'There's words': Dylan Thomas, Swansea, and Language[1]

M. Wynn Thomas

> Dylan loved people and loved Swansea. Even the eccentrics and odd characters were his kinsfolk be they Swansea people.[2]

The words are those of one of Thomas's closest friends, Bert Trick, and they seem to me to be a fair summary of the positive aspects of the relationship between the poet and his hometown. The negative aspects, mostly limited to that period in late adolescence when he morosely viewed Swansea as the provincial graveyard of his burgeoning talent, are lividly recorded in the self-dramatizing letters he sent to his young London girlfriend, Pamela Hansford Johnson.

It is still possible, in one sense, to tour Thomas's Swansea. Yet in another, more important, sense it is not. That is not only because such a substantial part of what he loved about the place was obliterated during three dreadful nights of air-raid in February, 1941. It is more importantly because a writer's town can be accessed by only one route – through that author's writings. We might even say that, as an inveterate writer, Thomas turned his town *into* words. But then, it was Swansea that had first set him on the way to becoming himself a figure fashioned out of language; a linguistic sign. Instead of word being made flesh, in his case flesh eventually ended up being made word.

This sobering realization occurs to Thomas at one arresting point in his moving and grossly underestimated radio play *Return Journey*. Broadcast first in 1947, it is a haunting account of his post-war return to his hometown in a wry, comic, poignant attempt to reconnect with his youthful self. He comes 'home' in search of what (or rather who) he had once been – a search that is also a search for the Swansea that no longer is. And his first port of call, once he has left the town's High Street Station, is naturally one of the many pubs he had frequented when he'd been a young cub reporter, apprenticed to language on the local paper that became the *South Wales Evening Post*. In an attempt to describe his onetime youthful self to the barmaid, he launches into a virtuosic performance of linguistic self-portraiture:

> He'd be about seventeen or eighteen […] and above medium height. Above medium height for Wales, I mean, he's five foot six and a half. Thick blubber lips; snub noses; curly mousebrown hair; one front tooth broken after playing a game called Cats and Dogs, in the Mermaid, Mumbles; speaks rather fancy; truculent; plausible; a bit of a shower-off; […] lived in the Uplands; a bombastic adolescent

2   Quoted in James A. Davies, *A Reference Guide to Dylan Thomas* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 24, hereafter *RG*.

> provincial Bohemian with a thick-knotted artist's tie made out of his sister's scarf, she never knew where it had gone […] a gabbing, ambitious, mock-tough, pretentious young man; and mole-y, too.[3]

And what is the barmaid's response? It is devastatingly uncomprehending. 'There's words: what d'you want to find *him* for, I wouldn't touch him with a barge-pole.'

'There's words': the phrase that haunts me, because in its ambivalence it encapsulates the creative heart of Thomas's life and writing. 'There's words' is, obviously enough, Dylan's self-knowing and self-mocking advertisement of his irresistible way with language, voiced here in a naïve barmaid's unconsciously wondering tribute to a poet's seductive potency of expression. And I'll be returning to this celebratory aspect of the phrase later. But the exclamation also carries dark, disturbing overtones. His wistful question to the girl behind the bar has in effect been, 'Do you remember a young Mr Thomas?' To prompt her memory he has launched into a bravura performance. And what is her response? 'There's words.' It is as if, horrifyingly, Thomas, the would-be home-comer, discovers he now has existence only in language, not only as a clever arranger of words but as a clever arrangement of them.

This is a realization already anticipated in an earlier failure of his in *Return Journey* to conjure up memories of his younger self in Swansea people, this time by mentioning him by name. The blank reply he this time gets from the barmaid, as she turns to another customer at the bar for confirmation, is: 'This is a regular home from home for Thomases, isn't it, Mr Griffiths?' (*RJ,* 75). Even the surname 'Thomas', it turns out, is not a reliable personal signifier, an identifier of self: 'Thomas' is after all the most common of surnames in Swansea, a by-word for all and sundry. It is much more common even than the familiarly Welsh 'Mr Griffiths' – a surname the barmaid can here confidently (even pointedly) deploy to denote a real, living, single person. It is as if Dylan the returnee finds himself lost in language.

No wonder, therefore, that, as he walks the streets of his old town, he seems to have become a merely ghostly presence wandering among the 'blitzed flat graves' of shops, 'marbled with snow and headstoned with fences' (*RJ,* 73). Words, it is implied, have usurped and thus obliterated his living, individual human identity. This is a point underlined, as the radio play subtly emphasizes, by the way the barmaid's phrase 'There's words' precisely echoes her earlier phrase, 'There's snow.' As *Return Journey* makes graphically clear, the exceptionally heavy snowfall under which Swansea disappeared in the notoriously hard winter of Thomas's return to the town in 1947 is symbolic of the obliteration, during the terrible three-night blitz in 1941, of the centre of the old town which had been the heartland not just of the town but of the young Dylan too.

