

Childhood and Subjectivity in the Work of Dylan Thomas

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In a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson written during the April of 1934, Thomas describes '[t]he Sunday-walkers [who] have slunk out of the warrens in which they breed all the unholy week . . . and are now marching up the hill past my window'. He goes on:

Life passes the windows, and I hate it more minute by minute. I see the rehearsed gestures, the correct smiles, the grey cells revolving around nothing under the godly bowlers. I see the unborn children struggling up the hill in their mothers, beating on the jailing slab of the womb, little realising what a snugger prison they wish to leap into . . .¹

Of course, from a biographical perspective, it is easy to dismiss this description of Uplands' 'Sunday-walkers' as simply expressive of the young Dylan's feelings of frustration with the constraints of a provincial bourgeois respectability from which he was keen to escape.² Moreover, the air of smug superiority and detachment with which he makes his 'observations' seem all too clearly designed to impress.³ Such biographical considerations should not, however, be allowed to distract from what is clearly expressive of a more general dissatisfaction with the fundamental inadequacy of symbolism and symbolic expression. Manners and bodily gestures are, after all, themselves inscribed within symbolic systems, and Thomas's sense of their 'emptiness' constitutes an acerbic commentary on the way in which culture constructs our every act, investing each symbolic gesture with a meaning which is at once arbitrary and conventional. To Thomas, in a very modernist way, the social convention cementing the bond between signifier and signified is all too clearly revealed as convention; a convention which, far from guaranteeing access to an agreed 'real', traps us within an imprisoning simulacrum. Symbolic expression thus becomes nothing more than a series of 'empty', inauthentic gestures divorced from any meaningful context; a set of stifling social/symbolic codes which parallels the physical confinement of 'the unborn children'.

For Thomas, then, the conventional relationship between signifier and signified is an inadequate one; language is never simply a vehicle for conveying a prior meaning or anterior reality. In his early poetry, Thomas responds to this insight not by rejecting language, but by engaging with it ever more intensely, investing in the materiality of words so as to transform them into *things* and thereby both make words *real* and make the real *speak*. The second stanza of 'Especially when the October wind' provides a good example of this process:

Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark
On the horizon walking like the trees
The wordy shapes of women, and the rows
Of the star-gestured children in the park.
Some let me make you of the vowel'd beeches,
Some of the oaken voices, from the roots
Of many a thorny shire tell you notes,
Some let me make you of the water's speeches.⁴

Language and substance become intertwined in this stanza ('[t]he wordy shapes of women', 'the vowel'd beeches', 'the oaken voices'), so that the real world of things takes on the qualities of language, its ability to speak and construct meaning. In the process, the 'emptiness' of language as simple referent is itself 'filled' by its association (and even identification) with the reality of physical objects. Both signifiers and signifieds thus merge into a single physical entity whose meaning, in Walford Davies's words, 'is not divorcible from their simple physical presence' - what is termed in the poem's next stanza a 'neural meaning'.⁵ The poem therefore serves to fulfil Thomas's claim that 'When I experience anything, I experience it as a thing and a word at the same time, both equally amazing'.⁶ Words to Thomas thus possess material significance; they do not (or cannot) simply 'stand in' for the objects which they symbolise, but must be transformed through poetic effect into the thing itself.

One way of understanding this conjunction of word and thing is through Kristeva's conception of the 'true-real': what Toril Moi defines as 'the effort to formulate a truth that would *be* the *real* in the Lacanian sense of the term'. Moi continues:

The speaking subject in search of the 'true-real' no longer distinguishes between the sign and its referent in the usual Saussurian way, but takes the signifier for the real (treats the signifier as the real) in a move which leaves no space for the signified. This 'concretization' of the signifier is not only typical of modernist art, it is also a striking feature of the discourse of psychotic patients⁷

The 'concretization of the signifier' is, of course, an obvious feature of much of Thomas's poetry, in which the materiality of language - 'the hewn coils of his trade' as he terms it in 'Poem on his Birthday'⁸ - is repeatedly foregrounded. However, in deploying this theoretical paradigm, it is important not to homogenise the diversity of Thomas's poetic practice. If, for instance, much of Thomas's earlier poetry appears to have no objective referent, reifying the linguistic image itself, it is clear that as a conceptual category the 'true-real' is equally applicable to a poem such as 'Especially when the October wind', in which, despite the transformation of words into things, a recognisable 'real-world' referent continues to be evoked.

