.<sup>275</sup> While his descriptions of Laugharne also share similarities, ‘a timeless, beautiful, barmy [both spellings] town... a legendary lazy little black-magical bedlam by the sea.’<sup>276</sup>

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

The houses are blind as moles (though moles see fine to-night in the snouting, velvet dingles) or blind as Captain Cat there in muffled middle by the pump and the town clock, the shops in mourning, the Welfare Hall in widows’ weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound town are sleeping now.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> James A. Davies, *Dylan Thomas’ Swansea, Gower and Laugharne*, pp.103-104.

<sup>275</sup> *ibid.*, p.104.

<sup>276</sup> This description appeared as a broadcast titled ‘Laugharne’ and was recorded by the BBC, and broadcast on November 5<sup>th</sup> 1953 – the day Thomas collapsed in New York. See: *ibid.*, p.102.

<sup>277</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, Dent, London, 1983, p.1.

Crucially, the First Voice also wishes to impart, with us as an audience, what insight it can:

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

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

Time passes. Listen. Time passes.<sup>278</sup>

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

Come closer now.

Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night. Only you can see, in the blinded bedrooms, the coms and petticoats over the chairs, the jugs and basins, the glasses of teeth, Thou Shalt Not on the wall... Only you can hear and see...<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> *ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>279</sup> *ibid.*, p.3.

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

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

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<sup>280</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.242.

learn exactly what they dream of: two dead husbands, babies and nothing, respectively.<sup>282</sup>

It is almost as if Thomas has fated his characters to live in the same kind of dichotomy that tried to govern him. Either his characters have a parochial sense of existence localised to Llareggub, or they have an awareness of life outside the Welsh town.

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

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

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<sup>282</sup> Mrs Ogmore-Pritchard dreams of ordering her two dead husbands, Mr Ogmore and Mr Pritchard, to perform household chores. See: Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, Dent, London, 1983, pp.13-15. (We hear the dreams of Polly Garter and Nogood Boyo on page 21 of the same text.)

<sup>283</sup> Bryan Magee, *The Story of Philosophy*, DK Publishing, New York, 2001, p.64.

<sup>284</sup> Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.207.

and commanding knowledge about Welsh culture. No other character appears interested in seeking an alternative world-view, and no other character from Llareggub engages in conversation concerning the Copernican paradigm. Moreover, much like the Copernican supporters during the Renaissance, such as Giordano Bruno, Johannes Kepler and Galileo, who were forced to safeguard their understanding of such a system for fear of persecution, Captain Cat and Reverend Eli Jenkins do not share their knowledge either. Both characters already inhabit the fringes of Llareggub, marginalised from the centre, with the sea captain only able to talk about his travels with ghosts, while the bardic scholar confines his consciousness of Welsh history to journals and poems. Such a depiction of the two demonstrates Jacob Bronowski's observation that the cast of temperament and mind that underlies any culture can be found in its astronomical outlook.<sup>285</sup>

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

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

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<sup>285</sup> Jacob Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man*, BBC Books, Great Britain, 2011, p.145.

<sup>286</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, Dent, London, 1983, p.3.

<sup>287</sup> *ibid.*, p.37.

Sitting at an open window, Captain Cat is able to observe the whole town's morning unfold, literally with his eyes closed:

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

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

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<sup>288</sup> *ibid.*, pp.39-40.

<sup>289</sup> *ibid.*, p.64.

<sup>290</sup> Stephen Law, *Philosophy*, DK Publishing, London, 2007, p.78.

<sup>291</sup> James Garvey, *The Twenty Greatest Philosophy Books*, Continuum, London, 2006, p.13.

person among the fools is shunned.<sup>292</sup> Evidence of this is clear in *Under Milk Wood*, when after being told by Rosie Probert's ghost to remember her, because she is 'going into the darkness of the darkness forever',<sup>293</sup> Captain Cat is seen crying by a child but the child's mother does nothing to comfort him:

CHILD: Captain Cat is crying

FIRST VOICE: Captain Cat is crying

CAPTAIN CAT: Come back, come back,

FIRST VOICE: up the silences and echoes of the passage of the eternal night.