The war in Europe had ended only some two and half years before Thomas's return to Swansea in 1947, and so much of the town still lay in ruins. Devastated by

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3   'Return Journey,' in Dylan Thomas, *Quite Early One Morning: Poems, Stories, Essays* (London: Dent, 1974), p. 76, hereafter *RJ.*

bombing, large areas from the docks to the shopping centre remained in a derelict, devastated state. 'What's the *Three Lamps* like now,' asks the returning Thomas of the barmaid. And the reply comes from a customer leaning on the counter: 'It isn't like anything. It isn't there. It's nothing mun. You remember Ben Evans's stores? It's right next door to that. Ben Evans isn't there either.' (*RJ*, 77) Buildings, places, these are now just names, just words. Whereas Thomas had once been able to take his substantial, material bearings from these buildings, and thus been able to orientate himself, now, disorientatingly, where there were solid shops there are nothing but 'hole[s] in space'. Those 'displaced' shops now have an existence – a 'place' – only in language. 'Eddershaw Furnishers, Curry's Bicycles, […] Hodges and Clothiers […] Crouch the Jeweller, Lennard's Boots, Kardomah […] David Evans, […] Burton's, Lloyd's Bank' (*RJ*, 78): 'there's words,' just as the barmaid said.

  This vivid elegy for a Swansea town that is no more may remind us how aware, and how appalled, the post-war Thomas was that the age had turned nuclear since last he had visited his home town. Bombed Swansea was, so to speak, his personal Hiroshima. It is as if the hopeless sense of nihilism by which he had been afflicted following the first nuclear explosions had fatefully heightened his sense that his beloved, Swansea-generated world of words and memories was itself likewise nothing but an endless chain reaction of signifiers.

  After all, Swansea and language had always been so intimately interconnected in Dylan Thomas's experience as to be virtually interchangeable. It is therefore not surprising that *Return Journey* should from the very outset show us a Dylan who, in returning to Swansea, is brought face to face not with his younger self but with language itself. It was there that he had first been brought alive to words. I would therefore like briefly to consider just a very few of the many important locations and occasions of his original awakening not just to the world but to the word in his home town.

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Let us start with one of his best-known poems: 'Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should rage against the close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'[4] This famous villanelle bespeaks Thomas's awareness that his father had not only begotten him; it was his father, too, who had made him a poet. Because what is rarely, if ever, noticed by commentators is that 'Do not go gentle' is Dylan's despairing, taunting challenge to his rapidly ageing father to assume the role of a King Lear. Behind the poem lies the aged Yeats's recently published poem, 'Lapis Lazuli', a poem Thomas would certainly have known, not least because his great Swansea friend Vernon Watkins was a Yeats fanatic.[5] In that poem Yeats famously celebrates the defiant 'gaiety' with which the great Shakespearean heroes meet their end, 'gaiety transfiguring all that dread,' a phrase echoed in Thomas's 'Blind

4   Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (eds), *Dylan Thomas: Collected Poems 1934–1953* (London: Dent, 1988), p. 148, hereafter *CP*.
5   'Lapis Lazuli', *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 338–9.

eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay.' Thomas is also picking up on Yeats's use of the verb 'blaze': 'Black out: Heaven blazing into the head'.

'Tragedy wrought to its uttermost […] Hamlet rambles and Lear rages,' Yeats had written. And Thomas next proceeds to borrow yet another Yeatsian word: 'rage'. 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light.' Thus in urging his father to turn 'age' into 'rage', just like Lear, Dylan Thomas is trying to provoke the sick atheist into once more roaring the disgusted cry that had characterized him in his prime: 'It's raining again, damn Him.'[6] Via Yeats, then, Thomas is implicitly alluding to the figure of King Lear throughout 'Do not go gentle.' And why is he doing so? It is in part his way of confessing himself to be, as poet, the offspring of a passionate Shakespearean – his father had actually read the Bard's poetry to him in his very cradle. 'Do not go gentle' implicitly bears witness to the vivifying effect of poetic language on little Dylan at the very beginning of his life, and so the villanelle is able convincingly to claim a like power to *re-*vivify D. J. Thomas at the very end of his life. In being a poem about Dylan's father, 'Do not go gentle' is also inescapably a poem about origins, about Swansea as a cradle of language, and about the power of words to shape personal identity.