Indeed, despite a more general movement towards greater referentiality in Thomas's later poetry, the evocation of the Lacanian or 'true-real' remains a dominant concern. In contrast to the earlier work, however, which often provides a concrete enactment of language's materiality, in the later poetry the 'true-real' tends to be symbolised as loss, displaced into an idealised childhood which can only ever be provisionally recuperated in the space of the poem. The child who is the subject of these poems is an exemplar for the adult poet, subverting language's socialising impulse through his privileged and almost God-like relationship to the word. Far from experiencing it as a rigid and limiting system of differences, language to this child is a fluid, almost magical force reconciled to the physical and the experiential in a way which possesses endless creative possibilities. This is true not only of Thomas's poetry but of his prose writings as well. One of the most vivid examples of the potency of language, for instance, its ability to make the world real, to *be* the real, occurs in a passage in 'The Peaches'; a passage which conveys a continuity between (even an identification of) life and language through a breathless accumulation of physical images:

On my haunches, eager and alone, casting an ebony shadow, with the Gorsehill jungle swarming, the violent, impossible birds and fishes leaping, hidden under four-stemmed flowers the height of horses, in the early evening in a dingle near Carmarthen, my friend Jack Williams invisibly near me, I felt all my young body like an excited animal surrounding me, the torn knees bent, the bumping heart, the long heat and depth between the legs, the sweat prickling in the hands, the tunnels down to the eardrums, the little balls of dirt between the toes, the eyes in the sockets, the tucked-up voice, the blood racing, the memory around and within flying, jumping, swimming, and waiting to pounce. There, playing Indians in the evening, I was aware of me myself in the exact middle of a living story, and my body was my adventure and my name.⁹

Within some of Thomas's most famous and anthologised poems too (most notably 'Fern Hill' and 'Poem in October') childhood is figured as a period of plenitude and innocent bliss, all the more poignant for being, as Alan Bold comments, 'a paradise subsequently lost'.¹⁰ In the poetry, however, the 'double-voice' of such depictions - that is, of the adult poet recalling the unselfconscious child he once was - is far more apparent. Indeed, it is the contrast between these two voices (and the different perceptions of the world which each embodies) which 'Poem in October' attempts to delineate and eventually reconcile. In its nostalgic recuperation of a benign, creative childhood, the poem itself performs the function of a Lacanian mirror, restoring to the poem's subject his childhood sense of contained well-being:

These were the woods the river and sea
Where a boy
In the listening
Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy
To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.¹¹

The absence of punctuation between the various manifestations of nature ('the woods the river and sea'; 'the trees and the stones and the fish') creates a sense of contiguity, of a unity of nature. The regular anapestic rhythm of the line 'To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide' (the only line in the poem in which this rhythm is maintained throughout) also produces an incantatory effect, a sense that nature is being 'conjured' into existence. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the syntax allows for the possibility that the boy is both 'listener' and 'whisperer', engaged in a creative and self-affirming correspondence with nature. In addition to listening, nature itself 'speaks': 'And the mystery / Sang alive / Still in the water and singingbirds'. These lines suggest that it is the act of utterance itself which brings 'the mystery / . . . alive', and are foreshadowed in the poem's opening, where 'heaven / Woke to my hearing'.¹² The syntactical ambiguity implies that heaven is not just awake to the poet's hearing, it is awake (and wakes) *because* the poet *hears*. Similarly, Fern Hill vanishes as Thomas '[rides] to sleep', only to return on awakening 'like a wanderer white / With the dew'.¹³ As in 'Especially when the October wind', words and things become inextricably intertwined. Now, however, this privileged relationship with language is experienced as loss, located in the timeless world of the child who, in Nietzsche's words, 'plays in blissful blindness between the hedges of past and future'.¹⁴

These depictions of a 'fall' into a knowledge of death and time's destructiveness, of the painful and traumatic gap between the intuitively experienced plenitude of the child and the laborious labours of the 'mature' artist striving to

reconstruct this plenitude, bear an obvious resemblance to Lacan's account of the feelings of loss and fragmentation which entry into the symbolic order entails. Summarising Lacanian theory Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh comment:

[I]n the necessary acceptance of the subject-positions offered by language, the individual experiences a loss or lack because it is *subject to* the positions that are predefined for it and beyond its control. The sense of a full and unified subject is contradicted by a sense of being defined by the law of human culture.¹⁵

