

“But the names remain”: Dylan Thomas’s *Return Journey*

MATTHIAS BAUER

Feature into Play

In February 1941, Swansea suffered its severest air-raids. Dylan Thomas was staying in Bishopston at the time but returned to his home town for a visit on the morning after one of the bombings. “Our Swansea is dead,” he said to a friend who went with him.¹ The destruction of this “ugly, lovely town,” as he called it two years later in *Reminiscences of Childhood*,² seems to have made him aware of a past that was forever lost. Or rather, it seems to have made him aware that the world of the past which was always present to his mind was dead. He emphatically stresses the liveliness of childhood reminiscences: “The face of one old man who sat, summer and winter, on the same bench looking over the swanned reservoir, I can see more clearly . . . than the city-street faces I saw an *hour* ago.”³ To Dylan Thomas, childhood memories connect persons, including his former self, with particular places. Thomas puts this quite simply when he says, also in *Reminiscences of Childhood*: “This sea-town was my world.”⁴

The adult speaker uses the past tense here: “. . . was my world.” But if the world of his childhood and adolescence belongs to the past and exists only before his mind’s eye, how can it be reached by his revisiting the real town now destroyed? This is, I think, what Thomas tries to explore in his thirty-minute radio piece *Return Journey*, which was first broadcast on 15 June 1947. It was commissioned by the BBC “for a feature series, itself called *Return Journey* and consisting of twenty-four programmes between 1945 and 1951, in which well-known writers recalled the place most closely associated with their childhood.”⁵ Thomas revisited Swansea in February 1947 in order to collect material, in particular concerning the air-raid damage.⁶ He probably adopted the title of the feature series for his radio

piece because it described what actually happened: the listener is presented with the story of a journey and not only with the author's memories of a place. At the same time, *Return Journey* is not just a piece of autobiography or travel literature or a mournful tribute to Thomas's home town. Even though it was announced as a feature programme, it is in fact a radio play,⁷ in which Dylan Thomas imaginatively transforms his personal experience into a more generally human one.⁸ The relationship between the personal and the general is a theme of *Return Journey* anyway, for the revisiting of a particular place connected with the particular remembrances of the poet's eccentric younger self leads to his regarding himself as the representative (and spokesman) of common humanity.

This is already indicated by the fact that the first-person narrator never identifies himself as "Dylan Thomas," nor is he ever identified by the people he meets. In the script, he is just called "Narrator." Even though his journey back to Swansea is a search for "Young Thomas" who lived there fourteen years ago the narrator does not openly regard him as his former self but calls him "a friend" and always speaks of him as a third person. One might object that this is a fiction to be seen through at once. But this is exactly the point. Thomas deliberately "fictionalizes" his experience by using such an obvious device, for while he thus barely hides the fact that he wants to learn about his own self, his speaking of "a friend" also indicates that this self is different from his present one. Young Thomas is, as it were, the narrator's double, who, although sought in the Swansea now gone, is not to be tied to a particular time or place. This search for himself as an elusive (or fictional or fairy-tale like) being on whom no one is able to set eyes is brought home by the auditory nature of the medium and by the author's employing certain techniques which are characteristic of the radio play as a dramatic genre. Thus there are rapid changes between the narrator's eye-witness reports, pieces of dialogue with persons he meets and asks about Young Thomas, flashbacks in which voices of the past are heard, present-day voices describing memories without addressing anyone in particular, and a passage of free indirect discourse in which the narrator addresses his *present* self in the third person (185).

Past and Present, Life and Death

The narrator's "epic" presentation of episodes and speakers contributes to a distinction of temporal levels, for instance when his pointing out that "there the Young Thomas whom I was searching for used to stand at the counter on Friday paynights" (181-82) is followed by a flashback to the former scene in the bar, or when the words of the (present-day) Promenade-Man are introduced by the narrator's "he said:" But not all the episodes and speakers are introduced in this manner, so that the listener may sometimes wonder for a moment whether they belong to the past or the present. Thus it is not immediately obvious that the voice of the Minister (184) belongs to the present or that the voices of the girls (187) belong to the past. This feeling of being on two time-levels at once is reinforced by a number of sounds characteristic of particular places both in the past and the present. The narrator's walk through the town is marked, for example, by "Bar noises in background," "School bell," "Funeral bell," "Noise of sea, softly" and, finally, "The park bell" Especially the ring of bells as a sound by which a place makes itself known unites the Swansea of Young Thomas with the dead city revisited by the adult narrator. Just as the famous bell that "tolling softly for another, saies to me, Thou must die,"⁹ the bells of *Return Journey* connect the living and the dead, linking the poet-narrator with his former self and his listeners in a *memento mori*. A similar relationship between revisiting one's past, an awareness of death, and the sound of bells is established in "Poem on His Birthday," in which Thomas presents himself as "the rhymer . . . who tolls his birthday bell" and "Toils towards the ambush of his wounds."¹⁰

