

'Shut in a Tower of Words': Dylan Thomas's Modernism

Dr John Goodby with Chris Wigginton

*I never thought that localities meant so much, nor the genius of places, nor anything like that.*ⁱ

Dylan Thomas

'Seedy shifting': the critical legacy

In one of the more bizarre asides in 'The Function of Criticism', an essay which has come to look increasingly radical the more the notion of a unitary modernism is revised, T.S. Eliot observed that 'the possessors of the inner voice ride ten in a compartment to a football match at Swansea, listening to the inner voice which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear and lust. It is a voice to which, for convenience, we may give a name: and the name I suggest is Whiggery.'ⁱⁱ The claim is evidence of Eliot's rightward progression in the 1920s, a coincidental seizing on the birthplace of Dylan Thomas as a location for irredeemable provincialism. For Eliot, having Vetch Field rather than Little Gidding as a destination is a sure sign of the plebeian 'inner voice'; Swansea equals Dissent, industry, philistinism and possibly also internal British difference, a would-be insider's put-down to distract from his self-fashioning as classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion. Yet the slur cuts both ways, and can equally be said to furnish a starting-point for a consideration of Thomas's poetry and its relationship to modernist precursors like Eliot himself. In this essay we shall argue that while Thomas was, in several ways, the closest of his generation to *The Waste Land* and the essays on the Metaphysicals and Renaissance dramatists, so his work also acts as a form of punishment for high modernist condescension, embodying as it does the fear expressed in *Sweeney Agonistes* that life is no more than 'birth and copulation and death'. It will, we hope, be shown that this kind of uncertain and dual relationship with other writers and texts - close yet critical, derivative yet strikingly original - is a key aspect of Thomas's work and its reworking of modernism.

In order to do this we will look at the poetry most influenced by modernism, that from the first three collections; *18 Poems* (1934), *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936) and *The Map of Love* (1939). The stress will be on its liminal and hybrid qualities, its negotiations of constructions of Welshness through a Gothicised, even grotesque modernism, set in the context of the New Country reaction against modernist experimentalism and the social crisis of the 1930s. We will end with a brief consideration of the transition between the often gnomic compression of the earlier poetry and the more accessible later style, suggesting some connections between Thomas's use of voice and his continuing resonance within popular culture. In adopting these approaches we are conscious that a serious understanding of the poetry - perhaps more than with any other modern poet of equivalent stature - has been delayed by the lack of renewal of older critical paradigms. These, largely of a New Critical/ Leavisite and/or Freudian vintage, remain difficult to deal with because of their collusion with the vast quantities of biography, reminiscence and anecdote, a situation exacerbated by his position between Welsh national(ist), English/British, and international identities. Thomas's iconic status as self-doomed poet and the assault on it - most notoriously by Amis and Holbrook - also continues to make impartial critical assessment difficult, and has tended to confine the best recent criticism to a lucid but wary empiricism.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is no coincidence that the decline in interest in Thomas since the late 1960s dates from the rise of critical theory as a major force in the academy; acceptance of negative assessments of his work was all too easy for those involved in the deconstructionist assault on phonocentrism. Interestingly, Thomas's critical fortunes resemble those suffered until recently by (post)colonial and Irish literatures, for long the safe havens of those unwilling to come to terms with the newer critical methodologies. This, in itself, would suggest that he is overdue for the kinds of reading which are now proving so fruitful in these formerly neglected areas. For over two decades, in fact, those outside the narrow world of Anglo-Welsh literary studies have charted an unthinking middle course between the acolytes and detractors precisely because they rarely thought seriously about Thomas at all.^{iv} The difficulties involved in breaking with this approach can be seen in the swiftness with which even now those who begin by appealing for fresh appraisals, such as Neil Corcoran and Alan Bold, descend to the old *ad hominem* clichés.^v This kind of fudging of the issues is no longer acceptable, we feel; given the centrality of Thomas to 1930s poetry, to the transition from modernism to the Movement in the UK and to the mid-1950s revolt against academicist poetry in the USA, it is high time that one of the century's most discussed poets ceased to be one of its most critically misinterpreted and neglected.

New Country, Freud and Surrealism

Born in 1914, Dylan Thomas came of age as a poet in the early 1930s, a period of economic turmoil, social radicalism and the supersession of high modernism by new literary styles. Auden's *Poems* (1930), the *New Signatures* (1932) and *New Country* (1933) anthologies edited by Michael Roberts, and collections by poets represented in them - William Empson, Cecil Day Lewis, William Plomer, Stephen Spender - swiftly established a non-experimental, discursive, politically left poetic norm.^{vi} This response to modernism has been summed up by Spender:

What we had ... in common was in part Auden's influence, in part also not so much our relationship to one another as to what had gone before us. The writing of the 1920's had been characterized variously by despair, cynicism, self-conscious aestheticism, and by the prevalence of French influences. Although it was perhaps symptomatic of the political post-war era, it was consciously anti-political. ... Perhaps, after all, the qualities which distinguished us from the writers of the previous decade lay not in ourselves, but in the events to which we reacted. These were unemployment, economic crisis, nascent fascism, approaching war...^{vii}

Spender's account, perhaps out of tactical necessity, describes a modernism which is the mirror-image of the practice of those 'under Auden's influence'. The result now seems curiously distorted; how could Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Lawrence, 'the writing of the 1920's' have seemed 'consciously anti-political'? For Spender, however, the definition of the political is relatively narrow and sociological, and the notion of politics as purely superstructural is revealed in his switch from the internal and subjectivist ('despair') to the external and determinist ('lay not in ourselves'). It is a shift endorsed more recently by historians of modernism. Thus, Bradbury and McFarlane argue that after 1930 'certain elements of Modernism seem to be reallocated, as history increasingly came back in for intellectuals, as, with the loss of purpose and social cohesion, and the accelerating pace of technological change, *modernity was a visible scene open to simple report* ...'^{viii} (our emphasis) 'Visible'; 'open'; 'simple'; such qualities were anathema to Thomas who, precociously aware of metropolitan literary developments, rejected them for a closed and complex writing in which formal conservatism was estranged from itself by its modernist content, and modernist form undermined by an organicist pseudo-coherence.

If the *New Country* poets turned a diagnostic gaze upon society, Thomas deliberately opposed what he saw as their presumptive hyper-rationality. Small wonder, then, that William Empson, discussing 18 Poems, found them 'very off the current fashion'. Just how 'off' can be seen by comparing Auden's 'Sir, no man's enemy' with the opening verse of 'Light breaks where no sun shines', a poem which helped confirm Thomas's arrival on the London literary scene and was included in his first collection:

Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all
But will his negative inversion, be prodigal:
Send to us power and light, a sovereign touch
Curing the intolerable neural itch ... (Mendelson, 1989, 36)

Light breaks where no sun shines;
Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart
Push in their tides;
And, broken ghosts with glow-worms in their heads,
The things of light
File through the flesh where no flesh decks the bones. (SP, 17)

Although the initial difficulty of Auden's syntax and 'unpoetic' vocabulary reveal modernist influence, after the second line the piled-up opening clauses unravel and the sense of the poem becomes, and remains, accessible. The difficulties posed by 'Light breaks', however, are of a different order, even though it is (by Thomas's early standards) syntactically straightforward. The difficulties, characteristic of his poetry of this period, are many; they include the disconcerting combination of lack of specificity (of time, place, etc.) and lack of abstraction (one usually implies the other), and the use of the Grotesque rather than irony as a mode of critique (this largely stems from the Metaphysical trope of the body as cosmos).^{ix} But despite the differences in approach, the *New Country* writers were generally impressed by *18 Poems*.

One reason for this (along with the mid-1930s reaction to *New Country* Thomas was seen as having initiated) was an intellectual climate heavily influenced by Freudianism and surrealism. Freud, of course, was central to the decade's poetic of demystification; as Robin Skelton has claimed, Freud was read politically, as a champion of individualism and freedom and an honorary socialist. Indeed, any psychoanalytic exposé of human nature was regarded, *per se*, as revolutionary.^x Thus, in 1936 Cecil Day-Lewis could mark the difference between Thomas, Barker, Gascoyne and Clifford

Dyment on the one hand, and New Country poetry on the other, but place both within broadly Freudian parameters; in an echo of the politics of Popular Frontism which began in 1934-35, the younger poets were treated as literary allies against a common enemy. If Auden was the gallant lieutenant leading the main body of troops over the top, Thomas was the salt-of-the-earth NCO in charge of a more plebeian team of sappers detonating their mines under the ruling class, the id teaming up with the ego to strike against the tyrannical (and increasingly fascist) bourgeois superego.

