

“A SINGING WALT FROM THE MOWER”: DYLAN THOMAS AND THE “WHITMANIAN [RE]TURN” IN THE POST-WAR POETIC CULTURE OF THE STATES

M. WYNN THOMAS



IN JULY 1951, JOHN MALCOLM BRINNIN, academic and minor poet, visited his friend Dylan Thomas at his boathouse in Laugharne, West Wales. The poet had recently returned from his first turbulent tour of the United States, which the American had innocently arranged. En route to Laugharne, Brinnin stopped off in the Welsh capital, Cardiff. There, he met Aneurin Talfan Davies, Thomas’s long-time friend and important early mentor. It was Davies who had first given the poet an opportunity to broadcast from the BBC studio at Swansea, and he was also to be involved in the broadcasting of *Under Milk Wood*. Seizing his opportunity, Davies extended to Brinnin an invitation to broadcast a short talk about Dylan Thomas in America.

Brinnin then proceeded to Laugharne, and while there, he began to work on his script. To do this, he repaired to Thomas’s little “studio”—a disused garage he’d acquired that was conveniently adjacent to the boathouse (see image on back cover). Seated there among the “rat’s nest of chewed, rolled, and discarded paper,” his eye was immediately caught by a face: “Topmost in the room over the small wooden table that served Dylan as a desk was a handsome portrait of Walt Whitman.”¹ It was flanked by portraits of Marianne Moore and Edith Sitwell.

Brinnin then set about reflecting on Thomas’s explosive impact on the poetry scene in America, and he came to two interesting conclusions about its causes. The first was what he believed to be the American response to the perceived “ancientness” of Thomas’s Welsh cultural hinterland. This, he suggested, was deeply attractive to a nation whose “history is brief, and our national character, compounded of so many heterogeneous influences, still does not allow of definition.” But Thomas seemed to have Welsh “history in his bones”: “As a Welshman rooted deeply in his people and land, Dylan Thomas speaks to us from sources we have lost, and we are drawn by his native accents with

nostalgia and the excitement of vicarious participation.” (*DTA*, 97) There was, Brinnin suggested, something of the appeal of the “primitive” to Thomas—an American impression to which this essay will return.

The other reason for his appeal in the States, Brinnin continued, was that “we find in him not only the lyrical finesse and delicacy of the [English poets] of the seventeenth century, but the vigour and breadth of Walt Whitman. For American readers this combination is irresistible.” Brinnin then proceeds to throw interesting light on the way in which American poets and academics regarded Whitman before what I would describe as the “Whitmanian turn” that was in some ways to be heralded three years later by the publication of Gay Wilson’s landmark biography *The Solitary Singer*. “We read Whitman when we are young,” Brinnin wrote:

. . . and he implants in us a lively vision of democracy, that persists as part of our belief. But as we grow older, we find less and less satisfaction in his qualities as an artist, and finally tend to remember him as a prophet rather than as a poet. On the other hand, we find that our youthful acquaintance with Donne and Marvell and Herrick and Crashaw grows into a loving knowledge. While Whitman the laureate of large ideals, lies forgotten on the shelf, we read these earlier poets with new pleasure and are perhaps puzzled by the change that has come over us. When we read Dylan Thomas, then, we feel again not only the breadth and grandeur that Whitman once evoked, but that finely wrought music of the intellectual eye and ear which charms us back to the seventeenth century lyricists. (*DTA*, 98)

It is a comment that is as provocative as it is intriguing and suggestive. It is also a reminder that, before the “Whitmanian turn” in post-war American culture, he was routinely viewed as lacking in the refinements of form and expression that were proper to poetry. As we shall see, suggestive connections between Thomas and Whitman did not occur to Brinnin alone, nor was he the first to intuit that the connection might facilitate Thomas’s reception in the States. But he seems not to have foreseen that those visits were to contribute to a new cultural interest in Whitman that led to a radical representation of him in America—what I have termed the “Whitmanian turn.” Thomas’s contribution to this process—which was also part of the process of Thomas’s own acculturation, his “translation” into terms intelligible and acceptable to American culture—is one of the themes of the following discussion. But before pursuing such lines of inquiry further, it might be useful to reflect on Thomas’s attitude toward Walt Whitman, who had served him as a “pin-up boy” in his little garage.



In a footnote to a letter he sent to Mimi Josephson on June 20, 1953, Thomas provided his own take on the picture of Whitman on his garage wall:

The photograph of the man with the striped tie, on the fire-escape of his New York apartment: W. H. Auden. Other photographs in my hut are of D. H. Lawrence & Thomas Hardy, there's a big photograph of Walt Whitman over my table, just under the roof, and a portrait of Blake. There are also, pinned about, pictures of monkeys & naked women.²

It is a useful little snapshot. On the one hand, there's that deliberately provocative mention of "monkeys & naked women," which gestures ostentatiously towards the promiscuous, and often libidinous, appetites of Thomas's creative imagination. From the very beginning, he'd refused to distinguish between respectable and disreputable, "literary" and popular culture, high and low taste—and Whitman had anticipated him in this, of course. The mad *mélange* of "sources" instanced in that patchwork of disparate images was to be a trademark of his output throughout his career. Whitman is, therefore, just another casual item on the list. On the other hand, all the other poets mentioned by Thomas are poets for whom we know he had the very highest regard, and all had impacted on his development, even though no simple evidence may be found of their "presence" within his writing. That strongly suggests that Whitman, too, had played his part in the growth of Thomas's poetic imagination.³

There are two other interestingly contrasted references to Whitman in Thomas's correspondence. April 1934 finds Thomas sending a letter to his early friend Glyn Jones, a young and highly talented Welsh modernist poet like himself. "I refuse on paper to quarrel with you about obscurity, fluid verse, T. S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, Worker's Poetry, my own anatomic slap-stick, and other controversial points mentioned in your letter, especially as you're coming down," Thomas writes, before adding "I would far rather be Eliot than Whitman, if only because Eliot has a very splendid sense of form" (*CL*, 117).

There are important features of these remarks that need to be noted. First, "form" meant everything to Thomas, who was the strictest of formalists. And at this point, he seems to agree with Brinnin that Whitman is essentially a "formless" poet and, therefore, no model for him. Second, the movement of the sentence directly from a mention of Whitman to *Worker's Poetry* is very important. It helps us set Thomas's acquaintance with Whitman at this juncture in its proper context: that of the Socialist culture of Thomas's industrial South Wales.

But before considering that, attention must be paid to the second reference to Whitman in Thomas's correspondence.

Six eventful years were to pass before Thomas referred again to Whitman, this time in a letter to his bosom friend and fellow Welsh poet Vernon Watkins. He sent him a 100-line satirical poem, a "half-comic attack on myself." "You'll see," he added, "the heavy hand with which I make fun of this middle-class, beardless Walt who props humanity, in his dirty, weeping, expansive moments, against corners & counters & tries to slip, in grand delusions of all embracing humanitarianism, everyone into himself." (CL, 445) The poem is deliberately rough-and-ready knockabout verse:

And I in the wanting sway
Caught among never enough
Conjured me to resemble
A singing Walt from the mower
And jerrystone trim villas
Of the upper of the lower half,
Beardlessly wagging in Dean Street,
Blessing and counting the bustling
Twolegged sparrows,
Flogging into the [porches]
My cavernous featherbed self.⁴

Reading this, it is useful to recall that one of the pictures Thomas had pinned to the garage wall alongside that of Whitman was of D. H. Lawrence, of whom he was an avowed admirer. The image that he paints of Whitman in this verse squib is very much in line with Lawrence's notoriously savage attack on Whitman in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, where he too mocks Whitman's omnivorous appetite for devouring all and sundry who stray into the path of his poetic imagination: "His poems, Democracy, En Masse, One Identity, they are long sums in addition and multiplication, of which the answer is invariably MYSELF."⁵ The comment remains one of the most devastating indictments that can be made both of Whitman and of those aspects of American culture that claim to embody everything to which the world at large aspires in the name of "democratic progress."

There were influences additional to that of Lawrence that mediated Thomas's response to Whitman. One of the most important of these was the working-class culture of industrial South Wales during the inter-war period. Its version of Whitman needs to be kept in mind when approaching Thomas's treatment of the subject.



As I have demonstrated at length elsewhere, the Whitman who so impressed the intellectual leaders of the Welsh proletariat (copies of an invariably bowdlerized edition of his poetry could be found in some of the South Wales Miners' Libraries) was, in essence, a utopian socialist and an internationalist.⁶ Their image—which owed much to the writings of Edward Carpenter—is irrelevant in this context. What is far more interesting to consider are the ramifications and practical outcomes of this heavily culturally inflected picture of “Whitman the radical” as they relate to Thomas.

