



GWASG PRIFYSGOL CYMRU
UNIVERSITY OF WALES PRESS



Open Library of Humanities

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF WELSH WRITING IN ENGLISH

John Berryman and the American Legacy of Dylan Thomas

How to Cite:

Kurt Heinzelman, 'John Berryman and the American Legacy of Dylan Thomas', *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, 5 (2018), 1, DOI: 10.16995/ijwwe.5.5

Published:

April 2018

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of the *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, which is a journal of the University of Wales Press.

Copyright:

© 2018 The Author(s). This article is freely available to read but, for reasons of third-party content inclusion, is not openly licensed.

Open Access:

International Journal of Welsh Writing in English is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The University of Wales Press wishes to acknowledge the funding received from the Open Library of Humanities towards the cost of producing this open access journal.

JOHN BERRYMAN AND THE AMERICAN LEGACY OF DYLAN THOMAS¹

Kurt Heinzelman, The University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

Lost in the celebration of the 2014 Dylan Thomas centenary was why Thomas's reputation, at least among literary historians and particularly fellow poets, had declined so much in the nearly sixty years since his death. That those poets once influenced by Thomas – and they were legion – produced a kind of 'Dylan Effect', diluting what was once impressive is one thesis of this article, even as non-professional readers continue to this day to revere some of his work. Another poet whose reputation has perhaps declined as greatly, a man born days apart from Thomas, is the American John Berryman. Berryman met Thomas only a handful of times over twenty-six years, but Thomas remained not an influence but a ghostly presence for Berryman. As this article tries to explain, Berryman's greatest work, *The Dream Songs*, does not so much imitate Thomas as assimilate his forms of oral performance and gaiety, if not his existential optimism. To use a legal term, the legacy of Thomas in the work of Berryman is the *casus omissus* – the missing case – among the statutory narratives of literary history. This article contextualises Berryman's very belated elegy for Thomas, with the Tennysonian title 'In Memoriam', which came well after the deeply elegiac 385 Dream Songs were completed. It is, in effect, both a post-scripted Dream Song as well as a kind of weirdly posthumous Dream Song for Berryman himself, whose own death would follow shortly after its composition.

Keywords Reputation, influence, affiliation, imitation, oral performance.

I half-adored him for his intricate booms & indecent tales
almost entirely untrue.²

It is safe to say that in 2014, the centenary of his birth, Dylan Thomas enjoyed, in Britain at least, the greatest public attention since his untimely death at age thirty-nine. The occasion was marked by lectures, revivals, BBC telecasts, musical adaptations of the poems, new editions of the poetry, public readings, one-man shows and much more. Signs of Thomas's general popularity still remained, independent of the centenary. Judging by the various illustrated editions, the book version of *A Child's Christmas in Wales* continues to be, as it was from the outset after Thomas's death, a best-seller for New Directions.³ Judging informally by the number of times it is anthologised, 'Fern Hill' continues to be one of Thomas's most popular poems; and even if 'Do not go gentle into that good night' is not recited at two out of every three funerals, as Paul Muldoon has jocularly claimed, its title has certainly entered general consciousness as much as 'April is the cruelest month' or 'The road not taken.'⁴ As an ongoing force in English-language poetry and poetics, however, Dylan Thomas has long since disappeared. Now may be a good time to ask why, especially when we remember how he was once the most emulated, the most celebrated and the most notorious poet of his generation.

In asking why, though, I want to offer some reflections on how we understand the idea of 'influence' and how misunderstanding it may lead us to miscalculate a writer's enduring effect on those who follow him. One way of measuring renown is in the stock market of poetic letters. After Thomas's death in 1953 his widow Caitlin made it known that his archive was for sale, and it was subsequently acquired by the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas. To this day the HRC's collection is the principal Thomas archive in the world, holding well over 50 per cent of all archival material extant. One sign of Thomas's disappearance, in America at least, was that the HRC hosted no public exhibition of its own and no academic programming in the centenary year, apart from a forty-minute outdoor poetry reading hosted by Gwyneth Lewis and myself.

Still, Thomas continues to appeal to non-specialist readers – those coming to his poetry perhaps for the first time, or coming to it one poem at a time, engaging with his work as readers rather than already deterred from or attracted to Thomas because of his popular reputation.

It is that history, always swirling about Thomas's life and his works' reception history, which is invoked in the recent book *American Smoke* (2013) by the Anglo-Welsh writer Iain Sinclair:

This crumpled, swollen-bellied man with stained nicotine teeth was the original postwar performance poet, playing to packed crowds, and losing, in the sweats and fears of hypnotic projection, all sense of self. The preacherly mannerisms of his Methodist ancestors, and the seductive rumble and thunder of voice from the abused instrument of body, mesmerized the uptown poetry mob.⁵

A bit breathless itself, this passage is not an inaccurate representation of what may be called 'The Dylan Effect', once so pronounced. What I am here interested in, though, is the precipitous decline in Dylan Thomas's stature among contemporary English-language verse practitioners – that is, among fellow poets, especially young poets, poets no older than Thomas was at the height of his fame. At the same time, I wish to take this occasion to query how celebrity, value and influence are related, and the way that relationship was played out in the work of one of Thomas's close contemporaries, John Berryman.