CHILD: He's crying all over his nose.

FIRST VOICE: says the child. Mother and child move on down the street.

If Captain Cat can be understood as some kind of blind seer, a mouthpiece for Thomas' literary understandings of other blind kinsmen common to English classical traditions – such as T. S. Eliot's ability in persuading Tiresias, the blind prophet of Ancient Greece, to guide us through 'The Wasteland,' or even the poet John Milton (who lost his sight during work on *Paradise Lost*) – then the Reverend Eli Jenkins can be said to represent those of the Welsh. The poet and preacher dreams of 'eisteddfodau' – the plural form of the Welsh *eisteddfod*, which originally was part of the cultural and religious life in sixteenth century Wales, providing a forum through either music or poetry for those in the bardic profession.<sup>294</sup> Where Captain Cat has left Llareggub to develop his other awareness, Eli Jenkins has not; he has stayed in Wales but is culturally

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<sup>292</sup> Law, p.79.

<sup>293</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, Dent, London, 1983, p.66.

<sup>294</sup> Ross, p.130.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>295</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, Dent, London, 1983, p.23.

<sup>296</sup> *ibid.*, p.68.

<sup>297</sup> Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.255.

drama.<sup>298</sup> Perhaps the best example is when the Reverend writes his final comments for the day, concluding:

Llareggub Hill, that mystic tumulus, the memorial of peoples that dwelt in the region of Llareggub before the Celts left the Land of Summer and where the old wizards made themselves a wife out of flowers.<sup>299</sup>

The wife made out of flowers refers directly to Blodeuwedd, a female character from the *Mabinogi*.<sup>300</sup> In the story of '*Math fab Mathonwy*' (the same narrative in which Thomas' own namesake is born) Blodeuwedd is created from the 'blossoms of the oak, and the blossoms of the broom, and the blossoms of the meadow-sweat...[producing] a maiden, the fairest and most graceful that man ever saw.'<sup>301</sup>

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

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<sup>298</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>299</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, Dent, London, 1983, p.76.

<sup>300</sup> Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.256.

<sup>301</sup> *The Mabinogion*, p.74.

encountered in English it is frequently mispronounced as ‘Cherry’. It is almost as if Thomas has intended to parody both an English speaking audience and the error itself – with the joke only apparent to those with some minimum form of exposure to Welsh and English.

T. H. Jones is another to comment on Thomas’ nimble application of humour, particularly in his application of parody. Jones comments, ‘The characters are admittedly drawn by a caricaturist’s rather than a portrait’s hand, but that hand is skilful and incisive.’<sup>302</sup> Thomas has drawn on the techniques of Caradoc Evans in providing us with characters we are able to laugh at, but has parodied their innocence with such tenderness and compassion that they become much closer to the originals as a result.<sup>303</sup> Again, the Reverend Eli Jenkins exemplifies this when he stops outside the Welfare Hall and listens to Polly Garter singing as she scrubs the floor for the Mother’s Union Dance. The song she sings is a lament, appearing honest in its sincerity for sexual longing and her reminiscence about past lovers.<sup>304</sup> Seemingly oblivious to its content, we hear the minister exclaim with unbridled joy, ‘Praise the Lord! We are a musical nation.’<sup>305</sup> The parodying is complete when we are informed that he then ‘hurries on through the town to visit the sick with jelly and poems.’<sup>306</sup>

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

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<sup>302</sup> T. H. Jones, p.92.

<sup>303</sup> *ibid.*, p.93.

<sup>304</sup> Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.254.

<sup>305</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, Dent, London, 1983, p.51.

