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"The Rhymer in the Long Tongued Room:" Dylan Thomas and Radio

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August 1995

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate
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of the requirements of the degree of Master
of Arts in English.

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Abstract

Dylan Thomas's relationship with radio is marked by an increasingly complex aesthetic response. The broadcasts which he wrote for the B.B.C. demonstrate a progressive refinement of technique and an increasingly original approach to the medium. Under Milk Wood, in many regards, represents the culmination of this broadcasting work; it is a remarkable response to the evocative potentials of radio. But the piece, apart from confirming Thomas's achievement in radio, also provides a unique vehicle for exploring critical treatment of a non-textual form like radio. The critical history of Under Milk Wood emphasises the need for a "form-sensitive" criticism appreciative of the artistic potentials and restrictions of radio. Finally, it is these potentials and restrictions, masterfully explored by Thomas, which can also be seen as exerting a powerful influence on Thomas's own artistic sensibility. The social essence of radio altered Thomas's own artistry.

Abrégé

Le lien qu'avait Dylan Thomas avec la radio se caractérise par une réponse esthétique de plus en plus complexe. Dans les pièces qu'il a écrites pour la "BBC" on peut déceler un raffinement progressif de technique et une façon de plus en plus originale d'exploiter ce média. Au Bois Lacté représente à maints égards l'apogée de ses ouvrages pour la radiodiffusion; c'est une réalisation remarquable du potentiel évocateur de ce moyen de communication. Mais la pièce outre le fait de confirmer les exploits de Thomas dans ce domaine, permet également et de façon particulière une critique exploratrice d'une forme de communication orale libre c'est à dire sans texte. L'historique de la critique de Au Bois Lacté fait valoir le besoin d'une critique sensible à la forme qui sait apprécier le potentiel artistique de même que les contraintes de la radiodiffusion. Finalement ce sont ce potentiel et ces contraintes, exploité si magistralement par Thomas, qui semblent exercer à leur tour une influence puissante sur la sensibilité artistique de Thomas lui-même. L'essence sociale de la radio a modifié le génie artistique même du maître, Thomas.

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Introduction

I am writing this near a two-foot statue of Echo,
who cocks her marble ear at me, listening to me
mouth the words aloud. (Ferris 18)

This appears in one of Thomas's earliest surviving letters, written to a young fellow writer, Trevor Hughes, in the summer of 1933. It is strangely prophetic: radio, the new and mechanical Echo of the twentieth century, would prove to be a powerful receptor for Thomas's written mouthings.

Indeed, this thesis is motivated by an interest in Thomas's life-long relationship with the cocked ear and echoing voice of radio. It was a relationship rooted in the aural beauty of Thomas's voice, in the magnificence of a dynamic and transient expressiveness. It was a relationship through which Thomas achieved remarkable artistic results in a relatively new medium. It was, fundamentally, a relationship that altered both radio and artist.

Apart from the centrality of this relationship, this study is also defined by a curiosity about the implicit assumptions and explicit demands of an artist's chosen medium. Radio, a paradoxical combination of personal intimacy and social breadth, has a fascinating artistic potential; it will be argued that, in Thomas's own work, this potential culminated in Under Milk Wood.

There is a last and central element informing this thesis. This century has been marked by a proliferation in media

available to the artist. The particular use of a medium by an artist is a viable study; more urgent, though, is consideration of the effect of the medium on the artist. Inherent qualities distinguish one medium from another: it is the effect of these qualities on the artist that will provide a central undercurrent of inquiry in this thesis.

The work of "the rhymer in the long tongued room" (Collected Poems 155) is examined in four chapters loosely organised by a chronological/developmental paradigm. The first begins with an examination of the aural qualities of Thomas's poetry; it is suggested that sound can provide its own level of meaning. The chapter then considers Thomas's own opinions of radio. He never articulated a forceful aesthetic position in relation to the medium; however, by carefully examining his letters and broadcasts, it is possible to trace an increased sensitivity to radio.

The second chapter advances a mode of criticism closely attentive to form; this provides a context in which to examine the broadcasts that Thomas wrote prior to Under Milk Wood. Narratorial position, linguistic style, an argument for the "sense of sound," an initial investigation into visual evocation in radio and a preliminary struggle with "reading" vs. performance: these are central issues addressed under an overarching insistence that the broadcasts, considered chronologically, demonstrate Thomas's increasingly complex

response to radio.

The third chapter focuses explicitly on Under Milk Wood. Dramatic convention and critical reception are related to the poetic drama, and contribute to a definition of the unique qualities of Thomas's piece. The multifarious role of Captain Cat is examined--the narratorial sophistication of his position and his role as "medium" serve to emphasise Thomas's complex treatment of radio. The creative tension between a visual and non-visual mode of evocation extends this complexity. The final part of the chapter identifies the problematic textual bias that is of fundamental importance in an analysis of Under Milk Wood; critical comparisons with Chaucer, Dickens and Joyce serve, among other things, to emphasise the need for a criticism attentive to form. A final investigation into the history of the German Hörspiel serves to qualify this need.

The fourth, and final, chapter of this study concentrates on the impact of radio on Thomas's own aesthetic. A study of his poetry reveals a shift from an early introspective style to a broader social interest. Indeed, that Under Milk Wood can be seen as the culmination of this social interest suggests perhaps that it was Thomas's work in radio--a medium fundamentally communal--that produced this shift. His relationship with radio was, in the final analysis, both outwardly and inwardly influential.

One final introductory point remains to be made. This thesis is the result of an incorporative approach to Thomas's

relationship with radio. It does not isolate a small part of Thomas's radio work and then provide a detailed examination of that part. Its approach is more general, more wide-ranging in scope and intent. Where the former approach would have produced an exhaustive study of a small portion of Thomas's work, I have chosen instead to present several areas of research in Thomas's radio work while continuing to argue for the remarkable accomplishment represented by Dylan Thomas's radio aesthetic. It is hoped that this movement between detail and expansive treatment will provide an effective introduction to Dylan Thomas and his relationship with radio.

Chapter One: Dylan Thomas on Radio

To begin at the beginning. . .

- Dylan Thomas, Under Milk Wood

Dylan Thomas's life-long relationship with radio began in "private" broadcasting when he was a child; Warmley, the house of his friend, Daniel Jones, was the site of the "Warmley Broadcast Corporation," (W.B.C.). The W.B.C. studio entailed three microphones and two wires that led to the radio downstairs. The inauguration of the W.B.C. is related by Daniel Jones, in his book My Friend Dylan Thomas:

On that day, when my father was settled comfortably in his armchair beside the radiogram, Dylan asked permission to tune in some foreign stations. He played with the dials for awhile, and then switched on to the W.B.C. studio, where I was already playing the piano. 'Ah! The Waldstein!' cried father, 'turn up the volume.' Dylan did so, and father listened contentedly. I allowed a minute or so to pass before I introduced the first odd chord. This had an effect on my father like an electric shock. 'A mistake! how unusual!' Then I allowed strange thematic contortions to creep gradually into the music, until not a trace of Beethoven was left in the barrage of sound. Father, red in the face, ran to the door of the room and called

out, 'Ettie! listen to this! the world has gone mad!'
My mother, answering from somewhere in the depths of
the house, called back, 'I can hear it too. It's coming
from upstairs'. (32)

If Daniel Jones' future as composer and performer is implicit in the incident, so too is Dylan Thomas' comedic potential.

The W.B.C. provides an engaging introduction to Dylan Thomas' relationship with radio. But it is important to note that it would be twelve years before Thomas and radio would meet again--"Life and the Modern Poet," broadcast on April 21 1937 at B.B.C. studios in London, was the apotheosis of the earlier W.B.C. days. Nonetheless, the aural dimension of this early W.B.C. "radio" work remained an intrinsic part of Thomas' artistic approach. Indeed, it is perhaps only Thomas' short-story collection A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog, and his attempted novel Adventures in the Skin Trade that can be noted as exceptions to an otherwise prevalent interest in aural *performance*.

This interest in aural performance--a dynamic that combines the human voice and a temporally-insistent movement--is evident in much of Thomas' work. Broadcasting and his writing of film-scripts presupposes the dynamic; his poetry was also informed by an acute and demanding ear. An intriguing poetic projection of this encompassing interest is evident in the poem "Especially When October Wind," as the poet observes an autumn world distorted by the "syllabic blood and . . . words" of his own

"busy heart." The words that rule the poet's work are projected onto the external world:

Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark
On the horizon walking like the trees
The wordy shapes of women, and the rows
Of the star-gestured children in the park.
Some let me make you of the vowelled beeches,
Some of the oaken voices, from the roots
Of many a thorny shire tell you notes,
Some let me make you of the water's
speeches. (Collected Poems 15)

Poetic creation and Nature's reality are drawn into a synthesis of the aural and semantic word, as the poem's linguistic reality is both tested and affirmed. Aural performance is introduced, both through and during the poem.

In the years between the Warmley broadcast and the first B.B.C. piece, Thomas wrote nearly three-quarters of the poetry that would eventually appear in his Collected Poems. While "Especially When the October Wind" provides a cogent reflection of the aural bias in Thomas' work, a significant portion of the early poetry has a degree of complexity which problematises aural apprehension. A textual mode of reception seems to be a necessity for a poem like "Today, this Insect":

Today, this insect, and the world I breathe,
Now that my symbols have outelbowed space,
Time at the city spectacles, and half

The dear, daft time I take to nudge the sentence,
In trust and tale have I divided sense,
Slapped down the guillotine, the blood-red double
Of head and tail made witness to this

Murder of Eden and green genesis. (Collected Poems 36)

This is sufficient to establish the difficulties inherent in the aural apprehension of the poem. The stanza's confusion of image and myth, and the grammatical challenges posed by an elusive subject/object construct are potential causes for a fragmentation in an aural experience of the poem. In short, the eye must be able to play across the stanzas of this poem; the spatial advantage of the printed poem must be utilised. The ear, even on repeated hearings, is simply not suited to the reception of the piece.

The problem, however, cannot be construed with quite such simplicity. The textual dimension of a poem--and what I mean by that is simply the presentation of the poem on a page--problematizes the whole concept of reception. This is a concern which I will discuss in Chapter Two; it is sufficient here to turn to Dylan Thomas' appraisal of his own verse, written in response to a query by Charles Fisher, friend and colleague at the South Wales Evening Post:

You asked me to tell you about my theory of poetry.

Really I haven't got one. I like things that are
difficult to write and difficult to understand; I like
'redeeming the contraries' with secretive images; I

like contradicting my images, saying two things at once in one word, four in two words and one in six. But what I like isn't a theory, even if I do stabilise into dogma my own personal affections. Poetry . . . should work from words, from the substance of words and the rhythm of substantial words set together, not towards words. Poetry is a medium, not a stigmata on paper.

(Letters 182)

Here, Thomas's explication of the complex images in his poems culminates in a discussion of the very words that achieve those complexities; the poem will consist of the "substance" and "rhythm" of words, achieving a "medium" of expression greater than the visual "stigmata on paper." Performance, then, lingers behind the act of reading; it is the synthesis of "substance" (connotation, denotation, "meaning") and sound that Thomas sees as crucial to his poetic.

It is, however, possible to speculate that "substance" was often over-taken by the rhythm of the poem's aural existence. Writing to his friend Bert Trick in the summer of 1935, Thomas very bluntly exclaimed: "I'm never very hot on meaning; it's the sound of meaning that I like" (Letters 190). The degree of seriousness motivating this statement is amplified by criticisms of this facet of Thomas' work. Robert Graves, in a retrospective review of Dylan Thomas' poetic method, complained that he:

was drunk with melody, and what the words were he cared not. He was eloquent, and what cause he was pleading,

he cared not . . . he kept musical control of the
reader without troubling about the sense. (138)

"Musical control" is an extreme descriptive, as is Graves' criticism of a lack of "sense" in Thomas's poetry. After all, Dylan Thomas was not engaged in the creation of 'text-sound'--Richard Kostelanetz's term for a poetry rooted entirely in the sound of the words used. And yet, by Thomas' own declaration of his preference for sound over meaning, Graves' point may have a degree of validity.

It becomes essential, then, in approaching Dylan Thomas' work, to question the extent to which sound shapes and contributes to the overall "meaning" of one of his poems. Louise Murdy, in an important, though overly-clinical, study of Thomas' poetry concludes that the two aspects of sound and meaning represent crucial points of analysis. Citing critical approaches that tend to favour either the sound or the meaning of a poem too much, Murdy attempts to demonstrate that in "great poetry--among which Thomas' best deserves place--sound is a medium of sense"(15). In Chapter Two, I will question the severity of this subjugation of sound to sense--must the former serve the latter, and to what effect?--but, for now I merely want to cite her work as an important critical step towards evaluation of the role of sound and meaning in Thomas's work.

Thomas himself was not so sure of the end product. In an albeit light-hearted broadcast entitled "The Poet and his Critic," he claimed that he had to agree with critics' accounts

of his "swaggering and belligerent faults":

I could, by quotation and with delight, morass [the critic] under sentimental turgidities, wet wads of near-cliché, tortuous solipsism, crippled rhythm, forced rhyme, obscurity, eccentricity, muddledom and woolage. (Broadcasts 173)

Thomas' genius lay in the fact that in criticising himself, he only confirmed his marvellous command of aural reception. The criticism, read aloud, sounds very fine!

Of course, Thomas was aware of the charges being levelled at his poetry. But while he may have allowed for criticisms of his own application of an aurally-refined poetic, he was adamant about the value of the poem performed. Poetry, he said in a B.B.C. broadcast, "should always be better when read aloud than when read silent with the eyes. Always" (Broadcasts 57). Thomas' fame as a performer of poetry bears testimony to the force of his conviction; it is fair to say that a substantial part of Thomas' fame was secured by the power of these performances. Here, in relation to aural performance, conviction clearly joined with practice.

* * *

Thomas' convictions about the importance of the aural dimension of poetry are clear. As a consequence, both the form of the poem and the form of the poem's expression are of great importance in any proper criticism of his work. At first glance, his opinion of his work in radio would seem to lack the same

aesthetic determination. Indeed, the sceptical critic could, with little effort, establish the paucity of artistic intent in Thomas' work in broadcasting.