Yet although Thomas linked his poetry to the general interest in Freudianism, in a questionnaire of 1934 and elsewhere, his avowed distrust of system - embodied in his poetic practice - makes it impossible to read it as programmatically psychoanalytic. This is not to say that the work cannot be analysed, of course. Stuart Crehan, in one succinct account, argues that Thomas made 'a Freudian exemplar of himself' and that the poetry arose from a conflict between rebellious libido and a repressive super-ego which was an internalisation of paternal authority.^{xi} To illustrate his point he cites another piece from *18 Poems*, 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower':

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever. (CP, 13)

In this most typical of Thomas's early poems, as Crehan notes, 'the phallic fuse and ejaculatory flower are symbolically repressed by a root-blasting force which turns the speaker's initial energy against itself. As if this were not punishment enough, the speaker's super-ego repeatedly reminds him of his inability to speak' ('And I am dumb to tell!'). Throughout the poetry, for Crehan, there runs a symbolism of castration which for Freud is associated with birth itself - 'the prototype of all castration' - while the desire to return to the womb 'is a substitute for [the] wish to copulate' and so avoid the castrating father. This reminds us of Thomas's ambivalent attitude towards his father, encourager of his own 'lovely gift of the gab' but also a brooding presence, at one level the monitory figures, simultaneously terrible and pitiable, of the poems. Yet the dominant tone of the treatment of such material is ambivalence, as Thomas's response to the attacks on 'Light breaks' for its 'obscenity' show.^{xii} At this time he discussed his poetry in terms which echo Auden's of the need to 'strip bare' the recesses of the self, but at the same time stressed its reliance on an inassimilable morbidity, and rejected the idea that it should have a therapeutic role.^{xiii} As Conran points out, 'This reluctance to come clean is not a fault of *18 Poems* but a condition of their being'.^{xiv} Nevertheless, the traditional weaknesses of Freudian criticism - a tendency to ignore differences and a slippage from text to author - can be seen at work even here, and in Thomas criticism historically they have tended to acquire exaggerated form. If Crehan is right to view the adoption of a Freudian role as only one among many, the issue of role-playing raised in making oneself an 'exemplar' nevertheless goes beyond psychological structures to issues of social and literary identity. The ambiguity and role-playing ultimately derive from marginally modernist, national and historical locations out of which Thomas manoeuvred his banal psychic material (keen awareness of mortality, adolescent male sexuality) at a critical angle to the *zeitgeist*.

Given their social agendas, the New Country poets were incapable of grasping that Thomas's resistance to their own abstraction and discursiveness was a major part of his point.^{xv} As a result they relegated the poetry he wrote to an ancillary, subaltern status, a complement to, rather than a critique of, their own. Reviews show that despite being impressed, they often regarded Thomas as a hit-or-miss writer. MacNeice, for example, described *18 Poems* as wild and drunken speech, but with the saving grace of rhythm. Spender, less sympathetic, claimed it was 'just poetic stuff with no beginning or end, or intelligent and intelligible control'.^{xvi} Such responses linked Thomas with surrealism, and played a crucial part in the reception of his poetry. Thomas argued that his poems were not automatic writing and therefore not surrealist; the ignorance pleaded in a letter of 1934 is typical:

But who is this Gascoigne? I saw a geometrical effort of his in one
New Verse, and also a poem in which he boasted of the ocarina in his
belly. Is he much subtler or more absurd than I imagine? It is his
sheer incompetence that strikes me more than anything else.

This kind of response - to protest painstaking craftsmanship - was understandable. Yet both the denial and its narrow definition of surrealism have been accepted too uncritically; Thomas was, after all, an avid reader of the avant-garde *transition*. The 'last snapshot of the European bourgeoisie', as Walter Benjamin called it, was in fact a complex set of artistic practices which went far beyond voluntarism or associationism, as a glance at the variety of surrealist visual art - say, Dali's hallucinatory realism and the collage of Ernst's *La Semaine de Bonté* - will reveal. (The claim that surrealism in Freudian terms simply inverts passive realism is true up to a point, but overlooks the linkage between the movement and political activism, most strikingly illustrated by André Breton's yoking of radical surrealism to Trotsky's Fourth International). More important, to the extent that surrealism had affinities with the Metaphysicals' violent yoking together of heterogeneous images (the conceit as a distant cousin of Lautréamont's collision between an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dining table) there was a link between surrealist practice and the climate created earlier by Eliot and Grierson. Thomas, an avid reader of Donne, exploited such similarities to forge a semi-surrealised Metaphysical mode,

a form of Gothic, from a marginalised and belated Welsh modernism. In this - as with Freudianism - he was pragmatic and ambivalent rather than systematic. 'Altarwise by owl-light' from *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936), most frequently adduced as proof of surrealism, reproduces surrealist effects. Sonnet VI, for example, ends

Adam, time's joker, on a witch of cardboard
Spelt out the seven seas, an evil index,
The bagpipe-breasted ladies in the deadweed
Blew out the blood gauze through the wound of manwax. (CP, 61)

The point, however, is not that such lines have no 'real' meaning to be unravelled; they do (although that is not the whole point either). It is, rather, that it would be obtuse to deny the calculated appeal here to a sense of the surrealist absurd. Thomas, in other words, guys and mimics the attributes of a metropolitan style where it can be made to coincide with his own tactics of estrangement, but stops short of becoming a surrealist *pur sang* - as, for example, David Gascoyne did. In both embracing and rejecting surrealism he created a provincial simulacrum of surrealism, or what might be called (for want of a better word) surregionalism.

This parodic (dis)engagement was enacted at the high point of surrealism in Britain, the London Surrealist Exhibition of June 1936, when Thomas toured the galleries offering visitors cups of boiled string as he enquired: 'Weak or strong?'^{xvii} His use of surrealism in his work at this time can probably be seen most strikingly in his prose fiction. Again, these works arouse and then exploit readerly expectations; 'The Orchards', for example, is a surrealist parody, a rich elaboration on the nervously dismissive humour of the letter to Spender:

Put a two-coloured ring of two women's hair round the blue world,
white and coal-black against the summer-coloured boundaries of sky
and grass, four-breasted stems at the poles of the summer sea-ends,
eyes in the sea-shells, two fruit trees out of a coal-hill: poor Marlais's
morning, turning to evening, spins before you. Under the eyelids,
where the inward night drove backwards through the skull's base,
into the wide, first world on the far-away eye, two love-trees smouldered
like sisters. Have an orchard sprout in the night, an enchanted woman
with a spine like a railing burn her hand in the leaves, man-on-fire a
mile from a sea have a wind put out your heart ... (CS, Davies, 1993, 44)

Thomas, then, cannot be read solely in terms of Freudianism or surrealism; both are period elements he deployed tactically, while the desire to emulate which we might detect in their usage is inseparable from a simultaneous sense of rejection and self-mockery, of centrality from marginality, of purity from heterogeneity. Such disconcertingly *hybrid* conjunctions account for much of the incomprehension, then and now, of the poetry. For as Homi Bhabha has argued in *The Location of Culture*, what disturbs the metropolitan centre most profoundly are those identities seen as sham, those which, in the act of imitating, disturb the fixed and binary categories of identity politics, of them/us, self/other. Thus, '[Hybridity's] threat ... comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory "identity effects" in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no "itself".'^{xix} The whole tenor of the critical attack on Thomas, we should remember, centres on his alleged *inauthenticity*, on the poet as impostor. Crucially for Bhabha, and for a more nuanced understanding of the importance of Thomas's location(s), hybrid writings have to be distinguished from the simple inversion of the binary terms of a relationship; 'Hybridity represents that ambivalent "turn" of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification - a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority ... [it] is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures.'