<sup>306</sup> *ibid.*

– with Richard Burton reading Thomas’ role of the First Voice – the Welsh Home Service refused to broadcast it again, citing the play was not suitable ‘for family of home listening.’<sup>307</sup> As Andrew Lycett observes, little had moved on since the days of Caradoc Evans: those chapel-goers affronted by *Under Milk Wood* rejected all suggestions of Welsh hypocrisy and instead chose only to see malicious satire.<sup>308</sup> Similarly, David Holbrook believed it bore no realistic or moral resemblance to any town or village, projecting, instead, a kind of Toy Town fabrication from an artist lacking skill in his art.<sup>309</sup> This stemmed, according to Holbrook, from Thomas’ inability to understand what ‘genius’ meant; such aspirations were for people like Joyce who could concentrate expression into a single word, hitting the target once rather than peppering it with clichés such as ‘fishingboat-bobbing sea.’<sup>310</sup> For all the sensitive affection that Thomas used in creating his drama, only the hindrance of prejudice – either through insularity or pedantry – could have overlooked such craft and subsequently miss what potential was possibly living beneath the surface of his text.

And there is still so much happening there. If we look closely enough we can find a set of variations on the theme of love. Arguably, the drama can be read as a Welsh interpretation of Plato’s *Symposium*. Just as Plato’s dramatic dialogues concern themselves with a series of speeches in praise of love, the same could be said of Thomas’ characters. We can witness such variations in the way Captain Cat remembers Rosie Probert, we can see maternal love in the way Polly Garter feels for her babies, we can

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<sup>307</sup> Lycett, p.442.

<sup>308</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>309</sup> David Holbrook, ‘A Place of Love: Under Milk Wood’ in *Dylan Thomas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, C.B. Cox (ed.), Prentice-Hall Inc, New Jersey, 1966, pp.116.

<sup>310</sup> *ibid.*, p.106.

hear the lascivious yearning Sinbad Sailors has for Gossamer Beynon.<sup>311</sup> The erotic and the idealised forms of love – *eros* and *agape* – are very much alive in the lives of the characters of Llareggub, along with their varying understandings of the appreciation and desire of beauty.<sup>312</sup> Even the prickly marriage of Mr and Mrs Pugh finds itself underpinned by the notion of *philia*, the fondness in friendship and desire for the good of another – each needs the other in order to remain unhappily married; her nagging and his plotting could not endure otherwise.<sup>313</sup>

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

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<sup>311</sup> T. H. Jones, p.95.

<sup>312</sup> Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.263.

<sup>313</sup> T. H. Jones, p.95.

<sup>314</sup> Plato, 'Symposium' in *The Dialogues of Plato*, Benjamin Jowett (trans.), University of Chicago, Chicago, 1952, p.158 [§192].

<sup>315</sup> *ibid.*, pp.157-158 [§190].

<sup>316</sup> *ibid.*, p.158 [191].

<sup>317</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>318</sup> Please refer to the passage concerning Note 288 above.

even mentioned Shakespeare's similar incorporation of Plato's graduations on love in his play, *Twelfth Night*.

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

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

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<sup>319</sup> Alistair Wisker, *T. S. Eliot: A Beginner's Guide*, Hodder & Stroughton, Oxon, 2007, p.3.

<sup>320</sup> *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, John Goodby and Chris Wigginton (eds), Palgrave, 2001, p.8.

<sup>321</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>322</sup> *ibid.*

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

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

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<sup>323</sup> John Peck and Martin Coyle, *Literary Terms and Criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, MacMillan Education, Hampshire, 1993, p.179.

<sup>324</sup> John Goodby, 'The Later Poems and *Under Milk Wood*' in *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, John Goodby and Chris Wigginton (eds), Palgrave, 2001, p.215.

<sup>325</sup> *ibid.*, p.214.

<sup>326</sup> Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, p.265.

Alongside Thomas, as equals, in Bloom's pantheon are R.S. Thomas, Philip Larkin, James Joyce and Robert Graves.<sup>327</sup>

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

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<sup>327</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, Papermac, London, 1995, pp.548-555.