There is of course a fundamental problem in applying Lacanian theory to Thomas's childhood poems: the subject of these poems is already a subject of (and thus *subject to*) the law of language and culture. In the Lacanian narrative, the 'fall' has already occurred. Nevertheless, recent critics writing in the psychoanalytic tradition have stressed the significance of childhood as a state in which the trauma of the initial fall into language is reconciled through a narcissistic delight in the materiality of language and its creative potential. Thus, in an approach to Thomas's work heavily influenced by the writings of Kristeva and Lacan, Eynel Wardi argues that childhood, in its 'narcissistic state of contained, creative well-being', acts as 'a kind of a second mirror . . . which heals the rupture of the first and represses the anxiety of its consequent state of powerlessness'.¹⁶ An adolescent awareness of what Bakhtin terms the heteroglossia of language could thus be viewed as a second rupture, in which the subject becomes aware for the first time of *the different and conflicting* subject positions available within language and the necessity (and consequent feeling of loss) of having to choose one such position in the articulation of identity.

While extremely compelling in many respects, one problem with such a psychoanalytic account is the way in which it presents the transition from narcissistic childhood to adult differentiation in terms of a normative (and thus naturalised) developmental process; an ideological effacement which has had profound (and largely negative) implications for the ways in which Thomas has been critically received within English studies. Within this critical/ideological framework, for instance, Thomas's highlighting (particularly in the earlier poetry) of the fluidity of the signifying process and the materiality of language is seen as evidence of an unhealthy youthful obsession ('glandular compulsiveness' as Neil Corcoran terms it);¹⁷ a fetishistic substitution for (and thus refusal to let go of) the narcissistic plenitude of childhood or the pre-Oedipal. Such reductive Freudian readings typify much of Thomas criticism, the most notorious example being that of David Holbrook. In a vehement assault on Thomas's poetic reputation, Holbrook claims that there is a 'complete absence in his poetry of "inscape", organic rhythm, pattern, the true voice of poetry. And they are absent because there is no metaphorical discipline of art. It is all word-game, infantile babble, and as disarming as that.'¹⁸ It is worth noting straightaway how Holbrook's avowedly psychoanalytic account of Thomas's poetry masks a crude Leavisite conception of literature as the simple and unproblematical reflection of personality. Thus Thomas's failure as a poet is simply the product of an arrested personal development; a failure to 'mature'. This failure is itself related to a perceived lack of sincerity and authenticity: a predilection for 'word-game' and 'infantile babble'. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of Holbrook's critique is his reversal of Thomas's views on the emptiness and inauthenticity of symbolism - 'the rehearsed gestures' and 'correct smiles' of 'the Sunday-walkers' who began this paper. Whereas Thomas perceives an inherent lack in such language (which his poetic practice attempts to address), to Holbrook it is Thomas's subversion of language's referential qualities which actively produces this lack; a subversion which is again, for Holbrook, symptomatic of an arrested personal development, a failure to mature. To quote another critic, Russell Davies, with whom Holbrook would undoubtedly concur, '[I]t is a shallow and sickly pleasure that uses the possibilities of sound to thrust back sense from its only appointed place, within words.'¹⁹ If we examine the words of Davies and Holbrook, we find that their condemnation of the 'immature' Thomas evokes for its support a series of binary oppositions - presence/absence, depth/surface, truth/falsehood, sincerity/insincerity, the natural and the unnatural - which holds in place their whole conception of 'the mature' and what constitutes it. Thus, far from reflecting an objective category, maturity and its attributes are revealed as cultural constructs: the products of a 'depth' model of subjectivity which in recent years has been severely criticised. In attempting to naturalise this conception of the self and negate the threat which Thomas's poetry poses to it, Holbrook dismisses Thomas as shallow, artificial and insincere - that is, as immature.

While Holbrook might be seen as a rather extreme example, I would argue that even very recent psychoanalytic perspectives on Thomas often remain trapped within the same ideological criteria which they purport to reject. To understand why this is so, one need only turn to the connection posited between modernist culture and psychosis by Toril Moi above; a connection later elaborated in terms which echo those of Holbrook. Thus the language of 'borderline' patients, argues Moi, in a peculiarly postmodern or modernist way, appears 'empty': 'it is simply a screen hiding nothing. . . . [A]ll their utterances lack depth, and their stream of words . . . simply seem to be masking a void.'²⁰ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that even where (as in Wardi's case) a psychoanalytic perspective forms the basis for a largely positive appraisal of Thomas's work, there remains a tendency to present Thomas's poetic career in terms of a movement from what Corcoran terms 'mesmerised and self-obsessed narcissism'²¹ to a more mature, representational style. Within this narrative of Thomas's poetic development, the crucial transition is seen as being from an *enactment* of narcissistic identification in the semiotics of the early poetry to its *representation* in the later poetry through a symbolism which is also (necessarily) a recognition of its loss. Viewed in this way, a later poem such as 'Poem on his Birthday' which does not conform to this representational mode can be presented as a retrogressive step, a temporary and unwelcome retreat into narcissistic immaturity. Contrasting 'Poem on his Birthday' with 'Poem in October', for example, Wardi comments:

[U]nlike the hypercondensed, quasi-material . . . verbal construction which the 'Birthday' poet posits as if to hold on to as to a fetish, against his existential (maternal) anxiety, in 'Poem in October' there is more air. . . . The poet can let go, and be content with *symbolizing* his lost object instead of clinging to its fetishistic, material equivalent.²²

Thus, while Wardi provides a largely positive appraisal of Thomas's work (and one which thankfully remains anchored to the text), it is an appraisal in which the ideological criteria deployed by Holbrook remain undisturbed – indeed, are even actively legitimated.

It seems clear, then, that notions of maturity have served only to legitimate normative ideological categories within Thomas criticism, marking Thomas as deficient to the extent that he deviates from those categories. Moreover, the ideological foundations of such criticism remain perniciously active, even where (as in Wardi) they have been ostensibly repudiated. The challenge facing Thomas criticism today, I would argue, is to find new ways of discussing Thomas's poetry that avoid replicating the pathological criteria which concepts such as maturity all too readily evoke. In this respect, psychoanalysis still has much to offer – Kristeva's distinction between symbolic and semiotic modes of utterance, for instance, being one way in which Thomas's poetry could be more productively explored. Psychoanalytic accounts of Thomas need to be aware, however, of their own discursive histories and the ideological assumptions which underpin their analyses. To describe typically modernist phenomena in terms of pathology, for instance, seems to me a reductive and rather facile attempt at explication which merely serves to reinscribe Leavisite notions of personality and its literary expression in new, 'theorised' ways. Those who would deploy psychoanalytic terminology, I would suggest, need to adopt a more critical approach to their own discursive practice. It is only by doing so that psychoanalytic discourse will be able to transcend its normalising compulsions and achieve a more radical understanding of the *cultural* conditions in which subjectivity in Thomas's poetry (or any other poetry for that matter) is constituted.

Notes:

- 1 Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Letters*, ed. Paul Ferris [1985] (London: Paladin, 1987) 110-11.
- 2 In a letter of January 1933 to Trevor Hughes, Thomas explains his refusal to accept a job on a local newspaper: 'No, what I feared was the slow but sure stamping out of individuality, the gradual contentment with life as it was, so much per week, so much for this, for that': Thomas, *Letters* 10.
- 3 Thomas met Johnson in February 1934 and they quickly became friends (and later lovers). Johnson, who was soon to become a successful novelist, was two years older than Thomas. In his very first letter to her, however, Thomas lies about his age, claiming to be, like Johnson, twenty-one. See Thomas, *Letters* 20, 22.
- 4 Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953* [1988] (London: Everyman, 1993) 18-19.
- 5 Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986) 22.
- 6 Quoted by Alastair Reed in E. W. Tedlock (ed), *Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet* (London: Heinemann, 1960) 54.
- 7 Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 214.
- 8 Thomas, *Collected Poems* 145.
- 9 Dylan Thomas, 'The Peaches', in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* [1940], reprinted in *Collected Stories* [1983] (London: Everyman, 1993) 137-8 [my emphasis].
- 10 Alan Bold, 'Young Heaven's Fold: The Second Childhood of Dylan Thomas', in ed. Alan Bold, *Dylan Thomas: Craft or Sullen Art* (London: Vision Press, 1990) 159.
- 11 Thomas, *Collected Poems* 88.
- 12 *Ibid.* 86.
- 13 *Ibid.* 134.
- 14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* [1874], in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, intro. J. P. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 61.
- 15 Philip Rice & Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* [1989] (London: Arnold, 1996) 124.
- 16 Eynel Wardi, *Once Below a Time: Dylan Thomas, Julia Kristeva, and Other Speaking Subjects* (Albany: University of New York Press, 2000) 101.
- 17 Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993) 45.
- 18 David Holbrook, *Llareggub Revisited: Dylan Thomas and the State of Modern Poetry* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1962) 154.
- 19 Russell Davies, 'Fibs of Vision', *Review* (Autumn-Winter, 1971-72) 69. Quoted in Stuart Crehan, 'The Lips of Time', in *Dylan Thomas: Craft or Sullen Art* 42.
- 20 *Kristeva Reader* 239.
- 21 Corcoran, *op. cit.* 45.
- 22 Wardi, *op. cit.* 129.