To witness how Thomas now looks to the young, let me cite two poets from different sides of the Atlantic. The English poet Glyn Maxwell tells this story:

One morning long ago in Boston [Massachusetts] town Professor [Derek] Walcott said I played melodies with my right hand but my left hand just lay there. Another time, in his tiny wooden office on a Tuesday morning in November sunshine, he surveyed a forty-line lyric I'd written about me. He'd made us memorise Dylan Thomas's short poem 'Twenty-four years remind the tears of my eyes' and well, I'd had a birthday just that week, my 25th, so I'd done the obvious but gone on way longer. He frowned, ringed a little phrase with his pencil and then quoted with evident scorn: 'caving into sleep . . . caving into sleep? *Caving* – into – *sleep*?' Knowing what was coming, I said, 'yes I suppose . . . that's pretty rubbish now I look . . .' He slid the poem back to me. 'It's terrific, the rest is shit.'⁶

Here is the nine-line poem that did not give Maxwell much joy:

Twenty-four years remind the tears of my eyes.
 (Bury the dead for fear that they walk to the grave in labour.)
 In the groin of the natural doorway I crouched like a tailor
 Sewing a shroud for a journey
 By the light of the meat-eating sun.
 Dressed to die, the sensual strut begun,
 With my red veins full of money,
 In the final direction of the elementary town
 I advance for as long as forever is.⁷

Maxwell does say he may have learned something—namely, that his own birthday poem had ‘gone on way longer’ than was necessary – but I doubt that the lesson of brevity was the sole reason Walcott assigned this memorisation exercise. Thomas uses rhetorical flourishes that an up-and-coming young poet might shake his head at and think are rubbish, like Maxwell’s own ‘caving into sleep’. I am thinking of the first line with its oddly skewed way of ‘reminding’ the speaker that time is short and in danger of being wasted, or of ‘the meat-eating sun’, or of that bizarre line about ‘red veins full of money’. And even the wonderful last line may sound to a young poet trying to ‘make it new’ like an old-fashioned rhetorical flourish with too much trombone glissando. I trust that one intent of Walcott’s assignment was to say, ‘Listen, ephebe, you cannot imitate this, but you can *learn* from it.’⁸

Michael Robbins is a young American poet who contributed a column to a recent issue of *Poetry* magazine devoted to why contemporary poets might hate their modernist predecessors. Robbins is snarkier than Maxwell: let us call his sport ‘Mocking Thomas.’ Here he is speaking of Thomas’s rhetoric:

They appear to be the names of heavy metal bands: Plague of Fables; Star-Flanked Seed; Serpent Caul, Murder of Eden; Altar of Plagues; Seed-at-Zero; The Grave and My Calm Body; Dark Asylum; Mares of Thrace, Herods Wail; Christbread; Binding Moon; Red Swine. In fact they are phrases culled from Dylan Thomas’s poems – except that I threw two actual metal bands in there. Didn’t notice, did you? . . . In Thomas’s work, self-seriousness is the major trope. Everything is intoned from on high.

...

All that's at stake for Thomas is whether his self-pity has been gorgeously enough expressed.⁹

This is a harsh evaluation, and arguably unfair, as Robbins seems to concede when he continues: 'That's what I hate most about Thomas: if you care about poems, you can't entirely hate him.'¹⁰ Robbins's complaint that Thomas can be bombastic, guilty of heavy breathing, is itself a bit of a cliché. It has often been said that the decade following Thomas's death in 1953 was one 'in which the rhetorical, the bardic, and the orphic were under heavy interdiction in England as the Movement's aesthetics took the field',¹¹ Outside Britain, though, Thomas's poems remained vital longer, as Seamus Heaney remembered:

[The poems] opened a thrilling line between the centre and the edges of the Anglophone world. For all us young provincials, from Belfast to Brisbane, the impact of Thomas's performance meant that we had a gratifying sense of access to something that was acknowledged to be altogether modern, difficult *and* poetry.¹²

For a little while, that is. John Tranter, the fine Australian poet and man of letters, remarked to me in an e-mail during the centenary year that he, like many other poets Down Under, were influenced by Thomas early on, but that 'he just didn't fit in the 1960s: think Dylan in Carnaby St.: no way'. Even as Dylan Thomas appeared on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* he was being replaced by that other Dylan, Bob. Or, in Heaney's words, 'Dylan Thomas is by now [the early 1990s] as much a case history as a chapter in the history of poetry.'¹³

In this essay I wish to re-examine that time when Thomas was a chapter in an ongoing history of poetry by looking at two poets: one (from Down Under) who is clearly imitating Thomas; and a second who is doing something else in regards to 'The Dylan Effect'. There is a difference between popularity and love (or affection), between imitation and influence, just as there is a difference between celebrity, merit and enduring value. The broader question is how poets learn from one another, even if – or especially if – their work is not exactly *influenced* by that of the other. Answers require mapping the limits of influence.

Is this too fine a distinction, one might ask, between ‘learning from’ and ‘being influenced by’? Let me first lay out my thesis, and then backtrack to this question.

I am going to examine Thomas’s ongoing effect through a source that has rarely been acknowledged by literary historians and, when noticed, has never been carefully and systematically pursued. I am speaking of the strange *affiliation* between Dylan Thomas and the American poet John Berryman. I will go a step farther and say that one reason literary critics have overlooked this affiliation is because they are looking for *influence*. Perhaps it is even the case that young would-be poets do not respond as powerfully as young would-be poets once did to Thomas’s poetry for precisely this reason: that what his work once could teach, and might even now be able to teach, has been lost under the weight of all those poets who were directly influenced by him.