Modernism, Nationalism and the Thirties

Most discussions of the relationship between Thomas's work and his Swansea origins relate him in some way to a putatively 'essential' Welsh identity, mirroring precisely those dominant discourses of Englishness they generally purport to displace. Thomas is cast either as the bardic Other of thin-lipped London literati or the Welshman who welshed on his birthright for a mess of BBC pottage. The idea of a hybrid writer - not 'a third term that resolves tension' - confounds polarised views and the process by which they mutually confirm and entrench each other. Bhabha's notion of hybridity derives from the work of the Indian Subaltern Studies Group, work which emphasises the need to look at postcolonial writing in terms of its subversion of mainstream writing through *mimicry*, what Bhabha also calls 'sly civility', of its location on the boundaries between the provincial and the outright colonial, a location which does not permit a simple ethical response. Subaltern Studies Group members, that is, see traditional nationalist responses to national subordination as totalising, restrictive and ultimately untenable political discourses which are compromised by their

tendency to mimic the repressive, essentialist structures and values of the (ex)colonial/metropolitan centre. In this way they reject opposed positions which are part of the same discourse, each produced within a framework of identity thinking which holds as self-evident the origin of meaning in a unitary self and, by extension (according to the imperatives of liberal ideology), a nation-state. There are, of course, grave dangers of critical aggrandisement here; Wales is not India (although the analogy has been drawn).^{xx} A closer parallel, however, illustrates the potential for a postcolonial redefinition of some elements of 'Welshness'. Critics in the field of Irish Studies have recently begun to explore the ways in which postcolonialism attempts to fragment and disintegrate the monologism of cultural affiliation and to rethink notions such as mimicry and hybridity 'out of a recognition of the claustrophobic intensity of the relationship between Ireland and Britain.'^{xxi} The distinctiveness of the Welsh situation is not just in its dormancy (this is how traditional nationalism would read it; a 'national spirit' waits to be aroused), but in its even more impacted and compromised nature. In this sense Thomas is - paradoxically - far more 'Welsh' than writers who aspire to an ideal of a pure Welshness - or of Welshness as a kind of purity - registering as he does at every level of his poetry the struggle with 'claustrophobic intensity'. It is, we would argue, precisely in the modernism of Thomas that the mark of the onset of a deep historical crisis is found in a form of interstitial writing which confounds simple notions of identity.

Thomas's hybrid qualities can be seen indirectly in the way claims for identifiably Welsh elements in his early poetry have been continuously thwarted by its lack of obvious markers of nationality, despite ingenious attempts to detect the influence of *cynghanedd* or Welsh speech rhythms presumed to result from his *métèque* status.^{xxii} Although a more oblique influence has been detected in his ability to take 'an outsider's advantage of the English language' (somewhat inflated by Davies to a 'delight' in 'revenging' himself on the 'imperial, standardizing norms of the English language'), it can scarcely be distinguished from the kinds of linguistic subversion which mark many poets, regardless of origin, and particularly those who write, as Thomas did, during a transitional period. More important is a shifting relationship towards fixed identities perceived as constraints. Thomas's ambivalence towards nationality was expressed not so much in his outright denials ('Land of my fathers - my fathers can keep it.') as in the tongue-in-cheek styling of himself as the 'Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive', a *voyant* who felt lost without 'the aspidistra, the provincial drive, the morning cafe [and] the evening pub' of suburbia.^{xxiii} His poetic identity, or rather *process*, is precisely this mediation between the bardic and the banal, the balance of *hywll*-inflated rhetoric and literary *lèsé majesté*.^{xxiv} Tony Conran has deemed Thomas's national identity 'largely a negative thing - he is not English'; but this itself is a one-sided assessment. In the Machereyan sense the 'negative thing' is also an absence that speaks, and what it speaks of is an initially enabling isolation, a source of self-belief, a calculated philistinism and defensive humour.

But if consideration of Thomas's status forces us to modify our view of the way in which national 'identity' operates, what precisely was his relationship to Welsh modernism? As Gareth Thomas has pointed out, in Thomas's time 'no Anglo-Welsh literary tradition that was in any way comparable to the Anglo-Irish had yet been established'.^{xxv} The Anglo-Irish/Anglo-Welsh comparison is devastating, of course, precisely because Welsh modernism was patchy and disparate even by comparison with the English variety. If modernism in Britain was largely imported - think of James, Yeats, Conrad, Pound, Eliot and Joyce - it was heavily Irish-influenced. Predictably, the Welsh variety has been seen solely in terms of its input to the definition of British (i.e.: English) modernism, in the shape of David Jones. Although its anomalousness and belatedness are arguably a sign of writing which deals with the condition of Welshness, concentration on Jones' high modernism (endorsed by Eliot and Faber publication) has led critics away from other Welsh modernists. This is particularly the case with poets writing in Welsh, but Anglo-Welsh writers have also suffered.

Crucial to an appreciation of Thomas's Welsh modernist context is the work of the fiction writer Caradoc Evans. Evans, a palaeo-modernist to use Kermodé's term (that is, modernist in terms of narrative strategy or content, but not in a formal sense), was author of the pioneering short story collection *My People* (1915), often seen as the Welsh equivalent of Joyce's *Dubliners*. *My People* combines anecdotal structure with savage, grotesque realism to attack rural Welsh Nonconformism, hypocrisy, greed and cruelty, and it made Evans himself 'the most hated man in Wales'. There is no doubt that Thomas, who visited Evans in 1936, included him among his literary heroes.^{xxvi} But Evans was also a literary forerunner in the sense that his tales reverberate with the discourses of Nonconformism; their language is 'simple, often majestic, and suggestive also of parable and myth', while criticising its use for repressive ends.^{xxvii} As in Thomas's poetry, religion's musical and rhetorical resources - part of its popular, radical tradition - were exploited, even as the social forms in which it had ossified were critiqued.

Yet as well as belonging to a later generation, very different forces intersected in Thomas than in Evans; his upbringing was freethinking, his surroundings suburban and his literary and political contexts more radical and cosmopolitan (again, this requires qualification; rejecting organized religion, Thomas seems to have opted for a form of Lawrentianism, a faith in the interrelatedness of all things which became more religious during the 1940s). Again, it would be wrong to see this as a simple split, this time along urban-rural lines. Swansea lies at the westernmost point of English-speaking South Wales, its frontier, liminal situation reinforced by the fact that it also represented the class divide which Thomas's parents had crossed in order to achieve middle-class respectability. In the 1920s the Welsh-speaking farming communities of Carmarthenshire still lay within easy reach of Thomas's home; Swansea was a mainly (but not totally) English-speaking town hemmed around to the north and west by its Welsh-speaking hinterland. Historical change was

less ambiguous and inflected the treatment of Welsh identity as repression and ambiguity. Not only did the effects of WW1 postdate *My People*, so too did the economic crisis which gripped Wales from the early 1920s. This can be put another way by noting that Thomas's move to London in 1934 was that of an entire Welsh generation. And if Wales was more closely tied to England than any other of the UK's component parts, it was because its economy - lopsided to serve imperial rather than domestic needs - had produced what Gwyn A. Williams has called an 'offshore working class', with its middle class appendages. It was thus especially vulnerable to the decline of British power; recession bit more deeply and earlier in Wales than anywhere else in Britain.

The Depression pushed the already high unemployment level up to 32%, a figure around which it lingered until the end of the 1930s. The demographic effects were devastating; over half a million people left Wales in the 1930s, most of them from the South. Though it was one of the more advanced areas of the South Walian economy, 'even Swansea with its poets and musicians ... fell into a pall of neglect and depression, a collapse of social capital and a dismal legacy in bad housing, ill-health, poor environment'.^{xxviii} Thomas's own (dis)location ensured both relative personal comfort and an inescapable awareness of suffering; his political response was a socialism as intense but more diffuse and durable than those of the more overtly Left poets. The general disaster of the times sharpened the differences between a generation of radicalised Anglo-Welsh writers and Welsh language writers, whose nationalism and rural values were often reinforced by ethnic-linguistic exclusivism, or even flirtations with fascism.^{xxix} As Tony Conran claims, 1930s Anglo-Welsh writers had nowhere to go but London; 'They either stayed in Wales and festered in isolation, or they offered themselves as international or colonial recruits to the London intelligentsia. Nationalism was hardly an option for most of them.'^{xxx}

This is an important point given recent attempts to interpret modernism in nationalist terms. Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature*, for example, argues that modernism should be read as a provincial revolution against a complacent Anglocentric literary establishment, and can clearly be applied in some measure to Thomas. Crawford is certainly on firm ground when he opposes what he calls 'cursory' accounts of modernism which stress its 'cosmopolitanism and internationalism to present it as a facet of "high" metropolitan culture'. Yet the resultant claim that the provincial/demotic on the one hand and cosmopolitanism on the other 'are not opposites; they complement one another' seems to us too neat a reversal, a too-easy overcoming of very real and material differences of class, gender and so on within the nation and modernism as a literary trend. Crawford overlooks the role of bourgeois nationalist culture in submerging the kinds of internal national differences which produce hybrid, mixed, boundary writings (for his argument to work, the desire to integrate within the London literary and social mainstream on the part of writers like Thomas and Eliot also has to be seen in purely personal terms as an error of judgement).^{xxxi} To view modernism chiefly as an outgrowth of a wholly positive nationalist self-assertion, then, is to depoliticise both nationalism and modernism; celebration of national difference erases internal difference and ignores nationalism's reactionary potential. Crawford's formulation cannot account for the juxtaposition of 'international' and 'colonial', settling for the kind of cultural identity politics sketched above, according to which Thomas can only be interpreted as either 'genuinely' Welsh or an inauthentic showman.