As a reading of The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas reveals, Thomas was constantly threatened by financial ruin. Radio was a constant and reliable source of money for Thomas throughout his later years. Indeed, a pragmatic response to Thomas's work in radio could insist that his insatiable need for money was the prime motive for his work, and that the artistic impetus behind the relatively profitable broadcasts and Under Milk Wood was, consequently, relatively small.

Initial investigations certainly support this view. Correspondence related to the different broadcasts is strictly limited to discussions of money--prospective projects, rates to be paid, money due. At no point, before the writing of Under Milk Wood, is there critical commentary on these broadcasts. And, in a passage from a letter to his American friend, Oscar Williams, dated 27 February 1953, Thomas poignantly emphasises the pragmatic value of his radio work:

Caitlin's no longer pregnant; it cost five broadcasts and a loan, and I wish I could have announced, on the air, the reason for these broadcasts. (Letters 873)

The words themselves deny artistic "reasons" for his radio work.

If Thomas' work seems ruled by pragmatics, then the radio writing of Samuel Beckett can be instanced as a study in contrast. Beckett wrote five plays for radio; in discussing these

works he maintained a defined aesthetic position on the inherent value and insistent shape of each piece's radio form. In all five plays, he was adamant about the necessity of the medium. Writing on his play All That Fall, for instance, Beckett commented:

[It] is specifically a radio play, or rather a radio text, for voices, not bodies. I have already refused to have it "staged" and I cannot think of it in such terms. A perfectly straight reading before an audience seems to me just barely legitimate, though even on this score, I have my doubts. (Frost 366)

The aesthetic value placed on the form is important, and indicates the degree to which Beckett responded to the demands of the medium.

So to turn now and insist that the broadcasting efforts of Dylan Thomas were motivated by a puristic desire to exploit the aesthetic shape of radio would be ridiculous. Clearly Thomas' work in radio was informed by an often desperate financial need. And yet, through a careful analysis of other letters and comments from Thomas, it is possible to resuscitate the aesthetic worth of this radio work.

Let me begin with Thomas' opinion of the organisation for which he did all of this radio writing. In a programme entitled "Swansea and the Arts," Thomas spoke of the contrast between the "Grove of Swansea" and the B.B.C. studio in Swansea:

We speak from the Grove of Swansea. But if anyone in the deep damp caverns of the rustic dead, in some Welsh

tenebrous regional, should have seen this programme announced in the Radio Tombs, turned on his badger set, tuned in on a long-forgotten gravelength . . . let me hasten to tell him that he, alas, would hardly recognise the Grove at all. Where once, on the swain-littered grass, to the music of the jocund rebeck and the cries of nymphs on the run, shepherds piped, elves pucked, goats panned, dryads hama'd, milkmaids were merry, satyrs busy, centaurs forwards, now stands the studio of the B.B.C. Here notices, cold as ice-cream, say, Silence, Please, where once you could not hear a Phyllida drop for the noise of the Corydons. And here where the microphones disapprove, like sneering aunts, amourour dianas of the golden uplands stopped at the old pagan whistle. Everything in the Grove has changed. Or nearly everything. I know where the satyrs go by night, but that would be advertising. (Broadcasts 218)

Attributes of the passage--the Whitmanesque catalogue, the rich lyrical balance of tone and image, the heightened impact of rhythm and stress, the hint of the later pastoral aspect of Under Milk Wood--are important qualities of Thomas' radio technique, qualities to which I will return in later chapters. For now, it is sufficient to note that the playful nostalgia for a lilting, soundful Swansea is set against the technical severity of the studio; piping is undermined by silence, while "disapproving" microphones disrupt the natural promiscuity of pastoral world.

But if Thomas had reservations about the B.B.C., he certainly recognised the artistic potentials of working for the organisation. When Louis MacNeice left the B.B.C. to become British Council representative in Athens, there was the possibility that Thomas would receive MacNeice's position as script-writer. Thomas himself seemed quite assured of his chances:

When I return in the spring, I think I shall be offered quite a good job on the B.B.C. . . . This would entail only a few broadcast scripts for me to write, which I will enjoy, and those to be as imaginative & experimental as I like. So, perhaps, in the coming year my most horrible pressing problems will be solved.

(Letters 734)

Of course, the "horrible pressing problems" were not aesthetic in nature; monetary difficulties still shadowed the poet. But he valued the B.B.C. for precisely the same reason that many other writers did: as the critic Ian Rodger observes, the B.B.C. provided "a community which from 1945 became, to use Shakespeare's dedication, the 'onlie begetter' of several literary and dramatic movements and ideas" (Rodger 4-5). The relatively low cost, and the willingness of the Features department, headed at the time by Laurence Gilliam, to attempt new approaches, served to cultivate this creative community. Thomas was certainly aware of the virtues of membership in the community.

As has been mentioned, Thomas' judgements about his early broadcasts are scarce. However, he was much more explicit when it came to his work on the project that eventually culminated in Under Milk Wood. The piece evolved over a period of fourteen years; Douglas Cleverdon's The Growth of Under Milk Wood provides an extensive account of its complicated growth. The notion of a play of characters was first mentioned by Thomas in December 1939, to the novelist and radio dramatist, Richard Hughes. After a benefit performance in Laugharne of the one-act farce, The Devil Among the Skins, Thomas speculated that what Laugharne really needed was a play about well-known Laugharne characters (Cleverdon 1). Initially, he was unsure of his ability to write such a play; a month earlier, Rowland Hughes, Welsh Regional producer, had asked Thomas to attempt a "long dramatic programme in verse" (Cleverdon 2). Thomas was hesitant:

I don't think that I'd be able to do one of those long dramatic programmes in verse; I take such a long time writing anything, & the result, dramatically, is too often like a man shouting under the sea. (Letters 337)

Robert Graves' criticisms, mentioned earlier, lurk behind Thomas' sense of the overwhelming quality of sound in his work. Thomas was acutely aware of the plot and character demands of the dramatic mode; indeed, he had a prophetic sense of the difficulties that he would face in the writing of Under Milk Wood. It was, after all, the qualities of conventional drama that would prove too demanding for his initial plan.

In May 1949, Thomas sat down to work on the first script. The piece was initially to involve a clear plot-line, focusing on a small town in Wales; Thomas described the original plan in an interview for the Saturday Review of Literature:

I'd have a new nationalist Government taking over Wales. One of the new Government's inspectors comes to Llareggub and says to the mayor, "We're taking charge of affairs here now, and we've decided to declare this disgraceful town an open-air lunatic asylum." The townspeople scream with rage and each person defends himself, and his seemingly insane actions. In the end they accept [the Government's restrictions], preferring to remain "mad," because their insanity appears to them healthier than the sanity of the Government. (25)

But the demands of the plot proved to be the downfall of the initial effort. Although he wrote nearly half of the script in the fall of 1949, the project foundered, to be resurrected only in the altered form of Under Milk Wood.

The failure is important; Thomas' comments on his inability to continue indicate a shift in his own approach to radio work. In a letter to Margaret Caetani, written in 1951, Thomas explains the failure of the piece. It was, he suggests, a failure of the "subject;" he complains that the language of the piece entirely subsumed the plot of the play (Letters 813). "The comedy," wrote Thomas, "was lost in the complicated violence of the words: I found I was labouring at each line as though I were making some

savage, and devious, metaphysical lyric." The complex imagery of his early lyrics had returned to haunt this new work; and, the "violence" of the words, (aurally, a "shouting under the sea") had displaced his attempts at the dramatic convention of plot.

The idea for Under Milk Wood resulted, an idea much more finely attuned to the possibilities and restrictions inherent in radio. His new approach was rooted in aural performance, although dramatic conventions were rejected. Indeed, in the letter to Caetani, Thomas demonstrates a profound awareness of the potentials of the medium. I want to outline examples of this awareness, both as an important indication of his maturing sense of the medium, and in anticipation of issues to be discussed later.

While working on the piece, Thomas noted that translating the piece from one mode of presentation to another involved significant difficulties. In a letter to his agent, David Higham, Thomas describes his efforts in revising the piece for publication:

I enclose a copy [of Under Milk Wood] unrevised. This is the version which was performed--or, rather, spoken in performance--in New York. I am now adding quite a lot to this, and changing quite a bit which is more effective on the stage, I think, than it would be on the printed page. (Letters 904)

The "stage" version was simply the radio text read on a stage before a live audience; the changes Thomas mentions are not in

relation to a "theatrical" mode of presentation (attempted, for instance, by Douglas Cleverdon, in 1956 and 1957, and by a number of directors since). Aware of the more precise demands of a textual presentation, he felt it necessary to alter the piece. This is another result of textual influence; it further extends the influence noted in relation to the "textual" poem. I will have much more to say about this issue. For now, it remains significant that Thomas never discussed the role of the text in relation to his creation/performance of his poems. Here, at least, Thomas demonstrates an increasing awareness of the demands of aural expression.

The letter to Caetani also reveals Thomas's development of a subtle evocative technique. He wants the listener to know the town "at many levels," to gain a knowledge that will extend beyond a mere understanding of place. "Sight and speech, description & dialogue, evocation and parody" are to weave a profound sense of Llaireggub and its inhabitants. It is, according to Thomas, the "raw" medium of radio that will make this possible; the immediacy of the aural presentation, combined with an insistent poetic language, will appeal to a comprehension grander than mere description.

In concluding his discussion of the manner in which the listener will come to know the town, Thomas writes:

I hope to make you utterly familiar with the places and the people; the pieces of the town will fit together; the reason for all these behaviours (so far but hinted

at) will be made apparent; & there the town will be laid alive before you. And only you will know it.

(Letters 813)

The final statement is intriguing, and hints at another aspect of Thomas' increasingly refined sense of radio. Radio is, as Rudolph Arnheim pointed out over sixty years ago, an intimate medium; radio, he said, "talks to everyone individually, not everyone together" (Radio 72). Under Milk Wood, I will argue at a later point, represents an important experiment in the dynamic between listener and speaker. For the listener is drawn into the evocation of the town in an unusual fashion--the narrator presents one level of the town, the villagers' dreams another, and the poetic language of the piece yet another. Radio, as Thomas had recognised when he came to write Under Milk Wood, could offer the potential for a unique relationship between the artist and the "reader."

But it is Thomas' infamous description of Under Milk Wood as:

a piece, a play, an impression for voices, an entertainment out of the darkness, of the town I live in, [written] simply and warmly and comically with lots of movement, and varieties of moods (Letters 813)

that contains impressive indications of Thomas' perceptive approach to radio. Implicit is an awareness of the potentials of vocal orchestration, of the advantages of sensory restriction, of the tension between visual and non-visual evocation, and of the

comedic potential of this mode of presentation. I do not want to suggest that this makes Thomas an insistent radio aesthetician. His analysis of radio was always more implicit in what he wrote than in what he said, and certainly never approached the explicit levels of analysis demonstrated by MacNeice, Tyrone Guthrie, or Beckett. But, at the same time, the financial value of broadcasting did not displace its artistic merit; indeed, Thomas's work in the medium demonstrates its exciting artistic potential. An examination of Thomas's early broadcasts in the next chapter, and of Under Milk Wood in the third, will further clarify this potential.

Chapter Two: The Early Broadcasts

Life is only waves, wireless waves and electric vibrations.

- Dylan Thomas

Dylan Thomas was perhaps the most widely known poet of his day. The quality of his poetry was, to a significant degree, the source of this reputation. However, radio, with its ability to reach enormous audiences, probably had a greater impact on his popularity. His readings, of both his own verse and that of others, were widely broadcast, as were the radio plays in which he acted. His scripts, too, often read by himself, were very successful. Aneurin Davies, in his Preface to Quite Early One Morning, a collection of Thomas' scripts, observes:

Through the microphone, as writer or reader, Thomas made his art and personality widely known, and drew into the circle of his readers many whose appreciation of verse needed the persuasion of the poet's own interpretation; in this way the number of readers and admirers grew, until, as the sales of the Collected Poems show, the popularity of Thomas' work was unequalled by any other modern poetry in English.

(vii)

But, if radio had an impact on those who listened, it had an equally important impact on Thomas himself. Through a detailed analysis of Thomas' broadcasts, it is possible to observe both

marked and subtle alterations in his approach. Indeed, such an analysis reveals shifts in technique and artistry that prefigure many of the outstanding qualities of Under Milk Wood.

Many critical evaluations of the broadcasts have concluded that the work is trivial. Peter Lewis, in his important study entitled "The Radio Road to Llareggub", characterises these "high-minded" critics as "belonging to the school of close verbal scrutiny;" they criticise such radio prose for being "trivialisingly lightweight, superficially clever, and meretriciously attractive" ("Road" 80).

But Lewis is a doubly important introduction at this point; not only does he accurately characterise the critical responses of the "high-minded critics," but he also provides an important critical approach for challenging their assessments.

In approaching all Thomas' creative writing for radio, including these talks, it is vital to remember that his radio prose was written for the ear of a listener, not the eye of a reader, and is therefore not 'literary' prose, however 'literary' its techniques may be. It was primarily designed for immediate aural impact, and any sensitive criticism must bear this in mind. ("Road" 80)

Lewis' approach is what I would like to term form-sensitive; it pays close attention to the very medium through which an art-form is transmitted--in this case, of course, radio. It marks an important departure from the literary assumptions of Thomas's

"high-minded" critics.

When Lewis wrote his essay, "The Radio Road to Llaireggub", in 1981, form-sensitive criticism was not a particularly new development. Rudolph Arnheim, in the first important study of radio and its artistic implications (Radio, published 1936), outlined the necessity for such an approach. His method was determined by his interest in the psychology of perception; applying a procedure he had already made use of in an influential study of film (Film, published 1930), Arnheim sought to determine "the expressive potentials" of radio. These potentials could be described, he stated, by ascertaining "the conditions of the material, that is to say, the special characteristics of the sensations [of] which the art in question makes use" (18).

Arnheim's approach provides an alternative to the literary critical presumptions which have dominated much of the discourse surrounding radio (see pp. 72-82). As well, the attention to form prioritises the role of sound, even to the extent of over-riding meaning; thus, Arnheim observes that "the sound of the word . . . should be of more importance than the meaning" (29). Thomas' aesthetic does not seem far away. Indeed, at a later point, both the letter and the spirit of Arnheim's approach will be related closely to Thomas' work.