So, before we turn to John Berryman, who, in my view, assimilates Thomas without imitating him, let me cite one example of what I would call a largely successful application of Thomas’s poetics but one that also shows the limits of influence. It is an early poem by the acclaimed Australian Les Murray, collected in his 1965 volume *The Ilex Tree*, and the poem it echoes is Thomas’s ‘Fern Hill’. The poems are about the same length, both too long to quote in their entirety. Readers will remember, of course, the floating, languid rhythms of ‘Fern Hill’, its sometimes startling imagery combined with wide-eyed optimism:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
 The night above the dingle starry,
 Time let me hail and climb
 Golden in the heydays of his eyes . . .

One remembers its love for the rural scene:

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
 In the sun that is young once only . . .
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
 And the sabbath rang slowly
 In the pebbles of the holy streams.

And its particular attention to birds and horses:

As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark.

And of course there is the plangent closing couplet, making 'Time' the ultimate subject of the poem: 'Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea.'¹⁴

In Murray's poem called 'Spring Hail', a boy and his pony go out riding in the countryside after a hailstorm. The opening two lines serve as a refrain, omitted in the general abridgement that follows.

This is for spring and hail, that you may remember:
for a boy long ago, and a pony that could fly.

We had huddled together a long time in the shed
in the scent of vanished corn and wild bush birds,
and the hammering faltered, and the torn
cobwebs ceased their quivering and hung still
from the nested rafters. We became uneasy
at the silence that grew about us, and came out.

The beaded violence had ceased. Fresh-minted hills
smoked, and the heavens swirled and blew away.
The paddocks were endless again, and all around
leaves lay beneath their trees, and cakes of moss.
Sheep trotted and propped, and shook out ice from their wool.
The hard blue highway that had carried us there
fumed as we crossed it; and the hail I scooped
from underfoot still bore the taste of sky
and hurt my teeth, and crackled as we walked . . .

I sat on a log then, listening with my skin
to the secret feast of the sun, to the long wet worms
at work in the earth, and deeper down, the stones
beneath the earth uneasy that their sleep
should be troubled by dreams of water soaking down,
and I heard with my ears the creek on its bed of mould
moving and passing a mothering sound . . .

My pony came up then and stood by me,
waiting to be gone . . .

It was time
to leap to the saddle and go . . .
Time to shatter peace and lean into spring
as into a battering wind, and be rapidly gone.

It was time, high time, the highest and only time
to stand in the stirrups and shout out, blind with wind
for the height and clatter of ridge to be topped
and the racing downward after through the lands
of floating green and bridges and flickering trees.
It was time, as never again it was time
to pull the bridle up, so the racketing hooves
fell silent as we ascended from the hill
above the farms, far up to where the hail
formed and hung weightless in the upper air,
charting the birdless winds with silver roads
for us to follow and be utterly gone.¹⁵

Murray is too good a poet merely to copy Thomas, and it is instructive to see both what he chooses to borrow and how the poems differ. One can hear immediately the same rhythms in both poems: in Thomas it is a kind of sea-wave music; in Murray it could be construed as galloping or cantering or trotting, completely appropriate in a poem about 'a pony that could fly', but still clearly derived from 'Fern Hill'. Yet the narrative stance of Murray's poem is quite different. Thomas's poem is unabashedly personal, its 'green' faith totally identifiable with the 'young and easy' speaker. The body of Murray's poem is spoken by a boy as well, but the chorus distances the poet-speaker from that boy: 'This is for spring and hail, that you may remember: / for a boy long ago.' 'Fern Hill' is often criticised for its relentless optimism, its naive, even youthful, nostalgia (since it is about a relatively young man recalling his own youth), or for a pastoralism over-ripened, going to seed. Murray's refrain prevents that criticism by separating the boy who acts and speaks from the poet who records for the sake of remembering, though this memorialising or distancing device may not necessarily make a more moving poem.

One also notes in Murray an attempt at chain rhymes and near-rhymes like 'hill' / 'hail' / 'hung', which suggests the Welsh-language practice called *cynganedd* that Thomas uses to much greater effect in 'Fern Hill'. The invocation of 'time' in Murray's poem also creates echoes with Thomas, but it seems rather melodramatic and a bit comic here: 'It was time, high time, the highest and only time / to stand in the stirrups and shout out.' (This suggests to me a football cheerleader.) One can often tell that a poem is borrowing too faithfully when it loses touch with its own composing practice, when it stops listening to itself because it is listening so hard to its predecessor. I think that is the case here with 'time', and also earlier when the speaker says 'I heard with my ears.' The mature Murray will never be so deaf to such redundancy.

Finally, I think the greatest strength of Murray's poem compared to Thomas's is also its greatest weakness: the portrayal of landscape. Murray's landscape is a drought-hardened, winter-chilled opposite of Thomas's green world. Murray's highway is hard and blue, and although this is a spring hailstorm, it is still cold enough that the ice stays unmelted in the sheep's wool. Yes, like 'Fern Hill' 'Spring Hail' is decidedly rural, but with the possible exception of those 'bush birds', whatever species they may be, it is a countryside without local specificity. I do not mean that the place is unreal – we know that it is meant to be New South Wales but it could as easily be my native Wisconsin or Dylan's own south Wales. By contrast, Fern Hill seems a more actual, or at least a more specific place. For all the nostalgic, Edenic imagery in the poem, Thomas's birds are exactly identified as owl and nightjar; his foxes bark; his horses whinny; there are ricks in the field and pebbles in the stream. Apple trees appear not because this farm is symbolic but because apples grow in Wales. I am not saying that Murray's poem would be better if it had a kangaroo in it; I am only pointing out that when a poem lacks a local habitation and a name its portrayal of memory becomes more mythopoeic than personal. The specialness of the memory seems compromised.