In *Return Journey*, the narrator toils towards death as well, or rather he finds it at every station of his way and upon each level of time. Both in the past and the present, however, death goes together with life. They are connected in a parallel as well as a crosswise manner. The fourfold relationship resulting from this (past life and present death, past death and present life, past and present life, past and present death) is the main theme as well as the organizing principle of *Return Journey* with its interplay between adult and youthful self, destroyed and undestroyed town, encounter and remembrance. The dialectical relationship between these poles becomes visible in the overall structure of *Return Journey*. The

narrator's journey is a twofold one: while he moves on in time he probes deeper and deeper into the past.¹¹ In terms of space, the downhill road of his life (ending in the pub) is reversed by his ascending the hills above the sea-town.¹² Each place he revisits is connected with an earlier stage of Young Thomas's life: from the bar he frequented as a young newspaper man, when he was a "bombastic adolescent provincial bohemian with a thick-knitted artist's tie made out of his sister's scarf" (180) he goes back to the place where the Kardomah Cafe used to be, in which Young Thomas and other "poets, painters, and musicians in their beginnings" once talked about "Einstein and Epstein, Stravinsky and Greta Garbo, death and religion, Picasso and girls" (183). Further back in time, this is followed by the empty space that once was a bookshop, by the school, and by the seashore where girls first became aware of the boy who "swallowed a dictionary." Then come the shops and houses of the Uplands, where, as the narrator says, "the journey had begun of the one I was pursuing through his past" (188). The last stage, even further up the hill, is Cwmdonkin Park where Young Thomas played as a child, recklessly, cruelly (pelting the old swans, for example) but where, as the Park Keeper thinks, "he was happy all the time" (189).

The Suffering Place

The ending of the narrator's journey meets its beginning. "What has become of him now?" he asks the Park-Keeper, whose answer rings like the funeral bell, "Dead, dead, dead . . ." Here we are back at the narrator's starting point, where he compares past and present and describes the present town as dead:

It was a cold white day in High Street, and nothing to stop the wind slicing up from the Docks, for where the squat and tall shops had shielded the town from the sea lay their blitzed flat graves marbled with snow and headstoned with fences. (179)

The whole town has become a graveyard in which man's work of building and destruction is complemented or completed by forces of nature; both

are described in terms of animation, only to stress the presence of death: the wind is implicitly personified when it is said to be "slicing up" from the Docks; this is further emphasized a few lines later when it "cut[s] up the street with a soft sea-noise hanging on its arm." A corresponding image of destruction, as well as of animation going together with petrification, is presented by the "blitzed flat graves" of the once "squat and tall" shops. The shops not only look like graves now that they have become mere heaps of stones but they are themselves buried in graves "marbled with snow and headstoned with fences." Death is further multiplied by the word "blitzed." Not the shops are blitzed but the graves, destruction is heaped upon destruction. "Blitzed" itself is a word linking man's deadly work with nature's destructive force in the German expression for lightning. As the past participle of a verb derived from a noun, "blitzed" corresponds to "shielded," "marbled," and "headstoned."

Noun-derived participles have been recognized as a distinctive feature of Thomas's style and it has been suggested that they indicate "the reciprocal participation in one another . . . of what would ordinarily be thought of as isolated objects."¹³ Later in the passage when the shopping women are described there is another sequence of such participles ("Fish-frailed, netbagged, umbrella'd . . ."), which are heaped up in a way emphasizing the passive, suffering element in those women. This is underlined by the ambiguous use of "crunched" in "crushes of shopping-women crunched in the little Lapland of the once grey drab street," which denotes the women's making their way "with crunching"¹⁴ but also suggests the women themselves being crunched or ground to pieces.¹⁵ In the first sentence of *Return Journey* the noun-derived participles serve to stress the temporal relationship of things, the transforming effect they have upon each other and the marks they leave upon a place. Thus the fences have become headstones of the graves of shops. There is a kind of petrification implied in this process, especially since fences, different from walls but fending off opposition as walls do, would not normally be expected to be made of stone. This unexpectedness gives additional verbal energy to the syllable "stoned" in "headstoned" as the result of an activity, which is all the more noticable since the verb *to headstone* is not recorded by the *OED*. In 1947 "stoned" did not yet mean intoxicated

(*OED* 1952 ff.) but of course it meant “put to death by pelting with stones” (*OED* *stone* v. 1. a.). This in turn makes us note, upon rereading the sentence, the component “bled” in “marbled,” and, more clearly heard as a syllable with a meaning of its own, “dead” as a component of “shielded.” The echoes of the cruel activity that led to the destruction of the revisited place are still to be heard in the words used to describe it.

