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QUARRELLING WITH THE OUTSIDE WEATHERS: DYLAN THOMAS AND SURREALISM

CHRIS WIGGINTON
SWANSEA UNIVERSITY

Between June 11th and July 4th 1936, the New Burlington Galleries in London played host to a further noisy assault on that cosy, common-sense bugbear of the *avant-garde*, consensual representational reality —the International Surrealist Exhibition. A green-haired André Breton and his green-clothed wife opened the exhibition. Paul Eluard and Herbert Read delivered their lecture on "Art and the Unconscious" while perched on the backrest of an increasingly unstable sofa. Salvador Dali was almost asphyxiated after giving his paper clad in a diving suit whose helmet became stuck. Among the others involved were a young woman carrying a false leg and a bunch of roses in one hand and a raw pork chop in the other, and a young man who offered visitors cups of boiled string, asking "weak or strong?" The young man was Dylan Thomas. He later read his work at one of the evening events along with Paul Eluard, Samuel Beckett and David Gascoyne.[1]

Thomas's involvement in the 1936 Exhibition is frequently dismissed as inconsequential by a bevy of contemporary critics unwilling to take into account the modernist and, more particularly, surrealist elements in his work. Lurking behind the margins of such readings, which often amount to little more than a kind of bardological empiricism, are attempts to secure Thomas's canonical status by situating him in a metaphysical or romantic tradition. Criticism of this sort has dominated Thomas studies over the past thirty years or so, and even those dissenting voices keen to establish a more positive relationship between Thomas and surrealism have tended to rely upon the same monolithic model as those eager to play down its influence. Paul C. Ray, for example, suggests that "of the major poets of our time, Dylan Thomas was the one most influenced by surrealism", but later claims

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that "whereas they achieved their results by immersing themselves in automatism, Thomas achieved his by remaining in lucid control of his materials and intentions" (1971: 277, 278). In this article I shall argue that this limited (mis)conception of surrealism as purely psychic automatism is partly responsible for, in Alan Young's words, "the failure of British critics generally to appreciate the modernity and seriousness of the early poems and stories of Dylan Thomas, who most successfully combined traditional and modernist elements in his quest for a solution to serious metaphysical questions" (1981: 222).[2]

In the 1930s, the *New Country* poets consistently linked Thomas's work to a surrealism which they regarded as at odds with their own *engagé* writing. Early reviews show that, despite impressing, Thomas was seen as a hit-or-miss writer. Louis MacNeice, for example, referred to the "surrealist principles" and "nonsense images" of Thomas's work (1938: 159, 160). To Stephen Spender it was "just poetic stuff with no beginning nor end, shape, or intelligent or intelligible control" (in Thomas 1985: 297). Yet it is precisely Thomas's refusal to toe their particular poetic line that makes his poetry so outstanding and demands that it be considered as more than just a footnote to the "Audenary", non-experimental, discursive poetic history of the 1930s. The idea that Thomas's own imploded modernist poetic, however, opposed as it was to the diagnostic, hyper-rational, politically left poetic norm of the *New Country* poets, can be read in surrealist terms continues to be viewed with suspicion. The lip-service given to surrealism by, among others, Paul Ferris (1978) and Walford Davies (1986) reflects not only a particular desire to subordinate the *avant-garde* in Thomas's work, but also a suspicion of the authenticity and validity of surrealist practice in general.

Much of the unwillingness of critics to take surrealism seriously, either in relation to the poetry and prose or in its own right, stems from Thomas himself who, six months prior to the exhibition, wrote:

> I have very little idea what surrealism is; until quite recently I had never heard of it; I have never, to my knowledge, read even a paragraph of surrealist literature; my acquaintance with French is still limited to "the pen of my aunt"; I have not read any French poetry, either in the original or in translation, since I attempted to translate Victor Hugo in a provincial Grammar school examination, and failed. All of which exposes my ignorance of contemporary poetry [...]. I must confess that I read regrettably little modern poetry, and what "fashionable poetry" I do come across appears to be more or less communist propaganda. I am not a communist. (1985: 205)

