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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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Conclusion

*I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on
in the world between the covers of books,
such sandstorms and ice blasts of words...
such staggering peace, such enormous laughter,
such and so many blinding bright lights...
splashing all over the pages
in a million bits and pieces
all of which were words, words, words,
and each of which were alive forever
in its own delight and glory and oddity and light.*

- *Notes on the Art of Poetry* (Dylan Thomas)

One of the most iconic portraits of the writer Dylan Thomas hangs at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. Indeed, it is perhaps the most famous. Painted in the autumn of 1938 by Welsh artist, Augustus John (a name that later became entangled with the legend that came to surround Thomas' private life), it has been described as portraying Thomas as a 'narrowed-faced Renaissance courtier.'³²⁸ In fact, this was John's second attempt to capture an impression of Thomas. The first version had lacked something, bringing the artist a measure of dissatisfaction and causing him to try again.³²⁹ It is difficult to speculate on what it was that John felt he had initially missed. Perceptive artists are gifted not only in their ability to recreate images of others, but also in their sensitivity to perceive a true likeness for an individual. As Kenneth Clarke once observed, art has an almost prophetic nature to it – and maybe for an artist as talented as John he was able to sense the severity of oscillations brewing within Thomas.³³⁰ Trying to define the essence of Dylan Thomas, however, was never going to be easy because Thomas himself didn't really know, and the society to which he belonged wasn't quite sure either.

³²⁸ Lycett, p.202.

³²⁹ *ibid.*

³³⁰ Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation*, Penguin Books, London, 1987, p.106.

It wasn't until after the end of the Second World War, sometime in those transitional years when a waning of Modernism began to subside into the first tides of Post-Modernism, that Thomas was able to recognise and define himself in his own terms. He did this through a long, and possibly painful, process of mimicry. A time in which he compromised his true self, possibly even elements of his art, through a discourse of ambivalence – evident in the body of writing which remains today. In his poems we are able to see the two cultures to which Thomas experienced a belonging: those literary traditions of both Wales and England.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha claims that in order to be authenticated, mimicry must produce a kind of excess - almost an exaggeration of what is being mimicked, thereby making it different.³³¹ In the poetry of Thomas we are able to see his attempts to follow the two cultures he felt adrift from, producing notable differences as a result. This alienation, as Bhabha suggests, is the partial and conflicted presence of those two cultures, giving the work an appearance of being incomplete.³³² Thomas' attempt to assume the bardic role of a community commentator, often incorporating Welsh metrics of *cynghanedd* to English verse, is impressive. Yet it is not exact. This inexactitude may be due to either an unyielding form of fabric within the English language itself, or of Thomas' borrowed understanding of the fixed metrical pattern from Welsh speakers, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins.³³³ Similarly with an errant desire to align himself to literary London, Thomas managed to alienate himself from his

³³¹ Bhabha, p.122.

³³² *ibid.*, p.123.

³³³ Linda R. Williams (ed.), *Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature: The Twentieth Century*, p.314.

Welsh upbringing and came to mimic a self-promoting image of the Romantic poet in English society.³³⁴ This posturing, in part, was due to his inclusion of the natural world in his work (unintentional or not), at a time when the urban realist was seeking meaning in the material settings common to cities like London. As in the paintings of Edward Hopper, a Modern audience was invited in to the cold isolation of contemporary urbanity, to search, with the artist, for possible solutions to life there. Alas for Thomas, all the songs for the countryside had already been sung. But sing them he did.

It was the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who claimed that ‘freedom is always a meeting of the inner and the outer.’³³⁵ In the case of Dylan Thomas, this seems to have occurred when he embraced his own hybrid nature, and transformed it into something which distinguished him as a unique voice: the drama *Under Milk Wood*. The ambivalence he seemed to display towards both Welsh and English literary traditions earlier in his career later mellowed and harmonised. What he produced was a narrative providing a solution to his double-consciousness, through a precursory negotiation of post-structuralism using the heteroglossia of voices sounding within him, in between the strain of binary tension. As an audience we are able to experience this sense of being marginalised as well as being central to society: the peculiarity of all borderline existences.³³⁶ As a person, Thomas was able to express this duality because literature provided such a space. As he said, it became ‘the record of my individual struggle from

³³⁴ *ibid.*, p.314.

³³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, p.528.

³³⁶ Bhabha, p.312.

darkness towards some measure of light...[even] useful to others for its individual recording of that same struggle.’³³⁷

The work of Dylan Marlais Thomas endures as more than a memoir to this struggle. To recapitulate W.E.B. du Bois’ comments about double-consciousness, we are able to see and feel his twoness, his two souls, his two thoughts, his two unreconciled strivings.³³⁸ The achievement of Dylan Thomas was in preventing that duality from tearing him apart.

³³⁷ T.H. Jones, p.20.

³³⁸ See note 9 above (Also: Du Bois, p.17).