Thomas's well-known Leftist sympathies caused some difficulties whenever he applied for a visa to read in the States.⁷ This was, after all, the era not only of the Cold War but of Senator McCarthy and his notorious witch hunts; Reds were deemed to be lurking under many an American's bed. Was Thomas a Red? Certainly not. But he was pink enough to alarm American immigration authorities. One of the questions he was suspiciously asked by them was whether he would go to hear Paul Robeson sing. “Of course,” was his prompt answer. And that was highly significant at a time when Robeson—a self-declared international Communist and supporter of the Stalinist Soviet Union who had long been the darling of South Wales's industrial culture for his portrayal of a Welsh miner in the film *Proud Valley* and his championing of the cause of the Welsh miners—was being increasingly persecuted in the States, his passport confiscated to prevent foreign travel.⁸

Critics and biographers have repeatedly drawn attention to the young Thomas's close and educative friendship with Bert Trick, a communist grocer in Swansea. But as the early letters indicate, Thomas's socialism was never the Marxist version of the Communist Party. Nor was it even the politically pragmatic Socialism of the British Labour Party, class-based and union-centered as it was, that already held South Wales firmly in its grip. No, Thomas's socialism was very much in accord with the “socialism” that so many in South Wales attributed to Walt Whitman.⁹ In other words, it was a socialism of an ethical and utopian kind, sentimentally communitarian, inclined to the anarchic, benignly internationalist, and angrily anti-capitalist while retaining at its core a fierce sense of the sacred integrity of the individual. These, I would suggest, are the values that Thomas associated with Whitman and appreciated even as he expressed his misgivings about the American's devouring appetites for union and universality.

As for Whitman himself, his cautious views of Socialism in his old age

have been accurately chronicled by Traubel, who was very much a socialist sympathizer. When pressed on the subject of common ownership, the canny old man professed an ignorance tinged with innocent curiosity. He had remarked that he “looked forward to a world of small owners,” and Traubel had countered by provocatively suggesting that “a world of ‘of no owners at all’ might be even better.” Whitman’s mental eyes opened wide in disingenuous astonishment at this suggestion. “‘What do you mean by that? no owners at all?’ he mused. ‘Do you mean common owners—owning things in common? . . . [I]t *sounds* best: could it *be best?*’” (*TC*, 173-174) It was, in truth, just a rhetorical question. To the end, Whitman belonged to the pre-capitalist world of “the small owners,” as in many ways did the British Utopian Socialists of the late-nineteenth century from whom the socialism of many Welsh Socialists—including Dylan Thomas—originated, products as they all were, in essence, of the reformingly Liberal Nonconformist culture of Victorian Wales. This caste of Welsh radicalism unconsciously appealed to some of Thomas’s listeners in the States which helped them reconnect with Whitman.



There were those among his listeners in the States who sensed Thomas’s affinities with Whitman early. Karl Shapiro was one, and at that time, he was an influential figure on the poetry scene. He ended a long, balanced, and complex posthumous assessment of Thomas—who had become his friend—by referring to his poem “Twenty-four years remind me the tears of my eyes” and adding that “the last line of the poem is so much like a line of Whitman’s that I have searched through Whitman’s poems to find it. I am sure it is there and yet I know it isn’t. The line reads: ‘I advance for as long as forever is.’”¹⁰

Shapiro’s remark comes from the careful textual study of Thomas’s poems. But in general, the Whitmanian power of his poetry was revealed in his stunning performances of it, performances that were astonishingly at odds with the crabbed impression given by the published texts and that shocked delighted audiences with their electric demonstrations of the potential power of bardic orality. In the early fifties, poets and intellectuals in the post-war States were just beginning to shake off the strait-jacketing influence of a New Criticism that had resulted in intricately complex texts determinedly resistant to public performance. It was a precondition of the turn—or return—to Whitman, and Thomas, the incomparable and mesmerizing reader, made a modest but vital

contribution to the process.

At this distance in time, it is difficult to truly appreciate the seismic effect, at once scandalized and ecstatic, that Thomas's readings had on audiences right across the United States. Decades later, Donald Hall could still vividly recall the transformative and revelatory experience. "Out of this silly body," Hall wrote,

Rolled a voice like Jehovah's, or the Ocean's, or Firmament's. "R's" rolled, vowels rose and fell . . . consonants thudded and crashed and leapt to their feet again . . . I hovered five inches above my uncomfortable chair in New Lecture Hall, stunned by the beauty of poem and reading. Although I was later to meet him under different guises, I remember the first Dylan Thomas I saw: a small and disheveled figure bodying forth great poetry in great performance, an act of homage to poetry, an act of love for magnificent words . . . the voice was partly Thomas's performance and partly the poetry's structure of rhythms and assonance, which inhere and will endure.¹¹

Many another listener was to testify similarly to the transfiguring effect of Thomas's readings.

One of those to attend a Thomas reading in New York City was the young Allen Ginsberg. Immediately following the event, he recorded the aftermath in his *Journals*. It was "Late April 1952," and Allen Ginsberg was "in San Remo¹² sitting relaxed toward closing time" when "Dylan Thomas and someone else with a big bruise on right forehead" walked in. Ginsberg—yet to become the leading poet of the Beat Generation with the publication of *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956—is asked whether he knows "who this is" by Thomas's companion. "Of course man it is obvious," answers the young poet. Thomas, who boasts that "I have the shortest legs in the world, my belly hangs down to my groin," is looking for an obliging girl. But Ginsberg persuades him to end his evening's drinking in his attic. At this point, Thomas's companion reminds him that "Caitlin is waiting," and Ginsberg recalls in his journals that

Finally Thomas decided to go, and I closed a cab door on them, ran to other side & stuck my tongue in window at him which I immediately regretted tho I meant it as a friendly gesture. He stared out at me drunkenly without response . . .

Ah, Dylan Thomas, I would have liked to know you that night, wish I could have communicated who I was, my true feeling, and its importance to you. For I too am a lover of the soul.

How disappointing to come away empty-handed with no recognition from this Chance meeting—I fell sick and unhappy because I could not make a great sweet union of the moment of life—now this is 45 minutes after, it will pass but it is sad & true.¹³

Over forty years later, Ginsberg was invited to read his poetry at a festival in Thomas's hometown of Swansea. While there, he insisted on being driven to Laugharne. Having arrived in the early evening, he embarrassed and alarmed his companion by sinking to his knees by Thomas's simple grave in the village churchyard and chanting the *Kaddish*, the Jewish elegy for the dead. It was moving, disconcerting testimony to Thomas's significance for Ginsberg, who in the fifties had helped draw his poetry and his performances to the attention of his fellow Beats in California at exactly the time when, as we shall see, Ginsberg was beginning to come under the influence of Whitman.

At least equally important, however, in effecting that vital connection between the Welshman and nineteenth-century American was Kenneth Rexroth, an avowed enthusiast for Whitman and Thomas. By the early fifties, Rexroth was already a very well-accredited American radical both in politics and poetics. Thereafter, he became routinely labeled—much to his chagrin—the “father of the Beats.” Some eight years older than Thomas, he was already well-known as a poet in America long before the former exploded on the scene. He'd had a colorful early career that included backpacking across the country several times and spending two months in a Hudson Valley monastery. During the 1930s, he became a leading figure of the left—he claimed his parents had been associated with Eugene Debs—participating in the Communist Party's John Reed Clubs, organizations supporting working-class writers and artists.

His passion for Whitman developed early, lasted long, and powerfully impacted his beliefs, his poetry, and his life. In her essay “Re-Discovering Community: Rexroth and the Whitman Tradition,”¹⁴ Linda Hamalian described Rexroth as a “wanderer-speaker,” who “found the wellspring of his own authentic idiom, that direct presence of speaking that Whitman demanded of his own poetry.” Although his roots lay in Indiana, Rexroth settled in San Francisco in the late 1920s and thereafter identified strongly with the wild country of California, embracing it with fervor. During the Second World War, an assortment of “alternative” figures, poets, and political activists gravitated to Rexroth's home, many imbued with the same pacifist-anarchist values as Rexroth himself. But while Hamalian mentions Rexroth's importance for an emergent generation of post-war American poets—Ginsberg, Snyder, Ferlinghetti, Diane DiPrima, Whalen, and Kaufman—nowhere does she mention Dylan Thomas, whom Rexroth had recognized as a poetic brother in the early 1950s.

Rexroth wrote a brief, pithy, brilliant essay on *Leaves of Grass* that deserves to be much better known.¹⁵ For him, Whitman had provided the supreme answer, in his poetry, to “a predatory society” such as the twentieth century had become.

