Cool enough for Lou Reed?: The plays of Ed Thomas and the cultural politics of South Wales¹

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In the conclusion to his 1985 book *When Was Wales?* the historian Gwyn A. Williams declared that the Welsh were now ‘nothing but a naked people under an acid rain’ (305). Written in the aftermath of the anti-devolution vote of 1979 and the fatal blow delivered to the economy and confidence by the defeat of the 1984 miners’ strike, Williams’s work, for all its tentative faith that some form of Wales will survive, is a litany of loss. Above all it mourns the loss of a Welshness of class and community which provided illuminating moments of inspiration, and in particular the loss of a righteous communal resistance to injustice captured in the triumphant mass resistance to the government’s 1934–5 Unemployment Assistance Board Act. This victory of grass-roots radicalism, argued Williams, buoyed up the flagging confidence of a people ravaged by unemployment and ‘carried [them] into their liberating World War on a surge of socialist and Labour hope’ (264).

While the cultural and linguistic reality of Wales encompasses far more than the heavy industry and socialism of the predominantly English-speaking southern valleys it is that Wales which is home to the highest percentage of the population. It is also the Wales which has come closest to extinction. For despite the ravages experienced by the hill farmers of rural Wales it is the south which has seen the erasure of the very sources of income upon which the community was founded and through which its identity was forged. In the aftermath of what Williams termed ‘the terrible year 1979, *blwyddyn y pla*, the year of the plague ... The elections of that year seemed to call into question the whole basis on which Welsh history had hitherto been written’ (1990/91: 57).

Such an analysis might appear idiosyncratic in the light of the rock band Catatonia’s celebratory ‘Every day when I wake up/I thank the

Lord I'm Welsh' (1998). Coming at the end of the 1990s, a decade which saw the triumph of the Manic Street Preachers, this unironic paean to a nationality whose future Gwyn Williams had doubted only a decade earlier suggests either an inadequacy in his analysis or a staggering reversal of economic and cultural fortunes. As the decade closed with the establishment of a Welsh Assembly it might appear that Williams was simply wrong in pronouncing that with the 1979 anti-devolution vote, and the swing to Conservatives throughout almost all of Wales in the General Election of that year, the Welsh had identified themselves with southern England and 'finally disappeared into Britain' (1985: 305). The socialism forged in the inter-war years can still be found in the self-confessed 'classic labour' (Maconie 1998: 96) lyrics of the Manic Street Preachers whose 'A design for life' (1996) announced 'Libraries gave us power/Then work came and made us free'. Yet even this anthemic assertion of the cultural and material foundations of traditional valleys socialism acknowledges the extent to which it is an historical memory in the bleak contemporaneity of the next line: 'What price now for a shallow piece of dignity?' However, out of this complex of economic despoliation, a burgeoning cultural confidence and residual socialism has emerged a fledgling theatre movement which captures the trauma consequent on the fact that, in the words of Ed Thomas, foremost among these playwrights, 'old Wales is dead' (1997).

But Thomas is not here reflecting on the loss of Williams's cauldron of radicalism. His reference point is a Cymru of clichés whose longevity was demonstrated by Shirley Bassey's Welsh-dragon dress at the 1999 Welsh Assembly celebrations. The reference to Max Boyce in the title of Thomas's 1997 article, 'A land fit for heroes (Max Boyce excluded)' neatly captures the image which he wishes to dispel: the caricature of Welshness whose soft sentimentality eases away the necessity of self-analysis. The thrust of Thomas's argument is that a people can only live in, and live up to, the images of themselves which circulate in the culture. As one of the characters in his first play, *House of America* (1994b [1988]), expressed it: 'look at Wales, where's its kings, where's our heroes? ... one answer, mate, we haven't got any. I mean let's face it Boyo, Harry Secombe isn't a bloke I'd stand in the rain for, is he?' (46–7). And as suggested by Thomas's extended list of images capable of producing a cultural cringe, '[the] Wales of stereotypes, leeks, daffodils, look-you-now-boyo rugby supporters singing Max Boyce songs in three-part harmony while phoning Mam to tell her they'll be home for tea and Welsh cakes' (1997) is one whose demise he would welcome.