D. J. Thomas was, by some reports, not an easy man to live with. Aloof, frustrated, and irascible, he seems to have been periodically irritated by the class difference between his sophisticated educated self and his comfortably homely chatterbox of a wife from working-class Swansea east. Young Dylan was thus encouraged early to escape and make an alternative home for himself in language, which is what he memorably did in magical Cwmdonkin Park, whose true 'keeper' was not the park keeper but, of course, the hunchback. Bent out of true, 'the hunchback in the park' is the physical image of the enticingly deviant, the alluringly monstrous, the rivetingly grotesque (*CP*, 93-4). Like the poet, he is the eternal outsider. To enter his territory is to cross over to the wild side, to join the company of 'the truant boys from the town'. Truancy must have held an irresistible appeal for a schoolmaster's son who went on to revel in the truancy of words.

Tributary influences on 'The Hunchback in the Park' are many, and obviously include the film of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and the William books by Richmal Crompton that Thomas devoured as a boy.[7] But all influences tend towards the same conclusion; that as a poet he feels most at home with the errant life and the wild energy of words. Those are the words that, like the truant boys, once they are clearly heard can then seem to 'run on out of sound'. This truant phrase, like so many of Thomas's, is itself a hunchback, because it wilfully distorts a well-known idiom – 'run on out of sight'. In the process it reveals all poetry to be language mis-shapen, like the hunchback himself. It also reminds us that, for a poet like Thomas, a poem is a device for allowing words to 'run on out of [the] sound' of their usual, ordinary usage and meaning. A poem is a magical 'park' where words are let out to play, given their head, and allowed to go wherever their exuberant

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6   Constantine Fitzgibbon, *A Life of Dylan Thomas* (London: Dent, 1965), p. 13.
7   For the influence of Crompton, see Betty and William Greenway, 'Just Dylan: Dylan Thomas as Subversive Children's Writer,' in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays,* 5 (1999), 42–50.

energy of life may take them. 'Run on out of sound' can mean either 'run on out of the reach of sound', or it can mean 'run on propelled only by sound' (compare 'I did that out of spite'), just like one of Thomas's poems.

'The Hunchback in the Park' is often sentimentally read as enchanting idyll and indulgently supposed to be a poem as innocent as strawberries. But stalking the text is an incipient, because pre-pubescent, sexuality, hinted at in the description of the hunchback himself as 'the old dog sleeper' – the phrase 'old dog' (with its echo of the Welsh 'hen gi') implies an old womanizer, the roguish aged twin of the 'young dog' Thomas himself boasted of being in his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog.* Of course the poor old hunchback can be such only in his sleep, and even then he is capable only of a eunuch dream of 'a woman figure without fault', the old man's pathetic twist on the Pygmalion story. The sublimated sexuality of his frustrated making is paralleled and contrasted with the activity of the incipiently sexual boys who 'made the tigers jump out of their eyes / to roar on the rockery stones, / and the groves were blue with sailors.' The word 'blue' there refers not only to the colour of the sea and the uniform of sailors, but also to their blue language and thus by connection to the docks from which the Cape Horners sailed in the heyday of Swansea as Copperopolis.

This dockland area, with its adjacent red-light district of the Strand, was distantly visible from Dylan Thomas's window away at the far end of town from his home in the affluent genteel suburban Uplands. Indeed, wickedly hidden in that phrase, 'the groves were blue with sailors', is a subversive allusion to the bourgeois neighbourhood in which young Dylan lived, because the name of the triangle of streets directly adjacent to Cwmdonkin Park is 'the Grove.' In exultantly making the groves 'blue with sailors' Thomas is therefore slyly using his power as poet to turn the respectable Grove into a district of low repute.

For Thomas, Cwmdonkin Park was both nursery of the imagination and an adventure playground for language. That it was so may have been in part due to its proximity to what in those days was referred to as a School for the Deaf and Dumb, the significance of which for Thomas was pointed out in an important but neglected essay by my late friend Vic Golightly.[8] It was awareness of signing that lay behind such phrases as 'the rows / Of the star-gestured children in the park'. Hence, from earliest days, Thomas was aware of language not as voiced, fixed, and given, but as a system of flexible signs, a nimble means of signifying. That words could be produced in all forms, shapes, and sizes would have been self-evident to one who grew up in a bilingual environment. Welsh was the first language of both his parents, and his country relatives were virtually monoglot Welsh-speakers. There were Welsh-language dictionaries, grammars, and poetry anthologies on his father's shelves. And the English spoken all around him as a boy would have been colourfully influenced by the Welsh language. Indeed, the very phrase 'there's words' is a good example of this. A familiar form of Welsh English, it derives from the use in Welsh of 'dyna' (English 'there [is]') where in English an exclamatory 'What' or 'How' would be used. Hence 'There's posh,' 'There's lovely', and so

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8   Vic Golightly, '"Speak on a Finger and Thumb": Dylan Thomas, Language and the Deaf,' in *Welsh Writing in English: a Yearbook of Critical Essays*, 10 (2005), 73–97.

on. The young Dylan would also have been very familiar with code-switching – a primitive example of it in the text of *Return Journey* being the use of 'Tawe water' to denote a pint of beer – 'Tawe' being the Welsh name of the river at whose mouth – Aber-tawe – Swansea stands.