And he had done so by advancing a unique vision of “the American Dream as an apocalypse, an eschatological event which would give the life of man its ultimate significance.” In the process, he had exposed and exploded “all the frauds that pass for the American Way of Life. It is the last and greatest vision of the American potential.” At the center of that vision was “a community of men related by organic satisfactions, in work, love, play, the family, comradeship—a social order whose essence is the liberation and universalization of selfhood.” Work, in his poems, was not conventional labor since, for him, workers were “participants in a universal creative effort in which each discovers his ultimate individuation.” And Rexroth ended his piece by explicitly praising Whitman’s artistry, his practice of poetics that has influenced all the cadenced verse that has come after it.

Rexroth’s essay identifies, with uncanny prescience, some of the key features of Whitman’s poetry that were duly noted and praised by the generation of young, left-wing academic scholars (myself included) that emerged from the 1980s onwards. It equally clearly lays bare the social vision underlying the poetry of the Beats, who were, in many ways, Rexroth’s heirs and admirers of Whitman on the same terms as himself. The essay also makes clear that Rexroth’s admiration for Thomas sprang from the very same source as his admiration for Whitman. For him, Thomas was a poet whose social values rhymed exactly with those of Whitman.

After Thomas’s death, Rexroth wrote “Thou Shalt not Kill,” a memorial that became one of the American’s best-known performance pieces. A long work, it treats Thomas’s death as emblemizing the death of all artists martyred at the hands of a murderous capitalist order that had demonstrated its true, ruthless nature by exploding the hydrogen bomb over Hiroshima. It accuses capitalism of “vaticide”—that is of slaying the vates, the bardic seer, and sayer—and it ends apocalyptically:

The underground men are not singing
On their way to work.
There is a smell of blood
In the smell of the turf smoke.
They have struck him down,
The son of David ap Gwilym.
They have murdered him,
The Baby of Taliesin.
There he lies dead,
By the Iceberg of the United Nations.
There he lies sandbagged,

At the foot of the Statue of Liberty.
The Gulf Stream smells of blood
As it breaks on the sand of Iona
And the blue rocks of Carnavon.
And all the birds of the deep sea rise up
Over the luxury liners and scream,
“You killed him! You killed him,
In your God damned Brooks Brothers suit,
You son of a bitch.”¹⁶

Rexroth viewed Thomas, partly courtesy of his Welshness, as an outsider to the Anglo-American Establishment like himself and like Whitman, of whom he was a devoted disciple. This becomes clear if one recalls his verse report on his fleeting experience of the London poetry scene in the early 1950s, “The Dragon and the Unicorn.” It includes the following passage:

Intellectual parties,
Orgies of foolish snobbery,
Bad manners, and illiteracy.
The Irish are not considered
Human, the Scotch and Welsh subject
To worse chauvinism than
Can be found in the Deep South.
Everywhere, here, covetousness
And envy of money-grubbing
Americans.¹⁷

From his early days in Chicago, Rexroth had reveled in the company of oddballs and crazy marginals: “Anarchists-Single-Taxers, British-Israelites, self-anointed archbishops of the American Catholic Church, Druids, Anthroposophists . . . Socialists, communists . . . Schopenhauerians, Nietzscheans.” He also loved to go to jazz clubs to listen to Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke. When he settled on the West Coast, in the Bay Area of San Francisco, he reveled in the freedom of mountains and ocean. He also established groups to discuss politics and read poetry. By the 1950s, these informal gatherings had spawned a new kind of performance poetry, and it was at one such event that Allen Ginsberg heard Rexroth read poems to musical accompaniment, poems that included the elegy to Dylan Thomas.

There is also another point of connection between Rexroth, Thomas, and Whitman. As Hamalian shrewdly notes, “What cannot be overemphasized is that during the thirties, forties, and fifties, the kind of poetry that Rexroth was

writing ran against the grain of literary critics who believed that poetry had to be written in an impersonal voice, in language of preconceived and historical order.” Rexroth instinctively recognized in Thomas’s readings a speaking out of the self, albeit in the heavily mediated form of his poetry. In this, he heard an echo of Whitman’s song of himself. Thomas made a similar impression on other listeners, who were roused by the impression the poems gave of emanating from the core of a self that, like that of Whitman, was untamed and untamable and accordingly condemned to the suffering solitariness of perpetual, radical alienation. By such means did the “Whitmanian” Thomas inadvertently prepare the way for the emergence of the Confessionals as well as the Beats. However, by 1955, Lowell, an earlier qualified admirer of Thomas, was already hastily placing a distance between himself and the disreputable Welshman.

Bob Kaufman, a fellow traveler of the Beats, may commonly be labeled a Whitmanian poet, but he is also a revealing example of Thomas’s unexpected appeal to African Americans, a subject that has been brilliantly explored in an essay by Daniel G. Williams who traces that appeal back to a perceived “primitivism” in Thomas to which several of Thomas’s White American listeners—conditioned by their inter-war interest in the supposedly “primitive” art of the Jazz to which they had become familiar through their experience of Harlem—bore witness.¹⁸ In turn, African American poets like Kaufman professed to find a link between Thomas’s poetry and the performances of “Bird” (Charlie Parker), the virtuosic Black jazz saxophonist. It was linked to what those same listeners deemed to be the “Druidic” character of Thomas’s verse and its supposed “Celticism”—a concept that derived from Matthew Arnold’s influential, and racist, lecture on that subject.¹⁹ And from the very beginning, of course, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* had been dismissed as the work of a “primitive,” totally unversed in the arts of true poetry. In turn, Whitman had shrewdly presented himself, on occasion, as precisely such a figure.



Whitman had also presented himself as a poet of the body and all its “processes,” polite and otherwise, and had emphasized that these were the processes that generated and maintained the world at large so that the body offered a microcosm. This belief was also a prominent feature of Thomas’s writing; and at this juncture, it may be useful to digress and to call to mind that Thomas was the grandson of a remarkable nineteenth-century minister for whom he had in part

been named. “Marlais,” his middle name, was a tribute to Gwilym Marles, a radical social activist and despised Unitarian in a west Wales solidly dominated by an iron Calvinistic Methodism. This alone would have marked him out as a reviled “outsider” after Thomas’s own heart, but Gwilym Marles was yet a more controversial figure than that because he was a dissident amongst dissenters, a Unitarian of a shockingly independent turn of mind. In short, he was a follower of some of the leading figures of American Transcendentalism—the Transcendentalism out of which Whitman’s own cosmic vision had sprung, albeit in a startlingly “aberrant” form, although Emerson, very much to his credit, gamely acknowledged the relationship.²⁰

As for Thomas, there are obvious affinities between some of his best-known poems, such as “And Death Shall Have No Dominion,” and passages such as the following by Theodore Parker from an essay that was published in Emerson’s *Dial*. It had appealed deeply to his uncle:

Nature ever grows, and changes, and becomes something new, as God’s all pervading energy flows into it without ceasing. Hence in nature there is constant change, but no ultimate death. The quantity of life is never diminished. The leaves fall, but they furnish food for new leaves yet to appear, whose swelling germs crowd off the old foliage . . . Since God is essentially and vitally present in each atom of space, there can be no such thing as sheer and absolute extinction of being.²¹

Exhaustive scholarship has long since demonstrated the very evident continuities between this Transcendentalist vision and Whitman’s poetry.

The American poet who was most excited by the Whitmanian aspects of Thomas’s “process” poems, however, was Theodore Roethke, who was also the American poet Thomas himself most admired and with whom he felt a strong affinity. Theodore Roethke, whom Thomas came to know intimately and whose biomorphic vision of the evolution of the human self so uncannily resembled his own, had by 1950 already moved away from his formalist beginnings and begun to anticipate confessional practice, announcing “himself as the material of his art” and producing a poetry that searched “for some dynamic correspondence between the human and vegetable worlds.” No wonder Thomas could write to Roethke about the latter’s new collection: “I’d like to hear you read them, and to go through them very carefully with you. Perhaps we can learn a little from each other, and anyway it will be enjoyable if we learn and know nothing and only blunder loud about” (*CL*, 895). Brinnin recalls that, on his very first encounter with Thomas, when he had just landed in New York for his inaugural tour, “the first American writer he asked about was Theodore Roethke” (*DTA*, 5).

It was at Thomas's own request that Roethke reviewed *In Country Sleep and Other Poems* for *Poetry* in December 1952. As the flamboyant title, "One Ring-tailed Roarer to Another," would lead us to expect, not only is it an extravagant verbal bagatelle, it is also an ingenious act of acculturation—of the American appropriation of Thomas. This is signaled in the title itself, which is a slang American expression deriving from Southern folk humor, for a larger-than-life character: a loud, swaggering braggart, a ready roisterer and brawler.²² And in keeping with this, the whole piece is a colorful exercise in verbal brawling, designed to imagine Thomas as an untamed character after Roethke's own heart:

Has the ring-tailed roarer begun to snore? The limp spirit of a Peruvian prince taken over his wild psyche? Has he shoved down the throttle only to find a ramshackle model of patch-work fancies fluttering to a short cough? What time's the train of his spirit due? To what wonders are we now exposed?