Negative or disempowering stereotypes are an integral part of political and cultural colonialism. While efforts to locate Wales within any post-colonial paradigm inevitably looks strained owing to the fact that the undeniable colonisation 'happened seven centuries ago, rather than in the last century' (Aaron 1995: 15), the implications of the nursery rhyme 'Taffy was a Welshman/Taffy was a thief' are clear. Evelyn Waugh's description of the Welsh in *Decline and Fall* as 'low of brow, crafty of eye, and crooked of limb ... [slavering] at their mouths, which hung loosely over their receding chins' (1937 [1928]: 65–6) finds its 1990s equivalent in A. A. Gill's *Sunday Times* claims that the Welsh are an assortment of ugly trolls. Although Rhys Ifans's portrayal of a Welshman stole the screen in *Notting Hill* through the force of its comic brio, that image only served to reinforce images of the Welsh as voluble sexual obsessives. Thomas, however, insists that '[we] can't just blame the ignorance and stereotypes on people from outside' (quoted in McLean 1995: 6). Self-generated images have themselves ensured that the Welsh are incarcerated in a cultural landscape formed of an amalgam of John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* and Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*.

Loren Kruger has written persuasively on the role of the theatre in establishing a national hegemony by 'summoning a representative audience that in turn recognizes itself on stage' (1987: 35). The vibrant contribution of theatre to establishing a rejuvenated sense of nation in countries and moments as diverse as nineteenth-century Norway and twentieth-century Ireland suggests the possibility of a Welsh equivalent. The reality, however, is captured in Carl Tighe's 1986 observation that despite the 'enormous social and political and industrial changes that have swept over Wales in the last ten or fifteen years' (251), its stages have seen merely 'a parade of West End copies, examination texts and amnesiac froth' (258). 'There is', he argued, 'a general refusal to engage with the idea of Wales' (255), or rather to explore realities as opposed to an idea of Wales where 'sentimental twaddle' (257) dominates and the country is seen as populated by 'barmy eccentrics, loonies and no good boyos' (256). Tighe's dispiriting summary provides the context within which Thomas's observation that 'we haven't created enough fictions ourselves' takes its force (quoted in McLean 1995: 6). His objective is to create what he terms 'a vibrant and invented contemporary mythology ... a landscape of fiction that reflects the way we live, love and die; a fiction that shows us our experiences are particular and at the same time universal' (Thomas 1997: 18). With the establishment of Y Cwmni (now Fiction Factory) in 1988, Thomas engaged in the process of first

analysing then generating adequate fictions to live by; a process which continued across the 1990s. In addition to Thomas's plays this decade saw the proliferation of alternative Welsh images across a variety of genres, most particularly music and film. In a 1997 interview with Thomas, Heike Roms speculated that contemporary Welsh youth would 'find their role-models in films like *Twin Town* rather than in the writings of Jack Kerouac' (1998b: 190), which drove the protagonist of Thomas's *House of America*. While *Twin Town* (1997) blasts open images of Wales as an extended Llareggub, a closer analysis suggests a less progressive set of values than implied by Roms and forms a useful point of comparison to Thomas's attempts to stimulate 'a multicultural Wales with a myriad of sustainable myths' (Davies 1998a: 117).

After the sweep of the camera across the expanse of Swansea Bay and fleeting glimpses of the city's loveable, if slightly eccentric, normality, the film roars into action as two teenagers, the Lewis twins, joy-ride, *Bullit*-like, down the steep streets of the city before stopping outside a doctor's surgery and picking up a pensioner couple. 'Now don't forget, there's a welcome for you both in the choir practice. Your father was a fine tenor, be a shame to break the mould, innit?' are the words of the husband to the blank-faced boys. The penetration of such residual values into a culture of joy-riding and joints is complicated by the fact that the pensioners are fuelling the boys' drug habit by selling them their Diazepam prescription: 'The boys have this with their cider ... To have a good time see' is the streetwise comment of the wife. Clashes of contemporary culture with remnants of a glory that is gone continue throughout the film in which language and attitudes have the gloss of contemporaneity: 'karaoke is what's killing the fucking male voice choir music', the police are corrupt, the sex is brutish and the patron of the rugby club, Bryn Cartwright, is funding Swansea's cocaine traffic. When the boys' family are burnt to death as a result of an escalating feud over compensation demanded in recompense for the father's accident while working for Cartwright, they initiate a scheme of revenge which results in the death of both Cartwright and Terry, the corrupt policeman who was the direct cause of the family's murder. As the production team of *Trainspotting* were involved in *Twin Town*, comparisons between the films are readily made. The way in which *Twin Town* ends, however, lends itself to a reading more confirmatory of 'residual' cultural values than is suggested by this particular Welsh connection.

