

A critique of the “sullen”- poetry in Dylan Thomas’s “In My Craft or Sullen Art”.

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Abstract: Set in the context of World War II, Dylan Thomas’s “In My Craft or Sullen Art” puts forward the figure of a poet-speaker who composes “art” (Thomas, *Collected*, 128) in private, that reflects the lamentations of the suffering people through “ages” (ibid); showing neither any dependence towards the exploitative capitalist society nor any obligation towards its suffering people, who are the subject of his art. This paper tries to explore how the utter non-committal mood of the poet-speaker not only suggests a special privilege for him from the capitalist social structure during the wartime, which ultimately puts him in opposition to the grieving and exploited “lovers”, “for” (Thomas, *Collected*, 128) whom he writes sympathetically; but also is a kind of mythical impossibility in the context of day-to-day life of the poet at any socio-political situation, unless the capitalist socio-economic structure itself is uprooted.

Keywords: World War II, the Blitz, paper-shortage, *non servium*, index of effectivity, Dylan Thomas

In the poem “In My Craft or Sullen Art”, by Dylan Thomas (written and published in 1946, in *Deaths and Entrances*), the poet-speaker announces himself to be a non-conformist and independent artist who composes “sullen” poetry about the “common wages” of the lovers through “ages” [i.e. universal and eternal], not “for” sustenance (“bread”), nor authoritative recognition (“ivory stages”) or “ambition”; but “for the lovers” (Thomas, *Collected*, 128); although with no intention to make his poem available to them (the lovers). Besides the agglomeration of the words from the public and the private spheres; the fact that he is writing about the grieves of the lovers due to the “common wages” of “ages” [I write. . . for the lovers” (Thomas, *Collected*, 128)] makes him a sympathiser of the suffering lovers. In this poem, the term “sullen” carries within itself both its early meaning, i.e., “averse to company”; and its contemporary meaning “bad-tempered or sulky” (*English*, N.p.) Keeping in mind that the English-speaking readers have become accustomed to the tradition ‘to think of literature in moral terms, as an appendage to “life” (Simpson, 25) with nominal recognition of the freedom of imagination in creativity; and that Dylan Thomas himself confessed to an audience that he had no “theory of poetry” (Simpson, 16), this paper will try to evaluate the feasibility and the effectiveness of the poet-speaker’s claim of non-conformity, especially in the poem’s context of World War II. Also, as Louis Simpson observes that Thomas maintained the appearance of the archetypal poet-figure, “locked into the narrow round of his own immediate consciousness, his poetry restricted to a view of the world as an extension of himself, literally, his flesh and blood and bone . . .” (Simpson, 10); significant biographical references from his own life, as a poet with first-hand experience of the World War II, will be drawn in this paper, to concretize the argument.

John Ackerman observes that following the sale of his notebooks in 1941, Thomas started nourishing his poetic imagination from the newly attained experiences of the World War II, which is evident in the poems that were published under the title *Deaths and Entrances* (Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas*, 106). The poem seems to explicitly concern itself about the “common” sufferings of lovers through “ages” (Thomas, *Collected*, 128); but the terminology from modern economics (“labour”, “wages”, “trade”, and from warfare: “arms” [Thomas, *Collected*, 128] gradually overpowering the meta-poetic privation of the “sullen” art; besides the very time of its composition (1946) helps to decode that the setting of the poem is deceptively archetypal and remote; and is basically the world-war-II-devastated Britain. The poem’s theme runs almost parallel with Goodby’s general characterization of the Blitz poetry of World War Two:

“ . . . simultaneously libidinal and repressed, of wartime London, with its blackouts and blinding searchlights, its common purposes and individual suspicions, its propaganda and espionage . . . a zone in which the normal barriers between public and private selves might suddenly rear up or collapse” (311).

“Thomas’s response to the war was chiefly shaped by its most appallingly novel aspect- aerial bombardment of the cities” (Goodby, 309); and, the “raging moon” (Thomas, *Collected*, 128) in this poem seems to stand for the juxtaposition of life and death at war-time, symbolically representing both the German offensive ‘the Blitz’ (meaning ‘the lightning’

in German), and Roman Goddess of procreation, Diana (Goodby, 339), who is raging in despair at the genocide and unsuitability for new lives and the absence of loyal sexual relationships. The destruction of the past, the incomprehensibility of the present and the uncertainty of the future had not only contaminated the erotic ecstasy of the lovers with “griefs”, but also had increased the number of irresponsible sexual encounters between adults as an attempt to momentarily precipitate the frustration of war; resulting in birth of innumerable illegitimate children (Goodby, 320).