Precisely because Murray's 'Spring Hail' is a good poem it serves as a limit-case for the power of influence. John Berryman is quite a different case, as I have already suggested. He is what lawyers call a *casus omissus* – a missing case – among the statutory narratives of literary historians; surprisingly so because there are so many superficial similarities between Berryman and Thomas, not the least of which is that by the end of his life Berryman himself was as famous, or notorious, as

Thomas had been when Berryman knew him. And, if one is to believe J.C., writing in the N.B. column of the *TLS* almost exactly on Berryman's own centenary (24 October 2014), 'few [literary reputations have] fall[en] as precipitously as Berryman's has done in the past quarter-century'.¹⁶

Like Thomas, John Berryman was as often known for his drinking, and for the behaviour that followed from it, as he was for his poetry. It is understandable that critics have wanted to lump Berryman together with his American contemporaries – Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell – but in actuality Thomas had pride of place in Berryman's own life. He met (and drank with) Thomas long before he made the personal acquaintance of his own American compatriots. This was back in 1937 when Berryman's chance to visit William Butler Yeats, whom both men revered, was spoiled by Thomas's getting too drunk to keep the appointment. According to Berryman's biographer, Paul Mariani, before Berryman made Thomas's acquaintance he thought the Welshman's poetry was 'fairly good' but also 'overrated'. But after Berryman had spent some time in Thomas's company he always included him in every university class he taught on modern poetry, usually as the only contemporary British writer (besides W. H. Auden).¹⁷ I will argue that the presence of Dylan Thomas as one of John Berryman's 'true contemporaries' stayed with him in ways that affected most notably the poetry of his later years – that is, from Thomas's death to his own (1953–72). I am using the word 'affected' here rather than 'informed', because the former term suggests emotive resonance – an affect or feeling – whereas the latter suggests a shaping force – an effect. I do not think there is a cause-and-effect relationship of any significant sort between Berryman and Thomas.

In spite of the fact that Berryman had met Thomas only a couple of times in person before he saw him in the hospital in November 1953, on what turned out to be his deathbed, there is a host of circumstantial evidence for the ongoing connection that Berryman felt to Thomas. To start with, the men were born a few days apart. Berryman was actually a few days older, but Thomas had somehow persuaded him that he, Dylan, was the elder – 'born one day / before I surfaced', as Berryman put in his elegy.¹⁸ Berryman was at Thomas's side when he passed away in his fortieth year and shrieked for anyone to hear that, with Dylan,

poetry itself had died. In fact, Thomas died when he was almost exactly the same age Berryman's biological father was when he committed suicide. The death of the father Berryman never knew – 'my father', as he puts it in *The Dream Songs*, 'who dared so long ago leave me' – haunted him throughout his life, and it is reasonable to assume that after 1953 the paternal ghost was partly entwined with Thomas's.¹⁹ Moreover, close to his own fortieth birthday in October 1954 Berryman moved to Minneapolis, thirty miles from where his father had been born, in order to take a job that he would keep until his own suicide in 1972, shortly after he had finished his elegy for Dylan Thomas. Less than a year after he moved to the University of Minnesota, less than two years after Dylan's death, and after some intensive dream analysis, Berryman began writing what would become *The Dream Songs*, poems that Berryman himself saw as a new beginning.

Rather than saying that Thomas influenced Berryman directly, as he did Les Murray, I would say that Berryman absorbed Thomas; that Thomas's ongoing, though intermittent, presence for him manifested itself in a voice and a manner that Berryman would be projecting in his new *Dream Songs*, begun in the mid-1950s but not published as a volume until 1964. Many of the completed 385 *Dream Songs*, the last instalment of which appeared in 1968, are serial elegies, signalled early in the sequence by Dream Song #21 with its invocation of 'all the dead' and its haunting refrain, 'O come on down. O come on down' – a refrain that eerily anticipates Berryman's very, very belated elegy for Thomas, with its refrain, 'down a many few'.²⁰ Let me call Berryman's elegy for Thomas a post-scripted Dream Song, or even a kind of weirdly posthumous Dream Song, for Berryman's own death would follow hard upon its composition.