Thomas’s combining references to animation and petrification in the language of the opening passage contributes to the impression that his (or the narrator’s) revisiting his home town is presented as the transformation of a biographical event into a literary or fictional one. For in describing the place revisited, Thomas speaks a language suffused with literary echoes, and in particular he alludes to his favourite master of prose fiction, Dickens.¹⁶ This concerns the general atmosphere as well as such telling details as the use of “headstoned,” a word in which life and death are united. Dickens’s Bradley Headstone, for example, whose name indicates that he “belongs in a churchyard,”¹⁷ represents death in life, as he is the victim of demonic life-forces that make him, while still alive, turn into a stony being covered with ashes.¹⁸

In *Return Journey* the shops and pubs and other places of social intercourse are shown to be victims of similarly pulverizing forces; they are like beings that have entirely dissolved into dust, and are covered by a layer of snow. This is confirmed later when the narrator comes to the place where the bookshop used to be and the Minister whom he meets there simply comments: “Ashes now, under the snow” (184) or when the narrator speaks of plodding “through the ankle-high one cloud that foamed the town, into flat Gower street, its buildings melted” (186). In the opening passage, the dissolution is emphasized by the “powdered fields of the roofs of Milton Terrace and Watkin Street and Fullers Row.” The narrator leaves it open whether the roofs themselves have dissolved into powdered fields or whether it is only the snow that makes them look like powdered fields; at any rate, another noun-derived participle, “powdered,” is used that rings with the devastating effect of war action.

Childhood and the Knowledge of Death

At the same time, the narrator stresses that the destruction paradoxically leads to his seeing things he hasn't seen before: "I could see the swathed hill stepping up out of the town, which you never could see properly before, and the powdered fields of the roofs . . ." Upon revisiting Swansea, a new perspective has literally opened up to him. The blitz, however disastrous, has enlightened him. Taking the beginning and the ending of *Return Journey* together, the listeners realize that the Uplands and the hill that now have come into view are to become the goal of the narrator's search. What becomes visible to him is the world of Young Thomas's childhood, which used to be obliterated by structures belonging to later stages of his youth.

In the opening passage of *Return Journey*, Thomas links the subject of "A Place Revisited" with the perennial theme of death and recognition, or death and knowledge. This theme defies annotation but since John Donne already made himself heard in the background, one may also recall his "huge hill, / Cragged, and steep," where "Truth stands" and which the speaker strives to reach before "death's twilight."¹⁹ What the narrator of *Return Journey* reaches when "Dusk [is] folding the Park around, like another, darker snow" (188) is the knowledge of Young Thomas's death. At this point we are once more confronted with the basic paradox of *Return Journey*: if Young Thomas is dead, he belongs to a different world from the narrator's. But then death also belongs to the present, where the narrator, beginning his "search through Swansea town," moves about like a ghost or shadow. Thus the hotel-porter ignores or fails to hear his greeting. To him, he is just another "snowman" (or no-man or [k]now-man). Similarly, when he enters the bar, nobody takes notice of him. "I said Good morning, and the barmaid . . . said to her first customer: . . . Seen the film at the Elysium, Mr Griffiths, . . ."

If the present is some kind of world beyond death (however un-Elysian the deadly "white wastes" [181] of snow may be), then the past must be living. In accordance with this paradox, the narrator looks for Young Thomas as for a living person and describes him to the barmaid as someone who is missing or who is a wanted criminal ("Thick blubber lips; snub nose; curly mousebrown hair; one front tooth broken . . .," 180). But then

the past is also dead. Young Thomas cannot be found again as a living person. The "death" of the place revisited is, from this perspective, most profoundly appropriate to the fact that the person whom the narrator tries to find is dead, too. The presence of death unites the narrator and Young Thomas, but all the same there is an insurmountable barrier between them. Talking about the child's wild games, the narrator thus realizes that there are "No fires now where the outlaws' fires burned and the paradisiacal potatoes roasted in the embers" (188).

Thomas's concern with the theme of childhood has been compared to Vaughan's or Wordsworth's view of the child as belonging to or representing an unfallen state. Especially poems such as "Fern Hill" invite such a comparison.²⁰ *Return Journey* also focuses on the "retreat," on the way back to *Kinderland*, as Brahms's song has it.²¹ Like the speaker in Vaughan's poem "Childhood," the narrator of *Return Journey* "cannot reach it." He arrives at "the last gate" of Cwmdonkin Park but this gate remains closed (or is being shut). There are several voices of the past to be listened to but the voice of Young Thomas is never heard. As distinct from Vaughan or Wordsworth, however, Thomas does not stress the innocence of childhood. When in Thomas's poem "The Hunchback in the Park," the wild boys are called "innocent as strawberries," this does not imply saintly innocence. In this poem, the hunchback is cruelly mocked, as in *Return Journey* the old swans are pelted and the children go "snip, snip through the dahlias." The cruelty uniting man and nature (cf. the stoning and the cutting wind at the beginning) already belongs to childhood.

