
Durrell's *Delta* and Dylan Thomas'
'Prologue to an Adventure'

JAMES GIFFORD
University of Alberta

In 1939, Keidrych Rhys charged that Dylan Thomas' 'Prologue to an Adventure' was reprinted by Lawrence Durrell 'in *Delta* (Paris) without acknowledgement . . . without permission' (241); however, Ralph Maud contrarily argues 'Durrell, as editor of *Delta*, asked Thomas for contributions and published something by him in all three issues' (123). Thomas' letters to Durrell support the latter position, as he repeatedly offers material for publication (not subtly in exchange for ready money), writing 'If you want – and you say you want – and I believe you – a poem for the new DELTA, why not the one you like in the paper of Tambimuttu. . .? If not – and perhaps, I hope, as well – here's a new short poem' ('Letters' 4). Nevertheless, the tone of Rhys' opinion seems to have become the standard for discerning the print history of this particular short story, 'Prologue to an Adventure', although any serious debate of the issue appears to have vanished, if any ever occurred. The *Wales* edition of the story in the summer of 1937 has become standard and is the only printing referenced in Thomas' *Collected Stories* and *Early Prose Writings* (both edited by Walford Davies). I contend something different. The correspondence between Thomas and Durrell, as well as other letters by Thomas, point to an amiable relationship of mutual artistic interaction, where Durrell's reprinting of Thomas' work 'without permission' (Rhys 241) would seem unlikely. In fact, available materials further suggest that Thomas' interest lay in having Durrell and

Henry Miller secure publication of 'Prologue to an Adventure' in a book project through the Obelisk Press, which also published two novels that Thomas praised: Durrell's *The Black Book*, and Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. Just after Christmas of 1937, around Durrell and Thomas' first meeting, Durrell also writes to Henry Miller that 'DYLAN THOMAS will have a book for us' (MacNiven 95). Most importantly, such possibilities challenge the authority of the authoritative editions of Thomas' works, since they have relied solely on the first publication of the text, rather than noting what I argue are subsequent revisions by Thomas for what appears to have been a more significant publication project. I therefore argue for a corrected edition of Thomas' 'Prologue to an Adventure' that is based on the version edited by Durrell.

While quite similar, there are variations between the *Wales* printing of 'Prologue to an Adventure' (and therefore the *Early Prose Writings* and *Collected Stories* printings) versus the later printing in *Delta*, and these differences suggest a work in progress (as another Adventure was subsequently titled). The majority of differences involve clarifications from the *Wales* version that make a given subject more particular. However, there are also word changes, alterations to paragraph breaks that encourage a 'race to the cadence', and the addition of a clause to one sentence. All of this points to Thomas having revisited the story after its first publication. This seems even more likely in view of Thomas' letter of June 16 1938 to George Reavey:

The only story I can think of which might cause a few people a small and really unnecessary alarm is 'The Prologue to an Adventure'. This I could cut from the book [*The Burning Baby: 16 Stories*]. . . . [P]ublication first in Paris seems very sensible . . . I am pretty confident that, through Durrell and Miller, [the Obelisk Press] would publish the book. (Fitzgibbon, *Life of Dylan Thomas* 237)

The book never came to fruition, but 'Prologue to an Adventure' was re-published in Paris six months later in *Delta*, under Durrell's editorship.

I should first note that there are a few minor errors in this later printing that could be accounted for in any number of ways, especially without access to the actual manuscript exchanged between Thomas and Durrell, and these errors include 'watchain' (Thomas, *Delta* 7) for 'watch-chain' (Thomas, *Collected* 106) and 'in to' (Thomas, *Delta* 7) for 'into' (Thomas, *Collected* 106). Nonetheless, the clarification of 'the gossips of heaven' (Thomas, *Collected* 106) to 'the gossip of heaven' (Thomas, *Delta* 7) emphasizes gossip as aligned with 'fallen rumours' (Thomas, *Delta* 7) rather than a group of talkative seraphim. More significantly, to the sentence 'I jostled the devil at my elbow, but lust in his city shadows dogged me under the arches, down the black blind streets' (Thomas, *Collected* 107; *Delta* 8), Thomas adds the clause 'and through the maze of alleys' (*Delta* 8), which anticipates further labyrinthine imagery that appears shortly thereafter. The next sentence likewise varies between a 'ribbon' (*Collected* 107) and 'shawl' (*Delta* 8) 'that hides the nipples' and leaves the 'bald girl. . . the nakeder' for

it (*Collected* 107; *Delta* 8). The latter, and later, word-choice highlights the alliteration in the sentence of 8 fricative 's' or 'sh' sounds, as opposed to the earlier use of 'ribbon', which matches only 'ragged'. Furthermore, when the phrase 'we shall be naked' (*Collected* 108, *Delta* 9) recurs, this same alliterative pattern recurs with another 8 fricative 's' or 'sh' sounds, suggesting that the change to 'shawl' in the later *Delta* printing was part of a larger poetic structure Thomas intended for the work.