In terms of serious critical appraisals of radio, Arnheim's work was followed, twenty years later, by the work of Donald McWhinnie. His book, The Art of Radio, published 1959, is a penetrating and far-reaching study of radio's qualities. He, like

Arnheim, noted that the form of radio had "no equivalent or substitute"(5). But, with the "Golden Age" of post-war radio behind him, McWhinnie noted that the form had still to reach its ultimate capabilities; in the Preface, he writes that his book "is written in the belief that Sound Radio must perfect its own imaginative and creative forms"(5). It is necessary to contend that Under Milk Wood, performed some six years before McWhinnie's call, had accomplished an immeasurable step in that very direction.

* * *

Dylan Thomas' first broadcast occurred on April 21 1937; the piece, entitled "Life and the Modern Poet," involved Thomas reading several of his own poems. Between this programme and his death in 1953, Thomas was involved in over 145 broadcasts. The majority of these appearances, according to a comprehensive listing in Constantine Fitzgibbon's biography, were of Thomas reading poetry, either his own or that of others. A number of appearances were also in various dramatic roles. But the intriguing portion of these broadcasts are those which he wrote specifically for the medium.

Unfortunately, a complete study of Thomas' creative efforts for radio is impossible: his first three scripts (the last of which was rejected for broadcast) have disappeared, and no audio recordings remain. What does remain is Thomas' description of the third script, an historical account unwieldily entitled March of the Czech Legion Across Russia in the Last War. In a letter of

January 8 1941 to John Davenport, Thomas writes:

The script uses five announcers . . . 'War. The shadow of the eagle is cast on the grazing lands, the meadows of Belgium are green no longer, and the pastures are barbed with bayonets. War. War' Five announcers and a chorus of patriots crying 'Siberia', 'Freedom of Man', 'Strengthen us for the approaching hour.' (Letters 472)

To judge the script from such a tiny portion would be misguided; what can be inferred is Thomas's creative attention to the technique of radio, specifically the radio narrator.

Indeed, a brief analysis of early critical approaches to the radio narrator emphasises Thomas's own refreshing approach to its usage. The narrator is, fundamentally, in a position of mediation, in recognition of the significant gap between the listener and that which is being dramatised. Critics have identified the use of the narrator as a failure of the dramatic technique of the author. Julian MacLaren Ross, a radio dramatist of the 1940s, identified weak narration as indicative of the poor quality of radio drama:

I have listened to many plays on the air and it seems to me that, while some of them achieve a very high standard, the full possibilities of the medium have not yet been exploited. For example, it should not be necessary for the announcer to outline the scene where the play is being enacted, or for stage direction to be

read aloud; everything should be conveyed to the listener by means of sound and dialogue. (qtd. in Rodger 27)

Ross's criticism is apt: he identifies the over-dependence of early broadcasts on the narrator's omniscient or extra-dramatic stance. To use the narrator for scene shifts or for relating what was "happening" represented a limited usage of the device.

Ian Rodger, in his book Radio Drama, suggests that the overuse of the narrator was a response to an audience relatively inexperienced in theatre-going; narration, he argued, served "a necessary social purpose" (27).

the form [of drama] which immediately seemed to offer the best chance of being easily understood and received was that of the narrative play or dramatised story.

This form allowed the presence of a narrator who could take the listeners by the hand and lead them into and out of the dramatic action. (28)

Rodger's assumptions about the infantile state of the mass audience are distasteful; his sense that the narrator was merely a device to comfort the listener is equally so. For the narratorial position, to return to Arnheim's study, is simultaneously "the most abstract and unnaturalistic and the most natural and naive wireless form" (202). For, as Arnheim points out, the narrator, as a soliloquising, incorporeal announcer "is the most radical abstraction imaginable" (202); conversely, if the broadcast is interpreted as the appeal of sound to the ear, then

the narrator becomes the "most direct and simple form of expression" (202).

Thomas' early approach, evident in the previously quoted material from March of the Czech Legion, was certainly experimental. The use of a multiple narratorial stance diminishes the position of the narrator in relation to the listener; in other words, the distinctness of a single-voice narration is diminished, removing this distance from the listener's sense of the broadcast's structure. At the same time, using five voices for narration allows for carefully orchestrated vocal combinations. But it can also create an overly emphatic tone, as voices move repetitiously about a common point. The tone of Thomas' early use of five narrators suffers from a mawkish aspect; it should, however, be quickly added that this criticism is unfair, given the absence of the rest of the script by which to judge the full impact of the approach.

Thomas's approach to narration can be examined in subsequent radio pieces. Reminiscences of Childhood (15 February 1943), Quite Early One Morning (31 August 1945), and Memories of Christmas departed from the highly stylised five-voice narration of March of the Czech Legion, adopting a narratorial position both intimate and revealing. Reminiscences of Childhood begins:

I was born in a large Welsh industrial town at the beginning of the Great War; an ugly, lovely town (or so it was, and is, to me), crawling, sprawling, slummed, unplanned, jerry-villa'd, and smug-suburbed.

(Broadcasts 3)

The narrator assumes an authorial position; the artifice of the artistic scheme is subdued by the factual reality of the speaker. The intimacy of radio here merges flawlessly with the intimacy of the narratorial stance.

But the artistic potential of this stance is limited. John Ackerman notes, for instance, that Quite Early One Morning is less dramatised; all is seen, acted out, and presented through the poet-narrator. Consequently it lacks the dramatic qualities of variety, movement, comedy, the dull and vivid realisation of character that we find in Under Milk Wood. ("The Artist in Comedy" 171)

The predominance of the poet-narrator is an advantage in terms of the intimacy of address. However, it is, dramatically-speaking, restrictive.

This use of the personal narrator was displaced when Thomas turned to write the purely fictional script entitled The Londoner. Douglas Cleverdon has pointed out that the structure of the piece is closely related to that of Under Milk Wood (9-10). Like the later piece, The Londoner spans a complete day, presenting the events of that day in a close-knit community of people. Dreams, thoughts and conversations all serve to evoke the personal and social lives of the Jackson family, living in Shepherd's Bush, a suburban area of London.

The narrator contributes to this evocation, although, for

the most part, it is an contribution simplistically achieved. The dialogue between "Narrator" and "Questioner" at the piece's beginning, for instance, is a clumsy method for conveying the setting of the piece. The interplay of narrator and questioner with the "Voice of an Expert" and "Voice of an Old Resident" does somewhat energise the opening, but the end-result is cumbersome.

So, too, is the narrator's role in the rest of the piece. The narrator establishes the location of approaching scenes in a pointed and simplistic fashion--"Number forty nine Montrose Street is awake. Lily Jackson is in the kitchen"(78). Even more tedious, however, is Thomas' use of the narrator to overcome radio's displaced visual aspect. Thus, he attempts to create a mental picture of the pub in which Ted Jackson eats his dinner:

Joe's Eating House . . . is one long, narrow room, opening on the street, with cubicles on each side, and in each cubicle is a wooden bench and a plain wooden table. On the wall, pre-war notices which nobody has bothered to take down, announce unobtainable food. The men are drinking large cups of dark brown tea, their parcels and tin boxes, open beside them. (84)

Apart from the evocation of time and place achieved by the mention of the pre-war notices, the description is poorly presented and, essentially, unnecessary. Indeed, as I will argue more extensively later in this chapter, the attempt to construct a visual scene is questionable, ultimately limiting the evocative potential of radio.

The narration in a subsequent programme demonstrates an aspect of experimentation, but little improvement in the overall quality of the structure. Margate--Past and Present was recorded 22 September 1946, and was exchanged with a New York station in return for a feature about Coney Island. The narrator is a character in the piece; Rick is an American ex-serviceman, returning to Margate to marry Molly McFee, a woman with whom he fell in love during the war, but has not seen in a year. It is his naive, foreign perspective which serves to address many of the differences between Margate and his native New York.

The narratorial position attempts to combine straight narrative functions with character: as he disembarks from the train in Margate, we hear:

RICK'S THOUGHTS: How can I see her in this crowd? Don't know what she's wearing. Used to have a yellowish kind of dress. I'd know it anywhere. Why don't they get out of the way. Can't they see this is important? Oh please God she knows me when she sees me . . . please God . . .
 . (Broadcasts 108)

The technique is accomplished, suggesting rather than telling; Rick's discomfort, the station's crowdedness, and the tension between past memory and the present moment are aptly conveyed. But this passage is the exception. Elsewhere, the script is plagued by an overbearing descriptiveness that seriously undermines character. As Rick and Molly wander through a theme-park called Dreamland, for instance, there is simply too much

description. Peter Lewis highlights the difficulty when he observes that Rick "oscillates uneasily between performing dramatic and narrative functions" ("Road" 96). Although the occasional passage is successful, the overall synthesis is disappointing.

Innovative and successful, and emerging out of many of the difficulties mentioned thus far, is the programme Return Journey. Here, the narrator attains a degree of complexity only hinted at in the early broadcasts. The premise of the piece is the narrator's search for the young Dylan Thomas in Swansea; the narrator is situated strangely (and productively) between the extra-textual Thomas--writer of the script--and the intra-textual character of the young and mischievous Dylan. The tension between the past and present Thomas is projected onto the war-torn Swansea through which the narrator wanders.

I went out of the hotel into the snow and walked down High Street, past the white wastes where all the shops had been . . . There [the pub] The Three Lamps had stood . . . and there the Young Thomas whom I was searching for used to stand at the counter on Friday paynights with Freddy Farr, Half Hook . . .

(Broadcasts 181-2)

The destruction of youth is drawn into dramatic collusion with the air-raid destruction of the town. The synthesis is remarkable.

It is the search of the narrator that produces this

synthesis. It is also his central role that allows for an episodic construction that prefigures the construction of Under Milk Wood (Lewis 97). For there, too, as we will observe, the narrators become central points of focus, around and through which the lives and minds of the inhabitants of Llareggub are spread out. Finally, in Return Journey, the isolation of the narrator within the structure of the piece compounds the pathos of the larger tri-partite arrangement. Time and loss slice across the construct of poet, narrator, and boy. This, in short, is an accomplished usage of the narrative position, one that does much to overturn the criticisms levelled by Rodger and Ross, and much to fulfil the potentials of radio narration suggested first by Arnheim.

Closely related to Thomas' use of the narrator is the language with which these narrators speak. In the early broadcasts of personal reminiscence, a link was clearly defined between the speaking Dylan Thomas and his reputation as poet. Still, the language must have settled strangely into the minds of those who listened to the first broadcast of Reminiscences of Childhood. Describing Cwmdonkin Park, near his childhood home in Swansea, Thomas said:

In that small, iron-railed universe of rockery, gravel-path, playbank, bowling-green, bandstand, reservoir, chrysanthemum garden, where an ancient keeper known as Smokey was the tyrannous and whiskered snake in the Grass one must Keep Off, I endured, with pleasure, the

first agonies of unrequited love, the first slow
boiling in the belly of a bad poem, the strutting and
raven-locked self-dramatization of what, at the time,
seemed incurable adolescence. (Broadcasts 5)

As if writing a prose-parody of much of his early and complex poetry, Thomas produces an energetic synthesis of memory and myth, image and desire. The incorporative aspect of a Whitmanesque catalogue combines with a fragmented syntactic construct to produce a marvellous merging of image and sound.

But how exactly should this language be approached? It represents a remarkable combination of both sound and meaning, a movement beyond the normal parameters of prose, even of the "poetic prose" of novels such as Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient. This passage, and many others in Dylan Thomas' radio oeuvre, is of a language characterised by Henry Wells as "more rhythmical, more strongly accented, more highly alliterated, and more powerfully addressed to the ear than most verse" (443). The opening lines of Reminiscences of Childhood, quoted above, demonstrate these qualities.

It is possible to suggest that this complicated aural aspect creates a paradigm which can confuse a visual reading of the text: perhaps to be understood the passage must be heard aloud. Indeed, the concatenation of image and response in the passage above destabilises a straight-forward "reading," and serves to create a degree of ambiguity uncommon in prose, or even in other radio scripts.

This destabilisation emphasises the role of sound itself, and, by extension, the "meaning" of that purely auditory level. Critics have made gestures of inquiry at this level of meaning. Murdy, in her study of sound and meaning in Thomas' poetry, has suggested that "sound is a medium of sense" (15). But this definition can be challenged by simply suggesting that there is a sense of sound, that the sound of sense (ie., a close interlinking between the "meaning" of the words, and the sound which they make in performance) is not the only possible response. Murdy, herself, seems confused about the implications of "sense;" if we accept her initial definition of "sense" as a "precise meaning" (11), then the result of her analysis is a facile subjugation of sound to the over-riding semantic meaning of the poem. But she later describes "sense" as a "total meaning" (11); sound can then become part of a vital extension beyond the linguistic "meaning" of the text.

In some ways, my distinction between sound and sense is problematic. For I am proposing a dissociation between the sound of the word, and that word's denotative/connotative existence in language. However, it is possible to insist on this level of pure sound. The separation is rooted in the notion of text-sound, first identified by Richard Kostelanetz in an essay entitled "Text-Sound in North America". The notion

characterises language whose principal means of coherence is sound, rather than syntax or semantics-- where sounds made by comprehensible words create their

own coherence apart from denotative meanings. (167)

This extends Murdy's sense of "total meaning" to include a very subtle level of signification.

The argument is a powerful one when applied to Thomas' work, in considering both his broadcasting and his poetry. It emphasises the aural aspect of his aesthetic approach, and focuses attention on the potentials of that approach. Thus, when the critic Michael Schmidt writes that

the unique quality of Thomas' successful poems is the immediacy of their highly wrought language--an immediacy where the sense of experience precedes the specific meaning of words (157)

the "sense of experience" must be understood to incorporate the level of aural performance, subdued somewhat in the visual reading of a poem, gloriously emphasised in the hearing of it.