But just as "I am not a communist" was disingenuous, so too was his claim to ignorance of surrealism. The letter was, after all, written in immediate response to one by Richard Church, then the poetry editor of Dent, whose comments, "I look upon surrealism with abhorrence [...]. I am distressed to see its pernicious effects in your work" (Thomas 1985: 204), very nearly resulted in a rejection of *18 Poems*. Little wonder then that Thomas wrote back dismissing surrealism in his work with such gusto. In correspondence with Edith Sitwell over Church's near rejection of his first volume he even writes of *18 Poems* as "surrealist imitations" (1985: 210). Further, the notion that the self-styled "Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive", an avid reader of and contributor to *Transition*, *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* and *New Verse*, had read no foreign or contemporary poetry is, according to Constantine Fitzgibbon, "a downright lie; he had read it all" (1965: 196). Even a cursory glance at Thomas's *Collected Letters*, for example, falls upon the names of Stein, Jolas, Rimbaud and Cummings, and one of his best friends was a translator of Rimbaud: Norman Cameron.

If critics have taken too literally Thomas's dismissal of his work as surrealist, they have also accepted too readily his narrow definition of surrealist practice, citing Thomas's later discussion of surrealism, in his "Poetic Manifesto" of 1951, as often as his earlier dismissal:

> I do not mind from where the images of a poem are dragged up: drag them up, if you like, from the nethermost sea of the hidden self; but before they reach paper, they must go through all the rational processes of the intellect. The Surrealists, on the other hand, put their words down together on paper exactly as they emerge from chaos; they do not shape these words or put them in order; to them, chaos is the shape and order. This seems to me exceedingly presumptuous; the surrealists imagine that whatever they dredge from their subconscious selves and put down in paint or in words must, essentially, be of some interest or value. I deny this. One of the arts of the poet is to make comprehensible and articulate what might emerge from the subconscious sources; one of the great main uses of the intellect is to select, from the amorphous mass of subconscious images, those that will best further his imaginative purpose, which is to write the best poem he can. (1971: 150)

It is precisely this construction of a surrealist other to bolster his craftsman-like self which is accepted and echoed all too regularly by Thomas's critics.[3] Walford Davies concedes that "much in the early poetry smacks of surrealism [...]. Like the surrealists, Thomas thought of himself as drawing on subconscious material", but goes on to state that, "whereas the surrealists allowed no room for the selection, control, and development of images, Thomas again seems busy with those very activities, and with everything carefully subjected to the aesthetic demands of poetic form" (1986: 109-110). But, as was suggested earlier, the space between this account of surrealism ("no room for selection, control and development") and Thomas's own poetic practice ("make comprehensible and articulate what might emerge from subconscious sources") is occupied only by a very limited theory of surrealism. Too heavily weighed down by Breton's initial definition of surrealism as "pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express [...] the real process of thought, without any control exercised by reason" (1962: 40), Thomas's critics fall, more often than not, into the trap that Theodor Adorno identifies in "Looking Back on Surrealism": explaining away the peculiar power of surrealism by explicating the irrational by the rational, the strange by the familiar.

Take, for example, "When, like a running grave":

> When, like a running grave, time tracks you down,
> Your calm and cuddled is a scythe of hairs,
> Love in her gear is slowly through the house,
> Up naked stairs, a turtle in a hearse,
> Hauled to the dome. (lines 1-5)

Davies argues that "a running grave", "a scythe of hairs" and "a turtle in a hearse" cannot be read as surrealist because they are "consciously developed" and can be forced into meaning: "a running grave" is "meant" to imply infection and disease, and the "scythe of hairs" is that which scythes hairs (1986: 110). Surely the point, however, is that the poem is not structured by an external logic, but has a logic of its own (a perfectly surreal dream-logic so to speak) by which another, equally valid, reading might well have scythe made from hairs, a grave running around and a turtle driving a hearse up the stairs. The point is that images cannot be read in terms of what is "meant", but in terms of their effect, as they merge and melt, jostle and collide throughout. It is better, then, to conceptualize surrealism not by going back to psychology, but by looking at the surrealist artistic techniques of *montage* and *collage*. Read in this way, the focus would be on the ways in which

