

(Re)fractions of Cultural Memory and Welsh Consciousness in Dylan Thomas' Poetry

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine Dylan Thomas's poetry through the theoretic framework of cultural memory and collective consciousness, that studies how literature preserves, transmits and re-activates a community's common and shared past, in collective and symbolic form. Drawing upon the concept of memory associated with Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, it argues that Thomas's poetry functions as a cultural archive that preserves communal experience through language, myths, landscape, art and ritual. A detailed study his selected poems like, "Fern Hill," "And Death Shall Have No Dominion," and "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" reveal how personal memory is transformed into collective reminiscence. The study asserts that Thomas's poetry resists the fragmentation of modernity by reaffirming continuity, mythic consciousness, and shared collective human values, placing his poetic works in the monumental position of cultural memory.

Keywords

Cultural memory, Collective consciousness, Memory studies, Dylan Thomas, Welsh Poetry.

Though Dylan Thomas is renowned for his emphasis on his musical language and autobiographical intensity, some critical readings incline to study his poetry as a work of collective consciousness rather than purely individual experience. This paper argues that Thomas's poetry should be read as an expression of cultural memory, where personal recollection is shaped by communal frameworks of belief, landscape, and tradition.

Cultural memory enables literature to function as a medium through which societies remember themselves (Assmann, 2011). Thomas's poetry consistently exceeds personal emotions by drawing upon most common shared symbols of childhood, biblical imagery, rural space, and death, which is a part of collective consciousness. His work reflects an awareness of cultural inheritance that resists modern alienation and fragmentation.

The concept of cultural memory was pioneered by Maurice Halbwachs. He asserted that individual memory is socially conditioned not by the individual. Thus it's shaped by social frameworks (Halbwachs, 1992). According to Halbwachs, even personal memories are structured by collective frameworks such as language, social groups, and cultural practices.

Later Jan Assmann extends this argument by distinguishing between communicative memory, which exists within living generations, and cultural memory, which is preserved through texts, rituals, and symbolic forms across time (Assmann, 2011). Literature, particularly poetry, plays a crucial role in sustaining cultural memory by encoding shared values and experiences.

Collective consciousness, as articulated by the French Sociologist Émile Durkheim, refers to the shared beliefs and emotional attitudes that bind a community together (Durkheim, 2001). In poetry, this consciousness emerges through archetypes, mythic repetition, and ritualistic language. Undoubtedly Dylan Thomas's poetry excels in this convergence of cultural memory and collective consciousness.

Although Dylan Thomas wrote in English, his poetic sensibility is deeply inspired by Welsh cultural tradition. As Wales possesses a strong bardic heritage of poetry that can be referred to as a communal oral art form. Thomas's usage of opaque sound patterns, internal rhymes, alliteration, and rhythmic repetitions reflect this oral imagination.

Such stylistic features enable poetry to function as a collective experience rather than a private meditation. As Assmann (2011) observes, cultural memory depends upon repetition and performativity. His emphasis on sound patterns and stylistic features transforms the language as a part of remembrance of collective cultural consciousness.

Dylan simply asserted his concept of poetry as:

"Poetry, recording the stripping of the individual darkness, must inevitably cast light upon what has been hidden for too long, and, by so doing, make clean the naked exposure. Freud cast light on a little darkness he had exposed. Benefiting by the sight of the

light and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness, poetry must drag further into the clean nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realize.”(Dylan Thomas: New Verse, no.11, p.9)

Here the tone and substance are apocalyptic, self-conscious and rhetorical and showing the impact of surrealism and Freudian psychology on a young mind. But they represent attitudes of the poet who grew “from dragon’s tooth to druid in his own land”(Gwyn Jones).

Dylan was a Welsh by birth, though he chose English language over Welsh but he could not escape from the impact of his native place. He adopted English language and his poetic output is closely related to English poetic tradition but there is no doubt that being a Welsh, he also inherited Welsh poetic tradition, Welsh myths and legends and Welsh culture. Though most of the time he contempt everything that is Welsh but the impact of his own culture is inseparable in his works. He could not negotiate the fact that he belongs to his roots in Wales. Initially in the beginning of his career he did not want to accept his Welshness because of the influence of his father, who gave superiority to English language and culture over Welsh and never allowed Dylan to speak in his native language, later, with growing maturity he realized the importance of his native land, he admitted it and enjoyed being a Welsh. As Andrew Sinclair says, “Dylan was steeped in the riches of the English language, although his rhythms and phrasing, his choice of metaphor and odd matchings of words, have that Celtic run and lilt which seems to percolate and press through the greatest writers of Ireland and Wales such as Joyce and Thomas Nightingales in alien tongue that they better with the magic of their forgotten one.”(Sinclair, Dylan Thomas: Poet of His People. p. 116)