'The empty ill'; sex, writing and the Gothic

What this suggests is that it is the acceptance of the existing terms of the debate about Thomas - authentic or inauthentic, success or failure - which is the truly impermissible critical move. In other words when Paul Ferris, for example, registers 'fears' that Thomas's poems 'are thick with the affectations of poetry', we would see this as a problem not so much for Thomas's poems as for a narrow and conventional conception of poetry, and modernist poetry in particular.^{xxxii} All poetry - in its intertextual, parasitic, hybrid practice - is 'thick with the affectations of poetry', and this is not altered by presenting subjective moralising (who defines 'affectation', and on what grounds?) as universally agreed judgements. Modernism itself can be read as literary parody, and it is precisely the way in which 'affectation' is defined and its relationship to what the Russian Formalists called 'the literary' which demands attention in Thomas.

In this connection the aspect of the poetry which most immediately attracts attention is Thomas's use of grotesque style and the Gothic, an aspect which can be linked to his displaced, hybrid location and which has usually been discussed under the headings of Freudian and/or surrealism. Traditionally associated with mixing and impropriety, grotesque style and Gothic have affinities with Evans's black humour and brutal sexuality as well as with larger literary trends. The grotesque played a central role in Welsh modernism, as Tony Conran has argued:

Modernism in Wales is most at home with the grotesque. It is there that modernism characteristically shows itself, in Saunders Lewis as much as in Caradoc Evans and Dylan Thomas. The nightmare of monstrosity underlies the middle-class rejection of the buchedd, the sense of being suffocated by its hypocrisy and narrowness.

It is in the short stories written before *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940), that the Gothic and grotesque aspects in Thomas are flaunted most extensively. Many of the stories - some collected in *The Map of Love* (1939) - centre on the imaginary Jarvis valley. Jarvis is Evans's Manteg at one remove, Gothicised under the pressures of social crisis and literary displacement, and it provides the setting for a collection of Welsh rural stereotypes; thus, its weather is always lowering, its landscapes charged with apocalyptic threat and repressed sexual energy, its scattered dwellings inhabited by children, murderers, gardeners and vivisectionists, haunted by the Holy Six and other religious fanatics, by witches, visionaries, lunatics, decayed gentry. But despite the critical solemnities pronounced over them, the stories have more than a hint of *Cold Comfort Farm* about them, referring as they do to the town of Llarregub ('bugger all' when read backwards), and containing such characters as Sam Rib, Dai Twice and old Vole. This location, then, is a version rather than a copy of Evans's, travesty even as it draws on its bleak realism. What applies to the prose applies, yet more variously, to the poetry. Both *18 Poems* and *Twenty-Five Poems* trail their Nonconformist, Gothically-inflected properties, and are crammed with - to list a sample - ghosts, vampires, a 'Cadaver' figure, references to Struwwelpeter, tombs, sores, flies, cataracts, carcasses, cancers, 'cypress lads', hanged men, mandrakes, gallows, crosses, worms and maggots. Both books exude a charnel atmosphere of decay and mortality and their libertarian strivings are inextricably linked to the darker aspects they purport to reject, with the first poem of the first collection exploring the idea that the 'boys of summer' are 'in their ruin', always in the process of themselves becoming 'the dark deniers'.

Far from being 'universal', then, in its exploration of adolescent identity crisis, Thomas's extraordinary blend of sex and death is not merely of its time and place, but also very lower middle-class and male.^{xxxiv} The early poems chart not the achievement of stable identity, but a realization of its impossibility - in both national and personal terms - figured in part through gender. In pushing back to pre-natal origins, the speakers of the poems are attempting to reach the point at which they can escape the anxieties of sexual maturity facing Thomas himself. Thus, in 'Before I knocked' (in *18 Poems*), the speaker is without specific gender, both 'brother to Mnetha's daughter/And sister to the fathering worm', existing 'in a molten form'.^{xxxv} Nevertheless, this is no prelapsarian or ahistorical vision; even before birth suffering cannot be escaped:

My throat knew thirst before the structure
Of skin and veins around the well
Where words and water make a mixture
Unfailing till the blood runs foul;
My heart knew love, my belly hunger;
I smelt the maggot in my stool. (CP, 12)

But if there is a gesture towards the elimination of anxiety, there is also a petit-bourgeois bravado, a desire to exorcise uneasiness by dramatizing it. As elsewhere in Thomas's poetry, then, the unborn child is identified with, even as he rebels against, paternal and metaphysical authority. He is Christ - 'You who bow down at cross and altar / Remember me and pity Him / Who ... doublecrossed my mother's womb' - and Christ is the representative of the father, of the phallogocentric authority of the Symbolic Order and the promise of plenitude. But he is also the betrayed son ('doublecrossed'), both masculine and feminine, what Thomas called the 'castrated Christ' of official religion, and the attempt to escape anxiety by imagining an ungendered past generates new anxiety in the actuality of the father-dominated present. The anxiety, it might be argued, *is* the poetry; Christ is Logos, the word, the poet-as-hero charting his narcissistic, masturbatory sexual experience in 'My hero bares his nerves' (*18 Poems*). Writing, the means of achieving paternal sanction for the son and thus the way to sexual experience, breaks down leaving the speaker trapped in a cycle of identity formation through self-abuse. Masturbation and writing both figure as an unnerving absence and as a disquieting plenitude:

And those poor nerves so wired to the skull
Ache on the lovelorn paper
I hug to love with my unruly scrawl
That utters all love hunger
And tells the page the empty ill.

* * * * *

He holds the wire from this box of nerves
Praising the mortal error
Of death and birth, the two sad knaves of thieves,
And the hunger's emperor;
He pulls the chain, the cistern moves. (CP, 14)

Either form of self-authentication disrupts itself (and it is noticeable that the poem begins in the first and ends in the third person). The paper - both writing paper and tissue paper - is 'lovelorn' because it bears the evidence of an absent presence, the unruly scrawl of ink/ semen telling the narrator of the deferral of real voice or love as opposed to his auto-affection. In his discussion of Rousseau's *Confessions* in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida comments on the dangers of this process in terms of the 'supplement', that addition which would complete self-presence but which instead reveals its incompleteness and lack: '[a] terrifying menace, the supplement has not only the power of procuring an absent presence through its image; procuring it for us by proxy [*procuratio*] of the sign, it holds it at a distance and masters it. For this presence is at the same time desired and feared.'^{xxxvi} Because of its assumption of authority, Thomas's 'baring' of this 'nerve' clearly threatened a more understated, 'English' self-presence, as revealed by a critical language which charged him, on occasion, with sexual immaturity and 'unmanliness'. Typical of this kind of attack is Robert Graves's claim: 'Thomas was nothing more than a Welsh demagogic masturbator who failed to pay his bills'.^{xxxvii} Interestingly, Graves mirrors here the notorious assaults on Keats's poetry a century before; just as Keats's 'shabby genteel' class origins, for Byron, were linked to masturbatory immaturity in his poetry ('Johnny piss-a-bed Keats'), so Thomas's class and national identity, and through them his poetry, are impugned by Graves.^{xxxviii}

The value of Gothic to Thomas, then, stemmed from its generic capability for organising disparate stylistic and thematic elements - parodic appropriation, belated modernism, social radicalism, sexual uncertainty and the plenitude/lack of writing - within the outrageous constructedness which is its hallmark. Precisely the excess of Gothic enables it to perform this kind of function; as Fred Botting has pointed out, Gothic is the 'signification of a writing of excess' which shadows the progress of modernity and enlightenment with a dark counter-narrative.^{xxxix} In this way it also fulfilled Thomas's career need to subvert New Country hyper-rationality and dogmatism (although not necessarily in a merely irrational or ahistorical manner; as Crehan notes, the 'rich polysemy and fluidity' of the early poetry - thematic as well as linguistic - can be seen as an attempt to keep alive the dialectic which had been frozen by Stalinism by the early 1930s, just as it was simultaneously being erased by Hitler).^{xl} Gothic - like Thomas's work - operates with hybrid states and forms, insisting on the inescapability of the biological bases of existence. In it, as in the poetry generally, 'ambivalence and uncertainty obscure single meaning', while the anxiety over boundary transgression it feeds off was, at the geopolitical level, in line with the 1930s *zeitgeist*.^{xli} In alluding to a Gothic model - *Frankenstein* - to describe his practice at this time, Thomas implicitly defended such an oblique approach: 'So many modern poets take the living flesh as their object, and, by their clever dissecting, turn it into a carcase. I prefer to take the dead flesh, and, by any positivity of faith that is in me, build up a living flesh from it.'^{xlii}