To mention code-switching is to be reminded of an intriguing fact. Thomas's two closest friends in Swansea, the poet Vernon Watkins and the musician Daniel Jones, went on to work during the war at the Government's secret code-breaking centre of Bletchley Park. They seemed to share with Dylan an exceptional sensitivity to the complex patterned character of closed signifying systems such as language. Thomas's was an interestingly hybrid model of poetry. He repeatedly spoke of it in organicist and biological terms suggestive of natural processes. But he also described his poems as laboured assemblages, which is why of late they have caught the attention of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school of poets.[9] Thomas could represent poems as word machines for multiplying meaning. In the interests of the latter he did not respect the individual integrity of a single word but was happy to reduce it to its constituent parts if this served his purposes. This is most evident in the case of his only known Joycean, multilingual pun. His notebooks record his discovery that the Welsh word 'amser' (meaning 'time') could be split into the two syllables 'am' (which normally means 'around') and 'sêr' which means stars. The outcome of this bizarre nuclear splitting of a word to release its arbitrary additional signifying possibilities was the line he included in 'The force that through the green fuse', about 'how time [amser] has ticked a heaven around [am] the stars [sêr].' He has treated 'amser' as if it were a code word, a miniature cipher that needed to be cracked to reveal its secret meaning.

Had I time I would like to explore the broad analogies between both the making and the reading of Thomas's poetry and those of cipher-construction and cipher-breaking. Central to all these processes is the construction and deconstruction of patterns of equivalence. But if Thomas can be read as a maker of codes, he can also be read as a maker of anti-codes, since while his poems operate, like codes or ciphers, on the principle of equivalence, they knowingly resist the reduceability to singleness of meaning that any code or cipher presupposes.

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After the 'Cwmdonkin period' in Thomas's development came the period of Warmley, the substantial middle-class Sketty home of Dylan Thomas's great friend and fellow artist Daniel Jones. It was there that two lads crossing the threshold into their teens conspired to create their own theatre of the absurd out of the incorrigible zaniness of language. If Cwmdonkin Park was the nursery of Thomas the poet, then Warmley was the nursery of Thomas the comic writer – and I would even venture to suggest that he may have had a greater natural genius for comedy than he had

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9   Editor's Note: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E was a literary magazine published in New York from 1978 which cemented the school of 'Language poetry', a postmodern style which aimed to challenge the conventions of traditional poetry and notify readers that words are symbols separate from the reality they claim to reflect.

for poetry, because comedy allowed (and indeed positively encouraged) him to gleefully exploit the sheer glorious silliness of words. He revelled in the anarchic accidents of meaning and loved the adventitious character of words. In later years he was, after all, shrewdly and glumly to surmise that he might be more 'a freak user of words than a poet'.[10]

It was in Warmley that Dan and Dylan (even their names conveniently rhyme) mirrored the Marx Brothers films and anticipated the Goon Show, that madcap classic of postwar British radio, by inventing characters outrageously named Miguel Y Bradshaw, Waldo Carpet, Xmas Pulpit, Paul America, Winter Vaux, Tonenbach, and Bram (*CL,* 196). Across the sky of their Warmley world there flew 'panama-shaped birds from the Suez Canal', and the 'Radio Warmley' they invented broadcast rhymes of which Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear might not have been entirely ashamed: 'A drummer is a man we know who has to do with drums, / But I've never met a plumber yet who had to do with plums, / A cheerful man who sells you hats would be a cheerful hatter, / But is a serious man who sells you mats a serious matter?' (*CL*, 5). The adult Thomas was to view Warmley nostalgically as the epitome of 'the queer, Swansea world, a world that was, thank god, self-sufficient'. And of his Warmley alter ego, Percy, he was to write, 'Percy's world in Warmley was, and still is, the only one that has any claims of permanence […] His was a world of our own, from which we can interpret nearly everything that's worth anything' (*CL*, 197). To which I would add the question, what is Llareggub, after all, but a Warmley for grown-ups?