At once approximating to Southern tall-tale convention and roughly imitating Thomas's writings at their most wildly surreal, Roethke seems to demonstrate that he and the Welshman are kindred spirits, free rebel spirits both, walking on the wild side of language and convention, crazy boyos, "one of the roughs," ever-ready for a verbal punch-up. Roethke devotes a whole paragraph to the ancient art of "flyting," excoriating "those loathly wearers of other men's clothing . . . hyenas of sensibility . . . anglo-saxon apostles of refinement."

Roethke was alive to the importance for him of Whitman's writing. In "Some Remarks on Rhythm," he analyzed his own lovely poem, "Elegy for Jane," and in the process, highlighted two features of Whitman to which he was indebted: "For one thing, the enumeration, the favorite device of the more irregular poem. We see it again and again in Whitman and Lawrence." And then there was the freedom to lengthen or shorten lines according to the promptings of breath and emotion. "Think of what we'd have missed in Lawrence, in Whitman, in Charlotte Mew, or, more lately, in Robert Lowell, if we denied this kind of poem."²³ Whitman's gift for "enumeration" was clearly of considerable personal importance to Roethke. Judging by the following invocation from "The Abyss," he valued Whitman for his ability to reduce the threateningly manifold nature of the world to order by such a device: "Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues: / For the world invades me again, / And once more the tongues begin babbling. / And the terrible hunger for objects quails me: / The sill trembles."²⁴

Roethke was always sympathetic to Thomas's situation as an undomesticated Welsh outsider out to shock middle-class English establishment

culture: “a home-made halo he has in a sour country where at least they love a bard. *And sing*” (*LP*, 212). Many other American poets were adopting this approach when dealing with the Welshman. Their construction of him as a “primitive” was another facet of the Whitmanian aspect of his influence. Roethke’s invocation of him as a “ring-tailed roarer”—wide of the mark though he came after Thomas’s death to understand it had been—meant that he was a “type” familiar to American culture: a singer who sounded his barbaric yawp over the roofs of the post-war American world. Also like Whitman, his poetry seemed to be a song of himself, one who appeared to lay himself excruciatingly and vulnerably bare before his readers and listeners—and to do so at great personal cost. “He was one of the great ones,” Roethke wrote in a posthumous notice, “there can be no doubt of that. And he drank his own blood, ate of his own marrow, to get at some of the material” (*LP*, 52). Like Whitman, Thomas was destined to become a martyr-victim to a grossly materialist and exploitative America that had welcomed him only to destroy him—an image of Whitman, too, that Ginsberg was shortly to propagate in “A Supermarket in California.”

It was this perception of the “Americanness” of Thomas that made Elizabeth Hardwick, in a notable posthumous essay, remark that “He was one of ours, in a way, and he came back here to die with a terrible and fabulous rightness. (Not ours, of course, in his talents, his work, his joys, but ours in his sufferings, his longings, his demands).” That “he was first-rate” she had no doubt, but she was most interested in examining the reasons why he was “literally *adored* in America.” She concluded that “he was both a success and a failure in a way we find particularly appealing . . . a wild genius who needed caring for . . . he was a pattern we can recognize all too easily—the charming young man of great gifts, wilfully going down to ruin. He was Hart Crane, Poe, F. Scott Fitzgerald . . . and also, unexpectedly, something of a great actor . . . in a time when the literary style runs to the scholarly and the clerical.” Hardwick also recognized the important contribution made by Brinnin’s notorious, “outlandishly successful” book to the posthumous clinching of this American image of a suffering Thomas. And she ended her brief study with the remark that Thomas’s meteoric American passage had brilliantly illuminated and briefly relieved “the sober and dreary fact of the decline of our literary life, its thinness and fatigue. From this Thomas was, to many, a brief reprieve.” The ensuing “Whitmanian turn” in that literary life was also partly a reaction against that “thinness and fatigue.”²⁵

The description of Thomas as a “great actor” reminds us of another obvious

link between him and Whitman. Both were fascinated by the arts of oral performance and had grown up in cultures that admired oral skills. Whitman lived in the age of the great Lyceum lectures, of powerful preaching, and, of course, of the renowned Shakespearean actors on the Broadway stage. Thomas was born shortly before Lloyd George, a spellbinding orator, became Prime Minister of an Imperial Britain, and he could recall the memorable histrionic performances of the giants of the nineteenth-century Nonconformist pulpit. He had attended elocution classes when young and learned his acting skills on the stage of the Swansea Little Theatre. Whitman loved to declaim Shakespeare aloud atop a Broadway stage, and he strove to ensure his great poetry would approximate to oral performance. Thomas lived on into the era when the famed skills of the Welsh pulpit were finding new expression in a secular setting through the appearance of several generations of talented Welsh actors and actresses, such as Richard Burton, Sian Phillips, Anthony Hopkins, and Michael Sheen. And, as I have argued elsewhere, Thomas may be regarded as one who consciously set out to wrest control of the word in Wales from the preachers so as to be free to exercise as he wished in his writings—a transfer of power paralleled by Whitman when he produced his own distinctive, maverick version of his period’s oral performances in his poetry. In Thomas’s case, the process is clearly enacted in the short story “The Peaches” and in “After the Funeral,” the elegy for Ann Jones in which he consciously dons the mantle of the preacher to preach his own obsequy, in the process usurping the role of the preacher at the traditional burial service (*ISP*, 229-230).

★

“I’m giving a reading on the BBC 3rd Programme of Roethke this week,” Dylan Thomas wrote to Oscar Williams on October 8, 1952, and added, “Oh, yes, and I’m introducing & arranging a half hour of Spoon River, and also a Personal Anthology—the B.B.C. has been running a feature called this for over six months now—devoted to Masters, Lindsay, Robinson & Sandburg, a fine old four for a programme and a boozeup” (*CL*, 841). It is evidence that he was fully aware of the form that a socially committed “Whitman tradition” had taken during the America of the inter-war years. (The Whitman of Hart Crane’s “The Bridge” could be seen as a rogue variant.) His own readings in the States were to coincide with, and even perhaps to help enable, the beginnings of a new “Whitmanian turn,” very different indeed from the old, in the poetic culture of

post-war America.

The reasons for that turn were admittedly many and complex, and quite as much social, political, and economic as poetic. Thomas had arrived in America at the beginning of what Lowell was to term “the tranquilized fifties,” the Eisenhower era of what one critic has described as “the bland leading the bland.” Out of the traumas first of the Depression thirties and then of involvement in a World War, Americans had emerged into a period of supreme military dominance, political quietism, and consumer craving. It was perhaps the golden age of bourgeois America, although shadowed by the specter of communism and the threat of the bomb. This was the cultural context that produced a backlash in the form of James Dean, Marlon Brando, Elvis Presley, the dissenting culture of the Beats, the lacerating self-exposures of the Confessionals, and the ominous psychic landscapes of the Deep Image school. The early stages of the turn to Whitman were another example of the reaction against this perceived social and cultural stagnation. Although Thomas did not survive to see the emergence of this anti-bourgeois counterculture, he actually lived through its beginnings and helped develop the conditions necessary for its full development. And he was able inadvertently to do so because he already naturally spoke the language of this new generation—a vulgarized Freudian discourse, the anarchist vocabulary of the soft Left, the vatic utterance of visionary sexual politics.

Brinnin is shrewd on Thomas’s relationship to the politics of the Left in this period:

Dylan’s political naïveté, it seemed to me, was a consequence of his promiscuous affection for humanity and of his need for emotional identification with the lowest stratum of society. His socialism was basically Tolstoyan, the attempt of the spiritual aristocrat to hold in one embrace the good heart of mankind, a gesture and a purpose uncontaminated by the *realpolitik* of the twentieth century. While he expressed himself strongly on political matters and tended indiscriminately to support the far left, his attitude was a kind of stance unsupported by knowledge, almost in defiance of knowledge. As long as, anywhere in the world, there existed groups of men pilloried by the forces of propertied power, Dylan wanted to be counted among their sympathizers. (*DTA*, 26)

It is a passage worth dwelling on, because for “Tolstoyan” (Christian anarchist), Brinnin might as appropriately have written “Whitmanian,” since Whitman, like Thomas, was instinctively an anarchist, in the strict political definition of that term; a radical libertarian who believed in spontaneous communitarianism. The thrust of Brinnin’s comments helps us understand how and why Thomas came to appeal to the Beats and even to prepare the way, so to speak, to Woodstock.