What do I mean by 'a voice and a manner' as symptoms of how Berryman absorbed Thomas? We know that Berryman's reading style for *The Dream Songs* changed from what some have called his affected, waggishly Anglophonic, Princeton-ish, academic voice to a voice of much greater pitch changes, bardic riffs, bluesy mutterings – an amped-up reading style, partly fuelled by drink to be sure, but more dramatically attuned to the public reading voice, or voices, of Dylan Thomas than to Berryman's more scholastic poet-friends such as Allen Tate or R. P. Blackmur. We also know that Berryman was not unique among American poets at that time in hearing Thomas as a possible model for reaching a larger, non-academic audience.²¹

One can hear Berryman reading a very early poem in that thin academic voice. It is ‘The Ball Poem’, about a little boy’s loss of a ball, a simple theme that becomes part of Berryman’s later sense that we live in a world of unremitting loss:

What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,
 What, what is he to do? I saw it go
 Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then
 Merrily over – there it is in the water!
 No use to say ‘O there are other balls’:
 An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy
 As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down
 All his young days into the harbor where
 His ball went.²²

There is a compelling, one might say bouncy, repetitiveness to this syntax, where lines are sometimes stretched to make them more regular in length, as in ‘An ultimate shaking grief’ or ‘he stands rigid, trembling, staring down’, but nothing very exciting is at work in terms of rhetoric or tone. The regularity is apparent seeing the poem on the page, and the performing voice, in Berryman’s recordings of this poem, is downright teacherly, if not a bit pedantic.²³

One can also listen to the Berryman of *The Dream Songs* expressing a different kind of loss. The changes one hears in Berryman’s later work are not just in diction but in tonality, in verbal registers, from colloquial to high-toned, from vulgar to hieratic.²⁴ As Mariani points out, Berryman always said of the Dream Songs that he wanted to wed ‘gravity of matter’ to ‘gaiety of manner’, to make the language (in Berryman’s own words) ‘*much* rougher & more brilliant’ than what he had written before, and to jazz up the meter so as to drive prosodists ‘right out of their minds.’²⁵ If you look at the shape of these dream stanzas on the page, they look like structures designed by Gaudí – lines comprising a single word, gaps, elisions, jumpy pauses. They do not look like the usually very regular and regulated stanzas of Dylan Thomas. And the poems do not sound like Thomas either, except in their verbal extravagance, their tipsiness and their sheer derring-do of assimilation. If the whole notion of the Dream Songs as *songs* or stylised chants recalls Black American music, especially its call-and-response, then Berryman turns that into vaudevillian comedy, compounding the

blackface minstrel voice with Whitman's 'barbaric yawp' from 'Song of Myself', a work published exactly 100 years before Berryman started on his Dream Songs.

At the time when Berryman first knew Thomas, it was Thomas who had this sometimes clownish and sometimes ribald but also virtuosic range of performing styles and speaking voices. In Canto XVIII of 'Autumn Journal' Louis MacNeice remembered the effect of Thomas as performer in the old days:

A whole masque
Of tones and cadences – the organ boom,
The mimicry, then the chuckles; we could bask

As though in a lush meadow in any room
Where that voice started, trellising the air
With honeysuckle or dogrose, bloom on bloom,

And loosing bees between them and a bear
To grumble after the bees.²⁶

The send-ups of T. S. Eliot, for instance, or the readings of Herbert Read or the bearish grumblings of ballads or the sweet loosing of bees around Edith Sitwell were all the voices of mimicry and adulation that Thomas could assume, along with the organ voice. These are the reading styles that Berryman, too, heard from him. Although Berryman barely appears in Andrew Lycett's biography of Thomas, and does not appear at all in that of Paul Ferris, I believe that this range of voices was important, much later on, for Berryman.

All who know Thomas recognise, of course, the sonorous organ voice, which eventually became essentially his singular voice. As has been said by many listeners, Thomas seemed to be singing his poems as if they were arias. But there is an earlier, privately recorded voicing of the poem 'In my craft or sullen art', a poem we usually hear in Thomas's recordings as grandly operatic. In performance time the earlier version is half the length of the later one; it is spoken, not recited, and voiced quietly, almost as if it were acknowledging a secret, a way of colouring its saying that restores to the poem its essentially private or 'sullen' nature (one meaning of 'sullen' is 'solitary'). In this performance, it becomes a poem not so much to show off the poet as craftsman as to

address the lovers who, as the poem ultimately discloses, neither need nor want the poet's verses.²⁷

It is in Berryman's performative transformations that his affiliation with Thomas occurs and not so much in subject matter, the place where 'influence' is usually charted. Berryman has little or none of Thomas's green-world optimism, his near-mystical belief in a pure and good creationism, what one might call his sweetness. Igor Stravinsky noted this quality the only time he met Thomas. 'As soon as I saw him,' Stravinsky remembered, 'I knew that the only thing to do was to love him.'²⁸ Thomas himself was similarly taken with the older artist. 'What a beautiful man,' Dylan said, 'Sweet as a bee and small as a grasshopper.'²⁹ When Stravinsky asked Thomas to write a libretto for an opera that would take place in a post-apocalypse world where language needed to be reinvented *ex nihilo*, he had certainly found the right poet. Thomas always allowed that he became a poet not because of any ideas he wished to express but out of a pure – one could almost call it an Adamic – love of language, even when, or especially when, he didn't understand what the words meant.³⁰

Perhaps the only time that Berryman came close to Thomas in both subject matter and tone is briefly at the end of the first Dream Song:

Once in a sycamore I was glad
all at the top, and I sang.
Hard on the land wears the strong sea
and empty grows every bed.³¹

That first sentence is pure Thomas, but Berryman cannot sustain the hyperbolic fortitude of 'Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea.' For Berryman, there has been an irredeemable fall: 'Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed.' And in Berryman's myth the fall starts with the death of the father. His anger at this first desertion is voiced in a very late Dream Song by appropriating Thomas's famous code-word 'rage.' Thomas commanded his own father to rage *against* death, but Berryman inverts that into rage *at* the father's death: 'I stand above my father's grave with rage.'³²