Thomas's Eden is lost through man's fall, but this consists in his loss of ignorance (or unconsciousness) of death. The knowledge that kills the childhood world is the inevitable knowledge of death itself. This emphasis on death as the necessary condition, as well as distinction, of adult human life has much in common with existentialist tenets such as Heidegger's stressing that man is the only being that is capable of death.²² In Thomas's poem for his son Llewelyn, the child is oblivious to the fact that everything is doomed to death: "This side of the truth, / You may not see, my son, / King of your blue eyes / In the blinding country of youth, / That all is undone, . . . / Before you move to make / One gesture of the heart or head" (192).

Fellow-Passengers to the Grave

At the same time, the knowledge of death, which is the result of a return journey to the destroyed country of youth, implies a new kind of solidarity with "Young Thomas," or indeed with any child. The child does not see "this side of the truth" but, according to the ambiguous syntax of the poem, the child *and* the adult speaker dwell on "this side." If the child has to die in the process of growing to consciousness, the adult remains under the sentence of death. "I saw time murder me," the speaker says in "Then was my neophyte," a poem on an unborn child, but he also says, in the present tense, "Time kills me terribly." Realizing the death of one's former self means realizing the common destiny of all human life. In "Then was my neophyte" the "unborn" child is called "undead." To be born means to die; birth is, to quote John Donne once more, "a delivery over to *another death*, the manifold deaths of this *world*."²³ Or, as the Reverend Ely Jenkins puts it so simply in *Under Milk Wood*, we are "all poor creatures born to die."²⁴ Therefore, the narrator's solidarity with the dead in *Return Journey* is also a solidarity with the living.

Thomas here again can be seen to refer to and continue the tradition of a literary as well as philosophical theme prototypically realized in Donne's funeral bell which tolls for the living; the sign of death makes its listener bear in mind not only his or her own death but the fact that "Any Mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankind*."²⁵ The solidarity with the living that results from the awareness of death is of course also a characteristically Dickensian theme: other human beings are not to be regarded as "another race of creatures bound on other journeys" but as "fellow-passengers to the grave."²⁶ This holds true, too, for the reflection of one's own dead former self as a means of considering the common human destiny, which figures so prominently in *Return Journey*. Thus Gwen Watkins, in her recollection of a conversation with Dylan Thomas in 1951, remembers comparing *Return Journey* with Dickens's contribution to *The Haunted House*, in which the narrator meets the "ghost" of his "own childhood" in the form of a mirror-image and a skeleton "allotted" to him for his "mortal companion"; but never with his "man's stride" is he able "to come up with it."²⁷ However, it is this very fact of knowing one's own former self to be dead that brings back the

childhood world of imagination and, accordingly, the child's life itself.²⁸ Similarly, in Scrooge's revisiting his own boyhood self it is his being separated from it by the borderline between life and death that enables him to identify with the boy and brings about his solidarity with the living in the present.²⁹ The revisiting of the former self is a catabasis to the "shadows"³⁰ in the realm of death which leads to a meeting with life.³¹

In *Return Journey*, this becomes clear through its circular structure. Looking at its beginning in the light of its ending, we see that the narrator's circular journey not only links death with death but also life with life. Even though, at the end, the garden in which Young Thomas once played is found to be forever closed, it still exists or is newly created upon the ruins of the town: "Boys romped, calling high and clear, on top of a levelled chemist's and a shoe-shop, and a little girl, wearing a man's cap, threw a snowball in a chill deserted garden that had once been the Jug and Bottle of the Prince of Wales" (179). Young Thomas for whom the narrator looks is dead but he is also to be found again. If the town and the park have become a grave, the grave has also become a garden; a "chill deserted garden" but a garden nevertheless, and not so deserted either since a little girl plays in it.³² The graveyard turned into a garden by a little girl is again a Dickensian motif: Little Nell attends to life by literally keeping green the memory of the dead,³³ giving evidence to the schoolmaster's conviction that there is "nothing innocent or good, that dies, and is forgotten."³⁴ In *Return Journey*, even though on a more existential than ethical level (the question of "goodness" is never addressed) a similar continuance is pointed out. The child, though dead, nevertheless lives on—not so much or not only in the adult person into which he has grown but in the child now present, just as the garden continues to exist in a new location. The place has changed and yet remains the same, and so does the person belonging to it.

Lots of Thomases

This has to do with the fact that although the narrator looks for one particular person with certain idiosyncrasies such as wearing a "conscious woodbine" and although "there couldn't be two like him," as one voice