The difficulty with this subtle level of "sound meaning" is that it is extremely difficult to isolate. One performance of a poem will achieve an entirely different "total meaning" because, not only will different semantic and syntactic qualities be emphasised, but so too will there be appreciable (occasionally, dramatic) differences in tone of voice, volume, pitch, emphasis, and stress patterns. It is possible, though, to point to specific passages from Thomas' broadcasts and insist that there is a level of meaning in the sound of the passage separate from (and even contrary to) the level of syntactic meaning.

When, in The Londoner, Ted recalls the thoughts he had while

in a prisoner-of-war camp, a powerful evocation is achieved through sound alone. Sharply differing from the previously quoted passage from Reminiscences of Childhood (see p. 29), there is, in the sound, a lack of rhythm and alliteration that compounds the simplicity of expression. Furthermore, the movement is lacking in aural complexity; the sound serves to extend the profound compassion invested in these words:

This was one of the things I used to remember. The kids are upstairs asleep; Carole's got a doll on her pillow, it's only got one arm and the sawdust runs out of its head; at the bottom of Len's bed there's soldiers and a bear and a kind of duck that makes the wrong noise when you press it: miaow, like a cat. I remembered that all right. And you and me were sitting downstairs, just like we are now. You could hear the chaps all round you, thinking, as they lay down with their eyes wide open. Some with their mouths wide open too, snorting like Spitfires. Dreaming away. (Broadcasts 90)

The effect is very different from the sound of a passage in Thomas' accomplished piece entitled The Crumbs of One Man's Year. Written in the vein of the early reminiscences, Crumbs is a jumbled account of recollections gathered by Thomas in 1946. The passage to which I wish to draw attention has a smooth progression of image that operates against a less-than-mellifluous movement in sound:

And one man's year is like the country of a cloud,

mapped on the sky, that soon will vanish into the
 watery, ordered wastes, into the spinning rule, into
 the dark which is light. (Broadcasts 156)

Elemental progression is evident in the passage. So, too, is a delicate progression from a static mapping, through fluidity, to the combined fixity and flux of a "spinning rule" that echoes Eliot's "light . . . still / At the still point of the turning world" (Four Quartets, I, iv)

But existing in tension with these aspects of progression is the sound of the passage. The caesuric pauses stagger this progression. More importantly, the repetition of "into" introduces an aural aspect of recurrence: the list, consecutive and non-developmental in nature, serves to counteract the elemental and conceptual progress noted previously. Finally, the expansive paradox of the final clause, "into the dark which is light," is countered by a monosyllabic simplicity of utterance: once again sound acts "against" the words of the line.

I place quotations around "against" because the tension is creative. While the mind is drawn into a paradigm of progression, the ear is provided with a more troubled pattern. The effect is a poetic imagery combined with an immediacy of presentation, an immediacy closely related to the aural immediacy of the form. Sound need not always serve as a medium of "sense," as Murdy argues. It can operate independently, providing the ear with a rich landscape of aural image that the textual poem simply cannot access without aural performance. This approach can be profitably

applied to Under Milk Wood with interesting results; Chapter Three will return to this concept.

The Crumbs of One Man's Year is an important broadcast for another reason. The aural/semantic technique posed by the above passage gives way to a purely visual technique. The poet walks in a laneway "long and soused and dark" in a "night in that cavorting spring" as the broadcast draws to an end.

The lane was rutted as though by bosky watercarts, and so dark you couldn't see your front in spite of you. Rain barrelled down. On one side you couldn't hear the deer that lived there, and on the other side--voices began to whisper, muffled in the midnight sack. A man's voice and a woman's voice. 'Lovers,' I said to myself. For at night the heart comes out, like a cat on the tiles. Discourteously, I shone my torch. There, in the thick rain, a young man and young woman stood, very close together, near the hedge that whirred in the wind. And a yard from them, another young man sat, staidly, on the grass verge, holding an open book from which he appeared to read. And in the very rutted and puddly middle of the lane, two dogs were fighting, with brutish concentration and in absolute silence.

(Broadcasts 157)

The effect that the broadcast had on the B.B.C. audience reflects the startling quality of this passage; Thomas, with some pride, wrote, in a letter to his parents, that "A lot of people found

the talk eccentric; perhaps it was; it wasn't, certainly, what most people expected to hear after the news" (Letters 614). Critics, Thomas claimed in the same letter, had charged him with being an obscurantist, poseur, surrealist comedian and Bedlamite. The reaction was in part to the tumbling and dissociated aspect of the broadcast, through which Thomas presented multiple "crumbs" of the year's events. But the response was also, in part, to this strange conclusion.

The passage as a whole begins by confirming the visual restrictions of radio; the listener must rely doubly on her ears. Thus, the aural qualities of the world define reality, in a "midnight sack" world in which the eye perceives nothing. The narrator identifies the lovers by their voice. But existence, determined by sound in this entirely aural world, is also tested, as Thomas reveals deer which "you couldn't hear." The narrator's omniscience is confirmed, while the aural dependence of the listener is further intensified.

But, suddenly, out of this struggle with aural qualities, emerges a visual mode of perception. The narrator's torch is flicked on, and a scene revealed. Thomas's description resembles that of a painting, a composed and carefully defined portrait, in which the reality of the lovers is substantiated, and where the scene is extended to include the young man reading and the fighting dogs. The shift emphasises both the limitations and the advantages of the aural mode of perception. "Reality" is less complete through the ear; the scene is more fully defined once

vision is introduced. But the aural also encourages imagination; once the torch is flicked on, the passage becomes descriptive instead of speculative.

The conclusion of Crumba introduces a pivotal debate in the use of radio: should radio attempt to supplement the loss of the visual element, or should it celebrate the purely aural dimensions of its work? Should it, as Norman Nicholson suggests, "flash upon the inward eye . . . [and] construct the scene in your head" (48)? Or, should radio celebrate a non-visual universe, presenting, as psychologist T.H. Pear speculates, "those experiences which [do] not lend themselves easily to visualisation" (Drakakis, "Introduction" 23)?

Arnheim, working in his mode of form-sensitive purism, was adamant that radio entirely reject the visual. Broadcasting, he said, "lacked" nothing; it afforded access to "the essence of an event, a process of thought, a representation" (135). With this potential for "aural unity" in mind, Arnheim called on the radio artist to exploit the medium's purely aural aspect, for

the test of his talent is whether he can produce a perfect effect with aural things, not whether his broadcast is capable of inspiring his listeners to supplement the missing visual image as realistically and vividly as he can. (136)

Indeed, Arnheim went so far as to criticise appeals to any visual supplementation whatsoever; it is, he wrote, "a great hinderance to an appreciation of the real nature of the wireless, of the

particular advantages that it alone can offer"(137).

The visual bias, as Arnheim and subsequent critics have pointed out, is a result of the "sensory preponderance of the visual over the aural" in our everyday lives (Radio 136). David Wade, scriptwriter and radio critic for The Times, observes that "the primacy of the visual mode is first established and then reinforced during every day of our lives"(228). Citing television's displacement of radio as an example of this primacy, Wade identifies the common perception of hearing as being "harder, less 'natural,' less rewarding"(228).

Thus, the common response in radio writing has been to supplement the absence of the visual with mental portraits of the scene before the listener. This is, in part, the problem with the description of the pub in The Londoner broadcast (see p. 26). The creation of a "radio" pub is better done through a subtle evocative technique, where sound and language combine to utilise the potentials of the medium. Indeed, the appeal to the "inward eye" is of questionable value: apart from constructing a visual reality around the lunching workers, there seems to be little else accomplished.

But if the use of visual description seems of neutral value in The Londoner, it is positively disastrous in Margate--Past and Present. I noted previously that the combination of narrator and dramatic character in Rick was poorly achieved because the narratorial role seemed to subsume the dramatic situation. Part of the problem is linked to Thomas's treatment of the visual in

the broadcast. In the following passage, Rick's description of the merry-go-round violates the very simple fact that Molly, the person to whom he speaks, is standing beside him:

Kiddies Jolly Joyride. . . It's all little buses and cars and tanks and planes and motorbikes . . . See that old boy digging a sandcastle . . . bowler hat, glasses, bathing-trunks and a tummy like a bass drum.

(Broadcasts 109)

This may be satisfying the visual curiosity of the listener, but it is an effect that could be rendered in much subtler terms. Thomas' dependence on a visualised radio technique is disappointing in these early broadcasts.

As a result, the effective visualisation in The Crumbs of One Man's Year, a later broadcast, demonstrates a gradual refinement in Thomas's radio technique. In particular, he had recognised that mere visual descriptions were facile, and that a more advanced approach was both possible and necessary. Arnheim misjudged the capabilities of an appeal to the visual; his purist approach caused him to turn away from it entirely. But, as Thomas' work indicates, the visual does have a place in radio; it is a matter of carefully choosing and shaping one's effects. The visual in Crumbs is a creative application; Margate and The Londoner lack this originality.

In turning from the dangers and potentials inherent in the use of visualised detail, it becomes possible to question the nature of other modes of presentation. One interesting technique

used by Thomas is the construct of interspliced voices. It appears in Margate--Past and Present with humorous effect, as Rick sits at the table with Molly, her father and her grandmother, Flo:

MOLLY: Dad, your not attending to your guest. Go on,
pass him the beer.

MCFEE: Help yourself, Rick. Funny names Americans have,
don't they, Flo?

MRS MCFEE: Gives you wind.

RICK: Beg your pardon, Mrs McFee?

MRS MCFEE: Gives you wind.

MCFEE: Flo means bottled beer gives you wind, don't
you, Flo? (Broadcasts 110-111)

The use of a number of voices reaches a grander pitch in Holiday Memory, broadcast 25 October 1946. Here Thomas uses the familiar pattern of the personal reminiscence; Thomas introduces a chorus of voices by inviting us to listen at "some of the open doors of the houses in the street."

'Uncle Owen says he can't find the bottle-opener. . . '

'Has he looked under the hallstand?'

'Willy's cut his finger . . . '

'Got your spade?'

'If somebody doesn't kill that dog . . . '

'Uncle Owen says why should the bottle-opener be under the
hallstand?'

'Never again, never again.'

'I know I put the pepper somewhere . . . '

'Willy's bleeding . . . '

'Look, there's a bootlace in my bucket . . . '

'Oh come on, come on . . . '

'Let's have a look at the bootlace in your bucket . . . '

'If I lay my hands on that dog . . . '

'Uncle Owen's found the bottle-opener . . . '

'Willy's bleeding over the cheese . . . ' (Broadcasts 140)

A community of voices is drawn into a confusing chorus of interspliced comments; the effect, when read aloud, is of points of comprehension (ie., the first two comments, or the two comments about the bootlace) intermixed with a riot of other concerns (ie., resolution of Uncle Owen's search for the bottle-opener, and the lack of resolution over Willy's finger). The result is a powerful evocation of community; this community is not conjured by a narrator, but depends on juxtaposed voices.

It is this dependence on a number of voices which problematises our way of "reading" these scripts. Earlier, I mentioned, in relation to the sound in these broadcasts, that a different voice could shift the impact of a piece. Here, the aural performance of the passage is essential to a "reading." For not only does this performance create the communal dynamic of voices, but, more crucially, it determines exactly who is saying what. In reading the script, for instance, there is confusion as to who says "Oh come on, come on"--the conversational thread involving this comment can only be identified by hearing the

script in performance. This problem is unusual in that a textual script does usually give us a relatively accurate sense of the potential radio performance; but it also highlights the fact that a textual reading cannot fully embody the form of the radio broadcast. This point will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

The development of Thomas's radio artistry is evident in a magnificent application of this treatment of voices. This example, unique in all of Dylan Thomas' broadcasts, involves what could be termed a shadowed conversation, in which character is created out of an aural absence. The narrator's search for Young Thomas in Return Journey introduces a temporal jump through the description of a man who knew Thomas:

PROMENADE-MAN: . . . And on Sunday nights, after chapel, he'd be swaggering with his pals along the prom, whistling after the girls.

GIRLS (Titter): Does your mother know your out? Go away now. Stop following us. (Another girl titters)

GIRL: Don't you say nothing, Hetty, you're only encouraging. No thank you, Mr Cheeky, with your cut-glass accent and your father's trilby! I don't want no walk on no sands. What'd you say? Ooh, listen to him, Het, he's swallowed a dictionary. No, I don't want to go with nobody up no lane in the moonlight, see, and I'm not a baby-snatcher either. I seen you going to school along Terrace Road, Mr Glad-Eye, with your little satchel and

wearing your red cap and all. You seen me wearing my . . . no, you never. Hetty, mind your glasses! Hetty Harris, you're as bad as them. Oh, go away and do homework, you. No, I'm not then. I'm nobody's homework, see. Cheek! Hetty Harris, don't you let him! Oooh, there's brazen! Well, just to the end of the prom, if you like. No further, mind.

PROMENADE-MAN: Oh yes, I knew him well. I've known him by the thousands. (Broadcasts 187)

In constructing an entire conversation out of one person's perspective, Thomas introduces a technique for achieving rich, imaginative evocation of character. Hetty's adventurous spirit, the taunting and precocious boy, and the mature (though intrigued) girl-speaker are all created through one side of a tri-partite conversation. To an extent, the notion of a shadowed conversation, rooted in one person's perspective, emerges out of the narratorial position. But, here, the totally dramatic character of the girl (as compared with Rick's oscillations--see p. 27) undermines any narratorial authority. In addition, the temporal jump places the episode beyond the immediate dramatic level in which the wandering Narrator of the piece operates.

I have provided a number of instances in which Thomas's artistic response to radio became increasingly complex and original. To an extent, this response can be interpreted as a refinement in apperception, a process identified by Walter Benjamin in his influential study, "The Work of Art in the Age of

Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin connected modes of human perception with the influence of history, arguing that mechanical reproduction was producing a progressively democratic and egalitarian sense of reality. He also investigated the interaction between modes of perception and the medium used; film, for instance, had altered visual perceptual patterns:

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snap-shot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. (236)

Benjamin's attention to the 'grammar' of film highlights the possibility of an equally 'grammatical' approach to radio. Indeed, Benjamin's apperceptual argument can be related to the discussion of Thomas's broadcasts. Developmentally, the broadcasts demonstrate Thomas's incorporation of the "structural formations" of aural artistry; the refinement of this approach was a result of his shifting apperceptive awareness of radio.