As David Boucher has noted, “The Beat Generation was nascent at the time of Thomas’s death.”²⁶ The response of the Beats to Thomas (which in many cases was ambivalent) has been covered extensively and excellently elsewhere, as has the fascinating record of his attractiveness for Black American poets, such as Al Young and Bob Kaufman—Amiri Baraka is a dissenting case.²⁷ He began, when still LeRoi Jones, by viewing Thomas as a liberating Bohemian presence on the American scene, writing a letter in 1958 to the editor of *Partisan Review* regretting that “Poor Dylan Thomas carried the ball all by himself in England, and we know what happened when he eventually he did get to America.”²⁸ When eventually he became Amiri Baraka, he could see him only as a representative of the White “European” cultural ascendancy. And several Black writers regarded Thomas as a kind of poetic equivalent of Charlie (“Bird”) Parker.²⁹ The Beats, too, saw an affinity between Thomas and jazz.

The debt of the Beats to Whitman has already been extensively considered in Whitman scholarship. Writing to Ginsberg about *Kaddish* on April 10, 1959, Lowell praises it as “really melodious, nostalgic, moving, liturgical,” before cautiously adding, “probably there’s too much Whitman.”³⁰ Ginsberg had been excited by “Song of Myself” when his high school English teacher had read a passage of it aloud to her class. He was hooked for life. After Ginsberg had read excerpts from the typescript of *Howl* at the 6 Gallery in late 1954, Lawrence Ferlinghetti sent him a letter paraphrasing Emerson’s acclamation of Whitman: “I greet you at the beginning of a great career. When do I get the manuscript?” And *Howl* contained several tributes to Whitman, including the celebrated “A Supermarket in California”—an early example of Ginsberg’s long struggle to apprehend his own sexual orientation by taking Whitman as his model.

In a later conversation with Gregory Corso, following a trip to Russia, where homosexuality was illegal, Ginsberg interestingly explained his sensitive and nuanced understanding of how Whitman had broached his homosexuality in his poetry. In response to Corso’s query, “how did the Russians take to [*Leaves of Grass*],” Ginsberg patiently explained that even in the States, Whitman’s gayness was still, as late as 1978, never fully acknowledged. He then proceeded to talk sympathetically about how Whitman had disguised his desires by generalizing it “into comradeship, adhesiveness, empathy, sympathy, universal compassion,” and concluded by emphasizing that, nevertheless, it would not do to describe Whitman’s poetic strategies as a coverup for his homosexuality, because his was a case far more complex than that. Ginsberg ended by emphasizing that Whitman had no “secret poems.”

As for Corso, he, too, took his cue from Whitman, as is evident in his elegy for Jack Kerouac, “Elegiac Feelings American,” where he explicitly makes the connection between Kerouac and Whitman:

How a Whitman we were always wanting, a hoping, an
America, that America ever an America to be,
never an America to sing about or to, but ever an
America to sing hopefully for.³¹

The Whitmanian Corso was taken aback when, during the course of a conversation, Ginsberg responded to Corso’s reading of his poem “Hair” by remarking that “it’s more like Dylan Thomas than you would think . . . think of all the mad images in that, that’s like Dylan Thomas—‘I see the angels washing their oceans of hair’ is something that Thomas would have smiled at.” Corso is forced wryly to agree.³²

Of the Beats, it was Ferlinghetti who was most alive to Thomas’s influence on the milieu out of which they emerged and most appreciative of his achievements. During a visit to San Francisco, Thomas had given readings to packed houses in the Bay area as well as on the influential KPFA radio station, and those readings made an indelible mark on Ferlinghetti’s consciousness: “His voice,” he recalled years later, “had a singular beauty and richness, in the great Welsh oral tradition; and the excitement he generated was an early inspiration for a tradition of oral poetry here, the subsequent San Francisco poetry movement being consistently centered on the performance of poetry in public.” By 1957, Ferlinghetti and Rexroth were to begin performing poetry to jazz accompaniment at the cellar (576) Green Street, and these events were a focus of attention for the Beats as much as the City Lights Bookstore (which had opened in 1953).³³

Ferlinghetti made his poetic obeisance to Whitman in “Poem for Old Walt,” which opens by noticing “SKY OVER PATCHOGUE DENSE & GREY / AS WHITMAN’S BEARD / FLIGHTS OF GREY GEESE NESTED IN IT,” and goes on to imagine the “hulk” Whitman’s body “HOVE-TO / OFF OLD MANNAHATTA- / POETS STILL / SWIM OFF IT / THEIR FAR CRIES FAILING / LIKE LOST SAILORS IN A BURNING / TURNER SHIPWRECK”—implicitly representing Whitman as a patron saint of American poets destroyed by the inimical realities of their country. For Ferlinghetti, the poets of the US were condemned to live in a mechanized society, when human speech had been “affected by the absolute staccato of machines. And city poetry certainly echoed it. Whitman was a holdover, singing the song of himself.” (Geddes, 326)

The quality of song in Thomas's poetry was probably what attracted Ferlinghetti to it. In due course, following a visit to Wales, he wrote his "Belated Palinode for Dylan Thomas," which opens by setting the scene before continuing in a loose style that allows him to incorporate familiar phrases and references from Thomas's poetry into his own verse:

In Wales at Laugharne at last I stand beside
his cliff-perched writing shed
above the coursing waters
where the hawk hangs still
above the cockle-strewn shingle

Ferlinghetti looks out across "a bold green headland lost in the sun":

Beyond which lie
(across an ocean and a continent)
San Francisco's white wood houses
and a poet's sun-bleached cottage
on Bolinas' far lagoon
with its wind-torn Little Mesa
(so very like St. Johns Hill)³⁴

It is a moment of moving self-identification with Thomas and acknowledgment of his contribution to the culture of the Beats, a reverend act of poetic homage in the spirit of Ginsberg's gesture at Thomas's unassuming graveside in Laugharne.



If Ginsberg's gesture at Laugharne is one powerful image of Thomas's influence on post-war American poetry, then it finds its equally powerful counterpart in the presence of John Berryman at Thomas's bedside in St. Vincent's Hospital, New York, when he passed away on November 9, 1953. Berryman was at that time on the very threshold of the critical recognition that would begin to come his way with the publication of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in 1956. He had first met Thomas when he was a student at Clare College, Cambridge, in the mid-thirties and had reviewed him for the *Kenyon Review* in 1940. But like Lowell and so many others, Berryman had come a long way from the formalist poetry of his early period, and it was a different Berryman who, particularly with the publication of *77 Dream Songs* (1964), was to perfect a new genre of

Freudian lyric, who kept vigil by the dying Thomas's bedside. It is an appropriate emblem of Thomas's notable importance for a new, emerging generation of post-war American poets.

Berryman's debt to Whitman in the *Dream Songs* has been well canvassed. James E. Miller suggested that Berryman was working in the new tradition of the personal epic, the founder of which had been Whitman. As for Berryman himself, he stated in 1957 that "the greatest poem so far written by an American" was "Song of Myself." He followed this up in 1976 with a personally revealing essay on Whitman entitled "Song of Myself: Intention and Substance." There, he emphasized that Whitman had been the first to shatter the concept of a unitary "I" by demonstrating that the poet was "a mere channel, like a valve which admits various experiences." Whitman, he claimed, had been the first to conceive of the "I" as an "ambiguous pronoun"—an insight Berryman had by then already exploited for his own poetic purposes in his *Dream Songs*. (MS, 152-57)

What has been insufficiently noticed, however, is that Berryman had much earlier detected a similar fracturing of the "I" in the work of his friend Dylan Thomas. Forty years after Thomas's death, researchers found an unpublished memoir of Berryman's friendship with Thomas that was written in 1959.³⁵ This includes the usual colorful stories, such as the anecdote about the occasion Thomas got Berryman drunk in an attempt—vain, as it turned out—to prevent him from making a rendezvous with his hero, the great W. B. Yeats. Even then, "I was perfectly clear already that he was the most important of my generation to come into view on either side of the Atlantic."

It is, however, by characterizing the impression Thomas made on him as a remarkable reader of poetry that Berryman most clearly indicates Thomas's contribution to his own development. "At this time Dylan Thomas was very thin and small," writes Berryman. "His face gave the impression of being covered with knobs; he looked rather like a bug-eyed pixie; he was one of the most delicious clowns I have ever come on." Thomas the clown—Roethke likewise recalls his devotion to the films of Chaplin and of the Marx Brothers—was well calculated to appeal to the future poet of *Dream Songs*. That is the first of Berryman's significant comments. The second quickly follows: "His reading then was less mannered, less virtuoso-like, and adapted itself better to whatever the poem was Later, wonderful as his voice remained, he often used it as a machine into which he fed poems of every sort that came out then all much alike."

