

Title	From Mythic Space to Welsh Community : A New Light on Dylan Thomas's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog
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Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 47 p.87-p.104
Issue Date	2008-12-24
oaire:version	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/25306
rights	
Note	

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From Mythic Space to Welsh Community:

A New Light on Dylan Thomas's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*

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Dylan Thomas's later short story collection *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* named after James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* has been highly estimated by his critics. Little attention, however, has been given to how to place it among all his works: poetry, prose, film scripts and poetic dramas.

In this paper I would like to stress that this prose book including ten stories was the impetus to force a revolutionary change, about which I shall have more to say later on. To write prose was the necessary step for the transition.

His early poetry, written under the influence of Thomas's own image theory, is congested, incoherent and irrational. It is so obscure that no one can explicate it clearly. Its themes are considered to be "creation and destruction", "process of life and death with sexuality," and "exploration of poetic creation," as we see in the poem "The force that through the green fuse." As a whole "darkness" symbolizes the universe of the early poems. In contrast what is remarkable about the later poetry is that it has brightness and clarity, sometimes, with religious visions. In other words, it is less compact, limpid and much easier to understand than early one. His exact syllable-counts for the lines and scrupulously observed rhymes are loosened by insensible degrees. Welsh nature and his childhood there are the chief poetic source of the later great poems.

The peculiarity of Thomas's early poems and later ones

mentioned above often confirms the quality of his early and later prose. What, then, does the great shift in his prose, which is parallel with that in his poetry, suggest in his all works? Exploring the course of the shift, we find that the change in the prose occurred a little earlier than the change in the poetry. Consequently, it may safely be assumed the prosaic change was necessary and significant in all of Thomas's writings. This paper will reveal that the later prose work *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* is the very turning writing in Thomas's literary career.

His passionate concern for the mechanism of his own body and nature shifts to outward things, especially others. And prose is a suitable form for depicting others. Moreover, he chose the Welsh community where people had their life in order to depict polyphonic voices. While Modernism depicted city by fixing country to stereotyped representation and attempted the mythological method later, as Takao Tomiyana (314) points out, Thomas tried to emancipate country from its uniformed and standardized representation and depict the multiplicity of each locality. What is more, it leads us to another point of view that the country is not English but Welsh one: that is, he aimed to create "community in pathos" or "an imaginative unification with what is called deprived people," in Eagleton's words.

Then if we count "*Portrait*," an "artist novel," we can take the view that Thomas searches for and orients himself to, what the artist should be by having his hero, who is a boy in most instances, talk about his pride in being a poet. Ann Elizabeth Mayer observes on the difference between the early and later poetry:

The early stories illustrate a mythologizing of the creative process. The artist is generally depicted as a type, someone of unusual vision whose special status is used to explore the

discrepancies between image and reality. A godlike creator-destroyer, he transforms an already written world through acts of translation. In *Portrait*, the artist, a dog rather than a god, loses his special status. He is an ordinary person who explores the correspondences rather than the differences between image and reality. (Mayer 85)

It seems that her remark that "he transforms an already written world through acts of translation" is true of his later works, for later works also transform the written world depicting the untranslatable aspect in Welsh native culture of already translated Wales.

We now need to discuss how the Welsh community is depicted and what artist's posture is to be in his later prose works. In this paper, we shall confine our attention to "A Visit to Grandpa's" and "The Peaches." First, we shall discuss how the Welsh community is represented in "A Visit to Grandpa's."

"The first person" narrator is disturbed in his sleep by his grandfather's crying voice "Gee-up!" from the next room and awakes from a dream on the very first day when he visits grandpa's house.

'whoa there, my beauties!' cried grandpa. His voice sounded very young and loud, and his tongue had powerful hooves, and he made his bedroom into a great meadow. (A Visit 143)

In the dream he is running through the wilds of cacti flicking the horse with a whip and roping cows in. The vigorous dream, which reminds us of cowboy film and accords with his grandfather's voice, symbolizes the boy's omnipotence. After visiting his grandfather's room to see what happened to him and talking with him for a while, the dream he had again is an ominous one where a wagon of burning sheets was running. By this dream

we are shown that dream intermingles with reality, and that the boy and the grandfather momentarily inhabit a communal fictional world. At the same time the boy may understand his grandfather's senile dementia unconsciously.

The next morning they go for a drive in the cart. The description of nature in the neighborhood and incidents that happened then is consistently from the boy's point of view. The vocabulary and expression, however, belong to the grown-up poet. As is often the case with autobiographical works, the poet transfigures the imaginative world that the boy perceives into an adept retrospective description.