* * *

I have attempted, in this chapter, to establish a number of issues surrounding Dylan Thomas' pre-Under Milk Wood work in radio. His experiments in narration, the unique linguistic style of his radio writing, the potential for the "sense of sound," issues related to visual evocation, and Thomas' use of purely aural dialogue are central points in this chapter. In addition, I have suggested that there is a determinable line of development--

an increasingly sensitive response--to the formalistic qualities of the medium.

T.H. Jones was correct when he wrote that the broadcasts "show a distinct development in Thomas's radio technique;" what was missing in his account, and what I have attempted to provide in this chapter, is a justification for that statement. To a certain extent, Jones also predetermines my work on Under Milk Wood--for, as he suggests, Thomas's broadcasts also reflect a "development in the direction of a genuine and original radio drama" (86).

Indeed, a critical appraisal of Holiday Memory by Edward Sackville-West is an ideal point on which to conclude. For he noted that the broadcast "was radio at its purest," and represented "a superb justification of [radio's] right to be considered as an art in itself" (137). Indeed, the quality of the broadcast caused Sackville-West to wonder in writing "why this remarkable poet [had] never attempted a poetic drama for broadcasting" (137) Under Milk Wood was Thomas's "attempt;" and, while Sackville-West's notion of the poetic drama raises new and troublesome critical issues for the next chapter, his demand for further examples of Thomas's radio artistry serves to round out the positive valuations of this one.

Chapter Three: Under Milk Wood

Bloody potboiler.

-Caitlin Thomas

Interest in the poetic drama increased in the first half of this century; the dramatic efforts of Yeats, and his and Pound's investigations into the Japanese Noh drama are early and notable examples of this interest. But the poetic drama's most outspoken supporter was T.S. Eliot. The critic J. Isaacs (ignoring the efforts of Yeats and Pound) notes that a "new order" (140) of drama began officially in 1926 with the publication of fragments from Eliot's "Sweeney Agonistes" in the New Criterion. And, with the publication of The Rock in 1934, a pageant-play for the Anglican Church, Eliot emphasised publicly what his critical writings had already stated--that he was determined to continue exploring the potentials of the poetic drama.

But Eliot was only the most visible of this "new order;" a number of influential writers had begun to produce poetic dramas. In November 1933, Auden wrote a drama in verse entitled Dance of Death. In February of the following year, Sean O'Casey's Within the Gates was produced, and in April, Cocteau's The Infernal Machine. Auden, in May of 1936, co-wrote (with Isherwood) The Dog Beneath the Skin, after Eliot's very successful 1935 production of Murder in the Cathedral. The poetic drama had attained a notable degree of currency.

This early flurry of interest in the poetic drama was extended into the 50s through the continued work of Eliot--The Confidential Clerk (1954); The Elder Statesman (1959)---and Christopher Fry's The Lady's not for Burning (1949) and A Sleep of Prisoners (1951). It was an important school of dramatic practice, one whose ideas pervaded the twelve years during which Thomas worked on Under Milk Wood. Examination of these ideas, and their impact on Thomas's own work will introduce important issues of classification in relation to Under Milk Wood. This examination will culminate in an argument for the fundamental success of Thomas's piece, as opposed to an important flaw in the work of T.S. Eliot.

Given Thomas' early plot-oriented conception of the play and its intense prose-poetry style, the impact of the poetic drama on the early stages of Thomas' work is clear. But interestingly, the critic David Holbrook, writing in 1962, observed that perhaps the influence was flowing in the opposite direction:

Under Milk Wood has created a wide interest in 'poetic' language, since it is on the flow of ebullient language that the play's appeal depends. Some have even seen considerable promise in this piece--promise for poetic drama. (200)

Holbrook unfairly minimises the notable poetic dramas of the preceding fifty years; his comment, though, problematises the true nature of Under Milk Wood. Is the piece, after all, a poetic drama? Holbrook, in applying the term, raises essential questions

about Under Milk Wood's dramatic and poetic qualities.

Critics have been quick to fault Under Milk Wood for its non-dramatic aspect; in a review, Gene Baro wrote that "in terms of dramatic theatre, nothing happens; there is no development either of character or theme"(120). William Arrowsmith similarly notes that it is "plotless, undramatic in structure and without developed characters"(294); he concludes that it simply is not a verse-play.

But if we challenge these demands for plot and character development, and insist that they emerge out of a conventional critical approach, then we locate an important oversight in these criticisms of Thomas's work. The critics are not entirely to blame for their conventional approach to Under Milk Wood; as critic D.B. Watson points out, it is an approach that has defined much of the radio drama produced in England:

Much radio drama . . . tends to mirror the structure of what one might call 'conventional' drama: it has a beginning, a middle and an end; it has introduction, argument and resolution; in other words it has a plot.

(148)

Watson identifies Under Milk Wood as a piece operating beyond these dramatic conventions. But she is too insistent on the influence of the Features department of the B.B.C. on Thomas's work. Terming the piece an "archetypal feature," she notes that Under Milk Wood

uses the narrative voices to draw the listener into

relationship with the 'story'; but the expected 'story' is in fact, as in most features, an experience, a 'day in the life of' . . . The techniques of fades and cross-fades, of ambient sound as background to narrative (as with Captain Cat and the children): all these are devices familiar to the radio feature. (148)

Undoubtedly, Features techniques like vocal intersplicing and episodic construction are evident in both Under Milk Wood and, more generally, Thomas's radio aesthetic. But it is his refinement of these techniques that defines the remarkable quality of his broadcasts. Undoubtedly, the Features Department was responsible for elements in Thomas's radio "grammar;" Under Milk Wood's unique qualities, however, demand inquiry that reaches beyond mere identification of these techniques.

Henry Wells, writing in 1954, provides an early and brilliant account of the challenges posed by the piece. "Its form," he writes, "is a new type of drama for voices;" he proceeds to justify this claim:

Under Milk Wood is drama because it is vocalised dialogue, because it exists through impersonations achieved by actual speech, and moreover with impersonations where contrast and conflict create the high tension demanded by the successful dramatic poem. (440)

Wells then proceeds to challenge the very conventions of drama presumed by Baro and Arrowsmith:

Drama is not essentially plot, as Aristotle suggested, nor is it essentially theatrical, as the public of about 1900 generally supposed. For the last twenty-five years we have all accepted the notion of radio drama, which obviously is not a stage play. (440)

Radio, then, provided a new dramatic form: Thomas was not only responding to the elements of the new medium (as I have suggested in the previous chapter) but also adapting the demands of old forms of art. Under Milk Wood represents an important shift towards a new drama; as Brooks Atkinson succinctly commented in a review for the New York Times, "Under Milk Wood is not an evasion of the responsibilities of dramatic form. It is a deliberate creation" (2).

The shift noted by Wells and Atkinson was toward a new drama, but not a new *theatrical* drama. In 1954, Douglas Cleverdon translated Under Milk Wood into a stage-play; critical responses to this theatrical interpretation of Thomas's piece can be used to highlight the radio characteristics of the new drama. Gene Baro, quoted above, mentions that the Cleverdon production "is deficient as theatre" (122); Baro fails to identify the strictly aural theatre from which the script emerges. John Raymond criticises the "static quality of the play, something one had missed at a mere first reading" (372). On two counts, Raymond violates the intended form of Under Milk Wood. First, there can be little surprise that a visual version of the play would suffer from a "static quality"--Thomas was writing aural movements, not

visual ones. And, second, that Raymond has entirely missed the aural nature of the piece is not surprising--his textual experience ("a mere first reading", and the implied second reading) displaces the essential aural dimension of Under Milk Wood.

Geoffrey Heptonstall and Peter Lewis have challenged the inclination for translation between artistic mediums. Heptonstall rejects the connection between theatre and radio, for "we must not think of radio drama as theatre deprived of spectacle"(267); radio gains vision, he insists, "from its peculiar spirit"(267). Thus, he concludes that artistry must pay careful attention to the form of its creation: "What is not radiogenic is not radio, and would be served better elsewhere"(267).

Peter Lewis has likewise challenged those who would violate the initial form of an artistic piece. Questioning critics who point to radio's inability to present the full subtleties of a theatrical play, he writes:

A stage play or a play written with the stage in mind .
 . . achieves its fullest realisation in the theatre,
 and except in the rarest cases, radio cannot hope to
 compete. The same is true of adaptations of classic
 novels, many of which make excellent listening but all
 of which inevitably lose a great deal in the
 transformation. ("Literature" 30)

Conversely, a theatrical production--a synthesis of aural and visual dramatisation--of a radio play--aural, intimate, spatially

flexible--can only be a pale shadow of the original radio piece.

Under Milk Wood's history reveals a near-pervasive critical failure to appreciate the integrity of its radio form. Not only does the piece represent a new form of drama, to return to Wells' evaluation, but it also imposes restrictions on the forms into which it can be effectively translated. Perhaps the demands made by Under Milk Wood on its radio form--indeed, the inextricable connection between the form and the piece--suggests an equally important fact: that the accomplished piece of art will be one which fully exploits and depends upon the medium in which it is created.

I want to return to the second problematic aspect of Under Milk Wood: language. As with critical responses to the dramatic elements, misunderstandings have plagued analysis. Stephen Pike comments that "with the possible exception of Mr. Waldo's song . . . and a few scattered fragments, there is nothing in it that approaches poetry" (164). And with little in that "approaches poetry," Pike also has little use for its prose: "some of the prose is good, but too often degenerates into that maudlin hybrid, the prose-poem" (164).

Kenneth Tynan, in an extended attack on the poetic drama, actually uses Under Milk Wood as an example of what prose could accomplish in drama. "Prose," he exclaimed, after hearing a performance of the play, "went into battle rejoicing" (74). Perhaps it is not surprising that Tynan would classify its language as prose--in his article, he defines poetry rather

simply as "the line that stops short of the margin," and, as a result, rather simplistically dismisses the predominantly full-length lines of Under Milk Wood's printed text as being those of a prose piece. The visual/textual basis for Tynan's description--where the appearance on a page, rather than rhythmic qualities, defines "poetry"--is notable. But, in addition, this definition of poetry also emphasises Tynan's inability to comprehend the existence of, say, a poetic prose or a prosaic poetry. Indeed, both Pike and Tynan either despise or reject the combination of poetry and prose.

For surely Under Milk Wood poses a serious challenge to a conventional division of prose and poetry. Thomas' language is clearly not prosaic--its use of stress, alliteration, and unusual grammatical structures, for example, sets it apart from a "normal" prose style, even a highly rhetorical style. But, conversely, Under Milk Wood clearly does not adopt a regular rhythmic scheme or syllabic construction; it firmly rejects the label of "poetic." Indeed, as with the early broadcasts, much of the language of the piece defies classification.

Once again, Henry Wells provides an advanced mode of analysis. Linking language to his own notion of the piece's unique dramatic qualities, Wells argues that Thomas "takes a stand . . . beyond the familiar distinctions of verse and prose" (443). Part of Thomas' stance involves a reversal of convention:

The passages of his play printed as prose are actually

more rhythmical, more strongly accented, more highly alliterated, and more powerfully addressed to the ear than most verse. Conversely, the passages printed as verse comprise in general the parts of his play intended to be sung and are essentially in the style of folk rhyme and much less sophisticated or developed as poetry than his own prose. (443)

Having noted Thomas' collapse of the distinctions between prose and poetry, Wells suggests that "Its style [is] a new type of dramatic lyricism based on rhythms stronger than most poetic prose, [and] freer than most accepted verse" (443).

The dramatic and lyrical qualities of Under Milk Wood present an important alternative to the poetic drama. The structure is determined, argues Wells, by this aspect of dramatic lyricism: Thomas "has composed approximately thirty-six dramatic lyrics . . . and fused them into a single dramatic, or symphonic, poem" (442). All of the lyrics give us two or more voices, containing "miniature but striking drama in themselves, a contention, for example, between husband and wife, lover and lover, friend and foe" (442). Thus, Wells concludes,

The lyrical form becomes for Thomas, as for Donne and the composers of Elizabethan madrigals and the medieval verse dialogues, a drama in little. (442)

Wells fuses language and dramatic interests, providing a substantial defence of Thomas' work. Indeed, he asserts that Thomas is "not impossibly the first writer to fashion a

successful play out of a lyric sequence"(442-3). Clearly not within the parameters of Eliot's "poetic drama," Under Milk Wood represents a significant challenge to the conventions of the form.

But I am interested in the poetic drama, and, specifically, Eliot's efforts in this field, for the interesting access it provides to the fundamental spirit that informs Thomas' work. In a suggestive article, William Arrowsmith analyses Eliot's Confidential Clerk and Cocktail Party, noting a faulted combination of religious temperament and aesthetic style. Eliot was fascinated by the *via negativa*, a pursuit of God that involves the overcoming of earthly trappings. But this doctrinal approach, Arrowsmith argues, stultifies the world of these plays and strips it of its dignity (293). The result is a barren world of Christian action and impoverished character, a conflict between the demands of human theatre and religious doctrine.

This position--the *via negativa* of Christian mystics like St. John of the Cross--emerges from a belief in divine emanance (not recognised by Arrowsmith), from the notion that God exists separate from the world (as opposed to immanence, which sees God's spirit as manifested in the world). This doctrinal bias, when compared with Thomas's Under Milk Wood, causes Arrowsmith to posit a (faulted) comparison of positions of emanance and immanence:

But where Eliot transfigures the world by nearly annihilating it and comes upon the real by stripping

away the actual, Thomas' transfiguration comes in the intensification of the world, blessed at the very moment when poetry achieves a world's transfiguration.

(295)

Arrowsmith's comparison is instructive both for its proper assessment of Eliot's narrowly focused response, and its improper assessment of Thomas's work. It subscribes to the misguided stance of much of the critical attention focused on Thomas's poetry. Critics have often cited his use of Christian imagery as suggesting a profound religious poetry; here Arrowsmith attempts to uncover an immanent vision in Thomas's work.