Cwmdonkin Park, Warmley; these were then two Swansea locales important for Thomas's evolution in language. To these can be added an unexpected third: the Paraclete Congregational Chapel, just around the bay from Swansea in Newton, a corner of the sometime fishing village of Mumbles. It was there that the boy Dylan was regularly subjected of a Sunday to a strong dose of chapel religion administered by his mother's brother-in-law, who was a local minister. And that made him aware that for more than a century in Wales, the word had been the preserve of the great preachers of the Welsh pulpit, the lords and masters of language who had been allowed the last word on every aspect of life.[11]

Realizing that if he wanted to become a writer, he would have to wrestle language out of the iron control of the pulpit, Thomas began early to wage his own war for the word. One of the most celebrated of his attempts to displace what remained of the erstwhile regnant discourse of Nonconformist, chapel-mad Wales is 'After the Funeral: in memory of Ann Jones' (*CP*, 73-4). The poem openly presents itself to us as the very site of a linguistic struggle between Dylan, 'Ann's [dionysiac] bard on a raised hearth', who commands the power to 'call / all the seas to service', and the ministers and deacons of a repressed and repressive patriarchal culture, with

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10   Paul Ferris (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters* (London: Dent, 1985), p. 130, hereafter
       CL.
11   In the discussion that follows, I draw upon two earlier publications of mine, viz., the chapter
       entitled 'Marlais: Dylan Thomas and the "Tin Bethels"', in M. Wynn Thomas, *In the Shadow
       of the Pulpit: Literature and Nonconformist Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010),
       pp. 226–55; and 'Marlais,' in Hannah Ellis (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: A Centenary Celebration*
       (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 30–41.

their 'mule praises, brays' and 'hymning heads' as they soberly preside over Ann's chapel funeral service. In this inverted version of the Old Testament story about the contest between Elijah and the pagan priests of Baal, it is the pagan champion of nature, the anti-chapel Thomas, who emerges triumphant. That triumph is variously expressed in the poem as a power to raise an 'alternative', verbal tombstone in Ann's memory, and as a power to resurrect the dead fox, so that its 'stuffed lung […] twitch and cry Love / And the strutting fern lay seeds on the black sill.' The outrageous phallic thrust of that final image is, of course, utterly unmistakeable.

It is already evident in 'After the Funeral' that, to coin an image from *Under Milk Wood*, Dylan Thomas is a Polly Garter of a poet. He defies the respectable chapel-cowed community not only by flaunting the fecund sexuality of his poetry but by delightedly indulging in promiscuous verbal liaisons, encouraging words to copulate and thrive so as to breed unpredictable and uncontainable meaning: 'I like contradicting my images, saying two things in one word, four in two words and one in six […] Poetry […] should be as orgiastic and organic as copulation, dividing and unifying […] Man should be two tooled, and a poet's middle leg is his pencil' (*CL*,182). Implicitly imaging Nonconformist discourse as authoritarian, univocal to the point of being totalitarian, this poetic Polly Garter rebels by becoming a connoisseur of polysemy, a subversive profilerator of meanings.

From the beginning Dylan Thomas consciously uses puns, *double-entendres*, and a whole wild menagerie of suspect forms and socially proscribed kinds of 'language' to reflect on the profligate, uninhibited nature of 'language' itself. 'Llarregub/Llarregyb' – a word he had already coined and patented as his own in the stories of the early thirties – was always Thomas's true native place, a place made exclusively out of the potentialities of language to turn itself back to front, inside out, upside down. In his poetry topsy-turvy language proves itself to be an incorrigible contortionist and shameless shape-changer. 'Every device there is in language is there to be used if you will,' he told a Texan postgraduate in 1951: 'Old tricks, new tricks, paragram, catachresis, slang, assonantal rhymes, vowel rhymes, sprung rhythm.' [12] 'Poets have got to enjoy themselves sometimes,' he added disingenuously.

But there was always much more to it than that. To the Calvinistic minister's implicit model of human words as solidly and respectably underpinned by The Divine Word, Thomas, from his teens onwards, opposed an alternative, radically different model – of the ungovernable liquefactions of language, 'the sea-slides of saying' as he suggestively phrased it. His lifelong infatuation as poet, as short-story writer, and even as letter-writer, was with 'the procreant urge of the word', to misquote Walt Whitman, one of his poetic heroes.[13] In a poem like 'After the Funeral,' Thomas adopts an openly confrontational stance towards the dominant discourse of Nonconformity and constructs what socio-linguists terms an 'anti-language', an alternative discourse of his own.

And if 'After the Funeral' is the key text in Thomas the poet's struggle for mastery of the word, then its equivalent for Thomas the comic writer is 'The

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12   Walford Davies (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writings* (London: Dent, 1971), p. 156.
13   Francis Murphy (ed.), *Walt Whitman:The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 65.