For Berryman, language is all about usage, not prelapsarian naming. One has to believe profoundly in the eschewal of semantic sense to say, as he does in one of the later Dream Songs: 'These Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand.'³³ Henry, the poet's

quasi-autobiographical character, is snarly in a way that Thomas never was; he is huffy, waggish, pissy, filled with ‘plights & gripes’, and he speaks in all sorts of patois.³⁴ ‘There ought to be a law against Henry’, Henry says.³⁵ *The Dream Songs*’ rejoinder to Thomas’s notion (in ‘A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London’) that ‘After the first death there is no other’ would go something like: ‘The first death is that of the father and it is followed by nothing but death, especially of the *makars*, the true bards.’³⁶ It is a music that Henry in Dream Song #43 calls ‘the grave ground-rhythm of a gone / . . . makar.’³⁷

And yet there are Dylanesque moments, as in the following lines, where the narrator speaks to unidentified others, his friends, through the first-person ‘I’ but initially identifies himself in the third person as ‘he’:

My friends, – he has been known to mourn, – I’ll die;
live you, in the most wild, kindly, green
partly forgiving wood,
sort of forever and all those human sings
close not your better ears to, while good Spring
returns with a dance and a sigh.³⁸

What poet of Berryman’s acquaintance could this prayer for ‘better ears’, this benedictory wish that his friends live in a ‘most kindly, green . . . wood’ be echoing if not the Dylan Thomas of ‘Fern Hill’ and ‘Poem in October’? Those ‘better ears’ are the ones that Dylan could touch with his ‘human sings’, but it is not a music that Berryman could assimilate or affiliate with for more than a stanza or two.

The strongest evidence, however, for Berryman’s ongoing imaginative engagement with Dylan Thomas is not through poetic allusions or subject matter; it is in the elegy he wrote, as it turned out, in the last years of his own life – an elegy for a man he had watched expire at age thirty-nine, a decade and a half after they first met as drinking buddies and fellow poets trying to make their way in the world. When we remember, as Sinclair puts it, that Berryman was ‘the nerve-tuned laureate of obituaries’ – in *The Dream Songs* there are eleven elegies for Delmore Schwartz alone – one might ask why Dylan Thomas is not included in the *Songs* themselves.³⁹ One answer is that Thomas died before Berryman started writing his Dream Songs, and the obituaries included in the *Songs* are for those who died while he was writing them.

I must say I do not entirely understand Sinclair's additional, unsupported, but provocative assertion that Thomas 'flies through Berryman's *Dream Songs* like a wisecracking owl' unless Sinclair is merely suggesting that Berryman's comedic voice may have been partly acquired through Dylan's agency.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, if Thomas is in Berryman's *Dream Songs*, as I believe he is, there are certainly no poems about him. And I don't think that there are any poems of Berryman's that are really influenced directly by Thomas. I would argue instead that Berryman could not assess how important Thomas was to him until he had finished publishing the *Songs*. The elegy to Thomas comes as Berryman himself, now in his mid-fifties and hospitalised at least once a year from drink and depression, starts to understand that he may be veering towards the same sad end as Thomas.

Berryman's elegy for Thomas is called 'In Memoriam'. Like the other famous elegy with that title, Berryman's poem does not name the deceased. Tennyson gave only the initials of his subject (A. H. H); Berryman simply notes Thomas's dates of birth and death (1914–53). Perhaps Berryman thought that in 1970 Dylan Thomas's life would still be recognisable through these dates alone; but I think it more likely that dates and numbers were precisely what was most important personally for Berryman in recalling Thomas.

The first section is all about numbers. It recounts the deathbed vigil: 'on the third day' Thomas's own physician told Berryman 'to pray he'd die' because he had already suffered severe brain damage. Berryman 'took [his] leave [from the deathbed] . . . five times before the end'. On the last visit, stopped 'fifteen feet' from the bed, Berryman sensed trouble. The breathing had ceased. Berryman 'panicked a nurse, she a doctor / in twenty seconds', but it was too late. Berryman's last image of Thomas in his hospital bed, painful to see in a poet whose metrical feet had danced so gorgeously, is rendered in six stark monosyllables: 'His bare stub feet stuck out.'⁴¹

The next section begins with the fiction the young Thomas had foisted upon the young Berryman that he was a day older, a fiction that made Thomas 'gr[o]w stuffy and . . . puff all up / rearing his head back and roar // "A little more – more – *respect* there, Berryman!"' So, dates are important. 'Ah, he had *that*', Berryman says of 'the age's prodigy', his elegy's Homeric epithet for Thomas, who was 'so far ahead of me.'