says who remembers him, he is also the embodiment of any youth and child. In *Return Journey*, the solidarity with the living that originates in the knowledge of one's own death is characteristically expressed by the recognition of the prototypically human in the individual self. When the narrator has succeeded in making the barmaid listen to him she wants to know the name of the friend he is looking for. "Young Thomas. BARMAID: Lots of Thomases come here, it's a kind of home from home for Thomases . . ." (180). The "-mas[s]es" forming the latter part of "Thomases" underline the "Lots" being found when inquiring after the lot of the one Young Thomas. This sense of the individual having once been or having become (depending on which way you look) a kind of everyman or everychild emerges as the narrator proceeds. Thus the man he meets at the sea-front who, like Melville's water-gazers, "Year in, year out . . . always came to look at the sea" says he remembers Young Thomas well: ". . . but I didn't know what was his name, I don't know the name of none of the sandboys. . . . Oh yes, I knew him well. I've known him by the thousands."³⁵ The very same words are used by the Park-Keeper, another observer of mankind, towards the end of the narrator's journey: "Oh yes, I knew him well. I think he was happy all the time. I've known him by the thousands." The one happy child is all children, and even though this particular child, like all children, has grown up to be dead, he has been or become the prototypical child that will never cease to exist. In negative terms, Thomas expresses a very similar idea in the famous last line of "Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London": "After the first death there is no other": the one individual case is all that matters; other deaths are not different ones but a re-experiencing, a sharing of the first (which also, vicariously, has already annihilated death itself).³⁶

The narrator searches for one particular Young Thomas, who cannot be recaptured, but because he does so he will learn from the place revisited that he was one of "thousands." This is also a possible answer to the question in how far the world of childhood is affected by the poet (or his persona) revisiting its locality. The narrator, walking through the destroyed town, becomes increasingly aware of the general nature of the individual fate, a process reflected by the form or genre of *Return Journey* as a piece of autobiography becoming fictional narrative or drama.

This relationship between the personal and the general, as well as the autobiographical and the fictional, corresponds to the connection between the material and the spiritual, which also characterizes the narrator's return journey. Both Young Thomas and the narrator are men of words, as is pointed out in the encounter with the minister on the site of the former bookshop. The clergyman remembers rubbing shoulders with Young Thomas

by the shelves in the back corner on the right—just by there it would be. You see, poetry and theology was next door to each other. He was swimming out of his depth in a flood of words, and I was toiling up high mountains of biblical exegesis. (184)

This passage may be taken as a hint regarding the poet's view of his own calling. He shares with the priest the concern for words and their meaning. The true life of persons and things, in which the coincidental and individual goes together with the general and typical, is a spiritual one, and this means, in *Return Journey*, the life of language.

The Life of the Name

To the narrator, the link between the material reality of places and persons and the spiritual reality of language consists in their names. This is already suggested by the opening verbal image of the shops' graves "marbled with snow and headstoned with fences," by which the return journey is shown to be like a visit to a cemetery, where the physical remains of the dead will, to use Keats's words, "from this mortal state . . . Be spiritualised"³⁷ in the memory evoked by their names on the gravestones. The narrator revisits names just as much as places; twice the empty spaces of former shopping streets are structured by the names of stores and other buildings which have ceased to exist. To be exact, the houses have not ceased to exist, because their names are still there, they have only become "invisible": "Down College Street I walked then, past the remembered invisible shops, Langley's, Castle Cigar Co; T. B. Brown's, Pullar's, Aubrey Jeremiah, Goddard Jones, Richards, Hornes, Marles, Pleasance and Harper, Star Supply, Sidney Heath, Wesley Chapel and nothing" (184-85). The sequence

of names suggested by empty spaces guides the narrator to Young Thomas's school, where, in a similar way, absence and annihilation lead to the remembrance of names. Here, too, by the poet's remembrance of individuals' names that which is dead and past is eternized or entered into the book of life: the school-building "has changed its face" and

the names are havoc'd from the Hall and the carved initials burned from the broken wood. But the names remain. What names did he know of the dead? Who of the honored dead did he know such a long time ago? The names of the dead in the living heart and head remain for ever. Of all the dead whom did he know? [FUNERAL BELL] VOICE: Evans, K. J., Haines, G. C., Roberts, I. L. . . ." (185-86).

This is the passage in which the narrator addresses himself in the third person in a kind of free indirect discourse or interior dialogue. Thomas thus creates an effect of both personal involvement and distance. Personal recollection goes together with such general statements as "The names of the dead in the living heart and head remain for ever." In this formula, "poetry and theology" are indeed "next door to each other." For the words chosen point to religion, and the way they are used and put together signalizes poetry. As regards theology, the poetic formula which sums up the hope for a life in spite of death rings with biblical echoes. Besides Revelation 3:5 ("I will not blot out his name out of the book of life") there is Ecclesiasticus 44:14 ("but their name liveth for evermore"), and perhaps most pertinently, the prophet Isaiah's vision of "the new heavens and the new earth," which will remain before the Lord just as "your seed and your name [shall] remain" (Is. 66:22). In this context, the "return" of *Return Journey* suggests a rebirth, for the remaining of the name does not mean changeless duration but is to be brought about by an act of the living heart and head. Without making direct reference to the Gospel, Thomas' formula echoes, and to a certain degree, shares the Biblical message that man is "Being born again" by the word "which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Pet. 1:23).³⁸