Peaches,' the first story in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*.[14] Based on Thomas's boyhood recollections of visiting his relatives' farm in the rural west, it features a wonderfully comical sermon, solemnly delivered by the would-be preacher Gwilym, a twenty-year-old 'with a thin stick of a body and spade-shaped face'. He has a captive audience of one – his cousin Marlais, Dylan's alter ego, a little Swansea townie. Obediently seated on hay-bales in the barn that passes for Gwilym's chapel, little Marlais listens to his country cousin's 'voice rise and crack and sink to a whisper, and break into singing and Welsh and ring triumphantly and be wild and meek', until the sermon reaches its grand solemn climax: '"Thou canst see and spy and watch us all the time, in the little black corners, in the big cowboys' prairies, under the blankets when we're snoring fast, in the terrible shadows: pitch black, pitch black: Thou canst see everything we do, in the night and day, in the day and the night, everything, everything: Thou canst see all the time. O God, mun, you're like a bloody cat".' In the silence that follows, 'the one duck quacked outside.' '"Now I take a collection," Gwilym said' (*CS,*128). Then, as the story proceeds, Gwilym's Calvinistic sermon (the emphasis is on a humanly distant, prying, preying God) is implicitly trumped by the alternative, secular, story-weaving power of little Marlais from Swansea town, as he plays with his Swansea friend Jack Williams in the secret dingle on the farm: '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.'

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By the end of his teens, Thomas was understandably beginning to feel distinctly isolated in Swansea. In 1933, when he was nineteen, he could write like this, in one of his outrageously pretentious letters to Pamela Hansford Johnson: 'In my untidy bedroom, surrounded with books and papers, full of the unhealthy smell of very bad tobacco, I sit and write' (*CL*, 47). In one way, his Swansea had shrunk to a single cramped room 'by the boiler', to which he regularly retreated between 1930 and 1934 to fill notebook after notebook with remarkable drafts of poems, steeped in adolescent eroticism, many of which, duly reworked, would find their way into his first two published collections. By now, he could superciliously describe his Swansea as a 'dingy hell' from which he longed to escape, 'and my mother is a vulgar humbug, but I'm not so bad, and Gower is beautiful as anywhere' (*CL*, 63). In a letter to the *West Wales Guardian* he expressed disgust at 'this overpeopled breeding box of ours, this ugly contradiction of a town for ever compromised between the stacks and the littered bays' (*CL*, 142).

By this time, the Thomas who yearned to escape the confines of his home town and who had ostensibly retreated from its Philistinism into the safety of his own bedroom was also the Thomas who had for a couple of years been a 'young dog', cutting a figure in the local pubs, on the stage of the Swansea Little Theatre, and in the mildly bohemian company of his acquaintance at the Kardomah Café. As a cub reporter on what became the *Evening Post*, Thomas was wholly unreliable and

14   Leslie Norris (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Stories* (London: Dent, 1983), hereafter *CS*.

frankly irresponsible. But, as James A. Davies has emphasized, it

> increased his knowledge of Swansea and particularly of its crisis areas and low life: the hospital, the police station, the mortuary and its sad cargo, and the docks area with its sleazy pubs and loose women. He cultivated a 'reporter's image' influenced by American films; a pulled-down porkpie hat, dangling cigarette, and check overcoat. (*RG*, 21)

And it was during this period that the habit of trawling the pubs began. He captured the atmosphere of his life at this time in the last two stories of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*.

The old Kardomah Café was conveniently situated directly opposite the *Evening Post* buildings (diagonally opposite the Castle), and so at lunch times Thomas and his fellow trainee journalists like Charles Fisher could always slip across the road. Once again, therefore, he occupied a frontier zone, a socio-linguistic positioning that contributed significantly, time after time, to the development of his distinctively hybrid imagination. This cultural situation is again conveniently represented for us by the Kardomah's physical location and accordingly mixed clientele at that time. It was located in Castle Street, at the bottom of High Street, adjacent to the red-light district of the Strand and the racy docks area of Swansea. But it was also in the heart of the old Swansea's down-town shopping area, next to prestigious stores like Ben Evans, and so patronized by middle-class and working-class shoppers alike.

The strong development of the Swansea Art School under Grant Murray after the First World War meant that the town was home to a young artistic set, and from the late 1920s onwards one of the favourite haunts of young artists was the Kardomah. It was to this set that Thomas the cub reporter attached himself. Those gathering periodically at the café included the two young artists Fred Janes and Mervyn Levy, a young man who spoke Yiddish at home (that frontier zone again) because he was the grandson of the refugee Russian Jew who had opened the first cinema in Swansea. Other regulars were aspiring writers Tom Warner and Charles Fisher, who was to enjoy a very colourful career as a globe-trotting journalist and died in Canada at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Daniel Jones, Thomas's boyhood friend who would go on to fame as a symphonic composer, would also sometimes join the company. The model for them all were the Viennese and South Bank Parisian cafés frequented by intellectuals and artists who had contributed so notably to the development of the Modernist aesthetic.