The old man, treating the feeble pony kindly, stops at the churchyard and whispers:

Grandpa paused at the churchyard and pointed over the iron gate at the angelic headstones and poor wooden crosses.

'There's no sense in lying there' he said. (A Visit 145)

His saying "There's no sense in lying there" makes an allusion to a place of burial, which has great importance in Welsh culture, and it gives a hint about the old man's behavior that we see later.

In the middle of the story, the old man goes missing. Looking for him, the boy asks the barber next door if he saw the boy's grandfather and tells him that grandfather was wearing his Sunday best and waistcoat, without knowing the reason why he says so. Not only the barber who rushes out of the house to hear the news, but also the neighbors, tailor, carpenter, butcher and so on gather and begin searching for the old man, ringing a bell for "a fire or robbery."

We gathered together in Johnstown square. Dan Taylor had his bicycle, Mr. Price his pony trap. Mr. Griff, the butcher, Morgan carpenter, and I climbed into the shaking trap, and

we trotted off towards Carmarthen town. The tailor led the way, ringing his bell as though there were a fire or a robbery, and an old woman by the gate of a cottage at the end of the street ran inside like a pelted hen. Another woman waved a bright handkerchief. (A visit 147)

People of various occupations described here show that the community works as a self-sufficient organism and their behavior reveals that they internalize the community physically and that territorialized community provokes their attachment to others. The village is now vibrant with life as if it were in the middle of the carnival; an old woman who "ran inside like a pelted hen", "another woman waving a bright handkerchief." As Bakhtin says in his thesis about carnival that "An individual feels himself/herself to be an essential part of the mass or a part of massive body which consists of the public," the subject is not the opposite of others, but it exists as a subject who is a member of community in "*Portrait*."

The excitement of villagers is described without any affection of the boy. In other words it is described what we call "as it is." It is needless to say, however, that this is the subjective description of Welsh country by Thomas, which is composed of words and sentences of his own choice. It is the intentionally or unconsciously constructed community with Thomas's cultural background, based on his memories, as a sort of fiction. Thomas attempts to depict the dynamics of human experience not with his earlier modernistic execution but with realistic one. For instance "simile," not "metaphor," is used to describe the ritual solemnity after the fuss that neighbors made:

Grandpa's neighbours were as solemn as old men with black hats and jackets on the outskirts of a fair. Mr Griff shook his head and mourned; 'I didn't expect this again from Dai

Thomas.' (A Visit 147)

Here we notice that the use of the phrase and episode is not metaphorical and symbolic which is often the case with the earlier works, but metonymical. To take another example, the villagers never fail to add "he's got his waistcoat on" when they make the rounds of Dai Thomas's going. This "waistcoat" indicates his destination and what the purpose of his going to some place is. That is to say, neighbors know tacitly that the old man who is getting senile goes to neighboring village to bury himself by his wearing Sunday best. It is a Welsh custom to dress the dead in their best for burial. And we find this episode is related metonymically to the old man's puzzling action which the boy recollects, as can be seen in the following quotation:

As we clip-clopped over the cobbles that led down to the Towy bridge, I remembered grandpa's nightly noisy journeys that rocked the bed and shook the walls, and I saw his gay waistcoat in a vision and his patchwork head tufted and smiling in the candlelight. The tailor before us turned round on his saddle, his bicycle wobbled and skidded. 'I see Dai Thomas!' he cried. (A Visit 147)

The last scene where the neighbors found the old man is composed of "dialogue" with the minimum of narration by the boy like a scenario. It forces our attention on the content, not on the redundant narration. The scene shows what communication should be in the story. The old man replies to the villager who asks where he was going:

Grandpa said: 'I am going to Llangadock to be buried.' And he watched the coracle shells slip into the water lightly, and the gulls complain over the fish-filled water as bitterly as Mr. Price complained;

'But you aren't dead yet, Dai Thomas.'

For a moment grandpa reflected, then: 'There's no sense in lying dead in Llanstephan,' he said. 'The ground is comfy in Llangadock; you can twitch your legs without putting them in the sea.'

His neighbours moved close to him. They said: 'You aren't dead Mr. Thomas.'

'How can you be buried, then?'

'Nodody's going to bury you in Llanstephan.'

'Come on home, Mr. Thomas.'

'There's strong beer for tea.'

'And cake.'