Two points, then: Thomas's gifts as a clown, and his gifts as a reader not of poetry but of poetries—the young Thomas seemed to have not merely a single, sonorous, organ voice, but a dramatic range of different voices at his disposal. He

was precociously polyvocal. Those are the points to remember when one turns to Berryman's acknowledged masterpiece. Itself a "play for voices," except that the voices were all internal to Berryman himself, *Dream Songs* are one of the greatest achievements in post-war American poetry. Collectively, they constitute a vaudeville theatre of Berryman's psyche. The starring role, so to speak, is given to Henry, an imaginary character representing the unruly impulses of the id—since the anonymous scriptwriter of this vaudeville is, in effect, Freud, and the whole endless program of chaotic, tumultuous "acts" is based on Berryman's experiences.

Berryman underlined the closeness he felt to Thomas, as well as to Whitman, when he wrote "In Memoriam," an elegy for Thomas that Berryman wrote when he was "in his mid-fifties and hospitalized at least once a year from drink and depression" and starting "to understand that he may be veering towards the same sad end as Thomas."³⁶ Berryman ruefully remarked that, on meeting Thomas, he immediately noticed that "his talent for ordinary life was even less than mine." And he was never so besotted that he failed to protect himself from Thomas's dangerously radioactive presence. He made it clear that the more practiced the Welshman became at public readings, the more inauthentic they became, as "the voice" took over. He also distinguished between the early Thomas, whose "work was accomplished, even prodigious, but . . . overdone and a little inhuman," and the post-war work. And he particularly admired "Fern Hill" and "A Refusal to Mourn"—one of the poems that made a profound impression on a substantial number of American poets. Touchingly, he recalled how he and Thomas had enthused together about the unfulfilled promise of the young Welsh poet Alun Lewis, who had tragically died in wartime Burma by his own hand.



Whitman and Thomas became twinned in the minds of several American poets because they were both outcasts who instinctively sympathized with other outcasts and social rejects. Both poets were prized for their energizing presence in a moribund society. In "I Sing the Body Electric," Philip Levine plays the vibrancy of Whitman's affirmations off against the numbness, physical and mental torpor of the residents of Wallace Stevens's Hartford, Connecticut, in the biting cold of a glum Sunday in March. He feels that he lives in a country and in an age where "poems are dying." In a twenty-minute radio interview with BBC Wales's Caroline Hitt—recorded to mark the centenary of Thomas's birth—Levine spoke at length about his love for Thomas's poetry, which he had first encountered in

Oscar Williams as a freshman at what became Wayne State University. He had found it refreshing for its exuberant vitality, after slogging in class through the “gloom and doom” of Eliot’s poetry. A few years later, he heard him read and was startled both by how different he had then become from his youthful self—in the flesh, he proved to be “Rumpled, stubby, red-faced”—and by his electrifying performance. Thomas had, he still remembered, read not only his own poetry but Crowe Ransom’s “Captain Carpenter,” and pieces by Wilfred Owen, Hart Crane, and Theodore Roethke, whom he had strongly recommended. Levine and a group of other excited students had then met Thomas at the front door of the member of staff who was entertaining him, and still vividly recalled how delighted they all had been when Thomas boomingly announced that “he had come to meet the students.” Adding “Fuck the Faculty.”³⁷

Levine stressed what a rock star of poetry Thomas had been—the only previous example of anyone vaguely similar had been Edna St. Vincent Millay, striking in appearance but a bad poet and terrible reader. What a contrast, Levine archly added, Thomas was to the “dowager” Marianne Moore and to William Carlos Williams, who always seemed to be humbly embarrassed at being there. Levine had, he explained, later come to see Thomas as belonging to the vatic tradition of Blake and Whitman and had also come to believe that, as a reader, he had been somewhat of a ham. But he still loved some of the poems and still remembered how different his subjects (meadows, birds, and pastoral landscapes) had been from those of the survivors of the 1930s, who were still addressing the social and political issues of the Depression years in their poetry. Of his poems, he particularly liked “In Memory of Ann Jones,” “The Hunchback in the Park,” “Poem in October” and—above all others—“A Refusal to Mourn,” which was the greatest of war poems. For Levine, Thomas remained a remarkable one-off, and one whose poetry always seemed to sing.

Levine’s close friend Galway Kinnell was another who confessed to an early interest in Thomas in a *New Yorker* interview. Recalling his awakening to poetry as a young man, he explained that “I read a lot of poetry. I really set out to read all poetry, from the beginning to now, and some of it I loved and some of it I disliked, and some of it sort of stirred me to write something myself. I would say Dylan Thomas was one of those.”³⁸ In that way, Thomas helped set Kinnell on the road that led to a lifelong admiration for Whitman, about whom he eventually wrote an interesting essay. “No one before him had thrust his presence and actual voice so boldly onto the written page,” Kinnell wrote: “This voice, so unmistakably personal, is also universal: while it is outgoing and attaches itself to the things and creatures of this world, it speaks at the same time of a life within”

(*MS*, 216). This is, for Kinnell, by far the most compelling and consequential feature of Whitman's writing, and so he dwells on it at illuminating length:

. . . as far as I know only Whitman has written on this primary subject, the original music of the human voice, how it rescues words and makes them fresh And since the reader's throat and mouth must form the words, the words enter the reader's very flesh. Poetry goes not merely from mind to mind, but from the whole being to the whole being. Whitman understood this. (*MS*, 217)

It is at this seminal point in his discussion that the example of Dylan Thomas comes to Kinnell's mind as relevant to Whitman's case. "Given the great public voices of Theodore Roethke and Dylan Thomas," he writes, "it is true that Whitman's specific prescriptions occasionally appear to be in error," but he then insists that "Whitman was the first to grasp the basic truth, that the music of the voice releases the word's secret life, just as being loved makes plain people brighten." (*MS*, 217-218) In context, therefore, these remarks also reflect upon the music of Dylan Thomas's voice.

Another poet of Kinnell's generation who admitted to an admiration both for Thomas and Whitman was Robert Bly, who achieved celebrity in the 1990s thanks to publishing a book, *Iron John*, that became the sacred text, the veritable testament, of the men's movement. It was the counterweight to the new wave of feminism that had emerged during the early seventies. One of Bly's reasons for a qualified admiration of Whitman was his lack of "care for male masters," and parallel with this, he embarked on a poetic search for his own "chosen fathers," or poetic teachers. The most important came from Russia, but among the others Bly included was Dylan Thomas.

During the course of an essay devoted to Whitman's limitations, Bly insisted that "I am a student of Whitman's and I think he is a genius several times over." (*MS*, 333) He valued, for example, his "emphasis," like that of Thomas, on an audience. (*MS*, 322) And, necessitating a deep indrawing of breath, Whitman's "public" poetry reveals language to be at root not the obedient tool of the rational, functional intelligence but the secret agent of our primal, pre-conscious, sensuous being: it beats to the pulse of our body and moves to the tidal rhythms of our blood, the "systole and diastole" of the heart hymned by Whitman, and it also reproduces, as does his poetry, "the promiscuous urge of the world." Bly recognized this, too, as being a signature of Thomas's poetry and highlighted through the relationship he forged through his readings with his audience. Bly expresses this in his poem "The Gaiety of Form," addressed to his chosen father, Dylan Thomas:

How sweet to weight the line with all these vowels!
Body, Thomas, the codfish's psalm. The gaiety
Of form lies in the labor of its playfulness.
The chosen vowel reappears like the evening star
There, in the solemn return the astronomers love.
When 'ahm' returns three times, then it becomes
A noise; then the whole stanza turns to music.
It comforts us, says: 'I am here, be calm.'³⁹

"Whitman's influence has been very strong on my generation" (*MS*, 321), Bly wrote at the beginning of his essay, and he proceeded to give three examples: Kinnell, Ginsberg, and Louis Simpson. Simpson was born and raised in Jamaica and throughout his life, he felt himself to be an outsider to the States, where he had moved when only 17 years old. He went on to serve distinction in the Pacific Theatre during World War Two. His most famous poem—and also perhaps his finest—is "Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain," which includes memorable lines of sad commentary on the state of the USA:

'Where are you, Walt?
The Open Road goes to the used-car lot.

'Where is the nation you promised?
These houses built of wood sustain
Colossal snows,
And the light above the street is sick to death.

'As for the people—see how they neglect you!
Only a poet pauses to read the inscription.' (*MS*, 255)

Simpson the outsider understandably didn't warm to Whitman when he was "whooping it up over the chest-expansion of the United States," as he put it sardonically (*MS*, 257). But he confessed he was exhilarated by the hospitable breadth and energy of his long lines. And he clearly sensed in Whitman something of an outsider like himself.