The Kardomah was, for Thomas, the successor to Cwmdonkin Park and Warmley – a congenial space within a comfortingly protective, intimately knowable, but ultimately Philistine town where his imagination could be allowed full play and find stimulation in the company of others. The informal café setting also promoted cross-fertilization between different art forms. This fluid, highly informal group consisted of painters and musicians as well as poets, many of them fascinated by the Modernist experimentations that had foregrounded the formal, compositional properties of art at the expense of the old, traditional, representational paradigms. And these interests, too, chimed with those of the young Thomas, reinforcing his

instinct to treat words rather as, say, the Cubist painters treated objects. He captured the flavour of their meetings in the story 'Old Garbo,' from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*:

> Most of the boys were there already. Some wore the outlines of moustaches, others had sideboards and crimped hair, some smoked curved pipes and talked with them gripped between their teeth, there were pin-striped trousers and hard collars, one daring bowler […] 'Sit by here,' said Leslie Bird. He was in the boots at Dan Lewis's.[15]

'Sit by here' is an example of the young men's self-mocking affectation of the Welsh-English that was the vernacular idiom of this cultural frontier town, situated on the very edge of the thoroughly Welsh-speaking industrial Tawe (Swansea) valley. And it is obvious that the language spoken by the youths in the café was a mix of the standard 'educated' English of their grammar school backgrounds, the Welsh-English of the streets, the high 'literary' language of the Modernist writers with whom they were obsessed, and the flavoursome slang of the American gangster movies they so loved. Whereas the language used by the leading English poets of the day, such as W. H. Auden, tended to be very much the limited product of an English public-school middle-class milieu, a Swansea Welshman like Dylan Thomas was early exposed to a variety of linguistic registers, class sociolects and cultural discourses that helped make him the distinctively 'hybrid' poet he became.[16] And conversations around the tables in the Kardomah obviously featured a constant switching between these many different examples of language usage. No wonder therefore that one of the places Thomas revisited so movingly in imagination, and indeed in implicit homage, in *Return Journey* was the site of the Kardomah, reduced to rubble in the blitz:

> I haven't seen him since the old Kardomah days [….] Him and Charlie Fisher – Charlie's got whiskers now – and Tom Warner and Fred Janes, drinking coffee-dashes and arguing the toss […] [about] music and poetry and politics, Einstein and Epstein, Stravinsky and Greta Garbo, death and religion, Picasso and girls. (*RJ*, 81)

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These were also years during which Thomas was active with the Swansea Little Theatre, 'based in Mumbles […] close to congenial pubs', as Jim Davies has astutely noted. This was a breakaway group from the Swansea Amateur Dramatic Society, interested in staging more sophisticated plays such as classics by Shakespeare,

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15   *The Dylan Thomas Omnibus, Under Milk Wood, Poems, Stories and Broadcasts* (London: Phoenix 2000), p. 242.
16   This aspect of his poetry has been highlighted most recently in John Goodby, *Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

Chekhov, and Ibsen.[17] During his time with the group, Thomas had roles in William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* and a couple of other contemporary plays. He attracted good notices for his performances, but was also criticized for his inability to adapt his accent and mode of delivery to suit the different parts he was required to play. But the experiences that he gained through his acting obviously contributed very substantially to his subsequent career of public performance, both as a brilliant radio broadcaster (who first took the microphone at the Swansea studios of the BBC) and as an incomparable reader of his own poetry.

His theatrical experience enabled him to perfect his public persona – or rather, his public personae, as he actually proved far more adept in life than he did on stage at changing his personality to suit his various audiences. One of the leading figures in the Little Theatre was Thomas Taig, at that time lecturer in the Department of English at the fledgling University College of Swansea, and after Thomas's death Taig was to stress how consummate an actor he had become in the street theatre of life itself. 'I think of him as infinitely vulnerable,' Taig wrote, 'living from moment to moment a heightened awareness of sense-impressions and emotional tensions, the victim rather than the master of his environment.' It was his acting skills, Taig added, that eventually enabled Thomas to overcome these handicaps and eventually to achieve a mastery, of sorts, of his environment – but at considerable, and eventually tragic, cost to his inner self (*DR*, 100-104).

Eerily enough, Daniel Jones was to paint a very similar picture of Thomas in one of the last interviews he gave before his death. He spoke of the Dylan he knew so well as a lost soul**,** one who could never reconcile public performer and inner being. Jones's Dylan is one who never really knew who he was – he is the lost soul we have already met, who in that opening passage from *Return Journey* returned to Swansea in a vain attempt to re-integrate his present with his past. Never lost *for* words, Daniel Jones's Dylan was consequently condemned to be forever lost *in* words, doomed to be a garrulous performer for all and sundry to the very last. So perhaps the barmaid had indeed innocently seen him for what he was, when she exclaimed, 'There's words.'