We are not claiming here, of course, that a Gothic thematics 'explains' Thomas's early work; what we do feel is that it provides a framework for interpreting a series of Welsh and modernist elements in the work, and that it has been overlooked because of the lack of awareness of Thomas' critics of recent developments in the field. Possible Gothic influences - Thomas's 'serious' reading,^{xliii} interest in film^{xliv} and taste in pulp fiction - have of course been known for years. A devotion to the work of the horror novelist Arthur Machen, for example, has occasionally been mentioned, but does not seem to have been considered significant.^{xlv} Machen, the author of what has been described as 'the most decadent book in English', *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), 'took up Darwinian anxieties as the basis for terror', mixing among others Huysmans, Pater, *La Queste del Sante Graal* and Sherlock Holmes. In *The Great God Pan* (1894), to take one example, a doctor operates on a young girl to open her 'inner eye' to the continuing diabolic existence of Pan. The resulting visionary power eventually drives her mad, and when the 'hell-child' born of her union with Pan dies, it passes through all the stages of biological species reversion, ending up as 'primal slime'. Parallels with 'The Lemon' and other works by Thomas might be drawn, but the important link lies in the resemblances between Machen's biological and physical emphases and Thomas's concern with cycles of inter-involved growth, biologic recapitulations, and pre-human states of consciousness. Again, we are not attempting to show that some hitherto overlooked influence 'explains' this or that aspect of the work; what we are claiming is that Machen, along with other Gothic writings known to have interested Thomas, are part of a complex writerly negotiation between modernism, location and gender.

Finally, the grotesque/Gothic aspect of the work needs to be seen in the light of one modernist influence besides Eliot's, that of D.H. Lawrence. There are many obvious similarities between Thomas and Lawrence; shared provincial and class outsidership, Nonconformist background (and personal puritanism) and an emphasis on redemption through the flesh rather than ratiocination. The relationship of both to the dominant metropolitan styles of the day also reveals parallels. Tony Pinkney has argued that Lawrence attacked the classicizing 'anti-Wagnerian' of Mansfield, Pound, Joyce, Eliot and Lewis in order to forge an alternative Expressionist, northern-Gothic variety of modernism.^{xlvi} Lawrence's fiction generally - think of *The Rainbow* or *The Plumed Serpent* - rejects the Hellenism running in English culture from Arnold to Eliot 'in which "criticism", "consciousness" and "irony" are cardinal virtues', in favour of the creaturely values of a more 'native' tradition deriving from Morris and Ruskin. It is this form of modernism which, in the Lincoln Cathedral pages of *The Rainbow*, is shown as incorporating classicism's 'virtues' within its host of small details rather than expelling them. The point is that only Gothic

deconstructs the rigid model of inside/outside ... Its outside is its inside; even the sly stone faces that denounce its incompleteness are, after all, part of it. The Gothic

contains its own "negation", which thereafter ceases to be its negative pure and simple, and is rather granted a local validity within a more generous system which exceeds it.^{xlvii}

The last part of this, it may be, reveals something of the limitations of Thomas as an artist and the major difference between him and Lawrence.^{xlviii} Nevertheless he can be seen as a writer who drew heavily, if indirectly, from Lawrence's 'northern' Gothicism, the 'sly stone faces' of the older writer perhaps recalling the 'sly civility' of Bhabha's subaltern and Thomas's own critical face-pulling.

'Under the spelling wall': modernism, voice and language

Any discussion of Thomas's relationship to modernism must touch at some point on his use of language. This has consistently been seen as *the* distinguishing feature of his work, and he was well aware of its central, even compulsive nature: 'I use everything and anything to make my poems work ... puns, portmanteau words, paradox, allusion, paronomasia, paragram, catachresis, slang, assonantal rhymes, vowel rhymes, sprung rhythm'.^{xlix} The 1930s poetry displays not just the systematic foregrounding of the 'device' as a vehicle of estrangement, but also a belief that poetry should work 'out of' words, not 'towards them', recalling the Mallarméan dictum that 'Poems are made of words, not ideas'. At its most extreme, this yields attempts at wholly non-referential poems! whose antecedents lie among the Russian 'zaum' poets, the Dadaists, and the Gertrude Stein of *Tender Buttons*. One point of such exercises, of course, is to prove that no writing can completely escape meaning-construction at the hands of a sufficiently determined (or self-deluded) reader. Only two of Thomas's poems - 'How Soon the Servant Sun' and 'Now' - go so far, and they show the parodic aspect of his modernism, foreshadowing in their extremism the shift away from it in the poetry of the 1940s. Yet even when not testing limits, Thomas is completely modernist in his insistence on the materiality of language and in the autonomy he grants to words. It was in this connection that he insisted he be read *literally*: his objection to Edith Sitwell's well-intentioned explication of the first sonnet of 'Altarwise by owl-light' was that 'She doesn't take the literal meaning: that a world-devouring ghost-creature bit out the horror of tomorrow from a gentleman's loins ... This poem is a particular incident in a particular adventure, not a general, elliptical deprecation of this "horrible, crazy, speedy life"'.^{li}

It is worth saying a little here about the implications of modernist practice for Thomas's style, since his 'everything and anything', in its relationship to the constraints of the poetry's conservative form, represents an internalised, imploded, even mimic modernism. The plethora of devices *replicate* the effect of modernist techniques such as collage, creating modernist textual instability and epistemological uncertainty. The parodic element which helps constitute modernist writing is foregrounded in this poetry. Thus, rhyme schemes and stanza patterns are deployed whose elaborate ingenuity is in excess of any mimetic or structural requirement.^{lii} Syntax is sabotaged, such that 'normal' grammar becomes at least as hard to construe as modernist fragmentariness, usually through the deferral of main verbs by subordinate, but apparently independent, clauses. Of the poem which opens 'Hold hard, these ancient minutes in the cuckoo's month,/Under the lank, fourth folly on Glamorgan's hill,/As the green blooms ride upward, to the drive of time ...' (CP, 44), Walford Davies claims that

In these lines we are bound to hear *Hold hard these ancient minutes* as a main clause, even though the commas show that the real main clause is "Hold hard... to the drive of time." And before we've grasped as much, we will also have heard (as a complete syntactic unit, despite the comma) *As the green blooms ride upward to the drive of time* ... Similar ghost-effects of syntax occur too often in Thomas to be mere accidents. He seems bent on accommodating them.^{liii}

And this is a straightforward case: in 'When, like a running grave, time tracks you down' there are no less than *thirty-four* subordinate clauses (some as short as a single word) in an opening sentence that stretches for twenty-five lines over five five-line verses. Not only does this stretch the possibilities of syntax; as with the use of surrealism and Freudianism there is more than a hint of mockery, of an effect analogous to what Bakhtin calls the 'double voice' of parody.