The “common wages” of the “ most secret hearts” of the lovers are the “griefs” of the “ages” encapsulated in their “arms” (Thomas, *Collected*, 128), as they lie abed in their private hours; but their experiences of war blurring in their mind the boundary between the private and the public sphere. Beside the easiest interpretation of the “lovers” as couples in love with each other, they can very well stand for the individuals and especially the army who lie alone only with their weapons (i.e. arms), estranged from their lovers; or the lovers who had to let their children be evacuated to the countryside from the cities and are lying with their arms round the “griefs” (Thomas, *Collected*, 128) owing to the war. And even if they lie together, loyalty in love having become a myth, they only make “lie” to each other and engage in sexual activity in order to subdue their hysteric fear of the war, resulting in illegitimate births whose information Thomas used to preserve personally; as Thomas comments: “the matey folk-warmth of the trenches can only make for hysterical friendships, do or die companionships, the joking desperate homosexual propinquity of those about to die: the joy of living and dying with a Saturday football crowd on an exploding ground” (Goodby, 311). It is notable that Thomas does not use “family” in place of “lovers”, even though “lovers” unquestionably included married couples or at least lovers living together. There seems to be his political inclination towards the Left at work. Changing its definition from the Seventeenth Century by almost excluding the household servants from it and keeping only the small group of people/ kins living under one roof; the bourgeois understanding of family as the economic unit of the society became predominant since the nineteenth century, with the parallel ascendancy of class division in society. It further divided the man from the family, as the man who earns ‘for’ the family (Williams, *Keywords*, 132). These hierarchical divisions are demolished since the poet refers to the couples as only lovers. They are being empathised on the basis of the common grieves that they share with other couples as well.

When England declared war on Germany, Dylan not only busied himself collecting “statements of objection to war” (Simpson, 31) from young writers, but also said regarding his own participation in war : “I shall declare myself a neutral state or join a small tank”(Goodby, 311). But apart from few such declarations and actions, in most of his responses towards war, his selfish fear of battle and tendency of escaping into poetry looms larger than his Leftist distrust on the Chamberlain government and his typically Welsh anti-imperialist pacifism: “my one-and-only-body I will not give” (Christie, 107), “. . . to help to kill another stranger, deary me I’d rather be a poet anyday and live on guile and beer”, “ what do I want for xmas? . . . war-escaper. . . ” (Goodby, 311). Thomas considered poetry as an “organism”, that generate new life in a “painfully slow” process (Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas*, 124) process of craftsmanship, just like conceiving and delivering in labour. Thomas’ intention of labouring through poetry (to Grigson: “the labour you put into the creation of poetry” [Christie, 66]), against the landscape of destruction becomes clear from the ‘Prologue in Verse’ that is attached to the *Collected Poems: 1934-1953* to which “In My Craft or Sullen Art” belongs. Anticipating the total destruction of humankind and its civilization due to the war, he tries to save that part of human culture from total loss which he practises. Likewise, in an attempt to continue the practice of creativity against the landscape of war and bombing air-crafts, the poet-speaker seems to maintain an absolute non-conformist devotion towards his artistic creativity by announcing his indifference towards the publishing market, and the dominant cultural practices. Like Thomas, the poet-speaker parallels composition of poetry with procreation, composed at “night”, which in Thomas’ poems stands for the time of “fathering” (Thomas, *Collected*, 101) in general; reminding of Tarquato Tasso’s claim: “ There are two creators, God and the poet” (Williams, *Keywords*, 82). Question arises, can the poet-speaker compose at night (night is synonymous with unpaid “leisure time” according to bourgeois terminology (Williams, *Keywords*, 336]) “sullen art” to exhale his despair on “spendthrift pages” (Thomas, *Collected*, 128) in a mood of private purgation, during a time of paper-shortage due to war and then not publicize it? Also, when the common people cannot even sleep in peace, and when the crumbling down of the socio-economic scaffolding of the State had put into question the possibility of affording and preserving the creative art, can he afford to create art for his own self without a certain amount of luxurious privileges?