At the film's close the boys enact a ceremony of simultaneous homage and revenge, providing the father with the burial at sea he

craved and executing Terry by strapping him to the coffin. As the coffin sinks beneath the waves the boys cast a Welsh flag on the sea, the whole final sequence being accompanied by the strains of 'Myfanwy' from a male-voice choir standing at the end of Mumbles pier. This excess of national signifiers might be taken as ironic were it not for the fact that the executed Terry has not only committed murder but aggressively mocked the Welsh throughout the film, finally deriding the national rugby team as a 'crap-shite rugby team that can't even beat Canada'. Terry is Scots, and it is worth noting that the moment of past rugby glory which is reflected on at some length, with individual moves being recited in sequence by three Welsh characters, refers to a 1977 Welsh victory at Murrayfield. Terry is also responsible for extending the volume of cocaine traffic in Swansea, the drug being brought in by a Londoner whose anti-Welsh prejudice matches his own. Although Cartwright is Welsh, his *parvenu* lifestyle suggests that he has cut himself off from any authentic communal values. The fact that the choir turns up on the pier at the request of the boys demonstrates that while the Lewises are delinquent they are not to be read as excluded. What they inflict is a communal punishment rather than an act of personal revenge and triumphantly demonstrate whose is the victory by placing the Welsh flag on the water, smothering the last sight of Terry even as it memorialises their father. While this moment is far from the radical communality recalled by Gwyn Williams, it is still closer to that sense of innate opposition to injustice than it is to the alienation of the world of Irvine Welsh. Its political impotence lies in the fact that while the Lewis twins triumph, the film ends as they head out to sea in a stolen motor launch, their only concern whether they have enough fuel to reach Morocco. The final shot of the choir on the illuminated pier is set against the dark night of the Welsh mainland and as the film credits roll the strains of the choir are replaced by the sound of the Super Furry Animals' 'Bad Behaviour'. The victory of the old Wales is fleeting, all that is left is a sense of what once was, for the values finally upheld by the brothers are 'residual', and too readily mourned and memorialised rather than mobilised.

The use of rugby failure as shorthand for a more extended cultural malaise is a feature of the film and, as argued by Glyn Davies, 'Welsh rugby, once a source of national pride, [has] now become part of that rapid erosion of national identity which has thrown a big question mark over what it means to be Welsh today' (1991/92: 4). Davies neatly summarises those elements of the culture which once represented Welsh-

ness: 'close communities sustained by heavy industry, the Welsh language, male-voice choirs, chapels, hill-farms, rugby', and the fact that now 'they are things in decline' (4). Having suffered defeats by Canada and Western Samoa, the rugby players of the early 1990s, and the nation whose pride they once embodied, saw themselves as 'figures of fun, out of date and out of fashion, searching for their "*hwyl*" [emotional ecstasy] amongst the wreckage of old securities' (1991/92: 6). The issue which is addressed directly by the theatre of Ed Thomas is how to rescue something from the ruins.

Thomas's decade-long dramatisation of the trauma of his native culture is born of his own sense that 'the only thing I see in Wales is defeat' and, he continued, 'I personally find defeat difficult to live with' (Davies 1994/95: 58). In the bleak *Song From a Forgotten City* (1995) Thomas takes this pervasive sense of terminal decline to an ultimate low as Wales, defeated in Cardiff by the English national rugby team, spawns desolate characters who, faced with the fact that 'THE WHOLE FUCKING WORLD IS BEATING US AT OUR OWN GAME', now cry 'I'm Welsh and I'm fucked in the head' (4). The grim sense of cultural meltdown is absolute. Despite the echo of Thomas's own sentiments in the assertion of Carlyle, the protagonist, that 'we must play our part on the world stage. We've got to show that the way we live, love and die means something, that we are part of the world, not unique but similar, universal, like small countries all over the world!' (17), it is the quality of lament which distinguishes the play, coupled with traces of a cultural anguish which drives Carlyle into excesses of self and national disgust which confirms defeat far more than it liberates desire. Thomas, as observed by Katie Gramich, may 'believe in the tragic potential of the cliché' (1998: 168), but Carlyle's masturbatory release over a Cindy doll in the aftermath of a rugby defeat runs perilously close to confirming rather than interrogating the most negative images of Welshness. Gwyn Williams noted that images of a cosy Welsh world were a badge of subordination, 'the diminishing and sometimes debilitating shorthand of a subordinate people cultivating a re-assuring self-indulgence in the interstices of subordination' (1990/91: 59). With *Song From a Forgotten City* Thomas is so concerned with demolishing cosy images that he fails to see that self-indulgence and subordination can take several forms. Far more significant both in cultural and dramatic terms are *House of America* (1994b [1988]), *East From the Gantry* (1994d [1992]) (which form the first and last plays of the *New Wales Trilogy*) and *Gas Station Angel* (1998), all of which interrogate the pressing need for