Thomas, characteristically, locates the life of the name (and thus, implicitly, the new heavens and the new earth) in the spoken word of the remembering narrator-poet. And this is where "poetry" joins "theology," as the author points out by making language speak of and for itself, for

instance in the paronomasia “names . . . remain,” which sounds as if to suggest that *name* is called name because it is that which “re-mains.”³⁹ The “return” just as much consists in a turning of words as in an actual journey, and the boy’s “beat of his blood” (185) is not to be separated from the beat of rhythmical, poetic language. Moreover, Thomas draws attention to poetic language by using, in a prose context, devices typically belonging to verse, such as rhyme (“dead”-“head”), alliteration (“heart and head”) and a rhythmical flow resembling the alternating stress of “iambic” verse (with two short beats in “of the” and “in the”).⁴⁰ The triadic rhythmical arrangement (“The names of the dead / in the living heart and head / remain for ever”) makes language itself melodically come alive. This grouping of words is not merely a formal device but is truly poetical in that it generates the distinctive meaning of the phrase: the poet’s book of life is “the living heart and head” in which the dead shall remain. This is not a question of permanent remembrance. The sentence occurs in the context of an act of remembering (“Of all the dead whom did he know?”). The word order, however, is not “The names of the dead remain for ever in the living heart and head” but “The names of the dead in the living heart and head remain for ever.” Once the act of remembering has been achieved by the living head and heart, the names will remain—quite independently of those who once remembered them. Those who remembered will of course die but the names will remain “for ever.” What gives them permanence is the one moment of thinking and loving remembrance brought about by revisiting the place to which these names once belonged.

The Knowing Place

This connection between place and person bears a certain resemblance to Gerard Manley Hopkins’s concept of the “running instress” of a scene which is kept as something real by its viewer though the place may have changed when he returns.⁴¹ In Thomas’s *Return Journey*, however, the opposite or counterpart of this phenomenon is dramatically realized. Here it is the place which retains and preserves the person once connected with

it so that revisiting the place implies meeting again a human being. Even though there may be "nothing to stop the wind" (179) like the Psalmist's wind that "passeth over" the grass or flower of man, in *Return Journey* Psalm 103 (in which "the place thereof shall know it no more") is as it were ironically reversed, since the place goes on knowing the man.⁴² This is mainly an auditory process. The place, even when it lies in ruins, preserves the voices of the people who once dwelt there. Thus the narrator notes that "The voices of fourteen years ago hung silent in the snow and ruin, . . ." (183). In a radio play, the reality of the voices kept by a place is quite easily affirmed, especially since in radio a person is identical with his or her voice. There is, in principle, no difference between the voice of a person actually heard and a remembered or imagined voice. Even though the narrator speaks of "silent" voices, they are to be heard by the listeners who accompany him on his return journey. Different levels of time and reality coalesce. The Minister, for example, whom the narrator meets where the bookshop used to be is, on the one hand, simply a passer-by who addresses him: "Lost anything—under the snow? A bookshop. Yes, I knew it well." On the other hand, it is no accident that the Minister's voice is heard at this particular place, for it belongs to it: Young Thomas talked to him only there.

Other voices, like those of the girls on the promenade, entirely belong to the past, but they are also kept and evoked by this particular place. What, technically speaking, is a flashback is also a statement about the properties of a location. The place revisited really speaks, such as the houses of the Uplands, where a voice which is not the narrator's suddenly declares: "Here was once the flea-pit picture-house where he whooped for the scalping of Indians with Jack Basset and banged for the rustlers' guns" (188). This voice of the place immediately stirs the narrator's memory and provokes his reply: "Jackie Basset, killed."

The idea of a place actually keeping the voice of a person over a long time and giving it back is also predominant in Thomas's "Poem in October," written three years before *Return Journey*. It is far more exuberant and joyful in tone than the radio play but there are strong parallels. On his birthday, the poet ascends the hill above a sea-town where he suddenly finds himself revisiting (or being revisited by) the country of his childhood

and where the voice of the boy has been kept for him by the "water and singingbirds" belonging to this place: "These were the woods the river and sea / Where a boy / In the listening / Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy / To the trees and stones and the fish in the tide. / And the mystery / Sang alive / Still in the water and singingbirds."

As in *Return Journey*, here is an interplay of death and life. The living boy whispers to the "listening / Summertime of the dead," while the "summer noon" in the presence of the speaker gives back the dead child's message: "And the true / Joy of the long dead child sang burning / In the sun." In *Return Journey*, we remember, the voice of Young Thomas is never heard but town and park keep the life of the child the narrator has come to find. Even though he was "happy all the time" his truth is a sad one. It is the mystery of death itself, with which the place truly rings since it has been destroyed.

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität
Münster

NOTES

¹See Gwen Watkins, *Portrait of a Friend* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1983) 92; cf. also 115. Thomas's statement is also quoted in John Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion* (London: Macmillan, 1991) 27.—I am grateful to Professor Inge Leimberg for her critical, as well as stimulating, discussion of this contribution to the *Connotations* symposium on "A Place Revisited" in Halberstadt, July 1997.