surrealism produces a "photographic negative" of modernity by foregrounding childlike perceptions ("as they must have been then" [Adorno 1991: 90]), rather than on attempting to find the originary moment of a surrealist image. That is not to say that surrealism has little to do with psychoanalysis *per se*: far from it. Adorno is insistent on its indebtedness to psychological dream-theory. It is merely to point out that surrealism is a disturbing and shocking articulation of the kind of images repressed in and by the conventionally structured logic of adulthood.[4]

In 1934 Thomas defined his own poetic practice in Freudian terms, which echo Breton's definition of surrealism. He declared that "whatever is hidden should be made naked", and that his poetry would be "the record of my individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light, and what of the individual struggle is still to come benefits by the sight and knowledge of the faults and fewer merits in that concrete struggle" (1971: 150). Partly in the light of such remarks, Thomas has a history of being read psychologically. Too often, though, such readings of Thomas are founded on the spurious assumption that his work can be taken as a displaced or condensed registration form for his clinical evaluation as a psychological case study (see, for example, Holbrook 1962, 1972). Recently, however, the emphasis of psychoanalytic criticism has shifted from inept attempts at psychobiography to self-aware examinations of the ways in which psychological, linguistic and literary structures are constituted. According to Elizabeth Wright, for example, the Freudian notion of the uncanny is one method by which surrealism might be usefully conceptualised. To Wright, the surrealist image is always uncanny (*unheimlich*), "in a constant process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction" by which it confronts representational realism with its own death by reminding it of its inability to cope with the fact that its rationality remains irrational. Expanding the Freudian definition, she suggests that "*heimlich* means not only homely and familiar, but also hidden and secret. The *un* of the *unheimlich* marks the return of the repressed material: the *unheimlich* object threatens us in some way by no longer fitting the context to which we have been accustomed" (1990: 265).

It is this uncanny and surreal struggle between the hidden and the naked that is articulated in the 1936 sonnet sequence, "Altarwise by owl-light", the closing poem of Thomas's second volume *Twenty-five Poems*. (Even its title effects the uncanny as the *heimlich* "altarlight" and "owl wise" become the *unheimlich* "Altarwise" and "owl-light"). The poem is about the problematic entry of a child into the authorized languages of adulthood,

charting the journey of a child who finds the death of a castrated Christ an enabling one as he is then forced to be its own creator of the Word. By literally forcing the child into meaning, "Altarwise by owl-light" explores the relationship between language and reality. One of the ways that it does so is by presenting a surreal landscape, a landscape which is not only structured by uncanny effects, but one on which is inscribed the very process of its own structuration. In other words, the poem both entertains a number of surreal images which work by means of the uncanny (the "wrinkled undertaker's van" of sonnet III, line 8, for instance, or the "bagpipe-breasted ladies" of sonnet VI, line 13) and is about the ways in which, to quote Wright, these images are constantly constructed, reconstructed and deconstructed.[5] This process of image formulation is one of the subjects of sonnet IV:

> Button your bodice on a hump of splinters,
> My camel's eye will needle through the shroud.
> Love's a reflection of the mushroom features,
> Stills snapped by night in the bread-sided field,
> Once close-up smiling in the wall of pictures,
> Ark-lamped thrown back upon the cutting flood. (lines 9-14)

Here can be found a series of transformative images: the "hump" of line 9 into and with the "camel" of line 10, the "camel" then to the "needle" as in the biblical phrase, the opening "Ark" of line 10 to its concluding "flood". What is interesting is that these surreal transformations are not ahistorical, but take place within the particular context of the early cinema —the "stills snapped", the "close-up", the "wall of pictures" and the "cutting flood"— which then provides the possibility of the photographic collage of surreal characters which follows in sonnet V:

> And from the windy West came two-gunned Gabriel,
> From Jesus's sleeve trumped up the king of spots,
> The sheath-decked jacks, queen with a shuffled heart;
> Said the fake gentleman in a suit of spades,
> Black-tongued and tipsy from salvation's bottle,
> Rose my Byzantine Adam in the night;
> For loss of blood I fell on Ishmael's plain,
> Under the milky mushrooms slew my hunger,
> A climbing sea from Asia had me down
> And Jonah's Moby snatched me by the hair;
> Cross-stroked salt Adam to the frozen angel
> Pin-legged on pole-hills with a black medusa
> By waste seas where the white bear quoted Virgil
> And sirens singing from our lady's sea-straw. (lines 1-14)

Wright notes that the "uncanny effect is brought about because we are confronted with a subjectivity now alien to us" (1990: 268), and here, as throughout the sonnet sequence, are childlike perceptions of the type described earlier. The poem can, certainly, be read to furnish a visual confirmation of surrealist-style images: the pin-legged frozen angel on pole-hills could fit into any of Salvador Dali's hallucinatory realist landscapes, as could the classically inclined bear into a painting of Rene Magritte's, while a gun-slinging Gabriel and what might be read as a card-sharping Jesus are suitably iconoclastic for a surrealist collage. More importantly, however, is that parts of the sonnet are historically representative of the 1920s and 1930s, when two of the most powerful legitimating discourses were religion and cinema. What is at work here is a dialectic between the mythology of the Wild West, a modern extension of the romantic notion of the frontier of the imagination, and the Authorized Bible. Caught somewhere in the middle of all of this is Captain Ahab, a man in pursuit, significantly, of a false purity, driven by the perverse religiosity of the puritan principle. Sonnet V is typical of "Altarwise by owl-light" in that a discursive sense is to be found in the fragments rather than the whole as meaning is localised. It is for this reason that its child-like images of the surreal are not merely regressive, but also subversive as the sequence reminds the reader of the artificiality of normal representation.[6] In its refusal to be absorbed into the conventional patterns of meaning construction the uncanny discloses the constructedness of the normative, whose repressed side it returns and foregrounds. Understood in this way, the surreal is that which both reveals and breaks the rules of the game. The disparate parts of its framed assemblages of disassociation both reflect and also, through their assumption of autonomy and self-sufficiency, enact a schizophrenic world. This is of political significance, as the surreal is only able to shock and break the hold of the consensual reality of the existing map of aesthetics because it has the disruptive quality of an event which is not immediately translatable into meaning.

To fully grasp the relationship between Dylan Thomas and surrealism it is essential to grasp the movement's political implications. Surrealism was keen to establish its radical credentials. Breton yoked surrealism to Trotsky's Fourth International and Walter Benjamin famously declared that its aim was "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution" (1979: 236). To talk of Thomas politically is not simply to refer to a political poetry of the kind normally associated with the 1930s, of poems like "The hand that signed the

paper" or "And death shall have no dominion", but is, more importantly, to seek an understanding of the political character of the *avant-garde* in general. Thus, Breton's attempt to create a "surreality" (1962: 11), a fusion of dream and reality, to reintegrate art and life and to resist the separation of art and social praxis, can be seen as an example of that which, for Peter Bürger, is the ultimate political manoeuvre of the *avant-garde*: the turning of art against itself as institution (1984: 12,13). The *avant-garde* art work, then, is inevitably self-critical, bound to the very processes that it attempts to criticize. As such, it speaks a perfectly surreal and uncanny language which at one and the same time reveals and breaks the rules by which it is constituted.