sustaining national images, passing through the inadequacy of those imported from another culture to tentatively alight on the possibility that Wales itself contains the necessities of renewal. But as is clear from *The Myth of Michael Roderick* (1990, unpublished) where the arms of stretcher bearers are wrenched out by the strain of carrying the dead who are 'heavy with nostalgia for a golden age there never was and they never saw' (Savill 1991: 86), this renewal is not to be grounded in images which sustained the Wales of the past.

Thomas's most successful play, *House of America*, takes a traumatised Welsh family living on the edge of an opencast mine as a metaphor for Wales itself. As noted above, a central question of the play is 'where's our heroes?' and, faced with the vacuity of those on offer, Sid Lewis and his sister Gwenny indulge in a progressively incestuous and ultimately murderous identification with Jack Kerouac and his lover Joyce Johnson. A more pertinent question, however, is as to what has created the pressing need for heroes; an issue which is acknowledged in Thomas's work, but only tangentially, and in increasingly elliptical ways, as his plays go through their various drafts in the process of production and publication.

In the second play of the *New Wales Trilogy*, *Flowers From the Dead Red Sea* (1994c [1991]), which is stripped down to a Beckettian bleakness in its published form, one character proclaims that 'the good bit' 'is already crushed, like my mother's and my father's, my grandparents and theirs. I am the progeny of crushed good brain, the history of crushed good brains, I am the future of a million crushed good brains' (124). And as becomes clear in this exchange from the final play in the trilogy, *East From the Gantry* (1994d [1992]), this sense of extinction is grounded in specific historical and material realities:

Bella: It's a shame it died out ... mining.
 Trampas: It is.
 Bella: It's a real shame.
 Trampas: Miners used to bring down governments.
 Bella: They did.
 Trampas: There were thousands of them.
 Bella: Yes.
 Trampas: Pits all over the place.
 Bella: And now there's none.

(197)

As recorded in a review of one production of the play, this moment was accompanied by 'big black-and-white photos emerging from dust-sheets

which conjure up images of old Wales – rugby teams, stone farmhouses, pitheads' (McMillan 1998: 225). Thomas has expressed his doubts about the 'old Wales' of clichés and stereotypes but this other 'old Wales' – while less apparent in his work, and while this moment is excised from the published version of the play – still underpins the essential tragedy which unfolds in *House of America*. For this is a Wales of unemployment where Sid's failure to obtain work at the open caste mine, and the fact that at thirty 'the only job I've ever had is fucking gravedigging', drives him inexorably into the 'game' of Jack Kerouac and Joyce Johnson which he 'plays' with Gwenny because 'I was Jack for a bit, felt good' (97). Escaping from this downward spiral of despair leads to Gwenny's pregnancy, and final drug-induced death, and his being beaten to death by his brother, Boyo, who is outraged at their incestuous liaison. Dreams, specifically American dreams, have a death-dealing power when cherished in lieu of reality. The fact that the mother's murder and burial of the father, which has always been referred to by her as his escape to America, is soon to be revealed by the encroaching opencast mine makes explicit Thomas's association of America with deaths which are both physical and cultural. He is scathing in his attitude to American commercialism and culture. In an interview in 1997 he commented that 'America is eminently successful at exporting crap all over the world – Mickey Mouse, Macdonald and KFC ... it supports a kind of monoglot culture, a dangerous simplicity' (Davies 1998a: 116, 118). But what it possesses, Thomas continues, is a sustaining power such as Wales lacks. There is then 'nothing wrong with Sid, he just selects the wrong dream. But the quality of his imagination is terrific' (126). However, while the play is explicit in its presentation of the consequences of the wrong dream, it is muffled on the causes of such a choice and limits alternatives to hints and suggestions which flit across the dialogue but are not embodied in either theme or action.