²*Reminiscences of Childhood (First Version)*, as included in *On the Air with Dylan Thomas: The Broadcasts*, ed. Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions, 1992) 1-8, here 3; see 16 for the 1945 version. *Return Journey* is also quoted from this collection (177-89). It was first published in *Quite Early One Morning* (New York: New Directions, 1954).

³*Reminiscences of Childhood (First Version)* 3.

⁴*Reminiscences of Childhood (First Version)*, *On the Air* 3; cf. *On the Air* 16 for the 1945 version.

⁵Peter Lewis, "The Radio Road to Llareggub," *British Radio Drama*, ed. John Drakakis (Cambridge: CUP, 1981) 72-110, here 92.

⁶Cf. Ralph Maud's introduction to *Return Journey* in *On the Air with Dylan Thomas* 177, referring to Thomas's notebook.

⁷Even though making a clear-cut distinction between the two genres is notoriously difficult, it seems useful to agree with John Drakakis, who points out that "At each end of the spectrum [i.e. from feature to radio play] the roles of journalist and dramatist could be clearly distinguished." See his introduction to *British Radio Drama* 8. Drakakis goes on to quote Laurence Gilliam who "in a more epigrammatic vein, asserted that 'Features deal with fact, Drama with fiction'" (8). Drakakis' source is Val Gielgud, *British Radio Drama 1922-1956* (London: Harrap, 1957) 48.

⁸*Return Journey* is appreciated as a work of radio art by Lewis, especially 95-97, who discusses it as a congenial precursor of *Under Milk Wood*; cf. also Douglas Cleverdon, *The Growth of Milk Wood* (London: Dent, 1969) on *Return Journey*: "With his poet's insight and his practical experience of broadcasting techniques, Dylan knew exactly how to create a work of permanent value from the fluid medium of radio. I doubt whether there has ever been a better thirty-minute radio piece" (15).

⁹The heading of Donne's seventeenth meditation is quoted from *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (New York: OUP, 1987) 86.

¹⁰Dylan Thomas's poetry is quoted from *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Jones (London: Dent, 1971; rev. ed. 1974; repr. 1987). "Poem on His Birthday" is no. 163 in this ed.

¹¹Cf. Lewis 97 ("as the day advances the memories regress in contrary motion").

¹²For Thomas' spatializing of time, cf. his well-known coinage "once below a time," e.g. in "Fern Hill."

¹³J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1965) 198.

¹⁴OED "crunch" v. 3.

¹⁵OED "crunch" v. 2.

¹⁶Cf. Ackerman 216: "We must always remember that his favourite prose writer was Dickens."

¹⁷*Our Mutual Friend*, ed. E. Salter Davies (Oxford: OUP, 1952) 793. The motif of the incognito return journey and the search for "a friend" strengthens the link with *Our Mutual Friend*, in which the "mutual friend" John Harmon, supposed to be dead, returns to London.—On the subject of grotesque animation in Dickens, see Dorothy Van Ghent's classic essay, "The Dickens World: A View from Todgers's," *Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Price (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967) 24-38. Cf. also my article on "Little Dorrit: Dickens and the Language of Things," *Anglistentag 1996 Dresden: Proceedings*, ed. Uwe Böker and Hans Sauer (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1997) 351-61.

¹⁸See, for example, *Our Mutual Friend* 800: "Rigid before the fire . . . he sat, with the dark lines deepening in his face, its stare becoming more and more haggard, its surface turning whiter and whiter as if it were being overspread with ashes, and the very texture and colour of his hair degenerating."

¹⁹John Donne, "Satire 3" (79-80, 83), quoted from *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971; repr. 1986).

²⁰See Alastair Fowler, "Adder's Tongue on Maiden Hair: Early Stages in Reading 'Fern Hill,'" *Dylan Thomas: New Critical Essays* (London: Dent, 1972) 228-61, especially 238-42.

²¹Op. 63, no. 8. For the text of Klaus Groth's poem ("O wüßt ich doch den Weg zurück"), see *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Ivo Braak and Richard Mehlem, vol. 5: *Hundert Blätter* (Flensburg: Wolff, 1960) 44.

²²See, for example, "Das Ding," *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954) 157-75: "Die Sterblichen sind die Menschen. Sie heißen die Sterblichen, weil sie sterben können. Sterben heißt: den Tod als Tod vermögen. Nur der Mensch stirbt. Das Tier verendet. Es hat den Tod als Tod weder vor sich noch hinter sich. [The mortals are the human beings. They are called mortals because they are able to die. To die means: to be capable of death as death. Only man dies. The animal perishes. Death as death lies neither before nor behind it]" (171). Cf. also Karl Jaspers on the borderline of death (or the end) as the true origin of our consciousness of being ("der eigentliche Ursprung unseres Seinsbewußtseins") in *Von der Wahrheit* (München: R. Piper, 1947; new ed. 1991) 173.