The Welsh influence was present in Dylan’s life in three forms. The First and foremost, there was the direct and inevitable influence of a particular community with particular traditions. Secondly, there was the influence of other Welshmen’s writing in English. These Anglo-Welsh writers helped to create a national consciousness, the sense of a life being lived that was peculiar to Wales: with them Thomas discovered a community of ideas and opinion. The third influence present in his environment was the tradition of culture existing in and through the Welsh language. Since he knew no Welsh this influence came through the two channels already mentioned: contact with Welsh-speaking relatives and friends, and through translations of Welsh poetry and prose.

To analyze this impact of Welsh consciousness in Dylan’s poetry we need to discuss the initial characteristics of Welsh poetic tradition in his poetic works. The first and foremost quality of Welsh poetic tradition is the Bardic tradition of Wales. In ancient Wales or Ireland a Bard was not merely a professional verse-writer, he was generally recognized to have extraordinary spiritual power. In his Note to the “Collected Poems” Thomas wrote:

“I read somewhere of a shepherd who, when asked why he made, from within fairy rings, ritual observances to the moon to protect his flocks, replied: ‘I’d be a damn’ fool if I didn’t!’—These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I’d be a damn’ fool if they weren’t.”

(“Collected Poems by Dylan Thomas”, p. 173-74)

There is a Bardic touch in this statement. Thomas proclaims a high function for the poet, though as usual it is a ‘dog among the fairies’ like mocking wisdom, which is a defensive irony in the light of such apocalyptic and romantic tendencies. Frequently in his later poems he adopts the role of prophet, of a person who is mediating in his art, who acts like a bridge between man and God. We can take the example of the “Author’s Prologue” to the “Collected Poems”, “Over Sir John’s Hill”, and “Poem on His Birthday”. His poetry was a reflection of Welsh consciousness, his love for rise and falls in tongue, stresses and syntaxes, use of local speech of Wales, ultimately made him the heir of the Bardic tradition in Wales, it also made him a preacher and the poet of the people. He was indebted to his Welsh heritage in the matter of religion also. He read the Bible when he was very young; he read it in the Welsh style as if the great rhythms had rolled over him from Welsh Pulpits.

The rhythm, a sequence of sounds-such as ‘young and easy’, ‘Adam and maiden’, ‘green and golden’ from “Fern Hill” came to him deliberately, as a number of images might come to unconscious part. But the way Thomas builds it into a longer sequence of verbal patterns (a whole poem) by conscious craftsmanship, is enough to demonstrate his relationship with Welsh tradition. The use of elaborate meters is the striking feature of the Welsh language which reflects in the analysis of the sound-structure of his poetry. Thomas uses some techniques of Welsh prosody also.

Dylan might have disliked his native language but certainly he loved his motherland. He loved Wales and took Welsh literature to the cannon of success. His love for its towns and countryside is quite visible in his poetry. He wrote many stories and plays about the city Swansea, he also gave importance to the opinions of the people who lived there. John Wain says that “Dylan was a Welsh poet, even a lover of English, still does not feel, think or write like an English, that means there was something essentially Welsh in him”. Wales was always present in the background of his poetry. We can analyze it through the example of his famous poems like, “Poem in October”, “Fern Hill” and “After the Funeral” etc., where he used Swansea and Laugharne as the background of his poems. His imagery was highly inspired by the natural beauty of Wales. The “heron Priested shore”, “green chapel” and “heaven’s high hill” in “Poem in October”, remind Cwmdonkin Drive, Swansea where he passed his childhood. “Fern Hill” poem which is a celebration of his childhood, can be the another example of Welsh background. The very name of the poem is a reference of a farm of his aunt where he had spent many summer vacations in Swansea. The imagery of “apple

boughs and apple towns”, “hunter and herdsman”, and “Sabbath” revives the memories of Fern Hill, Swansea. In “After the Funeral” also he used the same setting of Fern Hill. Thus we can say Wales was never absent from his thoughts and imagination and he somewhere preserved rural and traditional Welsh life.