Berryman does not mean that Thomas was ‘ahead’ in being older (Thomas was actually two days younger) but that he is so far ahead in renown, both in 1937 when they first met and in 1953. But then come what may be the most telling lines in the elegy: ‘I half-adored him for his intricate booms & indecent tales / almost entirely untrue.’⁴² These lines could serve as an epigraph for *The Dream Songs*, at least for ‘a many few’ of them, to use a later phrase from the elegy. Take Dream Song #4, for instance, with its comic booms and indecent tales. Here Henry is watching a lovely woman in a restaurant ‘Filling her compact & delicious body / with chicken páprika’ who ‘glanced at me twice’, prompting Henry to invent this syntactically intricate and off-colour come-on: ‘You are the hottest one for years of night / Henry’s dazed eyes / have enjoyed, Brilliance.’ But, following this rhetorically grandiose but fatuous and rather premature ejaculation, all he can do is ‘advance upon / (despairing) my spumoni.’⁴³

In the elegy, Berryman then turns to another memory of Thomas based on the next time they met, which was only the second time they ever met and would be virtually the last time until Thomas’s death: ‘Apart a dozen years, sober in Seattle / “After many a summer” he intoned / putting out a fat hand. We shook hands.’⁴⁴ Thomas’s greeting, by way of citing Tennyson, sets the tone for the concluding stanzas of Berryman’s ‘In Memoriam’:

His talk, one told me, clung latterly to Eden,
again & again of the Garden & the Garden’s flowers,
not ever the Creator, only of that creation
with a radiant will to go there.

I have sat hard for twenty years on this
mid potpals’ yapping, and O I sit still still
though I quit crying that same afternoon
of the winter of his going.

Scribbled me once, it’s around somewhere or other,
word of their ‘Edna Millay cottage’ at Laugharne
saying come down to and disarm a while
and down a many few.

O down a many few, old friend,
and down a many few.⁴⁵

Note, first of all, both the gossipy and archival nature of these recollections. Berryman said he had been told – a kind of literary gossip or oral history that is hard to document – how the latter-day Thomas ‘clung’ to his bright optimism, that Marvellian sense of a garden world of creation but without any theology. And farther along reference is made not just to the scribbled note but to the fact – attention: archivists! – that it is ‘around somewhere or other’ (presumably for biographers to discover). All of these queerly academic thoughts are essentially elegiac but not necessarily for Thomas alone. In any case, it is Thomas’s green faith which is the antecedent of ‘this’ in the subsequent stanza; it is what Berryman had ‘sat hard for twenty years on’ – that is, since 1949 in Seattle, though the stanza ends in 1953, on the ‘afternoon / of the winter of his going’. An odd juxtaposition of dates occurs here, and for an understandable reason, I think. If Thomas’s ‘radiant will’ forms the core of these elegiac thoughts, it is not a will that Henry in *The Dream Songs* was able to inherit, however much the remainder of this elegy tries to muster forth at this late date what it can of that radiance.

Whatever quality of irony Thomas intended in calling his boathouse an ‘Edna Millay cottage’ I do not know. Whatever either man may have felt about Millay’s poetry, Steepletop, her very bourgeois Victorian house in Austerlitz, New York, bore no resemblance to the very bohemian Laugharne.⁴⁶ But Berryman’s reason for remembering this remark may be particularly poignant. Berryman himself at the time of writing this elegy was just a couple of years younger than Millay had been when she fell down the stairs of her ‘cottage’ on 19 October 1950, a week short of Berryman’s own birthday, not a suicide but decidedly a victim of alcohol, drugs and depression. Thomas’s phrase, ‘come down to and disarm . . . / and down a many few’ is promising strong drink, of course – let us call it, as Thomas intended it, the milk of paradise – but when Berryman picks up the phrase, using it like a refrain in a drinking song, he is also recapping the whole elegiac pantheon of dead poets in *The Dream Songs*, a structure now closing, perhaps, around himself. It is a drinking song, that is, with the soul of an *ave atque vale*: ‘O down a many few, my friend, / down a many few.’ That is right, Henry might have said, down we all go. In parting thus, the refrain may remind us of Thomas’s earlier quotation from Tennyson’s ‘Tithonus’, which concludes: ‘After many a summer dies the swan.’ Thomas and Berryman were two birds of song, who knew how to throw back a many few, but

who were both already and always, in the refrain of another famous Tennyson poem, 'dying, dying, dying'.⁴⁷

While examining Berryman's assimilation into his own poetic practice of so many things he felt Thomas embodied in his, I have tried not to ignore what he could not absorb. The kind of relationship one poet with another that I have been trying to portray speaks of a deeper affiliation – more a brotherhood or kinship relation – than the idea of 'influence' usually expresses. It is undeniably true that Thomas had disappeared from the realm of contemporary poetic influence by 1970 when Berryman's elegy was completed, or even by 1964 when the first volume of *The Dream Songs* was published. However, Berryman's example remains one of the surest testimonies to Thomas's ongoing affective sway over one significant American poet's aesthetic practice.

Acknowledgements

'Fern Hill' by Dylan Thomas, from *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, copyright © 1945 by The Trustees for the Copyrights of Dylan Thomas. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

'Twenty Four Years' by Dylan Thomas, from *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, copyright © 1945 by The Trustees for the Copyrights of Dylan Thomas. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

Excerpts from 'Dream Songs #21, #76, #1, #386, #366, #4, #43' from *The Dream Songs* by John Berryman. Copyright © 1969 by John Berryman. Copyright renewed 1997 by Kate Donahue Berryman. Used by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. All rights reserved. <https://us.macmillan.com/fsg>.

Excerpts from 'In Memoriam' and 'The Ball Poem' from *Collected Poems: 1937–1971* by John Berryman. Copyright © 1989 by Kate Donahue Berryman. Used by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. All rights reserved. <https://us.macmillan.com/fsg>.