“I am a Welshman who does not live in his own country, mainly because he still wants to eat and drink, be rigged and roofed, and no Welsh writer can hunt his bread and butter in Wales unless he pulls his forelock to the ‘Western Mail’ . . .”, said Thomas (Ackerman, *Companion*, 20). But, such fervour of *non servium* would drown in the face of necessity to provide food to his family and himself in war-time Britain. As if the shortage of paper and economic disaster led to the shortage of free thinking and liberal literary atmosphere, the State was interested to spend resources

only towards propagandist films during warfare. The Royal Society Fund for the literati having been closed, and the journals of independent reviews that used to give Thomas employment, having been shut down owing to the restriction on paper and the loss of a market in war-torn cities, Thomas's dream to live only as a poet was thwarted, and he had to enlist as a propagandist scriptwriter at the Strand Films in London. This obligation of Thomas reminds of the power of the "index of effectivity" upon the Althusserian topographical metaphor of the society: "the upper floors [of the society, that is, the superstructure or the abode of culture and art] could not 'stay up' (in the air) *alone*, if they did not *rest* precisely on their base" [italics mine] (Althusser, 135), which is applicable in both society (of the State) at large and in private human life; until the Capitalist scaffolding of the society changes altogether to eradicate the Ideological State Apparatus and the Repressive State Apparatus, availing exact "freedom" (Williams, *Resources*, 88) to art and the artist. Because the poet-speaker does not nurture any possibility of help for such a change, his very existence, sustenance, availability of leisure, pages to write on, security to write and guarantee of food—all make him a reproducer and a consumer in a capitalist society during not only wartime but in any capitalist social condition. The poet-speaker uses a term from political economy "labour", which means in the capitalist productive institution "the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities", as Williams quoted from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Williams, *Keywords*, 177), but he (the poet-speaker) does not clarify how he will continue production in the Althusserian 'Superstructure' without reproducing the means of production at the 'Base' first. Even if he (the poet-speaker) refuses to commodify his "raging" poetry, he still needs to secure daily amenities from the same production system until a change comes; but, in which, unfortunately, Thomas (the creator of the poet-speaker) is uninterested.

His idea of political ups-and-downs producing eternal cycle of suffering (where "one must suffer, and, historically, poetry is the social and economic creed that endures" [Christie, 45]) shows similarity with the poet-speaker's evaluation of the common grieves to be that of "ages" (unchangeable and unavoidable): "the only politics for a conscientious artist ... must be left-wing under a right-wing government, communist under capitalism." (Simpson, 21). And, the fact that the poet-speaker did have some sort of privilege available to him to compose poetry at war-time becomes evident from the last line of the poem itself, as the subjects (the grieving 'lovers') of his "sullen art" do "no praise or wages/ Nor heed my [his] craft or art" (Thomas, *Collected*, 128). The emphasis on "spindrift pages" in the context of war inevitably reminds of scarcity of paper, hence, privilege for the poet. It seems appropriate to remember Bertolt Brecht in this context; "You never see where you are with production- production is unforeseeable" (Williams, *Resources*, 79). Having little sense of the practicality of human life, extravagant Thomas, in real life, faced the problem of clashes between exclusive pursuit of artistic creativity and the practical needs of life: "I want to write only poems, but that can't be. Never have I wanted to more. But debts are battering at me. I cannot sleep for them" (Simpson, 35); which anticipates the failure of the poet-speaker's claims as well: "Not for. . . bread". No wonder William Christie observes, ". . . he had a better grasp of Freud and Lawrence than he had of Marx and Keynes" (44).