But grandpa stood firmly on the bridge, and clutched his bag to his side, and stared at flowing river and sky, like a prophet who has no doubt. (A Visit 148)

It is useful to refer to "the dramatic effect on the road," as it were, in order to explain the humorous exchange in a sense between the old man and neighbors. As Yoichi Komori interestingly points out, the dramatic effect makes readers aware of "here and now", where the narrating boy erases his existence as if he only overheard them talking. Komori describes "conversation scene" as follows:

Considering a story from 'tense' aspect, the conversation scene necessarily assumes Present Progressive. Therefore the length of time that the story content (conversation in progress) takes should be almost as much as the one that story discourse, by which the story content is shown to readers, (description of what is told) takes. From a spatial point of view, on the other hand, the scene where conversation takes place begins to exist clearly for readers on the condition that we regard conversation as story content. The

consciousness of readers comes to rest on the scene where conversation is progressing as persons who stand by or overhear in the very scene, not in the space which the content of conversation suggests. (Komori 26)

While Thomas's earlier work is too obscure to expect readers to grasp, and has its own value on sound of language and images created by his own image-creating method, his later work makes a different use of language. As Mayer put it, "... here (in later work) the emphasis is on language as a communicative tool — for the uses the dialogic capacities of narrative, assuming a listener/reader who interacts with the story — teller." (Mayer 89)

In contrast to Thomas's earlier modernistic texts, which construct fragmental world that shows stream of individual consciousness, later works are written for readers who develop diverse reading so that the stories may function in the social context. In many "artist novels" the artist is represented as exile, isolated from society, torn between consecration and the ordinary. It is the importance of art and the privilege of artists that "artist novels" usually emphasize; however in some of Thomas's later stories, which we can read as "artist novels," Thomas searches for the origin of the Welsh community and creates a new protagonist without presenting sublimity beyond reach and universal value with God's eyes. In other words he tries to decenter, or to be 'eccentric' in Edward Said's sense from the authority prevailing in Wales and from the privilege brought by adoration of art, by representing the portrait of the individual in the Welsh locality.

Turning now to the story, there is something humorous and pathetic in the exchanges between neighbors and the half-senile old man, who, wearing a showy vest and a shabby hat, was going to be buried in all seriousness. The old man's behavior after facing death is the same as reconciliation build on a religious belief. Thomas focuses on the old man's firm faith whose

attitude shows his philosophical acceptance of death. John Ackerman discusses this episode:

One of the most delightful scenes in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* occurs in *A Visit to Grandpa's* and describes a situation that could be only be found in Wales, where, by tradition, much emphasis and concern is given to a person's place of burial. The elderly are usually anxious to be buried in their ancestral churchyard, a feeling which, in its philosophical acceptance of death, would attract Thomas's interest. (Ackerman 108)

The community is not only concerned with living people and their lives, but closely concerned with death. People are the objects constructed by a kind of community identity whose characteristic is formed from the involvement with other's death or traditional rituals. At the same time people are the subjects who construct a community by performing such rituals. Thomas, who struggles with death, describes a community which shares the violent aspect of death, with which he may try to nullify the religiously established and authorized institution.

The old man who wants to be buried not in Llanstephan but in Llangadock stands "firmly on the bridge" and stares "at the flowing river and the sky, like a prophet who has no doubt." Apart from the neighbors' gazing warmly on the old man, his prophet-like figure to the boy's eyes reminds us of Druid. It is appropriate to describe an old man from child's point of view in order to foreground the uncoded aspect of death, because both old man and boy seem to exist outside the established. The old man's firm faith here suggests not salvation or resurrection in a Christian sense, but the resurrection in unity between man and nature or natural life after death. This faith is still more so in the following poem, "And death shall have no dominion", which

was written in the same period as the story under discussion. This is the first stanza:

And death shall have no dominion.
 Dead men naked they shall be one
 With the man in the wind and the west moon;
 When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones
 gone,
 They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
 Through they go mad they shall be sane;
 Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
 Though lovers be lost love shall not;
 And death shall have no dominion. (The Poems 49)

Here we can see that men "shall rise again" whatever their state at death may be. There is the same hope of glorious resurrection as the old man desires. Thus, through the strange incident when he visits Grandpa's, the boy, who seems to be omnipotent, comes to awake to death and now has a newly segmented world that the word of "death" constitutes.

"The Peaches" can also be regarded as a *künstlerroman*. In the *künstlerroman* tradition, the protagonist is always conscious of his vocation as an "artist," and manifests his pride in the profession. The omniscient narrator is a hero at the same time in the story, which inevitably includes some artistic point: An experienced adult records ironically a child's vision as a writer with his skillfulness. That is, the essence of events is picked out and narrated by an adult. In Thomas's case the adult is an artist who witnesses events.