To celebrate the world is one thing--indeed, it is to attempt Wallace Steven's "great poem of the earth." It is quite another to direct that celebration at the Hopkinsian "dearest freshness deep down things" (27). Thomas's work rarely incites a religious celebration of God manifested in this world; it is instead focused on a profound celebration of earthly existence. Under Milk Wood is not, as Arrowsmith would like to suggest "an Incarnation in which the immediate physical world is transfigured" (295). Rather, it is a profoundly earthly piece, a celebration of a present-day Edenic state deprived of the God-head and blessed with sin.

* * *

Listening to the first five minutes of the Caedmon recording of Under Milk Wood re-energises previous points of discussion and introduces new concerns. But this occurs only after the immediate

pleasure of hearing Thomas intone the opening lines.

To begin at the beginning:

It is Spring, moonless night in the small town,
starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and
the hunched, courters'-and-rabbits' wood limping
invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black,
crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea. The houses are
blind as moles (though moles see fine to-night in the
snouting, velvet dingles) or blind as Captain Cat there
in the muffled middle by the pump and the town clock,
the shops in mourning, the Welfare Hall in widows'
weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound
town are sleeping now. (1)

The passage is originative. It explicitly defines the beginning of the narrative, the beginning of our awareness of the town, the beginning of the day, and, for that matter, the beginning of the fertile year.

The passage emphasises a darkness that, on a preliminary level, intensifies the evocation of the night. At a more profound level, the description dramatises the visual restriction inherent in radio. But the dramatisation extends beyond what was noted in The Crumbs of One Man's Year (see p. 37)--here, the blindness of the listener is projected into physical reality, through both the houses and Captain Cat.

The mention of Captain Cat is brief, but notable. The first identified character of this "lulled and dumbfound town," Captain

Cat has a radio lineage of some importance. Richard Hughes, in the first radio drama broadcast by the B.B.C., wrote of people left blind in a darkened coalmine; his recollections of the development of the plot are instructive:

I argued to myself like this. There had never been before anything which people had to take in by their ears only--anything dramatic, I mean--so it occurred to me that obviously the best thing was to choose a theme which would happen entirely in the dark, and an accident in a coalmine suggested itself. And that's how it came that I wrote this play beginning with the lines: 'The lights have gone out.' And it was hoping that everybody would listen in the dark and get the feeling of the darkness that way. (257)

Naturalising the play's conditions for the listener is an amusing literalisation of Hughes' concerns; perhaps it was a token gesture towards the condition of the theatre that compelled him to recommend this aural and visual synthesis to the listener. Nonetheless, the condition of blindness marked a turn inward, "an imaginative excursion into the deeper recesses of the human soul," to quote John Drakakis ("Introduction" 21).

Blindness permitted Hughes to exploit both the intimate and psychological potentials of a new medium of expression. But it also carried with it the literary and dramatic tradition of the blind seer; Tiresias, reincarnated by Eliot, lingered behind the appeal to the powerful type of the unseeing seer. Louis MacNeice,

in his enormously successful play, The Dark Tower, appealed to this tradition in his creation of Blind Peter. As Drakakis observes, Blind Peter "can testify to the reality of the dragon that Roland is destined to face in such a way that the symbolic nature of the quest is always kept before us"(21).

The blind character, then, provides access to subtle states of experience and expression. In Under Milk Wood, Captain Cat assumed this position, acting as character, narrator and medium. His role as character places him within the community, replete with a personal history which defines his own attitudes and experiences. But as narrator, Captain Cat remains a vestige of Thomas' original conception of the Captain as both central character and sole narrator (Lewis "Road" 87). As the town awakes, for instance, the narration shifts entirely to Captain Cat's perspective. Thus, from the detached anonymity of the First Voice's "People are moving now up and down the cobbled street"(47) we move to the Captain's intimate knowledge; "There goes Mrs. Cherry, you can tell her by her trotters . . . Mrs. Butcher Beynon with her pet black cat, it follows her everywhere, miaow and all"(47).

This synthesis of character and narration in Under Milk Wood overcomes the aforementioned faults in Rick's role in Margate-- Past and Present and adopts an originality different again from the unique narratorial character found in Holiday Memory. For here Captain Cat operates within the parameters of the official narrations of the First and Second Voice. The threat of an

imbalance between narration and character is neatly sidestepped. Furthermore, the aural dependency of the blind Captain meshes with the listener's own position. And, most importantly, his blindness allows Thomas to create an aural portrait of the town, where counted footsteps define movement ("One, two, three, four, five . . . That's Mrs Rose Cottage" (45)) and an aural absence can indicate a presence: the Captain, as he listens to the town, tells us:

Now the voices around the pump can see someone coming.

Hush, there's a hush! You can tell by the noise of the
hush, it's Polly Garter. (48)

Vocal response is linked with moral judgement, as the woman at the pump "vocalise" their disapproval of the promiscuous Polly.

Perhaps, though, the most interesting aspect of Captain Cat's role is as medium. This role is highlighted in James Connor's provocative study of radio's impact on the work of James Joyce. In "Radio Free Joyce: Wake Language and the Experience of Radio," Connor describes the chaotic experience of listening to early radio signals: "generic radio interference, including words and unintelligible sounds . . . [and] hissing sibilant white noise" (829) were distortion constants in any programme. Connor relates this "wondrous, often mysterious jumble of signal and noise" to Joyce's experimentation in a "language that imitated so many of its audial [sic] characteristics" (830). But the effect of radio was more than linguistic:

As Michael Begnal has pointed out: "Within the text [of

Finnegans Wake] are constant allusions to a wireless or short-wave radio as a central symbol or unifying device. . . ." According to Begnal, there are a number of dreamers, and a number of voices--HCE, ALP, Issy, Shem and Shaun, the Four Old Men--all communicating across space, fighting for the microphone. They act as dream radios, where what is distant is brought close and what is too far to imagine is as near as your headset. Near and far. Intimacy and distance. (Connor 830)

This collapse of space emerges out of a merging of man and machine: as Connor points out, the Four Old Men of Chapter Three in Book Two "are radios, and what they give and receive has the characteristics of radio signals"(830-1).

Joyce's human projection of radio casts an intriguing light on Captain Cat, and, in particular, the Captain's contact with the dead sailors in the opening pages of Under Milk Wood. Certainly, the tradition of the **human** medium lingers behind the Captain's evocations of these voices from the past. But it is also possible, with Connor's discussion in mind, to speculate that radio, the very medium for which the piece was created, has been evoked through the "medium" of Captain Cat. Blind and limited to an aural universe (Captain Cat does not leave his vantage point in Schooner House to physically enter the world of Llareggub), the Captain can be seen as one of Joyce's humanised radios. Indeed, considering his ability to overcome various separations (inter-textually, through his communications with the

dead sailors; extra-textually, through a mediating role as narrator), Captain Cat seems a natural extension of a radio sensibility; indeed, he represents the apotheosis of an apperceptual awareness of radio.

The magnificent originality of Thomas's Captain Cat raises questions about the nature of the larger, overarching narratorial positions evident in the First and Second Voice. Raymond Williams describes the development of these positions in his article, "Dylan Thomas's Play for Voices:"

The original narrator, the blind Captain Cat, was an obvious device for radio. Then, in the scheme of The Town Was Mad, Captain Cat became a central character, so that eventually another narrator was necessary. With his public reading in mind . . . Thomas moved steadily back towards emphasis on the narrative voice. (18-9)

The last statement is interesting, and perhaps correct; the shaping authority of the public reading and these narrative positions are similar. But there is a degree of complexity inherent in Thomas' use of these narrators that Williams fails to notice. This aspect is hinted at as the introduction to *Llareggub* continues to unfold.

You can hear the dew falling, and the hushed town breathing.

Only your eyes are unclosed to see the black and folded town fast, and slow, asleep.

And you alone can hear the invisible starfall, the

darkest-before-dawn minutely dewgrazed stir of the
black, dab-filled sea . . .

Listen. It is night moving in the streets, the
processional salt slow musical wind in Coronation
Street and Cockle Row, it is the grass growing on
Llareggub Hill, dewfall, starfall, the sleep of birds
in Milk Wood. (2)

The address to the listener achieves a remarkable intimacy; the
listener becomes the only listener, his or her attentions the
only focus. But, more acutely, the form of address activates the
whole construct of the listener's relationship with the piece
itself. John Drakakis relates his own interest in this
activation:

I have been very conscious recently of the extent to
which the listener himself is actually drawn into the
action as 'mute' participant. Saussure's comment in his
Course in General Linguistics that the act of speech
'requires the presence of at least two persons: that is
the minimum number needed to complete the circuit,'
seems to have reached its apotheosis in [a play] like .
. . Jonathan Raban's Will You Accept the Call (24 March
1977) in which the listener is cast in the role of (a)
judicious hearer, (b) correspondent and (c) the
receiver of a telephone call. ("Teaching" 35)

Raban's play changes the listener's role from "passive observer
to active participant, while at the same time exploiting fully

the intimacy of a medium where all is pared away save the sound of the speaking voice"(35).

This transformation of the listener's role can also be observed in Under Milk Wood. Unlike the earlier broadcasts, the listener no longer simply overhears a narrator speaking, or watches a dramatic action; and, while the position of the listener is not as dramatic as in Raban's play, the First Voice's appeal to "you" continually enforces the illusion of the listener's active role and, furthermore, compounds the sense of intimacy already inherent in the radio experience. Thomas was fully aware of the ramifications of his narrator's stance: in the letter of October 1951 describing the piece to Margaret Caetani, Thomas, in outlining the piece's movement from silence to silence and from morning to afternoon to night, noted finally that "only you will know it"(Broadcasts 814). The prioritisation of the listener, and the intimacy of the address, are important indications of Thomas' developed radio sensibility.

There is a last and significant aspect suggested in the opening pages of Under Milk Wood, and extending through the work as a whole. I wrote, in Chapter Two, and in relation to several broadcasts, about the issues related to visual evocations in radio. At that point, I noted deficiencies in the visualisations contained in Margate--Past and Present, and the subsequent achievement in the use of the visual in The Crumbs of One Man's Year. In Under Milk Wood, the visual technique is much more complicated. I want to argue that there is a deliberate tension

created between a visual and a non-visual technique. It can be noted in the opening passages of the piece quoted above, where the narrator presents a scene, then challenges that scene with a blackness that displaces vision. But it is an effect that can be more fully analysed in this passage from later in the introduction:

It is to-night in Donkey Street, trotting silent, with seaweed on its hooves, along the cockled cobbles, past curtained fernpot, text and trinket, harmonium, holy dresser, watercolours done by hand, china dog and rosy tin teacaddy. (2)

The passage evokes visual images: the donkey, its hooves covered in seaweed, and the subsequent catalogue of items, all call to mind a visualised action and place. But, simultaneously, the strange animation of Donkey Street and the equally strange correlation between silence and the muffling seaweed serve to destabilise this visual creation. And, while the catalogue of items may call to the mind's eye a number of objects, its unique qualities ("text and trinket," "holy dresser") and the rapidity of its presentation serve to challenge this evocation. The unique items in the catalogue challenge an easily visualised response, while the rapidity of presentation evokes a swirl of objects to which it is difficult to respond.

I will return to this catalogue effect momentarily; I want first to consider further this tension of visual and non-visual elements. In the earlier examination of the visual in Thomas's

work (see pp. 37-38) Norman Nicholson was mentioned in relation to his sense of images "flashing upon the inward eye;" his demand for visual evocation in radio can be profitably refined here.

Nicholson notes that Under Milk Wood:

above all . . . was notable for the enchanting picture
it evoked in the inward eye, not so much by direct
description, as by the use of phrases which touch off
the imagination like a lighted match. (49)

Nicholson problematises his sense of the visual perhaps because he senses, but fails to recognise, the tension between the visual evocation which he calls for, and the subtle undermining of that very evocation. Thomas's description of Donkey Street does "touch off the imagination;" the problem for Nicholson is that the "lighted match" does not shed a visual flame. Thus, when the Second Voice describes Miss Price's dreamed-of lover, the description extends beyond the visual and into a stirring evocation of physical passion; he is:

her lover, tall as the town clock tower, Samson-syrup-
gold-maned, whacking thighed and piping hot,
thunderbolt-bass'd and barnacle-breasted, flailing up
the cockles with his eyes like blowlamps and scooping
low over her lonely lovely hotwaterbottled body. (7)

Propelled by a rhythmic intensity that combines strange terms of comparison with enjambed descriptions, the passage achieves a dramatic synthesis of sexual lust and personal fantasy. More acutely, it is a description that, under a less skilled hand,

would be merely visual--Thomas achieves a much more profound description by carefully subverting visual description.

This is not to suggest that there is an utter lack of purely visual evocation. Thomas knew, perhaps better than most radio writers, the value of the well-placed visual description. One of the most beautiful passages in Under Milk Wood is this description of Mary Ann Sailors:

FIRST VOICE: Mary Ann Sailors dreams of

MARY ANN SAILORS: the Garden of Eden.

FIRST VOICE: She comes in her smock-frock and clogs

MARY ANN SAILORS: away from the cool scrubbed cobbled

kitchen with the Sunday-school pictures on the

whitewashed wall and the farmers' almanac hung above

the settle and the sides of bacon on the ceiling hooks,

and going down the cockleshelled paths of that applepie

kitchen garden, ducking under the gippo's clothespins,

catching her apron on the blackcurrent bushes, past

beanrows and onion-bed and tomatoes ripening on the

wall towards the old man playing the harmonium in the

orchard, and sits down on the grass at his side and

shells the green peas that grow up through the lap of

her frock that brushes the dew. (24)

The sustained action, complemented by conventional terms of description, achieves a stirring visual account of the woman's experience. Interestingly, these qualities of action and description suggest reasons for the predominance of the visual

mode here, and, incidentally, highlight elements that make the earlier passages non-visual. The mind's eye demands a degree of continuity in order to create a "portrait;" a rapidly shifting presentation too easily confounds visual perception. Furthermore, visualisation requires that a degree of conventionality rule the evocation; challenging the ear's eye with portmanteau words and a prismatic semantic structure only serves to derail visual evocations.