'I tell you one thing', says the Mother to Boyo, 'if you don't stand up to it, your roots are going to fly out of the ground to wherever the wind blows them' (1994b: 85). Apart from her fears that the mining operation will expose her own guilty secret, the explicit reference here is to the fact that it is their house, 'home', which will be destroyed by this new enterprise. The company operating the mine is given no national affiliation but what is made clear is that this is work lacking in all dignity and direction. In the desolate self-analysis of the labourer employed at the mine, 'the dreams have just fallen out of the ears' consequent on engaging in a work in which 'I've got to go now, see the machine's

started walking, got to follow the machine' (66). This is the low-skill employment produced in the postmodern economy which Fredric Jameson described as the global expression of American capitalism (1984: 57), and its all-pervasive quality is captured in Sid's observation that pretty soon the company will want their house 'and you'll say "You can't have it, it's part of our street," and they'll turn round and say, "We know, but we own the street"' (73). The paradox of Sid, and Gwenny, is that they are destroyed by the culture which they embrace as an escape from the ravages effected by its economy.

What is interesting is the position of Boyo: 'I drink coke, eat popcorn, wear baseball hats, watch the films' (76) is his comment on the perceived excessive identification of his brother with America as, by implication, he suggests that he draws the line at a purely physical consumption of that culture, denying the dominance of what he derides as 'yankage' (97). And when Sid and Gwenny offer him a baseball cap in the intensity of their Kerouac fantasy he 'scrunches it and throws it to the floor and spits' (89). While there is a difference between the consciousness expounded by Kerouac and the corporate capitalism from which the beat generation was in flight, the implication of *House of America* is that the commerce and the culture come as one imported and indivisible package, inhabiting dreams as readily as they control daily schedules. Both are equally invidious. 'Some of us don't forget' (81) is the Mother's comment as she commemorates St David's Day, and while this is articulated from within a hospital to which she has been consigned for mental illness the issue of holding to origin as an antidote to oblivion is echoed by Boyo's resolute 'this is where I belong, and I'm staying, no fucking tinpot dreaming for me' (73). While strong in this assertion, however, *House of America* is clearer in its analysis of cultural inadequacies than it is in explicating their causes and, while allowing Boyo's identification with 'home' full articulation, the play closes as he holds the dead Gwenny in his arms; the curtain falling on the failure of the false dream rather than on the reconstitution of an alternative.

The success of *House of America* led to its being made into a film in a Wales nominally quite other than that of its first production. The soundtrack for the stage production in 1988 was dominated by tracks from The Velvet Underground and The Doors. Such was the extent of the felt inadequacy of contemporary Welsh culture in this period that the significance of John Cale's birth in 'Ponty or somewhere' (Thomas 1994b: 32) is denied: 'I don't care if Cale came from fucking Ystrad, he's living in New York now' (32). And as for Cale's partner in boho cool,

Lou Reed, Wales is 'not cool enough for him, no way' (32). By the time of the film production in 1997, however, not only had Welsh culture taken on a different tone from that defined by Harry Secombe but Thomas's attitude to his native culture had consequently modified. Celebrating the explosion of Welsh bands he said '[we're] all outed now. Wales is full of different voices and the more the merrier. Take the bands, for example, Catatonia, Super Furry Animals, the Manic Street Preachers, they all have a different sound but they're all Welsh' (Hitt 1998: 5). Indeed, far from his 1994 sense of a prevalent defeat in the culture, by 1998 he was speaking of the fact that '[kids] growing up today now think it's OK to be Welsh, it's groovy, hip, cool, whatever you want to call it' (Hitt 1998: 5). However, the choice of a soundtrack which included successful Welsh bands not only for the film, but also for the 1997 tour of a drama nominally concerned with the inadequacy of the indigenous culture to sustain a demoralised people poses certain problems. Thomas acknowledged that 'the question will come up why these people don't get their act together', responding to this self-interrogation by asserting that rather than criticising Sid for dreaming, 'what I would give him a row for is buying an American dream off the shelf' (Roms 1998b: 190). The film, he went on to say, would not be played 'with the same moral correctness as the original stage version' (190) and the script has clearly been modified in the light of a perceived transformation in the cultural domain and Thomas's own analysis as it developed through subsequent plays.