"The Peaches" is composed of various events during his stay in his aunt's farm, which is famous for the one of Thomas's best poems "Fern Hill." The story begins with the description of the boy waiting for his uncle in front of the pub, who is somewhat

of a drinker. As "the passage grew dark too suddenly" (The Peaches 128) outside, the boy is trying to recall the stories he made to divert him from his imaginative fears looking into the pub through the window. The description implies that the boy is a potential artist who has a vivid imagination and is a precociously subtle observer. He heads for the farm of Gorsehill in his uncle's cart. His uncle finally leaves the pub seen off by two fat women of the pub. The farm Gorsehill famed as a "Fern Hill" is like the Garden of Eden to the boy. When they drive into the farm-yard of Gorsehill, the boy gets off the cart and runs to the farm-house door. Both his aunt and the place give this invitee an entire welcome to make him feel like a prince.

There was a welcome, then. The clock struck twelve as she kissed me, and I stood among the shining and striking like a prince taking off his disguise. One minute I was small and cold, skulking dead-scared down a black passage in my bomb, clutching my grammar school cap, unfamiliar to myself, a snub-nosed story-teller lost in his own adventures and longing to be home; the next I was a royal nephew in smart town clothes, embraced and welcomed, standing in the snug centre of my stories and listening to the clock announcing me. She hurried me to the seat in the side of the cavernous fireplace and took off my shoes. The bright lamps and the ceremonial gongs blazed and rang for me. (The Peaches 130)

On the one hand the "royal nephew" boy receives his aunt's great affection toward him, on the other hand, we find his sympathy with her poor farm in the description of the farm-yard with "one deserted sty" which he visits on the next morning to see the pigs.

There was nowhere like that farm-yard in all the slapdash

country, nowhere so poor and grand and dirty as that square of mud and rubbish and bad wood and falling stone, where a bucketful of old and bedraggled hens scratched and laid small eggs. A duck quaked out of the through in one deserted sty. Now a young man and curly boy stood staring and sniffing over a wall at a sow, with its tits on the mud, giving suck. (The Peaches 132)

The "narrator" boy feels deep attachment to his aunt, who lives in "so poor and grand and dirty" farm-yard, where, some hens are "scrabbling the muddy cobbles," and "a collie with one eye" is sleeping with it open, and the lean cat sits "snugly between the splintered jaws of bottles cleaning its face" and also to his cousin Gwilym, who is twenty years old and a lukewarm probationary minister and even to his uncle, who sells a new-born pig stealthily "to go on the drink."

Thomas, listening to their voices that are the most characteristic of the community with a keen ear, grasps their ways of living in the Welsh community, and aims to represent Welsh community, where their voices are organically operated, that is, its polyphonic state. It is not mono-vision for the community based on the single interpretation of it.

Take Gwilym for example. He is the boy's cousin and intends to be a minister. But we are told that this young man who made a "dusty wagon" his pulpit requires two pennies from his little cousin for a collection after preaching a sermon and wrote many poems to girls and changed all the girls' names to God afterwards. This is what he says his prayers to God:

'O God, Thou art everywhere all the time, in the dew of the morning, in the frost of the evening, in the field and the town, in the preacher and the sinner, in the sparrow and the big buzzard. Thou canst see everything, right down deep in

our heart: Thou canst see us when the sun is gone; Thou canst see us when there aren't any stars, in the gravy blackness, in the deep, deep, deep, deep pit; Thou canst see and spy and watch us all the time, in the little black corners, in the big cowboy's 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 night, everything, everything; Thou canst see all the time. O God, mum, you're like a bloody cat.' (The Peaches 133-134)

Here Thomas allows Gwilym to say "O God, mum, you're like a bloody cat" because of God's keeping eyes open everywhere and also "God exists in eagle" in a different place. Even though, in these ironical remarks on the hypocrisy of Welsh nonconformist, we can read Thomas's religious view for pantheism, it is more important to note that Thomas draws humorously the suffocative Puritanism pervaded in the community and the young man's voice, who reacts against "church" that standardized God.

Let us consider, then, how Aunt Anne forms her Self, who spent almost all of her life on the farm putting her energy into farmwork and taking care of livestock. It is involved with the episodic title "The Peaches." In the middle of the story the protagonist's friend Jack, the overnight guest, and his mother Mrs. Williams, whose husband is ex-mayor, appear. They visit the farm and have tea that Anne serves. Anne's behavior at the table is consistent with Welsh chapelgoer's culture not churchgoer. As we have in the poem "After the funeral" "I know," (The Poems 136) she incorporates the rhythm of her farmwork and her faith into her body. On the day when she invites the guests, she changes her plain clothes into a black shining dress with her gym-shoes on, sets the table in the best room and tries to treat them to a tin of peaches for a special occasion instead of some

pieces of cake that she can not order from a shop. Her behavior shows the sub-culture of chapelgoer as Linden Peach put it, "has developed" (The Peaches 80) and also they set a high value on and respect for the upper classes. Anne's unnaturally expansive Self, which is symbolized by her "black shining dress that smelt of moth balls," can be read in the description of "the best room" rarely used.