Thus, in the description of Mary Ann Sailors, Thomas demonstrates an attention to the power of visual evocation: the pastoral beauty of the description, where nostalgia and natural growth are delicately merged, is extended by the mental picture created. Conversely, a non-visual technique, employed in the description of Donkey Street and Miss Price's lover, appeal to a complex evocation, where imagery is challenged by fantasy, and mere description by aural artistry. The result is an extension of visual description, and, in conclusion, a further instance of Thomas's refined sense of radio's potential.

The catalogue, noted as an important method for evading explicit visual responses, has other effects in Under Milk Wood. T.H. Jones characterises Thomas's catalogues as a "pell-mell piling-up of words and puns and conceits, that at first sounds merely arbitrary, though inspection reveals that all is carefully chosen and ordered" (85). Jones fails to substantiate this claim of orderedness; however, his point about the splendid aural quality of the catalogue technique is well taken:

Bread is baking, pigs are grunting, chop goes the
 butcher, milk-churn bell, tills ring, sheep cough, dogs
 shout, saws sing. Oh, the Spring whinny and morning moo
 from the clog-dancing farms, the gulls' gab and rabble
 on the boat-bobbing river and sea and the cockles
 bubbling in the sand, scamper of sanderlings, curlew
 cry, crow caw, pigeon coo, clock strike, bull bellow,
 and the ragged gabble of the beargarden school as the
 women scratch and babble in Mrs Organ Morgan's general
 shop where everything is sold: custard, buckets, henna,
 rat-traps, shrimp-nets, sugar, stamps, confetti,
 paraffin, hatchets, whistles. (49)

The passage moves easily between rapid detailing and a more
 languid construction, and from a catalogue of sounds to a listing
 of objects. The overall effect is of an ever-expanding field of
 attention; the town, in all its multifarious glory, is "laid
 alive before you" (Letters 814).

Whitman made use of the catalogue as an incorporative,
 democratising tool. Dylan Thomas's usage, too, can be linked to a
 cultural perspective. John Ackerman observes that "the catalogue
 of words employed for comic or incantatory effect is a common
 feature of Anglo-Welsh speech and writing" (171). This cultural
 predilection for the catalogue is also noted by Sheila Deane. In
 her important study of the role of the bardic in Thomas's work,
 she writes that "recently, critics have come to consider that one
 of the most striking things about the Celtic aesthetic is [a]

reliance upon an interlaced structure"(39). The structure, she notes, is akin to that of a Celtic cross, where "an active, moving line is forced by the boundaries of the picture to wind back upon itself in a continual braid"(40). It is, says David Jones, "the result of the artist wanting to include 'the entirety or totality in a little place or space'" (qtd. Deane 39).

Thomas's catalogues, to an extent, are related to this aspect of Celtic art; they achieve an incorporative reach greater than their dimensions in the ear, an "entirety . . . in a little space." Indeed, if interpreted as an expression of interlaced structure, the catalogue achieves a "remarkable degree of vitality and complexity within its boldly drawn outline"(Deane 40) For the Celtic cross, this "boldly drawn" outline is the spatial restriction of its edges, for the bardic poem it is the rhythmic complexities of its language, and for the radio catalogue, the outline is temporal in dimensions--the duration of its aural delivery. The "vitality and complexity" of Thomas's radio catalogues is a merging of both tradition and innovation, exploiting both an age-old Celtic technique and a modern artistic medium.

I want to return now to an attribute of the broadcasts first discussed in Chapter Two. The presentation of multiple voices, noted in Margate--Past and Present and Return Journey, occurs again in Under Milk Wood; here the larger number of voices compounds the effectiveness of the technique. The presentation of Mr Waldo, for instance, demonstrates the complex treatment of

time and character made possible. The voices swirl in a rapidly shifting pattern, extending themselves over several minutes of dialogue; I will reproduce the beginning to highlight the effective manipulation of both voice and medium: the nursery-rhyme "This Little Piggy," recited by Waldo's mother gives way to:

LITTLE BOY: wee wee wee wee wee

MOTHER: all the way home to

WIFE (Screaming): Waldo! Wal-do!

MR WALDO: Yes, Blodwen love?

WIFE: Oh, what'll the neighbours say, what'll the
neighbours. . .

FIRST NEIGHBOUR: Poor Mrs Waldo

SECOND NEIGHBOUR: What she puts up with

FIRST NEIGHBOUR: Never should of married

SECOND NEIGHBOUR: If she didn't had to

FIRST NEIGHBOUR: Same as her mother (10)

The rapid juxtaposition of child and man, mother and wife, combined with the gossip tongue achieves a humorous portrayal that moves within the paradox of a never-changing town that constantly changes, ages, marries, and dies. The fluidity of radio perfectly embraces the evocation of the character of Waldo and the town.

In many respects, Under Milk Wood represents the culmination of Dylan Thomas's radio writings. In terms of the piece itself,

Thomas demonstrated a remarkable technique: narratorial structures, the activation of the role of listener, the deliberate tension between visual and non-visual evocation, incorporative catalogue techniques, and the startling expansion of character through the use of multiple voices are elements of this technique. In a more general fashion, though, technique embraced a larger aesthetic achievement, an achievement intimately involved with the very medium of its presentation. Dylan Thomas mastered the "long tongued room" of radio in a strikingly creative fashion; it is this mastery which continues to entrance listeners.

* * *

The last portion of my analysis of Under Milk Wood has lingered behind much of the previous discussion: the difficulty noted in reading Holiday Memory, where the demands of a chorus of voices exceed the limitations of a textual encounter; the demands of critics for visual pictures in radio; the difficulties inherent in translating art from one medium to another; these issues are all related to the central question of the text.

The distorting influence of the text is most evident in the critical treatment of Under Milk Wood. Earlier in this chapter, Henry Wells' work was cited as providing an advanced sense of the dramatic and linguistic uniqueness of Under Milk Wood. But his article can also be used as an introduction to the powerful role that the text (as words-on-a-page) has played in critical

reception. His article, written in November 1954, begins with a lament for the loss of Dylan Thomas; he then focuses on Under Milk Wood:

By the spring of 1953 the part of the public best informed in such matters knew that he had composed a poetic drama . . . which he had himself read in public and which had been several times given successful readings by a voice ensemble. But not until the welcome surprise of its appearance in the February number of Mademoiselle did the public enjoy the opportunity of reading the work. It now appears to be an impressive legacy to our literature. (438)

The appearance of the piece in a textual format, then, triggered widespread response. This degree of response is intimately connected with access: the large circulation of Mademoiselle expanded hitherto limited access to the work. But implicit in Wells' observation is the value given to the text, both as a mode of dissemination and as the central essence of "literature." The article assumes that only the printed text contains and, by extension, reveals, the value of Under Milk Wood: the experience and value of listening is of secondary importance.

This point of view underlies much of the derision levelled at radio art in general and Under Milk Wood in particular. G.L. Roberts, in 1955, notes that pieces for radio represent "a transitory art-form;" he insists that "anything which is good on radio alone cannot be of much value" (qtd. in Lewis "Radio Drama

and English Literature" 180). Walford Davies, while recognising the quality of Under Milk Wood, cites its "essentially low-key ambitions," which is, "unashamedly a trivialising work in that it reduces a view of life to immediately entertaining details". It is, he concludes, a work of "literary modesty" (qtd. in Lewis "Radio Road to Llareggub" 72).

This literary bias propelled critics to make comparisons between Under Milk Wood and various literary texts. Perhaps one of the best known vilifications of Thomas's work is David Holbrook's 1962 attack, Llareggub Revisited. In the course of the work, Holbrook posits a comparison of Joyce's Ulysses with Under Milk Wood. He queries: "as soon as one makes a comparison with . . . Joyce . . . the question arises--how seriously does Dylan Thomas intend his work to be taken" (196)? In insisting on the "ephemeral and caricaturing" (196) nature of Thomas's radio piece, Holbrook provides his answer. But to convince us of Under Milk Wood's artistic insignificance, Holbrook posits several instances where Thomas's work fails to achieve the same lofty heights as Ulysses. I have not the room to detail them all, but Holbrook's comparison of the authors' respective realisations of the sea reveals the common faults in his analysis.

Holbrook, in discussing a passage from Ulysses, observes that Stephen's descriptions of the sea are ruled by his tortured feeling that "he killed his mother by refusing to accept her faith on her deathbed" (206); thus, Stephen describes the sea as "a bowl of bitter waters," which, Holbrook suggests, recalls the

bowl of vomit at her deathbed. The observation is adequate; Stephen's reactions to the sea are undoubtedly affected by Mulligan's preceding description of the sea as "a grey sweet mother." The difficulty arises from Holbrook's criticism of Under Milk Wood as a piece lacking this level of inter-relatedness. His observation emerges from a profound lack of attention to the narrative condition of Ulysses, as contrasted with the dramatic lyricism of Under Milk Wood; more fundamentally, it suggests his lack of attention to the textual mode of Joyce's novel as opposed to the audible mode of Thomas's piece. Thus, when he notes that

In Joyce each chosen word reverberates always with other rich complexities: the mood of the protagonist, or the theme of the relevant chapter, (205)

the a-temporal aspect of the novel's textual presentation, where a line can (and must) be read again and again, necessarily qualifies his observation. The effect of Under Milk Wood, where the level of performance attributes degrees of meaning inaccessible in Joyce's work, escapes Holbrook's textual mentality and critical approach.

Not all the textual comparisons to which Under Milk Wood has been subjected are as faulted. Second only to comparisons with Ulysses are correlations with the works of Chaucer and Dickens. Henry Wells notes that "Thomas' humorous play often suggests the Chaucer of The Canterbury Tales, which depicts a similar number of type characters" (439). It is indeed the loosely constructed characters, nearly caricatural in dimension, that the two works

share.

Miller MacLure, in a review written for Canadian Forum, provides the earliest comparison with Dickens; writing in November 1954, he suggested that the villagers of Llareggub are like Dickensian figures(191). The critic John Ackerman mentions the similarity of their language, observing that "both fashioned a prose style that was especially compelling when read aloud"(216 Companion). Daniel Jones, in My Friend Dylan Thomas, extends both critics' comparisons to a compelling extent:

Both travelled extensively to give solo public readings of their own works; both earned large sums of money by this means, especially in America; both tried to make their performances impressive, Dylan by 'hwyl,' Dickens by extravagant gestures and grimaces; both became so exhausted by this activity that they began to subsist less on food than on drink; to both death came in the end far earlier than one would hope, and as the indirect result of anxiety and fatigue. (76)

Indeed, apart from startling similarities in biographical details, it is Jones' mention of the common role of performance that establishes an interesting (though by no means definitive) source for the shared qualities noted in the work of Chaucer, Dickens, and Thomas.

Chaucer, of course, wrote for court audiences; The Canterbury Tales were designed for aural apprehension. Dickens wrote, too, with an audience in mind; though his novels were

received first through magazine publication, Dickens was undoubtedly concerned with the performability of his work. And, of course, Thomas was intimately aware of the aural nature of his work; when he came to write Under Milk Wood he had extensive public performance and radio experimentation behind him.

The aural medium, then, played a role (albeit to varying degrees) in the work of all three authors; as I have argued in relation to Thomas's work, it was this medium of aural expression that influenced their respective aesthetic responses. There are a number of characteristics in both Chaucer's and Dickens' work which support this notion. Both, for instance, favoured the caricature; in an aural reading, it is the caricature--easily apprehended, and easily recalled--that will appeal most easily to a listening audience. Chaucer's predilection for a stabilised narratorial perspective in The Canterbury Tales, where only one character at a time tells a story (although the inter-chapters are not as simple), can also be seen as a response to aural demands; having a number of characters constantly involved in dialogue would risk confusing the listener. As monopolyogue, Dickens was able to overcome the demands of the conversations in his novels by playing several roles simultaneously: the addition of theatrics in his performance was necessary to overcome the novel's complex dialogue. As well, Dickens' detailed descriptions of person and place can be seen as early appeals to the ear's eye, a satisfaction . the visual bias in human perception (see p. 38) .

It would be a severe critical over-statement to insist on an absolute correlation between characteristics of these writers and their common interest in aural expression. However, it is possible to locate an influence, however slight, on their aesthetic approaches. Unwittingly, "textual" critics who compare Thomas's Under Milk Wood with the work of Dickens and Chaucer are actually sensing characteristics that result from the explicitly non-textual demands of the aural performance; ironically, subversion of textual critical approaches is located in that practice's own insistence on the value of the text.

There are a number of reasons for the insistence of the textual approach. Louis MacNeice provides an early attempt to explain these literary assumptions. In the Forward to his published radio play, Christopher Columbus, MacNeice notes that the radio has unintentionally challenged the assumptions of literary criticism. The animosity expressed by literary critics, according to MacNeice, indicates their inability to address these different assumptions. The foisting of literary technique onto radio can be seen as a rear-guard action resulting from this inability.

The literary approach may also originate in issues involving performance. The radio performance is usually read directly from the script; as a result, there is a precise correlation between performance and text. The notorious improvisations of traditional theatrical productions are absent; the potential performance in radio is inextricably related to the text. As a result, textual

critics have found it easy to disregard the dynamic of performance and base their study of radio on the text.

Finally, the literary approach to the radio piece can also be related to a requirement of the critical act. "Criticism," Drakakis notes, "demands that the object of its attention stand still and be examined" ("Teaching" 29). Thus, in the case of radio, the textual critic appeals to a script in order to analyse the broadcast. Textual criticism, once the piece has been abstracted to the level of text, is but a brief step away.

But the root source of the literary approach is found in New Criticism's practices. John Drakakis has devoted much attention to this attitude in both theatre and radio. Citing the appropriation of theatrical texts into the "specialist category of 'literature'" ("Adaptations" 112), Drakakis argues that radio adaptations of these plays have only served to inflict a similar bias on radio art. Thus, in Thomas's day, "the Third Programme came to be regarded above all as the repository of cultural and, hence, literary excellence" ("Adaptations" 112). It was this link between radio and "literature" that produced, for instance, Henry Reeds' over-inflated sense of the text's value:

In the last resort, the printed page must become the easily available repository of all good talk and writing; on the printed page dramatic literature remains perennially fresh and possible and reproducible in the mind; we neither need nor want the assistance of the actor every time to provide the human voice. (qtd.

in Drakakis "Adaptations" 112)

It is this perspective that propels the literary treatment of a piece like Under Milk Wood, and a perspective that demonstrates an incorrect handling of the formal demands of an artistic piece. Drakakis expands on the New Critical perspective:

This mandarin emphasis on the relationship between quality, exclusivity and permanence, with its implied commitment to an 'idealism of the essence' as opposed to that assumed to exist between the popular, the trivial and the ephemeral, served to reinforce the placement of all dramatic writing, and especially radio writing, in some sort of platonic relationship to the category of 'literature.' Once having established this relationship, the question of the listener's response was itself axiomatic: the process of 'listening' became analogous to that of 'reading.' ("Adaptations" 113)

Thus, radio writing was incorporated into a body of literature; the literary critic could approach the radio play with the same assumptions as he or she would approach a short story or a novel.