Such procedures raise the issue of narrative briefly considered in the reference to 'Light breaks where no sun shines'. Virtually all Thomas's poems are organised around a powerful narrative drive, a seemingly irresistible unfolding of event. Narrative is vital because it provides both an armature to which the many devices the poem requires can be attached and a pretext for their deployment in the first place. Defending his poetry in 1934 Thomas argued that '... all good modern poetry is bound to be obscure. Remember Eliot: "The chief use of the 'meaning' of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him."^{liiv} 'Meaning', as Thomas also made clear in 'Answers to an Inquiry', refers to narrative; the echo is of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in which Eliot likens the phenomenal text of the poem to a bone used to distract a guard-dog by a burglar before he goes about his business, the lived materiality of the poem - as in *The Waste Land* - acting as a 'cover' for, and authentication of, the operations of the ghostly discourse of the mythologies framing it. The narrative of *The*

Waste Land is famously discontinuous, yet its very discontinuity produces a metanarrative, aided and abetted by Eliot's knowing annotations. In Thomas's poetry, on the contrary, the local narrative of the poem appears to offer immediate coherence, unity and closure, but is frequently empty, or banal, in the usual sense. That is, the discursive meaning-content is usually straightforward, invariably relating to the interrelatedness of the human and cosmic, the inextricability of processes of decay and growth. When Thomas wrote of the New Country poets that he could 'see the sensitive picking of words, but none of the strong inevitable pulling that makes a poem an event, a happening, an action perhaps, not a still-life or an experience *put down*, placed, regulated' he went only part of the way to explaining the difference between his work and theirs. More to the point is the claim that the drive towards unification (of body, spirit, cosmos, body, etc) leads directly to a language use in which the materiality and autonomy of the signifier is a given. Thomas grants images almost the same degree of 'literalness' and autonomy, such that poems not only are *not* sustained by external reference, but follow a self-evolving dynamic of images, in narratives whose linguistic events frequently exceed any abstractable sense. Thomas's description of his writing process alludes to this:

I let, perhaps, an image be 'made' emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical force I possess - let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my own imposed formal limits, conflict.

This kind of poem is entirely, or almost entirely, interiorised, moving solely amongst irreducibly literal images that 'nevertheless seem to have the kind of air of significance about them that tempts us (unhelpfully) to unpack the poem like a suitcase.'^{vi} One image 'breed[s] another' in a piece like 'Where once the waters of your face', in which the initial mention of 'waters' is elaborated in a series of *implicit* metaphors; that is, the vehicle (the figurative part of the metaphor) - 'mermen', 'channels', 'wet fruits', 'corals' and so on - is not related back to its tenor (what is actually being referred to) - sexual desire, psychic depths, the amniotic 'waters' of the embryo. This is a narrative that 'just never *had* a real-world equivalent that could stand as referent [i.e.: as tenor] in the first place.'^{vii} Narrative advances, but the poem has been turned inside out; or, to use different image, it is as if we are viewing the back of a tapestry. Paradoxically the high degree of control the poems display is offset by the arbitrary power of individual words and images on their development.

There is a social dimension to this. In Saussurean terms the stress on verbal autonomy weakens the links between signifiers and their socially agreed signifieds, raising linguistic arbitrariness above ostensible message content. According to Saussure all meanings attached to signifiers are arbitrary, since meaning is generated not by homologies between words and things but through the system of differential relationships between words themselves. To enable social discourse to occur, however, the bonds between signifier and signified are habitually agreed to be stable. Yet as Saussure points out, for the individual subject the bond never ceases to be an arbitrary one. The putative stability of social meanings inevitably become naturalised, and it is this fossilization of the signifier-signified bond which Thomas's writing subverts, attacking the repression of our pre-moral delight in words. Put a different way, this could be taken to indicate the operation of the semiotic in Thomas's work, that infantile, pre-gendered, inchoate energy which, according to Julia Kristeva, is repressed by our induction into the symbolic order of social injunctions which marshal signifiers with their signifieds. As Crehan argues, a poem like 'From love's first fever' is about the ways in which, through the process of language acquisition, we are *interpellated* as human subjects, accepting an inherited system of agreed linguistic meanings. Again, the radical implications of Thomas's poetic practice have been overlooked by critics who seek (or fail) to find a social dimension to the poetry precisely because they look for evidence only at the level of overt 'reference' or 'allusion'.

As he used up the poems from his adolescent notebooks, pushing certain aspects of his work to their logical conclusion in *Twenty-Five Poems*, Thomas's poetry began to signal a shift away from modernism in *The Map of Love*. 'After the funeral' is the prime critical exhibit in discussions of this turn, with 'Once it was the colour of saying' usually offered as his renunciation of the early work. In accepting these truisms there is always a danger of missing some important points. For one thing it is the *later*, not the earlier, poetry which is most full of 'the colour of saying'. Thomas - partly due to personal circumstances, partly due to the marginalisation of experimental writing and partly due to the new crisis of impending world war - was trying to write more accessibly by the late 1930s: the poems mentioned date from the year of Munich, 1938, and may be read beside more explicit 'crisis poetry' of the time, such as MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*. One less-frequently noticed consequence is the changed role of the voice that such 'accessible' writing implies. What seems purely technical - the fact that the sense of 'When, like a running grave' simply cannot be sustained, in being read aloud, across minefields of devices and multiple clauses - had profound implications for the *kind* of poetry Thomas wrote. Invariably, the decision to give intelligibility a higher priority weakened the Gothic-inflected modernism of the early style, its hybrid and heterogeneous qualities; and, in a number of poems in *The Map of Love*, the advantages and disadvantages of change are thematized and discussed in a self-consciousness manner which is new.

One of these is 'How shall my animal', which opens by confronting the issue of expression and repression head on:

How shall my animal
Whose wizard shape I trace in the cavernous skull,
Vessel of abscesses and exultation's shell,
Endure burial under the spelling wall ...
Who should be furious,
Drunk as a vineyard snail, flailed like an octopus,
Roaring, crawling ...

Beginning with a conventional image - of an inexpressible self as an 'inner animal' - the poem enacts rather than discusses the problems of expression which will involve burying it 'under the spelling wall' of speech and writing through a series of quasi-surreal evasions of definition, the 'animal' mutating from snail to octopus (and to lion, turtle, fish and horse). That this is part of a larger literary debate is clear in the third verse, which opens by contrasting Thomas's method with those of New Country poets, of the 'Fishermen of mermen' who 'creep and harp on the tide' as opposed to those who 'trace out a tentacle' with 'a living skein,/Tongue in the thread, [and] angle the temple-bound/ ... cavepools of spell and bone'. The capture, or 'spelling out' of the beast/animal is its death, although it is suggested (in the link between 'wizard' and the sense of 'spelling' as the casting of spells), that it collaborates in its capture and destruction. Articulated in language it gasps and dies, 'cast high, stunned on gilled stone', although the final lines make it clear that this is an internal death: 'Lie dry, rest robbed, my beast./You have kicked from a dark den, leaped up the whinnying light,/And dug your grave in my breast.' The acknowledgement of this death - although belied, as usual in Thomas, by the poem's verbal and syntactic energy - can be interpreted as a recognition of what was lost in the shift to referentiality in *The Map of Love*, making this poem part of Thomas's farewell to modernism.

Can the shift from modernism, finally and briefly, be related to the peculiar evolution of Thomas's critical and popular fortunes? Andreas Huyssens has written of later modernism being defined by a split between the political and the aesthetic avant-garde; yet as we have seen, with the complicating of unitary modernism, the certainty with which a writer like Thomas would once have been placed in the 'aesthetic' camp now seems presumptuous.^{lviii} Certainly, by broadening definitions of the 'political' in 1930s poetry and stressing the liminal, hybrid and transgressive qualities which Welsh origins imposed on Thomas, it is possible to see his work as problematising this kind of division. Thomas remains a central and awkward fact of the decade; in him modernist difficulty, parodic-bardic persona and suburban Swansea petit-bourgeois produce what might be seen as a Derridean 'supplement' to complete and undermine the standard, 'audenarian' histories of 1930s poetry. By 1938 Thomas was externalising elements of his imploded modernism and jettisoning others, shifting his focus from language as the primary area of interest. The more he did this, the more - in an apparent paradox - he was credited with his 'gift of the gab'. He was, of course, not the only example of a modernist who felt that the consensual pressures of war demanded concessions to realism and, ultimately, an inclusive religious vision - to return to our starting-point and 'The Function of Criticism', we need only think of *Four Quartets*. Yet the conservative forms in which Thomas's work was cast meant that, under the circumstances, a personally-identifiable and self-authenticating 'voice' was strengthened by such a move, and the 1940s poetry diluted linguistic autonomy, the 'warring', dialectical qualities it had possessed in the 1930s.

The later investment in personal voice - because of the potency of the final years of the career in shaping reception - has been read retrospectively to cover all of Thomas's poetry. It can still be claimed that 'it is not as constructions or as sets of influences that we experience the poems. Their power comes from a unique and resonant voice', and this is a sign of the amount of demystification still required.^{lix} An assertion like this fends off crude sociological interpretations, but at the expense of evading issues like the importance of parody to modernism, or the role played by phonocentric prejudice in the reception of Thomas's work (phonocentrism being defined as belief in the absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning). The problem is the failure to specify what is meant by 'voice'. Performance? Writerly style? Or the more philosophical 'presencing' of the author? In Thomas criticism it tends to be all of these, confusing the massive authority of the readings and personal legend with the poetry's sincerity (an index, for others, of its bogusness). Thomas's own confusion of these aspects was, in one sense, the secret of his success; but it is for just this reason that criticism needs to avoid imprecision. Rather than succumb to the authority of the poet's utterance, or to phonocentric naivety, we would stress the need to tackle it both as a barrier to understanding and a key to Thomas's critical fortunes.