It was this aspect of Dylan Thomas, too, that drew Simpson strongly to him, and caused him to pay extensive attention to him, alongside Ginsberg, Plath, and Lowell, in a book-length study. He tellingly contrasted the Welshman with Auden:

Auden's dislike of Thomas had complex roots. Auden was an Englishman of the professional middle class, Anglican in religion, educated at public schools and Oxford or Cambridge. Thomas's people were Welsh dissenters, and anyone who does not know the suspicion with

which most Englishmen regard the Welsh, the Scots,⁴⁰ and the Irish, knows little of England. Celts are dreamers—they even believe in magic. They are music hall turns, entertaining there perhaps, but nowhere else. Moreover, not only was Thomas a Welshman, he came of a lower class—his father had raised himself by his bootstraps. Finally he was in bad taste: he cadged money, he drank too much, his behavior was a disgrace.⁴¹

Auden's style of writing was likewise the very opposite of that of Thomas. He was rational, while the Welshman was "demonic." Auden aimed at disenchantment, Thomas at enchantment.



"Whitman's return to American poetry, if we can set a date," wrote Galway Kinnell, "did not come until 1956, one hundred years after the appearance of *Leaves of Grass*, with the publication of Ginsberg's *Howl*." In early 1956, Ginsberg was reading proofs for his forthcoming landmark publication and was devouring Gay Wilson Allen's seminal biography of Whitman, *The Solitary Singer*, which had appeared the year before (*Gŷ*, 171). In that year, Ginsberg had reread *Leaves of Grass* from cover to cover, an experience he described as "a total turn-on" (*Gŷ*, 167). Also in 1955, James E. Miller, Jr., who would go on to become a major Whitman scholar, published *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass*. This, then, is clear evidence that at this inaugural moment of the post-war Whitman revival—there was a culturally germinating coincidence between the new academic interest and a new American poetry.

From then on, the paths of their respective development began to diverge, although they continued to cherish the image of Whitman as a great American visionary, a prophet, and a harbinger of a New Society. But just before the parting of ways, Miller—along with his academic colleague at the University of Nebraska, Bernice Slote, and the poet Karl Shapiro, who had known Thomas well—brought out in 1960 an important collection of essays under the title *Start With the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry*.⁴² It was dedicated to the enthusiastic study of what they termed the "Whitman tradition," a tradition they also termed "the New Paganism," contrasted by the "Eliot tradition," which they styled "The New Puritanism." The former was life-affirming and celebratory, in its delight in all the forces implicated in what Whitman had famously called "the promiscuous urge of the world," while the latter was lamentably negative and sterile. The key figures in the Whitman tradition, they asserted, were Whitman, Lawrence, Hart Crane, and Dylan Thomas, all of whom resembled Whitman in some way or

other in their poetics. But they emphasized that theirs was a study concerned not with “influences” but with “relationships, affinities, definitions.” And they observed that “Crane, Thomas, Lorca, and Ginsberg all participate in the creation of a twentieth-century Walt Whitman who was relatively unknown in the nineteenth”—as, one might add, he was unknown in twentieth-century America (with the exception of Crane) until after the Second World War.

In his essay “James Dickey as a Southern Visionary,” the distinguished Southern critic Monroe K. Spears described Dickey in terms that dovetail neatly with the discussion of twentieth-century heirs of “the Whitman tradition” in *Start with the Sun*.⁴³ Recalling Dickey’s statement that his religious vision “involves myself and the universe and it does not admit of any kind of intermediary, such as Jesus and the Bible,” Spears concludes that “Dickey belongs to the line of visionaries running from Blake through Rimbaud and Whitman to such modern exemplars as Hart Crane, George Barker, Dylan Thomas, and Theodore Roethke.”

As a young man Dickey, a committed Southerner, was prone to mock and dismiss Whitman as a “bard of the North.” But when addressing a 1977 Whitman conference in Camden, New Jersey, he completely changed his tune.⁴⁴ He’d first read Whitman, he claimed, in the gloom of the cockpit of a trainer fighter during the war and had suddenly realized that here was a poet he could relate to. Whitman had revealed to him, he added, that he needn’t despair of being able to write like Tennyson; that he could draw upon his own experiences and rely on his own style to write a poem. “And so I have been doin’ ever since,” Dickey concluded, “I think he’s my great father as a writer” (6). Dickey’s account of encountering Whitman may well have been a stretch—he was an adept practitioner of the Tall Tale tradition of the South—but there may have been at least a grain of truth that he’d found his way to writing partly through Whitman. Joyce Carol Oates once arrestingly described Dickey as “our dark Whitman” because he embraced the buoyant energies of American individualism, but in forms contaminated by the violence of the twentieth century.⁴⁵

Spears linked Dickey as a visionary not only with Whitman but with Roethke and Thomas, and evidence for his deep admiration for both seems to me to be unequivocal. He remarked that he’d been profoundly influenced by Roethke’s *The Lost Son* and thereafter had aimed for his “haunted perceptual clarity.” And during the course of informal discussions held with students at the University of South Carolina (where he taught), Dickey took off for ten enraptured minutes describing his envy for Thomas’s effortless and authentic originality of mind and expression. He marveled at lines in which there seemed a blend of surrealism and Freudianism, and both were combined with a song-like, rhythmic utterance

consistent with Thomas's South Wales accent. Such originality, he added, was inimitable, and so he'd been careful never to be influenced by Thomas. But he had learned from him. And Dickey ended with the typically hyperbolic claim that Thomas "was the most original and most unimitable" poet in English. He stated that the only two who could claim to be his equals were Donne and Hopkins, but in the end, Thomas was the most original of the three.⁴⁶

Dickey, then, provides another example of how familiarity with Whitman could facilitate admiration for Thomas in the States. In his case, though, what seems to have happened is that such an admiration seems to have coexisted in his creative consciousness with an admiration for Thomas, without resulting in what he was ever comfortable calling "influence." His insistence on that is understandable enough. After all, what he had learned from both was that the color of his own saying was bound to be different from that of theirs. He had to sing of himself and not join any chorus of praise for theirs. For him, both had proved liberators and enablers who had set him free to make his own distinctive way in poetry.



Glyn Jones, that youthful friend and fellow spirit of Thomas's, defied the Swansea poet's mockery of Whitman by remaining a great admirer of the great American until the very end of his long life. And a poignant note is struck in a late notebook entry by Jones (1973): "Ah, Walt, why were you never a Welshman? What a Welshman you would have been."⁴⁷ It perfectly voices the affinity that some in Wales felt with Whitman, and in so doing, it unwittingly mirrors the response to Thomas in the States by readers and listeners who, consciously or not, intuited that the poetry of the Welshman was curiously and instructively related to that of their own "Walt," who had long been culturally occluded.

Many of the terms that Americans used to describe their experience of hearing Thomas read—the terms in which they effectively "reconstructed" him as an honorary American—were terms that also later came to be applied, explicitly or implicitly, to Whitman. He was bardic, vatic, Orphic, Druidic, prophetic; he was thrillingly, even scandalously, visceral, undomesticated, and feral; he was shockingly personal, uninhibited in his evocations of the processes of the body and devoted to celebrating "the promiscuous urge of the world"; and he sounded his Welsh yawp unashamedly over the roofs of the American world.

One of those who were aroused by that yawp was Alan Ginsberg, at that time an embryonically Whitmanian poet who always lamented the fact that academics at Columbia, when he had been an undergraduate there in the late 1950s, had no time at all for Whitman. Their attitude towards him had been snobbishly condescending and dismissive. By 1955, things were beginning to change both in academia and in the world of American poetry. Dylan Thomas happened to appear in the States at that very time, in time to be implicated in this change, as this essay has attempted to demonstrate. That he facilitated it seems to me fairly clear; although exactly how far he did so is much more difficult to establish. What is certain is that American listeners repeatedly marveled at his demonstrations that spoken poetry could be an electric power capable of transfiguring lives. Long after he had died, his unquiet ghost seemed to linger in the States, and to buddy up with the equally unquiet ghost of an old Walt who was stealthily preparing for his comeback. And who knows, perhaps it was those two unquiet ghosts that Ginsberg was attempting to lay to rest in 1995 when he sank to his knees at Dylan Thomas's graveside in Laugharne and began to chant the Kaddish.