As the Welsh poetry is remarkable for some other prevalent themes like, life and death, loss of innocence, nostalgia and portrayal of Welsh landscapes, Dylan's poetry is also concerned with the fundamental ideas and problems of life like birth and death, God and Devil, growth and decay. The Welsh people loved nature and celebrated its beauty also, especially when they are in good mood. Such celebration of natural beauty can be easily found in many poems of Dylan like -”Poem in October”, “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower”, “Fern Hill”, “After the Funeral”, “Over Sir John's hill” etc.

One of the important features of old Welsh poetry is awareness of the double nature of reality and of unity in multiplicity. That is clearly visible in his poetry. He deals with both the aspects of reality, time (force) is a destroyer as well a creator for him. It is a never ending moment rather than something which separates past and future. Similarly he deals with the theme of life and death. Life is not only a beginning, it can be an ending of previous life, in the same way death is not an end, rather it can be the beginning of a new life.

In his poem “The Force that through the green fuse drives the flower”, force (Sexual urge) is responsible for every creative activity like birth as well as death and destruction, as suppressing the intense sexual urge can turn a man into “Crooked worm (22)”. The Welsh were fond of copulation; hence Dylan used it in a very frank manner. The word ‘force’ is having contradictory meaning; it signifies birth as well as the moment of death also.

“The Force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer”

(“The Force that through the green fuse drives the flower”, p. 10, lines 1-3)

The poem has universal appeal as if it is belonging or happening everywhere at once. The natural background of the poem is used to show the duality of nature as well as of time. The nature is exactly like time, it works as a creator at the same time as a destroyer too. If nature can bloom a flower, it can also ruin it with force. Dylan also presents parallelism and contrast between man and nature as they both are driven by a force. He used the contradiction of other things also like seasons and passions, a mood in which the poet brings into two contrary phrases together like love and war, summer and winter, spiritual love and adulterous love. Such startled juxtaposition of the unexpected things appears in Metaphysical poetry as well as in Romantics, like in Keats's phrase “fairy lands forlorn”.

This feature introduces an important aspect of Thomas's poetry as he was quite different from the Metaphysicals. He might have derived the sense of paradox from the Metaphysical poets and others but surely his method of composition was unique. He must be remembered for his techniques of dealing with specific attitude with specific style.

We can take another reference of "Poem in October", which is one of the finest lyrics published in his poetic collection entitled "Death and Entrances" in 1946. Here nature is glorified wonderfully with Welsh background and sounds. The poem starts on the note when the poet is getting a call from nature, as it is his thirtieth birthday. He steps out the home to enjoy the celebration of nature. This poem can also be read as a journey from darkness to light, as the poet tried to find himself through the natural objects. The very first line indicates his pessimism as birthday is not an occasion of happiness or celebration rather it reminds him that he has come forward another year which leads him to death:

"It was my thirtieth year to heaven
woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood.
And the mussel pooled and the heron Priested Shore.
The morning beckon with water praying and call of seagull and rook
And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall
Myself to set foot
That second
In the still sleeping town and set forth."
("Poem in October", p. 113-15, lines 1-10)

The poet imagines that nature is celebrating his birthday in every possible way, the images of "the mussel pooled(3)", "the heron Priested shore(4)", "call of seagull and rook(6)" reflect the natural beauty of Wales. The imagery of the birds flying high his name(12), "the farms and white horses", "hills", "gardens" and "the woods the river and sea(44)" shows his intense passion for nature. The poem also deals with the theme of the loss of childhood and nostalgia, the imagery of "the blue altered sky" (33), "summer with apples, pears and red currants" (33-34) reminds us Swansea and his happy summer vacations at his aunt's place. He is nostalgic for his glorious past in Wales. Thus, the poem celebrates all the important features of Welsh Poetry.