We would argue that the emphasis on voice - which, taken superficially, seems to reveal the work as a form of deluded self-presencing - can itself be seen an obstacle in the way of its incantational resonance and authority. The linguistic materialism of Thomas's poetry and the theatrical qualities of his long-unfashionable reading style can be seen, at a deeper level, as providing a critical opportunity; for, if the voice strengthens the nostalgia for an ineradicable source of meaning anterior to and constitutive of all sign systems, it nevertheless works, in its baroque richness, to present the materiality of the sign, pulling in the other direction against linguistic idealism and 'naturalness', sonorously and brazenly excessive of any strict regime of sense. The voice, indeed, alerts us to a central contradiction of the work: the fact that far from obscurity and popularity functioning as opposed terms in Thomas's case, they are actually complementary. Karl Shapiro has written of Thomas's public readings in America achieving 'the impossible' in creating "a general audience for

a barely understandable poet".^{ix} Although this baffles Shapiro, the fact that this occurred in the USA raises the issue of the role of the 'culture industry', as Adorno and Horkheimer dubbed it, and Thomas's importance to nascent counter-cultural trends at the height of the first Cold War; his performances were, as Louis Simpson has pointed out, a catalyst for revolt against the academicised, conservative, New Critical-dominated poetry of the time.^{ixi} It would be wrong, however, to see the idea of Thomas as a father of the Beats or of the Lowell of *Life Studies* as a merely ironic one, for it is at this point that his influence passes from the purely literary to become (along with Sylvia Plath's, perhaps) that of the modern type of the doomed poet. In a more genuinely ironic sense, it might be said, it was precisely the 'obscurity' of the early, modernist poetry which *proved* Thomas's authenticity as a poet in the eyes of non-academics, and paradoxically guaranteed his status as a popular cultural icon (and, later, a cultural icon for pop) long after his death and the decline in critical interest in his work.^{ixii}

Abbreviations

CP *Collected Poems*, Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (eds.), London: Dent, 1989.

SP *Selected Poems*, Walford Davies (ed.) London: Dent, 1993a.

CS *Collected Stories*, Walford Davies (ed.) London: Dent, 1993b.

NOTES

- i. Letter to Daniel Jones, August 1935, in Paul Ferris (ed.) *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, London: Paladin (Collins), 1987, 197.
- ii. T.S. Eliot, 'The Function of Criticism', *Selected Essays*, London: Faber & Faber: (1932), 27. Terry Eagleton has glossed Eliot's 'Whiggism' in an English context as 'protestantism, liberalism, Romanticism, humanism'. Welsh Dissent, socialism and 'celtic' emotionalism can be taken to represent extreme versions of these categories (Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, London: Verso, 1986, 147.)
- iii. David Holbrook's attack on Thomas is contained in *Llarregub Revisited: Dylan Thomas and the State of Modern Poetry* (1962) and *Dylan Thomas and the Code of Night* (1972); Kingsley Amis's distaste was expressed frequently and volubly from the 1950s to the 1990s.
- iv. 'Anglo-Welsh', like 'Anglo-Irish', is a critically category which implies not so much a hyphenated culture as a hierarchy of faithfulness to some putative national essence, taken as embodied in the Welsh language.
- v. Thus, Neil Corcoran's discussion of Thomas observes that Thomas is 'overdue for a contemporary Bakhtinian reassessment' but fails to provide it. Recognizing Thomas as the 'focal point for the anti-Auden disaffection', Corcoran nevertheless discusses him in Auden-derived, even Movement terms ('poetic tact, decorum, responsibility ... superior discrimination and scruple'), while the early poems are said to frequently defeat 'rational analysis' and to suffer from 'mesmerised and self-obsessed narcissism' and 'glandular compulsiveness'. The glib phrase-making of this betrays its own kind of narcissism, not to mention a certain kind of complacent Englishness. *English Poetry Since 1940*, London: Longmans, 1993, 41-7.
- vi. The term 'New Country' is hereafter used to refer to the house style of the Auden-influenced 1930s poets.
- vii. Stephen Spender, *World Within World*, Reader's Union: London, 1953, 119.
- viii. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds.), *Modernism: 1890-1930*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, 51-2.
- ix. See Thomas's letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson, early November 1933, *Letters*, 39, *op. cit.*:
... I fail to see how the emphasising of the body can, in any way, be regarded as hideous. The greatest description I know of our 'earthiness' is to be found in John Donne's Devotions, where he describes a man as earth of the earth, his body earth, his hair a wild shrub growing out of the land. All thoughts and actions emanate from the body. Therefore the description of a thought or action - however abstruse it may be - can be beaten home by bringing it onto a physical level. Every idea, intuitive or intellectual, can be imaged and translated in terms of the body, its flesh, skin, blood, sinews, veins glands, organs, cells, or senses.
- x. Robin Skelton, *Poetry of the Thirties*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 30-31.
- xi. Stuart Crehan, 'The Lips of Time' in Alan Bold (ed.) *Dylan Thomas: Craft or Sullen Art*, London: Vision Press, 1990, 54-6. Crehan's is one of the very best recent discussions of Thomas's poetry; our indebtedness to it is general as well as for specific points.
- xii. After publication in the *Listener*, there were complaints about the poem. In a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson of March 1934, Thomas revelled in the fact that his poetry had been 'banned' by the BBC. Referring to the verse beginning 'Nor fenced, nor staked, the gushers of the sky', he commented 'The little smut-hounds thought I was writing a copulatory anthem. In reality, of course, it was a metaphysical image of rain & grief ... all my denials of obscenity were disregarded.' The 'of course' is disingenuous; the second verse of the poem uses sexual (Freudian) imagery. *Letters, op. cit.*, 108.

- xiii. Thomas's answer to the question 'Have you been influenced by Freud and how do you regard him?' in a questionnaire of the time runs:

Yes. Whatever is hidden should be made naked. To be stripped of darkness is to be stripped clean, to strip darkness off is to make clean. Poetry, recording the stripping of the individual darkness, must inevitably cast light upon what has been hidden for too long ... Benefiting by the sight of the light and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness, poetry must drag further into the clean nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realise.

Andrew Sinclair, *No Man More Magical*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston: New York, 1975, 219-220.

This response - for the consumption of a public - can be compared with inter alia, a private defence of the parodically grotesque and Gothic elements of his work in a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson of 9 May 1934:

Tell him [Victor Neuburg] I write of worms and corruption because I like worms and corruption. Tell him I believe in the fundamental wickedness and worthlessness of man, and of the rot in life. Tell him I am all for cancers. And tell him, too, that I loathe poetry. I'd prefer to be an anatomist or the keeper of a morgue any day. Tell him I live exclusively on toenails and tumours. I sleep in a coffin too, and a wormy shroud is my summer suit.

Letters, *ibid*, 134.

- xiv. Tony Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997, 128.
xv. Thomas's argument in a review of Spender's *Vienna* of 1934 is a typically shrewd Metaphysical-influenced qualification of Poe's argument for the lyrical as the essence of true poetry:

There is more than poetry in poems, in that much of the most considerable poem is unpoetical or anti-poetical, is dependent on the wit that discovers occult resemblances in things apparently unlike or upon the intellectual consciousness of the necessity for a social conscience. In a poem, however, the poetry must come first; what negates or acts against the poem must be subjugated to the poetry which is essentially indifferent to whatever philosophy, political passion or gang-belief it embraces ... As a poem, *Vienna* leaves much to be desired; in the first place it leaves poetry to be desired. (Davies, 1990, 9)