Much of the poetry in *The Map of Love* dramatizes this problematic in such self-critical terms, turning language against itself in a violent display of the irrational. One such poem is "How shall my animal". First published in 1938, the poem begins:

> How shall my animal
> Whose wizard shape I trace in the cavernous skull,
> Vessel of abscesses and exultation's shell,
> Endure burial under the spelling wall,
> The invoked, shrouding veil at the cap of the face,
> Who should be furious,
> Drunk as a vineyard snail, flailed like an octopus
> Roaring, crawling, quarrel with the outside weathers. (lines 1-8)

The poem is concerned throughout with the limitations of language, the lyrical subject anguished by the impossibility of reconciling self and word, "spelling wall" and "animal". However, in the very utterance of this despair the poem comes to assume a life of its own. The language of the poem creates a reality which, rather than confining the animal and forcing its death and "burial under the spelling wall", liberates the monster from fixity, freeing it to mutate in a series of surreal transformations from human to lion to horse to turtle and beyond. At one and the same time, then, "How shall my animal" registers a prison-house of language and figures the means by which it can be escaped. It is to this paradoxical autonomy of the surrealist art-work that Thomas appealed in correspondence with Henry Treece about the poem:

> [The poem] is its own question and answer, its own contradiction, its own agreement [...]. The aim of a poem is the mark that the poem itself makes; it's the bullet and the bullseye; the knife, the growth, and the patient. A poem moves only towards its own end, which is the last line. (1985: 297)

Further, "How shall my animal" turns on the figure of the monster, regarded by Elza Adamowicz as "the surrealist figure *par excellence*" (1990: 299). As Adamowicz points out, one of the major impulses of surrealism is the relocation of the marginalized —*objets trouvés*, discarded materials, sweeps of the pen or brush— and the monstrous is no exception: there are Max Ernst's Lop Lop, Dali's "Great Masturbator", Pablo Picasso's and Man Ray's Minotaurs, Thomas's "Atlas-eater with a jaw for news", to name but a zooful (Adamowicz 1990: 286-287). Yet in this surrealist manoeuvre the irrational and uncomfortable monster does not escape from the ghetto only to be reconfined by the closure implicit in its foregrounding in a centre/periphery opposition. The central position which it comes to occupy is also that which it disturbs.

One of the positions that surrealism disturbs is the masculine. Traditionally, surrealism indulges *machismo*, articulating it through the likes of Picasso's Tauromachias or Dali's neurotic male fantasies. It might be argued, though, that the surreal is also that which haunts the *macho*. In the first book of Ernst's *Une Semaine de bonté*, for example, the masculine iconography of warfare is examined through the revolutionary lionheaded hero. "How shall my animal", which even uses the term "lionhead", goes further back to disturb the male (in this reading the animal might be considered as"animus") prior to its construction as the masculine:[7]

> How shall it magnetize,
> Towards the studded male in a bent, midnight blaze
> That melts the lionhead's heel and horseshoe of the heart,
> A brute land in the cool top of the country days
> To trot with a loud mate the haybeds of a mile,
> Love and labour and kill. (lines 12-17)

The poem is concerned to interrogate the false rootedness of aggressive masculinity, of the "studded male" (note the play on "studied"), trotting, loving, labouring and killing in the "brute land". This culminates in the male animal's pregnancy in the following stanza and, in the final stanza, the birth:

> Sigh long, clay cold, lie shorn,
> Cast high, stunned on gilled stone; sly scissors ground in frost
> Clack through the thicket of strength, love hewn in pillars drops

With carved bird, saint and sun, the wrackspiked maiden mouth
Lops, as a bush plumed with flames, the rant of the fierce eye,
Clips short the gesture of breath.
Die in red feathers when the flying heaven's cut,
And roll with the knocked earth:
Lie dry, rest robbed, my beast,
You have kicked from a dark den, leaped up the whinnying light,
And dug your grave in my breast. (lines 33-34)

This stanza, however, reveals the birth to be a stillbirth. Articulated in language, the animal gasps and dies, "cast high, stunned on gilled stone" and the final lines make it clear that this is an internal death: "Lie dry, rest robbed, my beast./ You have kicked from a dark den, leaped up the whinnying light,/ And dug your grave in my breast". Thus the poem exposes the spuriousness of the patriarchal inscription of the male as the centre of production. That it is at the end of the 1930s that the male body is so (un)written is crucial.