Swansea University

Notes

- 1 John Malcolm Brinnin, *Dylan Thomas in America* (London: Dent, 1956), 93. Hereafter *DTA*.
- 2 Paul Ferris, ed., *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters* (London: Dent, 1985), 900. Hereafter *CL*.
- 3 For discussions of Whitman's possible influence on Thomas, see Stanley Friedman, "Whitman and Laugharne," *Anglo-Welsh Review* 18 (1969), 81; and Paul J. Ferlazzo, "Dylan Thomas and Walt Whitman: Birth, Death and Time," *Walt Whitman Review* 23 (1977), 136-141.
- 4 Dylan Thomas, *Letters to Vernon Watkins* (New York: New Directions, 1957), 89.
- 5 D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 151.
- 6 M. Wynn Thomas, *Transatlantic Connections: Whitman US, Whitman UK* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2005), Chapter 9, 227-260. Hereafter *TC*.
- 7 Some important work has been done on this subject. See, for example, Victor Paananen,

“The Social Vision of Dylan Thomas,” in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Studies* 8 (2003), 46-66; and Vic Golightly, “‘Writing with Dreams and Blood’: Dylan Thomas, Marxism and 1930s Swansea,” *Welsh Writing in English* 8 (2003), 67-91.

8 By this time, Robeson had become a *persona non grata* in the States because he was a self-confessed Communist and admirer of the Soviet Union, where he frequently travelled. The account of the FBI’s hounding of Robeson is as disgraceful as it is harrowing. Having deprived him of his passport, they set out to break him mentally. But in South Wales, Robeson had been a hero to the mining communities since the 1930s. He was a staunch admirer and supporter of the International Socialism of the South Wales miners—he was eventually to sing to them, via the Transatlantic cable, in their annual Eisteddfod at Porthcawl in 1957, because he was denied travel abroad. Robeson had famously played the part of a black Welsh miner in the (rather absurd) movie *Proud Valley* in 1939. For a definitive, and scrupulously nuanced, account of Robeson’s relationship to Wales, see “‘They feel me a part of the land’: Paul Robeson, Race and the Making of Modern Wales,” in Daniel G. Williams, *Black Skin, Blue Books: African Americans and Wales, 1845-1945* (Cardiff; University of Wales Press, 2014), 142-207. See also “Class and Identity: Aneurin Bevan and Paul Robeson,” in Daniel G. Williams, *Wales Unchained: Literature, Politics and Identity in the American Century* (Cardiff; University of Wales Press 2014), 73-92. Brinnin mentions that Thomas expressly instructed him to agree to a reading, at a much reduced fee, for the Socialist Party of New York City: another example of his fidelity to the Socialism that was the default political faith of the industrial South Wales of his era (*DTA*, 109).

9 Whitman’s appeal to industrial Wales in the late Victorian Period and early-twentieth century was based on interpretations of him (mediated by Edward Carpenter’s writings) as a kind of Utopian Socialist. See *TC*, 226-260.

10 E. W. Tedlock, ed., *Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet* (London: Heinemann, 1960), 283. Hereafter *LP*.

11 Donald Hall, *Their Ancient Glittering Eyes: Remembering Poets and More Poets* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1991: enlarged edition, 1998), 46-47.

12 In the early 1950s, “the San Remo [was] the restlessly crowded hang-out of the intellectual hipster and catch-all for whatever survived of dedicated Bohemianism in Greenwich Village. There Dylan was ogled, and intruded upon, and recognized with surliness or awe”; *DTA*, 8.

13 Gordon Ball, ed., *Ginsberg, Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 14-16. Hereafter *Gj*.

14 Linda Hamalian, “Re-Discovering Community: Rexroth and the Whitman Tradition,” in *Modern American Poetry: An Online Journal and Multimedia Companion to Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (1999), maps-legacy.org/poets/m_r/rexroth/hamalian.htm.

15 Kenneth Rexroth, “Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*,” *Bureau of Public Secrets: Kenneth Rexroth Archives*, “Classics Revisited (9),” bopsecrets.org/Rexroth/cr/9.htm#Leaves%20of%20Grass.

- 16 Kenneth Rexroth, *Thou Shalt Not Kill: A Memorial for Dylan Thomas* (Sunnyvale, CA: Horace Schwartz, 1955); available online at genius.com/Kenneth-rexroth-thou-shalt-not-kill-annotated.
- 17 Eric Mottram, ed., *The Rexroth Reader* (London: Cape, 1972), 332.
- 18 See Daniel Williams' exploration of this perceived affinity in *Black Skin, Blue Books: African Americans and Wales*, 47-72.
- 19 R. H. Super, ed., *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 3 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 291-386. For an extensive discussion of the "Celticism" that became immensely popular the end of the Victorian period, see Chapter 5, "The Celtic Option," in M. Wynn Thomas, *The Nations of Wales, 1890-1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016).
- 20 See M. Wynn Thomas, "Marlais," in Hannah Ellis, ed., *Dylan Thomas: A Centenary Celebration* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 30-41. For a far fuller discussion, see M. Wynn Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit: Literature and Nonconformist Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), 226-255. Hereafter *ISP*.
- 21 *The Dial*, vol. 1: 1840-1844 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), 59.
- 22 For the origins of the term in Southern folk culture see Henry Wonham, "Character Development of the Ring-Tailed Roarer in American Literature," *Southern Folklore* 46 no. 3 (January 1, 1989), 265.
- 23 "Some Remarks on Rhythm," in Gary Geddes, ed., *20th Century Poetry and Poetics* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), 904.
- 24 Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, Dan Champion, eds., *Walt Whitman: the Measure of His Song* (Minneapolis: Holy Cow! Press, 1981), 180. Hereafter *MS*.
- 25 Elizabeth Hardwick, *The Collected Essays of Elizabeth Hardwick* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2017), 72-79.
- 26 David Boucher, "The Price of Fame: Bob Dylan, the Beats and Dylan Thomas," *Symbiosis: A Journal of Transatlantic Literary and Cultural Relations* 20 (2016), 75-90. See also David Boucher and Lucy Boucher, *Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen: Deaths and Entrances* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021). The following paragraphs of mine are heavily indebted to Boucher's discussion.
- 27 See "Blood Jumps: Dylan Thomas, Charlie Parker and 1950s America," *Black Skin, Blue Books: African Americans and Wales*, 47-72.
- 28 Letter of summer, 1958, reprinted in Matt Theado, ed., *The Beats: A Literary Reference* (New York: Carrol and Graf, 2003), 82.

- 29 See Daniel Williams' brilliant exploration of this perceived affinity. In particular, he sees both Parker and Thomas as representing different versions of the supposed "primitivism" (both of African Americans and of "Celts") that post-war White middle-class America welcomed as sources of "revitalization" for a jaded and satiated emergent consumer culture.
- 30 Saskia Hamilton, ed., *The Letters of Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 2005), 345.
- 31 Gregory Corso, "Elegiac Feelings American (for the dear memory of John Kerouac)," in *Elegiac Feelings American* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 7.
- 32 *The Allen Ginsberg Project*, "More Vintage Corso" (July 6, 2013), allenginsberg.org/2013/07/more-vintage-corso.
- 33 Laurence Ferlinghetti, *Literary San Francisco* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1981).
- 34 Lawrence Ferlinghetti Papers, 1919-2003, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, folder 32; available online at *imaginepoesia* (December 4, 2009), imaginepoesia.wordpress.com.
- 35 John Berryman, "After many a summer: Memories of Dylan Thomas," *Times Literary Supplement* no. 4718 (September 3, 1993), 13-14.
- 36 John Berryman, "In Memoriam," *Collected Poems, 1937-1971*, ed. Charles Thornbury (London: Faber, 1990), 244.
- 37 Philip Levine interviewed by Carolyn Hitt, 2014. Accessed at "Hundred Years of Dylan Thomas," WNYC.org.
- 38 Alice Quinn, "Working Poets" (interview with Galway Kinnell and Philip Levine), *New Yorker* (October 30, 2006), newyorker.com.
- 39 Robert Bly, "The Gaiety of Form," *American Poetry Review* 22 (January 1, 1993), 12.
- 40 Simpson's father was of part Scottish descent.
- 41 Louis Simpson, *Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell* (London; Macmillan, 1978), 36.
- 42 James E. Miller, Karl Shapiro, and Bernice Slote, *Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry* (Lincoln; University of Nebraska Press, 1960).
- 43 *Virginia Quarterly Review* 63 (Winter, 1987), 110-123; available online at vqronline.org/essay/james-dickey-southern-visionary.

44 James Dickey, "Introductory Remarks to a Reading, 8th Annual Walt Whitman Festival, Camden, New Jersey, 4 May 1977," *Mickle Street Review* no. 1 (1979), 3-6; available online at micklestreet.rutgers.edu/issue-1.

45 Aaron Baker, "The Strangeness of James Dickey," *Contemporary Poetry Review* (February 1, 2004), cprw.com/the-strangeness-of-james-dickey.

46 James Dickey, "Writer's Workshop" (episode in PBS series *Writer's Workshop* hosted by George Plimpton, University of South Carolina and the South Carolina ETV Network, 1982), available online at KnowItAll.org.

47 Meic Stephens, ed., extracts from Glyn Jones's Notebooks, *New Welsh Review* 29 (1995), 18.