- xvi. Rebutting Spender's claims Thomas protested his conscious and painstaking craftsmanship: 'My poems are formed; they are not turned on like a tap at all, they are "watertight compartments" ... Much of the obscurity is due to rigorous compression, the last thing they do is flow; they are much rather hewn', letter to Henry Treece, 16 May 1938, *Letters*, *op. cit.*, 298.
xvii. *Letters*, *ibid.*, 105.
xviii. The exhibition was opened by a green-haired André Breton and his wife and one of the keynote lectures was delivered (inaudibly) by a diving suit-clad Salvador Dali, who almost asphyxiated when his helmet became stuck. Other highlights included Paul Eluard's and Herbert Read's lecture on 'Art and the Unconscious' (delivered as they swayed insecurely on the edge of a sofa) and a young woman who wandered the halls carrying a prosthetic leg decorated with roses in one hand and a raw pork chop in the other.
xix. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, 90. See in particular, on hybridity, 'The commitment to theory', 'The other question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism', 'Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse', 'Sly Civility' and 'Signs taken for wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817'.
xx. See Tony Conran: 'Anglo-Welsh poetry differs from other poetry in the English language ... it has in its background a different civilization - it is like English poetry written by Irishmen or Indians.' Quoted by Ned Thomas, 'Constructing a Critical Space' in Nigel Jenkins (ed.) *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Tony Conran*, Cardiff: Welsh Union of Writers, 1995, 103. It is not the difference of Welsh from English writing that is questionable here, so much as the suggestion of a more distinct, less impacted difference than actually exists through reference to traditions far less compatible with English.
xxi. As in Colin Graham, "'Liminal Spaces": Post-Colonial Theories and Irish Culture', *The Irish Review*, 16 (Autumn/Winter 1994), 29-43.
xxii. For more details see John Ackerman 'The Welsh Background', in C.B. Cox. *Dylan Thomas*, Englewood Cliffs: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1972, 25-44. For a spirited counter argument, see Roland Mathias in 'Lord Cutglass, Twenty Years After' in Dannie Abse (ed.) *Poetry Dimension 2*, London: Abacus, 1974, 84.

- xxiii. Letter to Vernon Watkins, 20 April 1936, *Letters, op. cit.*, 222.
- xxiv. The function of Thomas's debunking of other writers partly betrays the anti-intellectualism which Walford Davies argues 'cannot be divorced from his very Welshness, his provincialism, or the surprisingly young age out of which most of the poems came': see Walford Davies (ed.), *Selected Poems: Dylan Thomas*, London: Dent, 1993, xviii.
- xxv. Gareth Thomas, 'A Freak User of Words', in *Bold, op. cit.* 66.
- xxvi. *Letters, op. cit.*, 172.
- xxvii. Caradoc Evans, *My People*, ed. John Harris, Bridgend: Seren Books, 1997, 10.
- xxviii. Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?*, London: Penguin, 1991, 253 In the town, 28,000 of a total population of less than 200,000 were registered out of work by the early 1930s.
- xxix. Gwyn A. Williams, *ibid.*, 280-86.
- xxx. Conran, 1997, *op. cit.*, 111.
- xxxi. Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 218-19. Again, recent work on Irish writing provides something of a corrective; a critique of Crawford which matches our own is made by Peter McDonald, who notes the 'useful warning' sounded in his book, but also the contradictions involved in desiring that a new identity-discourse of nationalism arise from the old one (of Englishness concealed by 'Britishness'); 'A complacent Englishness is no more subverted by (say) a complacent Scottishness than it is by the strident assertion of Irish identity; it is much more likely, in fact, to be reinforced by such pre-programmed systems of declaration.' McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, 193-4.
- xxxii. Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas*, London: Penguin, 1977, 53.
- xxxiii. Conran, 1997, *op. cit.*, 113.
- xxxiv. See Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990, 21: 'No doubt the sexual assertiveness bespoke a universal condition: one of Thomas's achievements was to make adolescence itself articulate.'
- xxxv. Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (eds.) *Dylan Thomas: Collected Poems 1934-1953*, London: Dent, 1989, 11.
- xxxvi. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, introduced and translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, 155.
- xxxvii. *Bold, op. cit.*, 92.
- xxxviii. Marjorie Levinson (in *Keats's Life of Allegory*, 1988) maintains that it was precisely those 'sensual' and improper aspects of his style - his very 'badness' and excess - which were foregrounded in his most significant poetry. This is a typical outsider strategy which has its similarities with Thomas's own poetic practice of the 1930s.
- xxxix. Fred Botting, *Gothic*, London: Routledge, 1996, 3.
- xl. Similarly, the charge that Thomas avoids social reality fails to stand up to scrutiny, given the poetry's pervasive thematics of modernity. 'Our eunuch dreams', for example, has film as a governing metaphor, while 'I, in my intricate image' visualises the 'land' as a 'wax disc', and lightning as its 'stylus'. Contemporary events crop up consistently, while WWI offered itself as a source of imagery partly because 1914 was the year of Thomas's birth, and thus fused personal origins and those of a murderously disintegrative modernity. The case for the effect of WWI on Thomas and its presence in his poetry is made most thoroughly by James A. Davies in "A Mental Militarist": Dylan Thomas and the Great War", *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, Volume 2, Cardiff: University of Wales Press (1996), 62 - 81. Likewise, favourite words - such as 'drill' and 'gear' - carry associations with machinery (the common claim that 'organic' imagery dominates the early poems is a good example of critical expectation overriding evidence; what Thomas does do is yoke together organic and inorganic terms. A very small sample from *18 Poems* would include 'the cemented skin', 'chemic blood', 'the seaweeds' iron', 'the milky acid on each hinge', 'lever from the limes/Ghostly propellers', 'nerves so wired to the skull', 'your face/Spun to my screws'. To note this is not to deny the concern with the mutuality of growth and decay, but to insist on the *dialectical* relationship between the two terms.
- xli. Botting, *op. cit.*, 3
- xl.ii. *Letters, op. cit.*, 72-3.
- xl.iii. His early reading included Blake, Thomas Lovell Beddoes's *Death's Jest-Book* and Swinburne (the verse in the short story 'The Fight' echoes 'Faustine'), as well as the Gothic qualities of the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Metaphysical writers advocated by Eliot and Grierson.
- xl.iiii. It is perhaps worth noting, given that Thomas was an avid filmgoer, and that Boris Karloff's definitive performance in *The Mummy* appeared at the time of the Notebook poems, in 1932. Mummies (usually associated with the passing of time) appear in several early poems. Ancient Egyptian designs and motifs, following the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1924, were also a major component in the Art Deco style of the late 1920s and early 1930s.
- xl.v. For Machen's now little-known work, 'the best in the rather sticky field of genre work which took up Darwinian anxieties as a basis for terror', see David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the present day, Volume 2; The Modern Gothic*, Longman: London, 1996, 22-25. See also Davies, *op. cit.*, 1990, 55, who notes that Thomas used material from Machen's Autobiography (1922) in *Under Milk Wood*.
- xl.vi. Tony Pinkney, *D.H. Lawrence*, London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1990. See especially chapter 2 'Northernness and Modernism'.
- xl.vii. Pinkney, *ibid.*, 73.
- xl.viii. Davies, 1990, *op. cit.*, 21; 'as in Lawrence's case [sexual assertiveness] also had something to do with a specific culture, in which Bible-based fears of the Apocalypse enjoined retreat into social "respectability". It never drove

Thomas, as it did Lawrence, to the exploration of a consistent compensating philosophy, but it certainly decided the emphasis of his protest ...'

- xlix. Sinclair, *op. cit.*, 232.
- l. See Davies and Maud, *op. cit.*, 201: 'One might think of 'Now' as the poem in which Thomas pays his greatest attention to words in themselves, paying such fanatical attention to them in the way they weight a line that referential meaning is ultimately lost in the presentational.'
- li. Letters, *op. cit.*, 301.
- lii. 'I, in my intricate image' is in three sections of six six-line stanzas (72 lines), each of which contains four end-rhyme variations on 'I' or 'Is', with the two other lines linked by a different rhyme. 'I see the boys of summer' follows an 11-7-10-8-8-10 syllabic pattern through nine stanzas with only one lapse.
- liii. Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986, 105.
- liv. Letters, *op. cit.*, 97.
- lv. Letters, *op. cit.*, 278.
- lvi. Davies, 1986, *op. cit.*, 111.
- lvii. *Ibid.*, 114.
- lviii. Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davies (eds.), *Modernism and Ireland: The poetry of the 1930s*, Cork: Cork University Press, 1995, 46.
- lix. Davies, 1993, *op. cit.*, xxxvi-xxxvii.
- lx. Cox, *op. cit.*, 179.
- lxi. Louis Simpson, *A Revolution in Taste*, New York; Macmillan, 1978, 3-42.
- lxii. Thomas is a rare example of a 'high' art poet lending his name to a rock star (Bob Dylan, but there is also Tom Verlaine) and his image to the cover of a seminal rock/pop album (The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* (1967)).