Further word-choice and grammatical changes include 'How long, how long, lord of the hail, shall my city rock on, and the seven deadly seas wait *tidelessly* for the moon, *the bitter end the last tide-spinning* of the full circle' (*Collected* 109; emphasis mine). The repetition of 'tidelessly' and 'tide-spinning' is excised in the *Delta*, and the comma-splice that suggests a subject and verb relationship between 'bitter' and 'end' is clarified to read: 'the seven deadly seas wait for the moon, the bitter end, and the last tide-spinning of the full circle' (*Delta* 10), which again points to the later printing as having been revised and clarified. What is the next paragraph in the *Delta* printing, or the same paragraph in the standard editions, also holds two similar corrections. 'Daniel. . . lamented. . . the death *on* the city' (*Collected* 109; emphasis mine) becomes the 'death *of* the city' (*Delta* 11; emphasis mine), and the paradoxical contrast of 'the *flying* beast and the *walking* bird that war about us' (*Collected* 109; emphasis mine) is made more poetic and sinister as 'the flying beast and *stalking* bird' (*Delta* 11; emphasis mine). Likewise, Thomas' mutation of 'Gentlemen, it is my call, said the live loudspeaker' (*Collected* 109) to 'Gentlemen, *this* is my call' (*Delta* 11; emphasis mine) figures as a correction in much the same way.

Two other minor alterations reinforce this overall trend. While 'the room behind us *flowed*, like four waters, down the seven gutters of the city into a black sea' (*Collected* 110; emphasis mine), with its allusion to the Nile basin, works as a water image, the synaesthetic shift to 'the room behind us *glowed*, like four waters' (*Delta* 12; emphasis mine) is more playfully aligned with the repeated light-oriented visual images surrounding the sentence: 'lamped', 'stars, with a built moon', 'candles', 'world of light', 'bright eyes', 'starfall', and 'glass lights' (*Collected* 110; *Delta* 12). This synaesthetic turn is also very much in line with Thomas' other phrases, like 'sounds of shape', 'short-time shapes', and 'figures in the shape of sounds' (*Collected* 107; *Delta* 8). All these changes point to a tightening of the language and sound of the work, as well as clarification of meaning. As such, they suggest that Thomas had returned to the work and that this later printing is more authoritative of his final intentions for it and that it functions as a more unified artistic product.

Nevertheless, the *Delta* printing is not perfect, and in the absence of any definitive copy by Thomas, the two editions ought to be amalgamated into a corrected edition. While the language of the 1938 printing is improved over that of the first appearance in the 1937 *Wales* issue, it is marred by minor typographical slips, such as missing periods and commas, and it seems likely that the hyphenated words of the first printing should be retained.

Also, I have not detailed all differences between the editions here, and have used only the most salient instances, but that is a project best left to a formal corrected edition.

As an epilogue, I would suggest that the significance of the friendship between Thomas and Durrell has been generally under-studied in scholarship on both authors, as is evidenced in the frequent misspelling of Durrell's name as 'Laurence' in a number of book-publications on Thomas and the absence of any reference whatsoever to the variant publication of Durrell's 'Shades of Dylan Thomas'; this work later appeared in French as the introduction to Thomas' translated *Ouevres* ('Images de Dylan Thomas' 7-13), but it first appeared as a letter to Tambimuttu's *Poetry London-New York* in 1956, the year before publication in *Encounter* (the manuscript of which resides in Special Collections of the McPherson Library at the University of Victoria). To further compound the connections between the two, the Thomas-Durrell letters, scant though they are, suggest that Rhys' charge of missing acknowledgement may actually be a fault on *Wales* or perhaps Thomas himself for giving multiple submissions, since Thomas writes to Durrell in 1937 that he had already given Henry Miller 'two prose pieces' ('Letters' 3) for *The Booster*, which later became the *Delta*. Significantly, the date of Thomas' statement is misconstrued by at least a year in Fitzgibbon's *Selected Letters of Dylan Thomas* (210), but a comparison between Durrell's statement that the letter 'followed upon our first meeting' (Thomas, 'Letters' 1) and his contention that this was concomitant with his appointment with Anne Wickham in 1937 ('Shades' 56) places the date securely. This is further supported by Miller's direct comparison of Durrell's 'Asylum in the Snow' to Thomas' prose work (MacNiven 39), which suggests Miller had read Thomas' prose before January 3rd of 1936. Furthermore, Durrell writes on November 5, 1938, 'A letter from Dylan Thomas – I like him more and more' (MacNiven 107), which decisively precludes the possibility of their *first* exchange occurring a month later in December of the same year. This also troubles the implication in Ferris' work that this first meeting occurred in January 1939 (167), when he is most likely referring to the later meeting described by Durrell in 'Shades of Dylan Thomas'. Nevertheless, of further significance is the mutual affinity between Durrell and Thomas' works, and to the best of my knowledge, no close comparison of their poetry has ever been published (though this would seem quite rewarding). Despite this, I have had success pairing their prose and poetry in the classroom, and the prose style of Thomas' surreal fiction with Durrell's early prose works deserves analysis as potentially interconnected (as Miller's letter that I note above reads them), or at the least as representative of a broader trend. For instance, Thomas refers to Durrell's *The Black Book* repeatedly in his letters and Fitzgibbon remarks 'Dylan at this time admired Durrell's writing' (*Selected Letters* 210), while Durrell gives heavy praise to Thomas. However, this would not seem to be a simple case of influence, since both were independently formulating these prose styles by 1935, but it does point to a mutual affinity. In particular, the

contemporaneous publication of Durrell's 'Asylum in the Snow' with Thomas' 'An Adventure From a Work in Progress', both in *Seven* (along with poetry by both), merits attention, especially given the numerous textual similarities and their inevitable familiarity with each other's work. Therefore, closer work on the two will likely develop profitably for criticism, a classical source analysis of their works, and potentially in establishing authoritative editions of their early writings.

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