After his first departure for London in 1933, Thomas was never again really a native of Swansea. And then, over those three terrible nights in 1941, the centre of Swansea was razed to the ground. It is scarcely an exaggeration to claim that the erasure of his hometown's heartland was a traumatic event in Thomas's life. After it, he felt imaginatively orphaned. The umbilical cord connecting him to the richest and most dependable source of his creativity had been cut for ever. He had always been restless, but after the war he became a displaced person.

There is even a sense in which both of his most popular works – *Under Milk Wood* and 'Fern Hill' – are elegies for the lost Swansea of his boyhood. In *Under Milk Wood* he re-created, after an adult fashion, the zany world he invented with Daniel Jones during those years of high-spirited collaboration in Warmley. And 'Fern Hill', although ostensibly a poem nostalgically recalling boyhood holidays

17   There is useful information about this period in Colin Edwards and David N. Thomas (eds),
      Dylan Remembered, Volume One, 1914–1934 (Bridgend: Seren, 2003), pp. 260ff, hereafter *DR*.

on his aunt's west-Wales farm near Llanstephan, is also a poem directly responding to the two events that changed Thomas's world for ever. The first was the bombing of Swansea; the second was the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Thomas's mind they tended to merge into a single nightmare – the irreversible loss of what had remained to him of human hope and innocence. 'Fern Hill' is an elegy for such a lost world. And his radio play, *Return Journey*, about his imaginary journey back to Swansea in the terribly cold winter of 1947 in search of an irretrievably lost town and an irretrievably lost self, is a memorable elegy for both self and Swansea that also darkly foreshadows his own imminent death.

Rooted in his Swansea experiences, then, are Thomas's great affirmations of language, such as the powerful magnificat to words he sent to an enquiring Texan postgraduate in 1951. Recalling his early discovery, once more in his Swansea childhood, of 'what went on between the covers of books' (the sly insinuation of verbal sexual shenanigans is interesting), he wrote of 'such sand-storms and ice-blasts of words, such slashing of humbug, and humbug too, such staggering peace, such enormous laughter, such and so many blinding bright lights breaking across the just-awaking wits and splashing all over the pages in a million bits and pieces all of which were words, words, words, and each of which was alive forever in its own delight and glory and oddity and light' (*EPW*, 156). But Thomas was also ever aware of being 'Shut, too, in a tower of words' – a tower that could be phallically creative but could also be humanly imprisoning. It is telling, I think, that at the time of his death, one of the projects Thomas was contemplating undertaking was entitled 'Where Have the Old Words Got Me.'[18]

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As I started this essay with *Return Journey*, let me also finish with it, ending with its immensely moving conclusion. It features Thomas, the returnee, wandering Cwmdonkin Park as twilight falls and the park prepares for closure. In one final attempt at coming face to face with his young self, he asks the lugubrious Park Keeper, now turned gatekeeper of tenebrous regions, the same plaintively insistent question he had asked the barmaid earlier: does he remember a curly-haired youngster? 'Oh yes, yes I knew him well,' comes the reply: 'He used to climb the reservoir railings and pelt the old swans. Run like a billygoat over the grass you should keep off of. Cut branches off the trees. Carve words on the benches.' This seems promising, at last, not least that memory of a boy whose very identity yearned to take the form of words. But even as the Park Keeper goes on to fill in the rest of the picture – of a boy who used to 'Climb the elms and moon up the top like a owl. Light fires in the bushes' – he is, we discover, preparing the way not for a revelatory disclosure but rather for an anticlimax. 'Oh yes, I knew him well. I think he was happy all the time,' the Park Keeper poignantly repeats, before fatally adding: 'I've known him by the thousands.'

18   Ralph Maud (ed.), *Where Have the Old Words Got Me?* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003).

[Dylan Thomas]:	We had reached the last gate. Dusk drew around us and the town. I said: What has become of him now?
Park-Keeper:	Dead.
[Dylan Thomas]:	The Park-keeper said:
(*The park bell rings*)	
Park-Keeper:	Dead…Dead…Dead…Dead…Dead…Dead.

<div align="right">(RJ, 90)</div>

That is indeed the play's very last word; the last word on the play; the last word on Thomas's search; the word that marks the end of language itself; the dead end. And behind this concluding passage we are surely meant to hear the ironic echo of yet more words, as memorable as they are ultimately futile; the words of John Donne in the great, famous, prophetic utterance that had ignited the young Swansea Thomas's imagination and helped turn his entire life into a fateful adventure in language: 'Ask not for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee.' [19]

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19   John Hayward (ed.), *John Donne: Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1972), p. 538.