In "Fern Hill", we find nostalgia, celebration of childhood and natural world of Wales. This Fern Hill was the name of the place of his aunt Ann Jones. The poem is not only a celebration of Dylan's farm holidays, it is also the celebration of the glory of Wales. He remembers his past when he was carefree and busy in his boyish activities that was the "green and golden" (44) phase of his life, full of creativity and innocence. The theme of "Fern Hill" is how it feels to be young; it can be read as a celebration of youth also. It deals

with the power of time which changes everything. We know that Welsh is a heavily syllabic language with stress on the second to last syllable to create harmony. For example in "Fern Hill", "th" and "s" words create harmony:

"Though I sang in my chains like the sea" (54)

This line is the best example of the use of Welsh rhythm and metrical style in Dylan's poetry. He wrote religious poetry also which is also influenced by his Welsh heritage. He used various myths from the Bible that can be the impact of Welsh culture. His poetry is well known for its myths, legends and supernatural fears.

In "Light breaks where no sun shines", he used the Biblical myth of Genesis to illustrate the process of procreation:

"Light breaks where no sun shines,

Where no sea runs,

the waters of the heart

Push in their tides;

("Light breaks where no sun shines", pp.29, lines 1-3)

The following lines remind the Biblical Myth of Genesis, as God says 'Let there be light', and there was light and the act of the creation of this Universe was started. He used the myth of resurrection and re-birth to represent the growth of spirituality.

According to Christianity death is not an end of life rather it allows us to merge with the divine soul. Many of his poems deal with the theme of death, which is mighty, powerful and inevitable; whatever is born in this world, is bound to die- the biggest truth of human life. "And death shall have no dominion", "Do not go gentle into that good night", "After the Funeral", "The Conversation of Prayer", "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child" and other poems deal with the theme of death as well as of religious thoughts. His poetry can be read as an assertion of the principle of existence. He used various traditional religious images; he used 'rose' as a symbol of Christ and 'worm' is the traditional symbol of Satan. He also talks about the internal process of time which is eternal.

"Death and Entrances" deals with the distress caused by the World War II. Dylan believed in 'no war world', here he used Welsh legends, Christian symbolism and other techniques of Welsh poetry like he followed the Welsh style of rich syllabic lines with length and obscurity. The poem is again from the tradition of lyrical poetry. The theme of the poem deals with religion, sin, destruction, death and redemption. Also we find a sophisticated description of his passion for sounds which is the most indigenous quality of Welsh poetry in "A Winter's Tale". The essence of this poem is the sound and the shape of the sound. Dylan used alliteration, rhythm, structure, texture and concerted vowels in the poem which reflect the crafting skill of Welsh poets, like:

“Torn and alone in a farm house in a fold” (“A Winter’s Tale”, p. 131, line 15) and
“A she bird dawned and her breast with snow and scarlet downed” (112)

The above mentioned lines are enough to show the effect of Welsh art. He gives the reference of the minstrels, which are closely related to the ancient Welsh Bardic tradition. Also we can read this poem as a fantasy of love as well as death, this death fantasy or fairy tale includes mythical technique, to portray the life of a man who is surrounded by despair in cold and dark place, he is saved by the vision of “she bird (Holy Ghost)”. The poem deals with the theme of physical and spiritual regeneration and resurrection. Thus the poem had all the formative qualities of Welsh poetry. As Matthew Arnold commented upon the Welsh literature:

“The Celts certainly have it in a wonderful measure. Style is the most striking quality of their poetry ... by throwing all its force into style, by bending language at any rate to its will, and expressing the ideas it has with unsurpassable intensity, elevation, and effect.” (Ibid., p. 110)

Dylan’s poetry highlights his poetic consciousness that is deeply influenced by culture, heritage landscapes, tradition, and collective memories of Wales. His poetry is not merely refracts rather it reflects cultural memory, transformation of personal experiences, childhood nostalgia that formed his Welsh identity. Dylan was constantly engaged with his rural landscapes, nature, mortality, that is visible in his poems like “Poem in October”, “Fern Hill”, “The Force that through the green fuse drives the flower” etc. Thus we can say memory turns into a dynamic force that connects the individuals with community and history of past with the present. His poetry is highly enriched in the musical quality and lyrical richness that echoes with Welsh Bardic traditions which further reinforced a distinctive consciousness. Though he was impacted by various cultures but his craftsmanship proved him a genuine Welsh poet. Dylan represents the concept of refraction regarding memory and identity through a nostalgic portrayal of Wales and his poetic transformation through symbolism, myths and legends. He highlights the complexities and struggles he faced due to the impact of multiple cultures that lead him to compromised and negotiable identity. His poetry served as a bridge between his native local experience to universal human concerns, thus he preserved and interpreted his artistic refraction of memory and identity related to his Welsh consciousness.

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