Caution: Users are warned that the works of John Berryman are protected under copyright laws. The right to reproduce or transfer the work via any medium must be secured with Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

- ¹ An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the 2014 conference of the North American Association for the Study of Welsh Culture and History. My thanks to NAASWCH, to Daniel Williams in particular, and to Paul Mariani for encouragement.
- ² John Berryman, 'In Memoriam', *Collected Poems 1937-1971*, ed. Charles Thornbury (London: Faber, 1990), p. 244.
- ³ At the time of writing, the most widely available illustrated editions are those by Fritz Eichenberg (New York: New Directions, 1997), Trina Scharf Hyman (New York: Holiday House, 1985), Edward Ardizzone (Boston: David Godine, 1980) and Ellen Raskin (New York: New Directions, 1959). For the effect of the book on New Directions, see Ian S. MacNiven, *'Literchoor Is My Beat': A Life of James Laughlin, Publisher of New Directions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), p. 302.
- ⁴ See Paul Muldoon's introduction to *PEN World Voices Festival 2014 // Dylan Live: A Tribute to Dylan Thomas*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=taY1jLh0E6Y (accessed 19 September 2016).
- ⁵ Iain Sinclair, *American Smoke: Journeys to the End of the Light* (London: Faber, 2013), p. 131.
- ⁶ Glyn Maxwell, *On Poetry* (London: Oberon Books, 2012), p. 51.
- ⁷ Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Poems: The New Centenary Edition*, ed. John Goodby (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), p. 107.
- ⁸ It is interesting to note, in light of my discussion of Berryman and Thomas below, that this was the very poem Berryman himself discussed at length in a 1940 essay refuting what he regarded as 'a very bad article' on Thomas by Julian Symonds. Symonds had argued that Thomas's poems were reducible to easily paraphrased, quite banal content. See John Berryman, *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 283.
- ⁹ Michael Robbins, 'The Child That Sucketh Long', *Poetry*, CCI/4 (January 2013), 449-50.
- ¹⁰ Robbins, 'The Child That Sucketh Long', 450.
- ¹¹ Terence Brown, 'The Irish Dylan Thomas', *Irish Studies Review*, 17/1 (February 2009), 49.
- ¹² Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 124.
- ¹³ Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 124.
- ¹⁴ Thomas, *The Collected Poems*, pp. 277-9.
- ¹⁵ Les Murray, *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), pp. 8-10.
- ¹⁶ J.C., 'NB: In the Dire Van', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5821 (24 October 2014), 36.
- ¹⁷ Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* (New York: Paragon House, 1992), pp. 67, 72.
- ¹⁸ Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p. 244.
- ¹⁹ John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (London: Faber, 1990), p. 83.
- ²⁰ Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, p. 23; Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p. 245.
- ²¹ Diane Wood Middlebrook cites Robert Lowell, Berryman's close friend, who 'had established a reputation as a skilled formalist . . . but while on a reading tour of the West Coast in 1957' looked for 'a new goal for his poetics', one that would make his verse more accessible in performance; and Dylan Thomas was one of Lowell's models. Diane Wood Middlebrook, 'What Was Confessional Poetry', in Jay Parini and Brett C. Miller (eds), *The Columbia History of American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 632-49, 637.
- ²² Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p. 11.
- ²³ See Elise Paschen and Rebekah Presson Mosby (eds), *Poetry Speaks* (Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2001), Disk 3, Track 8.
- ²⁴ Paschen and Presson Mosby (eds), *Poetry Speaks*, Disk 3, Tracks 9 and 10.
- ²⁵ Mariani, *Dream Song*, p. 301.
- ²⁶ Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. E. R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1966), p. 405.

- ²⁷ Both recordings are available on Dylan Thomas, *The Caedmon Collection* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), Disk 2, Track 17; Disk 5, Track 29.
- ²⁸ Igor Stravinsky, cited in Constantine FitzGibbon, *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (London: J. M. Dent, 1965), p. 386.
- ²⁹ Dylan Thomas, cited in Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 2003), p. 413.
- ³⁰ 'I should say I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with words. . . . What the words stood for, symbolised, or meant, was of very secondary importance. What mattered was the *sound* of them . . .' Dylan Thomas, 'Notes on the Art of Poetry', George J. Firmage (ed.), *A Garland for Dylan Thomas* (New York: Clarke and Way, 1963), pp. 147–52, 147.
- ³¹ Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, p. 3.
- ³² Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, p. 406.
- ³³ Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, p. 388.
- ³⁴ Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, p. 16.
- ³⁵ Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, p. 6.
- ³⁶ Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 173.
- ³⁷ Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, p. 47.
- ³⁸ Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, p. 31.
- ³⁹ Sinclair, *American Smoke*, p. 132.
- ⁴⁰ Sinclair, *American Smoke*, p. 132.
- ⁴¹ Berryman, *Collected Poems*, pp. 243–4.
- ⁴² Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p. 244.
- ⁴³ Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, p. 6.
- ⁴⁴ Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p. 244.
- ⁴⁵ Berryman, *Collected Poems*, p. 245.
- ⁴⁶ One indication of what Berryman felt about Millay's poetry, a feeling that Thomas may have shared, is reported by Mariani: '[Berryman] read I.A. Richards's *Practical Criticism* and became so enraged with those of Richards's students who had preferred Edna St. Vincent Millay to Donne and Hopkins that he was convinced there was "something to be said" for a literary "dictatorship"'. Mariani, *Dream Song*, p. 82.
- ⁴⁷ Alfred Tennyson, *The Poems of Tennyson*, vol. 2, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harlow: Longman, 1987), pp. 607, 231.