Klaus Schöning provides a study of the role that the text, and, more specifically, the philosophy of the text, has played in the wider field of aural artistry. In a brief history of the German Hörspiel (acoustic art), Schöning traces the work of artists such as Pierre Schaefer and John Cage, Dziga Vertov and Walther Ruttmann, noting their common interest in the fundamental

"organisation of sound"(311). This 1920s movement was part of a larger challenge to traditional aesthetic forms; futurists, dadaists and early film-makers "inspired a wide variety of polymedia encounters and fundamental aesthetic reforms"(317). Visual poetry, where coded text was transformed into visual image, and musical pieces, where the "entirety of the acoustic environment"(317) was explored, are but two examples offered by Schöning. But it was the insistent literary paradigm that fractured the efforts of the Hörspiel.

Both in theory and in practice, the Hörspiel moved away from the developments of the 1920s and encapsulated itself as a creature of text-based literature. Sound effects and music were subordinated as illustrative acoustic crutches for the word, for plot. (317)

Indeed, Schöning notes that the New Hörspiel in Germany--a period of revived interest in the potentials of aural art, beginning in 1968 with an influential lecture from Helmut Heifsenbüttel on acoustic art--has been defined by a critical rejection of detrimental literary assumptions. Thus Gerhard Ruhm contends that "the Hörspiel conceives of itself no longer principally as a literary genre"(qtd. Schöning 321); Heifsenbüttel expands on this challenge to literary influence:

An oversimplified definition of the New Hörspiel could be that here the Hörspiel itself becomes problematic . . . i.e., the Hörspiel, or rather its authors and performers, have ceased of their own accord to accept

the traditional rules and conventions of the genre, but instead have begun to question the medium, itself

(qtd. in Schöning 321)

This prioritisation of the medium, where fundamental questions are directed at the artistic form of expression, allows the radio critic to cast off the distorting influence of the text. It is precisely this approach that I have attempted to make use of in this chapter, in order to clearly illustrate the subtle artistry of Dylan Thomas' Under Milk Wood. The development of his radio technique culminates in the multitude of devices evident in the piece. More important, the development points a way towards a final, and crucial, argument in relation to radio's impact on Dylan Thomas himself.

Chapter Four: The Socialisation of Thomas's Aesthetic

In a broadcast entitled On Reading One's Own Poetry, Dylan Thomas spoke about his poem, "After the Funeral":

The next poem I'll read is the only I have written that is, directly, about the life and death of a particular human being I knew---and not about the very many lives and deaths whether seen, as in my first poems, in the tumultuous world of my own being, or, as in the later poems, in war, grief, and great holes and corners of universal love. (Broadcasts 215)

Thomas places the poem between an early poetry of self-concern, and a later poetry defined by a greater, "universal" perspective. Sheila Deane, in her compelling study of the bardic element in Thomas's poetry, also identifies "After the Funeral" as a pivotal point in Thomas's poetic career. She compares a first version of the poem, written in 1933, and the final version of 1938 (the version Thomas read in the broadcast mentioned above), noting important changes in the "tone and shape of the poem, the position of the speaker within the poem, and, most important, the purpose for writing the poem"(199). She compares passages from the two stages of the poem, arguing that the following, from the early poem, is "impersonal and dispassionate, a cold commentary on the hypocrisy of the churchgoers"(199), that it involves an "intentionally disrespectful and disconcerting"(199) focus on the

dead body:

Another gossip's toy has lost its use,
Broken lies buried amid broken toys,
Of flesh and bone lies hungry for the flies,
Waits for the natron and the mummy paint.
With dead lips pursed and dry bright eyes,
Another well of rumours and cold lies
Has dried, and one more joke has lost its point,

while the final (1938) version displaces this spirit of
impersonality and disrespect:

I stand, for this memorial's sake, alone
In the snivelling hours with dead, humped Ann
Whose hooded, fountain heart once fell in puddles
Pound the parched worlds of Wales and drowned each
sun. (Collected Poems 80)

Deane argues that, in this later poem, Thomas's interest in the
"particular woman" and the "particular event" (199) marks a
heightened response to the world around him; as well, the voice
is of a poet "speaking out loud" (200), displacing the "acts of
mind" of the earlier poem.

This expansion in Thomas's poetry has been noted by other
critics. John Ackerman observes that the overarching development
in Thomas's work was

away from this death-touched elaboration of his
introspective intensities, with their singular
explorations on the physical map of his own body, to a

passionate, albeit elegiac, celebration of the human condition on the wider map of the natural world around him. (90)

J.M. Kertzer provides a sophisticated elaboration of Ackerman's sense of the "introspective intensities" in Thomas's early work. He begins with Thomas's own definition of the poetic impulse as that which perpetrates a "brief adventure in the wilderness" (qtd. Kertzer 160). That wilderness, Kertzer argues, "rests in the self, because . . . [Thomas] is the hero of his adventures" (160). Kertzer extends this notion of Thomas-as-hero in relation to the self:

"Like Whitman before him, [Thomas] must make his poetry his own ego," notes John Bayley, because of a compulsion "to embody the experience of being himself." This identification of poetry and ego makes the self not just the hero of an adventure, but the adventure itself. (160)

The focus on the self is pervasive, according to Kertzer; the central force of the poetic adventure intensifies Thomas's role in his own early poetry.

A problematic assertion of Thomas's early self-interest and later social breadth is advanced by Jacob Korg. Indeed, his explanation marks a return to the letter and spirit of William Arrowsmith's evaluation of Under Milk Wood (see pp. 55-56). Korg suggests that:

His early poems were the profoundly spiritual record of

a mystic's self-exploration. Gradually, however, he began to look at the world about him instead of the world within, producing poems, short stories, a movie script, and an uncompleted novel on such subjects as nature, daily life, and the people of his native Wales. These later works represent Thomas's response to his public rather than to his poetic vision. (360)

My criticism of Arrowsmith is equally applicable to Korg's misguided sense of Thomas's Christian mysticism; his early work is neither "profoundly spiritual," nor the result of a "mystic's self-exploration." Instead, it is Korg's distinction between poetic and public vision that is most notable: the separation of the two suggests that, for Korg, public address and a poetic method could not co-exist in Thomas's oeuvre. The observation is remarkably deficient, for it pre-empts any aspect of maturation in Thomas's poetic (i.e., the incorporation of a broader social perspective into his poetry). Its deficiency is heightened by a more careful study of bardic poetry, the quintessential combination of a poetic and public vision.

Sheila Deane, in Bardic Style, notes three principle elements in bardic poetry. "The bard's concern for the spoken quality of his language, the discipline of his versification, and the use of his poems within the community" define the bardic position. Deane, in her analysis of Thomas's work, attempts to demonstrate that these three aspects of his verse emerged only in the later stages of his poetic career. I want to insist, however,

that it was the social vision--the third element of bardic poetry--which appeared later in Thomas's career. For Thomas's attention to the aural quality of his verse was a life-long interest; his comments on the importance of sound, referred to in Chapter One, attest to this. And the discipline of his verse (the restricting intricacies of form, rhyme and rhythm) is a constant throughout his poetic career. From the syllabic intricacies of the 1934 poem "I Dreamed My Genesis"--associated, incidentally, with traditional Welsh verse by Thomas himself (see Ferris 113)--through the "verbal arabesque" (Tindall 102) of "Now" (1936), and culminating in the demanding measures of "Do Not Go Gentle" (1951), the intricate verse construct was a constant in Thomas's writing. Thus, in relation to both the spoken quality of his language and the discipline of versification, it is clear that bardic elements were present in Thomas's poetry throughout his creative life.

But Deane, in attempting to demonstrate the relatively late development of the bardic in Thomas's work, also points to the emergence of a number of bardic techniques. First, she points to the riddling aspect of "Over Sir John's Hill" as an example of the bard's predilection for the cryptic. And second, the opening image of "Ceremony After a Fire Raid," Deane argues, shocks the reader to a greater extent than the obscenities of the early "Before I Knocked;" it is this surprising element that also suggests the bardic (220). But both of these instances are severely problematic. The riddling in "On Sir John's Hill" is

certainly evident, but so too is the riddle that is central to the poems "The Seed-At-Zero" and "My Hero Bares His Nerves," both written when Dylan was twenty. And, Deane's mention of shocking images in the later poetry as opposed to the "obscenities" of the earlier is a judgement rooted in her own moral stricture: "Before I Knocked" is ruled by a degree of surprise equivalent to the later "Ceremony," with the difference for Deane that she disapproves of the earlier example. Clearly, Thomas's use of bardic technique is evident in his earlier work.

Deane, then, should have concentrated explicitly on the development of the social aspect of Thomas's poetry. It is a shift revealed through a comparison of "Where Once the Waters of Your Face" (1934) with a poem such as "Fern Hill," (1945) where grammatical constructs become more conventional, symbols less arcane, and the sound of the verse more mellifluous. The overall result is a greater accessibility with, as critical acclaim will attest, no loss in poetic achievement.

The shift towards a broader social reach is also visible in the poem "In the White Giant's Thigh." Compared to the "introspective intensities" of the early verse, the poem demonstrates a dramatic increase in social sensitivity. The incorporation of voices other than his own, and a delicate portrayal of experiences past, are indications of this broadened sensitivity:

Through throats where many rivers meet, the women pray,
Pleading in the waded bay for the seed to flow

Though the names on their weed grown stones are rained
away,

And alone in the night's eternal, curving act
They yearn with tongues of curlews for the unconceived
And immemorial sons of the cudgelling, hacked
Hill. (Collected Poems 162)

Vital human energy collides with the eradicating forces of Nature, as the women's desires and memories are evoked. The achievement is remarkable; more accurately, it reflects a startling expansion of Thomas's poetic subject.

But the clearest reflection of Thomas's increasing interest comes through his use of radio. It can be noted in the shift from the personal reminiscences of his early three scripts to the broader interest implicit in broadcasts such as The Londoner. Peter Lewis observes, in his analysis of the programme, that "Thomas shows more interest in social breadth than psychological depth" ("Road" 80). Indeed, the focus is on evoking a community in London, and, specifically, the Jackson family.

But obviously, the most profound indication of Thomas's increasingly social perspective is contained in Under Milk Wood. Here a chorus of voices, individually drawn but communally interactive, is given a remarkable vitality. A comparison of Under Milk Wood with Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology emphasises the character of the social method implicit in Thomas's piece: Henry Wells notes that "Thomas is much less satirical than the American. In fact he is romantic and almost

sentimental; he writes an apology for his society"(439). Thomas's radio piece is not only socially attentive, but also socially sympathetic.

But critics, for the most part, have failed to recognise the social expansion that culminates in Under Milk Wood, speculating instead about the emergence of Thomas's dramatic sensibility. A London correspondent for an Australian newspaper claimed:

"Obviously, had he lived, Dylan Thomas might have become the major poetic dramatist for whom we have been waiting"(qtd. in Lewis "Radio" 76); William Empson writes:

He was just getting ready to be a dramatist, and knew he needed to, though the superb but rather static survey of Under Milk Wood was (as it happened) all he had time for. (85)

Refutation of these dramatic assumptions has been given in Chapter Three. It is, however, surprising that critics did not analyse more closely the unconventional dramatic structures of Under Milk Wood. The larger failing is that they assumed that Thomas's radio piece was the expression of a lately-arrived (though conventional) dramatic urge, and not the result of an increasing social interest.

Perhaps, however, this is too active a vilification of the critic. After all, Dylan Thomas had claimed (according to Daniel Jones) that he wished to turn "from a strictly personal kind of poetry to a more public form of expression, and to large-scale dramatic works"(Jones, Preface, vii). It is interesting to note

that, once again, Thomas affirms the introspective quality of his early verse. More importantly, he suggests that it is an interest in the "more public form of expression" that motivates the later work. Critics like Empson, however, prioritised Thomas's mention of the dramatic, interpreting it as the central motivating interest in Thomas's final radio writings.

But it was undoubtedly a profound social interest that was the greater motivational force, as has been demonstrated in relation to his poetry, his broadcasts and his own personal statements. Indeed, it is to be my final assertion in this thesis that this socialised intent resulted from his work in radio.

Marshall McLuhan, writing thirty years ago, revealed to us the paradox of radio: it is, he said, an intensely intimate medium and, at the same time, a broadly social one:

Radio effects most people intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. That is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience. The subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums. This is inherent in the very nature of this medium, with its power to turn the psyche into a single echo chamber. (319)

The subtle implications of radio, McLuhan argues, are social in dimensions. McLuhan proceeds to demonstrate the fundamental conflict between a literate society--individualistic, textual, rationalistic--and the radio medium, with its tribal, communal

shape. The New Critical treatment of radio, noted earlier, can be resolved with this conflict in mind, for the text and the radio broadcast emerge out of mediums fundamentally opposed. The aesthetic shape of each predetermines their mutual incompatibility.

Thus, if McLuhan's analysis can be applied, then Thomas's work in radio must be prioritised in studies of his writing. Indeed, if radio counters literacy's "extreme of individualism" with "kinship webs of deep tribal involvement" (McLuhan 321), then it is only reasonable to suggest that work in radio will be shaped by this social essence. Perhaps more importantly, the impact of radio on Dylan Thomas's artistic sensibility emphasises the necessity for careful analysis of restrictions and assumptions in any artistic medium. And, finally, the example of Dylan Thomas should emphasise the subtle influence which the medium can exert on the artist himself.

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