By the beginning of 1938, the militaristic dictatorships of the Anti-Comintern Pact had effectively undermined any vestige of League of Nations' authority. Japan had occupied Manchuria, Italy had conquered Abyssinia, Germany had reoccupied the Rhineland and was poised to seize Austria, and Franco's victories in the Spanish Civil War stood unchallenged by the western democracies. Confronting the terrifying prospect of a second world war, Thomas turned away from the modernist tradition. The acknowledgement of death in "How Shall my animal" might be interpreted as a recognition of what was lost in the shift towards referentiality in *The Map of Love*, making this poem part of Thomas's farewell to surrealism. In this he was not alone: T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók, for example, were all part of a general shift away from radical high modernism at the end of the 1930s. Whereas their modernist credentials are well established, however, Thomas's are not. Criticism has tended to concentrate on his later work, to the exclusion of the "modernist" and "surrealist" impulses of the early writings discussed here. To focus on this hitherto marginalized aspect of his work, in the wider context of European surrealism, is to disclose how much Thomas's poetry disturbs the too long prevailing notion of modernism as a monolithic discourse.

NOTES

[1] For a detailed account of the exhibition see Ray (1971: 134-166) and Thomas (1985: 230).

[2] See also Schvey (1975: 96-97): "As a highly conscious artist consumed by his craft, it would be wrong to classify Dylan Thomas with the surrealist movement which advocated the breakdown of the divisions between dream and reality, between art and life. For the true surrealist, whose philosophy was bent upon the revolutionary destruction of reality, art does not exist as an artefact separate from life: life itself is a surreal work of art to be performed. For Dylan Thomas, despite all we know about his lowering drunken personality, it was the other way around —his art was his life".

[3] See, for example, Thomas's response to Stephen Spender's claim that his poetry was "turned on like a tap": "My poems are formed; they are not turned on like a tap at all, they are "watertight compartments"" (Thomas 1985: 297).

[4] See also Elizabeth Wright's "The Uncanny and Surrealism". In *Modernism and the European Unconscious* (1990: 268).

[5] See also Thomas's own description of his composite method of construction in Treece (1957:37): "A poem by myself needs a host of images, because its centre is a host of images. I make one image, —though "make" is not the word, I let, perhaps, an image to be "made" emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical forces I possess —let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that came out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time" .

[6] This distinction between the regressive and the subversive is suggested by Wright (1990: 268).

[7] Thomas was familiar with Ernst's work prior to staying with him in America in 1952.

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THE EUROPEAN RADIO BROADCASTS OF T. S. ELIOT

MICHAEL COYLE
COLGATE UNIVERSITY

It is perhaps not surprising that Eliot's long commitment to radio broadcasting has passed without critical comment.[1] Only a few of his broadcasts were recorded in a publicly available form, so that what once was "broadcast" has left little historical trace. However, scripts for many of the talks survive in the BBC Paper archive, and others may well be found among the papers held by the Eliot estate. Furthermore, many of Eliot's scripts were subsequently redacted and published in periodical form.[2] On the basis of this evidence, and the voluminous records of the BBC paper archive, we can reconstruct not only the shape but also much of the substance of Eliot's radio talks.

He began broadcasting in 1929 and, admitting one early hiatus of five years, continued virtually to the time of his death: a period of approximately thirty-five years. His broadcasts fall conveniently into four groups. In the first period, 1929-1931, Eliot delivered nineteen talks, all in multi-part series, and focused on literary topics such as "Tudor Prose" or "Seventeenth-Century Poetry" (both in six parts). In the second period, 1936-1939, Eliot's interest in radio seemed to decline, and he gave only six talks on various literary and community topics. But the outbreak of war gave rise to a new period of activity, and between 1940-1947 Eliot broadcast at least twenty-nine times. Eleven of these broadcasts were directed at European audiences. In this, the most important phase of his broadcasting activity, Eliot tended to speak about culture itself, and especially about the ultimate unity of European culture. By 1948, however, Eliot became involved with the BBC's new "Third Programme", a species of minority programming concerned primarily with matters artistic and intellectual. His interest in and loyalty to the Third Programme redirected his broadcasting activity, and while between

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