The poet-speaker's uninterestedness in the conventional rewards like authority, tradition, academia, itself puts forward question of the feasibility and justification of writing the 'raging' poem itself. The poet-speaker as an "amateur intellectual" stands out in this particular poem in opposition to the idea of the "professional intellectual" (Farred, 516), as he does not seek for any payment for his job, but that affirms his beneficiary status in the society (Farred, 516). Distancing himself and his art explicitly from the "proud man" and his ('proud man[']s') sophisticated, lofty and consumable art [for whom "market was his freedom" (Williams, *Resources*, 79), that is, its supervisions and restrictions in exchange of money], as well as from the Romantic poetry [Nor for the towering dead/ With their nightingales (Thomas, *Collected*, 128)] that is ineffectual to voice rage against war; the poet-speaker announces: "I labour by singing light" (Thomas, *Collected*, 128). Even though the use of the word "labour" reminds of Thomas's inclination towards the Labour Party in Britain, question arises how much such passive sympathies (like writing poems and singing about "common wages" of "ages" which no one reads or hears) make any positive impact in their lives, and make the "light"-ness of the poet-speaker's singing as one of hope, and not of insignificance; especially when he is complaining against the war-monger State from a private privileged condition. It is notable to say that in his real life, Dylan Thomas being largely ignorant about the practicality of living ("Poets live and walk with their poems; a man with visions needs no other company I must go home and sit in my bedroom by the boiler" [Simpson, 20]), had to persuade people with his poet's identity for help: "I am a poet of some worth and deserving help. I have a wife and child and am without private means" (Simpson, 32).

Although his use of the term "common" seems to encapsulate "the very early use of common as an adjective and noun of social division" (Williams, *Keywords*, 71), a tendency germinated in the nineteenth century, and the fact that the poem is written at night, when workers under the Capitalist authority do not work (Williams, *Keywords*, 336); but that does not ensure that the poet-speaker does not serve the same divisionist and class-biased network of

consumerism and production during the rest of the day, for the sake of subsistence.

Besides, it reminds the reader that- "... a secure public positioning" (Farred, 516) which often requires "professional accreditation" (Farred, 516) is indispensable to protest against the status quo for the causes of the exploited mass of people, with an aim for a necessary change. But the lack of responsibility on part of the persona of the poet-speaker, more comfortable in ranting poetically in private (at night, with no audience in company), resembles the temperament of Thomas himself; as claimed by Mario Luzi: "If by intellectual you mean a man who feels culturally responsible for his times and also feels like one who has to point the way and guide people then Thomas seems to me to have been quite free from all these imaginary or necessary obligations" (Christie, 22). This temperament of escapism was also present in Thomas's response towards the question of Welsh nationalism: "It's impossible for me to tell you how much I want to get out of it all, out of narrowness and dirtiness, out of the eternal ugliness of the Welsh people, and all that belongs to them" (Christie, 47).

Regarding the difficulty of keeping the "balance" between "freedom and duty" in artistic endeavour, Raymond Williams writes: "... the first duty of the artist is to be free and ... the first duty of social provision in the arts is to ensure freedom" (Williams, *Resources*, 88), so that the artist's 'freedom' does not degenerate into a kind of "profitable" (*Resources*, 88) freedom of serving the propagandist and war-monger State and the capitalist publishing market. But, such freedom was thwarted during World War Two. In such complex times, the freedom of the artist that Williams stresses on is not a freedom for producing "sullen art", but to chronicle through art the many individual "voices" that publicize the "interaction" of "extreme complexity of any historical and social problems" (Thomas, *Resources*, 89) of particular places and times, with individual lives, with the common aim of alleviating human sufferings. Since, the more the voices documented, the better for society, Williams claims that the society must ensure freedom for the artists to allocate more and more voices, which again demands active association with the affected masses. But, Thomas's poem shows that the poet-speaker does not try to publicize his raging poem to the sufferers, as they "pay no praise, or wages /Nor heed my craft or art" (Thomas, *Collected*, 128). Besides refusing any commitment to the capitalist and war-monger society, the poet-speaker also refuses to help the distressed, other than producing for himself the literal portrayal of the time. A parallel can be drawn between the temperaments of the poet-speaker of the poem and Dylan Thomas himself. Thomas's poems and stories written in his youth, against the backdrop of the Depression years in Wales, proves that he merely played the role of a "casual looker-on of the period's historical and material culture" (Christie, 8), with his obligation drawn inwards, to himself and his art [as a craft], where "honest writing does not mix [with politics] you can't be true to party and poetry" (Christie, 45). As a reporter of the local Welsh newspaper, he reported on the increasing tendency of suicides in Wales, owing to the Depression, as: "Called at British Legion: Nothing. Called at Hospital: one broken leg" (Christie, 36). William Christie observes how such socio-political conditions were "unlikely to stimulate an ambitious poet with little sense of personal accountability or civic responsibility" (34). What Thomas tells regarding himself, could very well be spoken by the poet-speaker of the poem: "My own eyes, I know, squint inwards; when, and if, I look at the external world I see nothing or me" (Christie, 86).