²³Quoted from his "Deaths Duell" sermon (25 February 1631); John Donne, *Selected Prose*, ed. Neil Rhodes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) 313.

²⁴Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (London: Dent, 1954; reset ed. 1985) 82.

²⁵Donne, 17. Meditation, *Devotions* 87.

²⁶Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol, Christmas Books*, ed. Eleanor Farjeon (Oxford: OUP, 1954; repr. 1987) 10. Even though the statement specifically refers to one's attitude to people 'lower' on the social scale ("to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave"), the context of *A Christmas Carol* makes clear that it lies at the heart of Dickens's (to use Cazamian's term) "philosophie de Noël."

²⁷Charles Dickens, *Christmas Stories*, ed. Margaret Lane (Oxford: OUP, 1956) 252.

²⁸In *The Haunted House*, the child's imaginative world disappears when he learns about the death of his father. See *Christmas Stories* 251.

²⁹See Lothar Cerny, "Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*: Revisiting and Reformation," *Connotations* 7 (1997/98): 255-72, especially 263-65 on Scrooge's "experience of being two persons at one and the same time" (263).

³⁰*A Christmas Carol; Christmas Books* 27.

³¹In discussion, Leona Toker has drawn my attention to the "Boy at Winander" passage in Book V of Wordsworth's *Prelude* (364-425 in the 1850 text; see *The Prelude: A Parallel Text*, ed. J. C. Maxwell [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971; repr. 1986]), in which the speaker also appears to meet himself when he visits (and remembers visiting) the grave of a young boy in the churchyard of his home village. The speaker who stands "Mute, looking at the grave in which he lies" (397) a few lines earlier identifies with the boy to such an extent that, for instance, he knows "a gentle shock of mild surprise / Has carried far into his heart the voice / Of mountain torrents" (382-84). Maxwell in his note (p. 548) points out that "In the original version, written in Germany 1798-9, Wordsworth is the boy."

³²Cf. the garden in Louisa Alcott's *The Secret Garden* to which a girl brings new life.

³³See her churchyard conversation with the sexton in chapter 54 of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. the Earl of Wicklow (Oxford: OUP, 1951) 404: "I will make this place my garden."

³⁴*The Old Curiosity Shop* 406.

³⁵Again a Dickensian echo makes itself heard here. The one boy who is known "by the thousands" is related to the "Hundreds of people" who, according to Miss Pross in *A Tale of Two Cities* come to pay their attentions to Lucie Manette. See *A Tale of Two Cities*, intr. Sir John Shuckburgh (Oxford: OUP, 1949) 92-94 ("Hundreds of People" is the heading of ch. 6 in Book II). The "hundreds of people" are in fact "only One," i.e. Charles Darnay. He represents the archetypal man and wooer just as Young Thomas represents the boy and the adolescent.

³⁶Cf. also the lines Vernon Watkins remembered Thomas to have spoken to him during a London air-raid: "In London, when the blinds were drawn / Blackening a barbarous sky, / He plucked, beneath the accusing beams, / The mote out of his eye. / In the one death his eye discerned / The death all deaths must die. / 'My immortality', he said, / 'Now matters to my soul / Less than the deaths of others. . .'" (quoted from Gwen Watkins 106).

³⁷*Endymion* IV.933.

³⁸The action of turning and returning in connection with destruction and everlastingness suggests yet another Biblical context: in Psalm 90, relevant to *Return Journey* anyway for its subject of learning about death ("teach us the number of our days," 3), the Lord who has "been our dwelling place" (1) "even from everlasting to everlasting" (2) is asked to "Return" (13), as it is also man's task to do so: "Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men" (3).

³⁹Again, Donne's 17. Meditation is not far off: "No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a péece of the *Continent*, a part if the *maine*; . . ." (*Devotions* 87).—In the context of Thomas's revisiting his former school it may be allowed to point out that Latin *manes* (from *manere*, 'remain') is an anagram of *names*. Among the literary echoes of the name that remains, the ironical one of Shakespeare's Coriolanus is not to be forgotten, of whom "Only that name remains" (4.5.74) as a sign of what this soldier did for his country (cf. 5.3.147).

⁴⁰The "iambic" flow is another Dickensian feature of *Return Journey*. In *A New Spirit of the Age*, 2nd ed. (London, 1844), Richard Hengist Horne already pointed out that Little Nell's funeral in ch. 72 of *The Old Curiosity Shop* can be read as blank verse. The relevant passages are also published as "Nelly's Funeral: The Versification in Dickens's Prose," *Dickensian* 12 (1916): 154-55. Thomas could also have read about Dickens's metrical prose in T. W. Hill, "The Poetic Instinct of Dickens," *Dickensian* 12 (1916): 272-74 and 293-96.

⁴¹See Christiane Lang-Graumann's essay in this issue of *Connotations*.

⁴²"As for man, his days *are* as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more" (Ps. 103:15-16).