The best room smelt of moth balls and fur and damp and dead plants and stale, sour air. Two glass cases on wooden coffin-boxes lined the window wall. You looked at the weed—grown vegetable garden through stuffed fox's legs, over a partridge's head, along the red-paint-stained breast of a stiff wild duck. . . . A patched white sheet shrouded the harmonium. . . . The best room was rarely used. (The Peaches 134)

"Dead plants," "wooden coffin-boxes," "stuffed fox's legs" and "a patched white sheet shrouded the harmonium" means that her disguise is the death of her Self which has been brought up in the farm, and is also the denial of it. Her muddy gym-shoes 'which she forgot to change' with all hole' in contrast to Mrs. Williams's urbane outfit that includes pointed shoes, a ring and perfume.

'Now you must have some peaches, Mrs Williams, they're lovely.'

'They should be, they've been here long enough,' said Gwilym.

Annie rattled the tea-cups at him again.

'No peaches, thanks,' Mrs Williams said.

'Oh, you must, Mrs Williams, just one. With cream.'

'No, no, Mrs Jones, thanks the same,' she said. 'I don't mind pears or chunks, but I can't bear peaches.'

Jack and I had stopped talking. Annie stared at down at

her gym-shoes. One of the clocks on the mantelpiece coughed, and struck. Mrs Williams struggled from her chair. (The Peaches 137)

Here the important point to note is that insufferable behavior of Mrs. Williams, who owes her identity to the Englishness of London with disgust against the Welshness, should not be regarded as negative. Her pretentiousness to those outside her own class as well as her intolerance, and rudeness to them is one of the voices of the community and represented as an embodiment of cultural interaction between two classes. What is intended here is a narrative in which the story-teller boy, later an artist, translates the others' internal that does not become of conscious through sympathy and commitment with others. That is the reason why the boy's saying "I wanted to wear my old suit, to look like a proper farm boy" when being urged to change in order to receive the visitors in his best clothes stands out. Therefore it is the ethic respectability, shame, and responsibility of close-knit puritan community, around which the narrative is woven, seen through the boy's eyes that should be emphasized, beyond the simple dichotomy between upper-class' arrogance and inconsideration, and working-class' hospitality and excessive fawning to the former.

Thus, Thomas represented the community that operates organically on the people reflecting the one of Welsh cultural climates and the people's lives there in his later prose, tuning from the early modernistic method which were free from the ages and places. It is fair, hence, to say that *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* is a collected stories about others rather than self-portrait ones despite its autobiographical form. The other-oriented posture of the poet seems later to lead to the polyphonic works with many voices woven like a poetic drama, *Under Milk Wood*, subtitled "A PLAY FOR VOICES."

As I have mentioned at the beginning, the title of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* seems to be a parody of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by a great Modernist predecessor James Joyce. "Dog" is even suspected of being a Joycean anagram for "God." The title also serves as an example to illustrate that the later prose work in transition is necessary for Thomas's new exploration of the nature of art and the creative process, getting rid of the influence of Modernism on his early prose-poetry. That is, along with his subversive undermining of great modernism, Thomas comes to break through the barriers between high and low culture. Thomas's protagonist does not transcend "life" making art replace religion but just subverts the modernistic highbrow as a "Young Dog." In Ann Elizabeth Mayer's words, "the eventual portrait that develops is of an artist who seems to reject what Dedalus aspires to, not soaring to heights above the mundane world but plunging into the ordinary life around him." (Mayer 95) A young man in one of the *Portrait* tales, "One Warm Saturday," who is a hero and artist that feels alienated from society, states at the end of the story as follows: ". . . where the small and hardly known and never-to-be-forgotten people of the dirty town had lived and loved and died and, always, lost." There is a suggestion here that Thomas intends to create "little narrative" which represents Welsh people's desire and loss occurring in everyday life, not in Modernistic diversity with fragments and quotations, but, for them in order to signify "just one thing appealing" in Tomiyama's words. (315) It follows from what has been said that Thomas, through *Portrait*, the later prose works about others, moves from earlier poetry and prose which has a subjective, experimental and surrealistic world about his body and internal, to later works written about Welsh nature and people, memories of childhood and war. In his later years Thomas reaches to his religious poetic world of "praise for

human being, love, and God," in his own words.

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