About the Dylan Thomas who on the Armistice Day, 1933, wrote: "because we are poets and voicers, not only of our personal selves but of our social selves, we must pray for It is the Revolution. There is no need for it to be a revolution of blood. ... [but] that all that is in us of godliness and strength, of happiness and genius, shall be allowed to exult in the sun" (Ackerman, *Companion*, 15), Ackerman wrote "In the later poems he writes generally in a mood of reconciliation and acceptance, having outgrown the earlier rebellious and blasphemous attitudes of the enfant terrible" (Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas*, 115). "In My Craft or Sullen Art", belonging to the later period of his poetic life, seems to testify to this claim through the attitude of the poet-speaker.

Whereas, in Gorky's *Mother*, the subject (the working-class people) of the composition does manage to read about themselves: "[I will] study and then teach others. We working men must study. We must learn, we must understand why life is so hard for us" (39); and brew up a revolt against the capitalist exploiters, in "In My Craft or Sullen Art" the poet-speaker does not care either to publicize his "raging" poem or to make his poetry be acquainted among the subject of his poem. Both Foucault (who says that in the case of mass revolt, the intellectual does not need to play the distant extension of abstract "knowledge, truth and conscience", rather as a voice coming from the mass itself) (Kay, N.p); and Edward Said ("Not just passively unwilling but actively willing to say so in public" [Said, 23]) deliberately rejects this tendency of intellectual-self-exile as turning even the valuable suggestions on part of the intellectuals to be fruitless.

The poet-speaker rather resembles the protagonists of Flaubert's *The Sentimental Education*, and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. With a "luciferian *non servium*" (Said, 16) of Stephen Dedalus (protagonist of *A*

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man), to do anything but to witness the world through his thinking ability, the poet-speaker seems to echo after Stephen, quoted by Said “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe . . . using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning” (Said, 17). And in the same strain like Said, the poet-speaker impels the readers to question how far remaining a “curmudgeon and a thoroughgoing wet blanket” are enough aims for intellectuals whose purpose must be advancing “human freedom and knowledge”, through communication with the mass through “publishing and speaking out in the public sphere” (Said, 23). And, in order to maintain “the mean of effective communication”, C. Wright Mills says “it is in politics that intellectual solidarity and effort must be centered. If the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of live experience” (Said, 21). But Thomas being determined not to include politics in art, puts into question what kind of “credulous posterity” he indicated when he said: “Chelsea is ‘a place where the only peace is in the garrets of the lean and hungry poets who, by the light of a candle in a beer bottle, write for a credulous posterity what the dubious present will not accept’” (Ackerman, *Companion*, 32), a rant that goes very similar to the mood of the poet-speaker.

Although both the title and the introductory line of the poem tries to claim the meta-poetic venture of the poet-speaker as both “art” and “craft” (“artisan” and “craftsman”, having been defined by the eighteenth century bourgeois vocabulary as only the paid “skilled manual worker” who lack ‘intellectual’ or ‘imaginative’ or ‘creative’ purposes; helped in the specialization of “fine arts” within the larger rubric of “art”, and the distinction of ‘artist’ from “artisan” [Williams, *Keywords*, 41-42]); but his intention of producing free art from capitalist demands fails alongside the realization of the impossibility of attaining the ideal non-committal condition writing poetry that he claims to utilize. That is why Raymond Williams concluded that despite claiming to have “quite other intentions”, “within a given mode of production”, most artists are treated as “category of independent craftsmen or skilled workers producing a certain kind of marginal commodity” and “most works of art are effectively treated as commodities” (Williams, *Keywords*, 42). Because the “given mode of production” (ibid) ensures the artist’s dependence on the capitalist socio-economic structure at the least for her/his own sustenance, until the structure itself changes. Just as the “. . . dislike, amounting to superstitious horror, of philosophy, psychology, analysis, criticism” (Simpson, 10), resulted in the “fierce, fine, and foolish” Thomas consuming himself in to the intellectual “fires” (Christie, *Preface*, ix) of his own making; the claims of the poet-speaker, due to the lack of rational justification from socio-political and economic points of view, prove to be impossible, not only in the immediate context of World War Two, but in general.

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