The film of *House of America* provided a more complex psychology for Sid; his American dream is driven by his knowledge of his father's death, exacerbated rather than caused by unemployment. Rather than being killed by Boyo he commits suicide. The causal factors for the family tragedy are far more personal than social; indeed Sid's possession of a Harley Davidson casts him as romantic rebel rather than economic victim with his death imaged as a release and redemption when he rides through an *Easy Rider* landscape to be reunited with his father in the last of the black-and-white 'American' dream moments which have been interspersed through the film. With this resolution of Sid's trauma, it is suggested, the family regains some form of normality: the film closes as Mother and Gwenny discuss a name for the latter's baby while Boyo is heard from as working as a mechanic in Poole. Unemployment and its attendant despair are still present in a Wales imaged as bleached of colour but they are factors essentially external to the Lewis's intense domestic agony.

Despite the optimism which Thomas spoke of as entering Wales in the decade between the production of the play and that of the film, and its expression in the perpetuation of the family and the self-realisation of Boyo in work, its substantial elements are less evident. The film makes clearer the reality of America's economic colonisation of the valleys as the mining company's title, Michigan, towers in HOLLYWOOD-high red letters above the Lewis home. Despite the opening up of the drama into the streets, pubs and countryside of south Wales, however, there is a contraction of the scope of its analysis. Causes of social optimism are limited to the inclusion of the Manic Street Preachers and Catatonia on the soundtrack, in addition to three songs from Tom Jones. While Jones is approvingly acknowledged in the original play for being 'back now in the Vale' (1994b: 46) his presence in the film is an expression of his transcendence of ironic appreciation to iconic status. This, coupled with the fact that John Cale supplies the film's original music, suggests a more confident culture than that of the 1988 theatrical production. The problem posed by the film, however, is in many ways paradigmatic of the culture itself in that the optimism is generated at a superstructural level.

Thomas has frequently asserted that the real problem confronting Wales is its cultural invisibility: 'the way we live our culture doesn't mean anything to anyone else, and moreover, we've never seen that culture reflected back at us.' The result, he argued, being that 'the Welsh are paralysed by a lack of self-esteem and lack of confidence' (Davies 1994/95: 56). It is this lack of self-esteem, and what Thomas terms 'global myths ... exportable myths' (Davies 1998a: 116), which drives Sid Lewis into his destructive American dream. But if Sid's conviction that 'I've been born in the wrong country' (1994b: 45) is to be rectified for the culture of which he is, in part, the expression, then a sense of Wales as a country possessing indigenous sustaining myths has to be developed; a process which Thomas initiates with *East From the Gantry* (1994d [1992]).

In many ways Thomas's most technically interesting work, and one which demonstrates his acknowledged debt to Sam Shepard's American Expressionism, the play is set 'in Southern Powys ... In Wales' (182). But this grounded specificity of place is countered by the characters' fluid sense of time and memory as a feuding couple, Ronnie and Bella, and her potential lover, Trampas, reflect on the loss of love, life and dreams, the whole summarised in Trampas's recollection of a friend's despairing comment "You haven't got a home man," he said, "it don't exist, it disappeared, it shrunk, it fucked off, it took a walk, it died, it no longer continued to be" (182). The desolation evokes that of *House of America*,

and Trampas, like Sid Lewis, has sought consolation in an American identity which is both culturally and temporally regressive: that of 'Trampas' the cowboy drifter in the 1960s TV series *The Virginian*. However, *East From the Gantry* marks an advance on the earlier play where lines of resistance were limited to Boyo's rejection of 'yankage' and the Mother's feeble insistence on holding to roots. As the three characters converse in the fire-gutted house which was once a home, *East From the Gantry* moves to a sense of undefined, but optimistic progression. Recognising that '[the] home I knew has gone forever' Trampas accepts Ronnie's suggestion that it is '[time] to make a new start then', marking this with a return to his own name, 'Billy' (212). As the play closes, the three characters move to the table where Bella pours wine and lights some candles: 'The table looks beautifully laid, ready for something good to happen' (213).

The moment is one of anticipation rather than achievement, but in returning to his proper name Billy is laying claim to a future which is located in 'southern Powys'. His 'Trampas' declaration, 'I'm either going to fly or fall from the sky with a crash' (192), evokes the death of Martin Bratton who was killed in an attempt to fly east from the gantry. Attempts at flight, whether literal or metaphoric, effect their own kinds of death. And as Katie Gramich argues, 'what Edward Thomas seems to be suggesting is that the only place of salvation and fulfillment is not west, not east, but here' (1998: 160). While the resolution is suggestive rather than prescriptive, the play's opening, and Thomas's dense intertextuality, provides a clearer sense of the direction of his regenerative cultural analysis.

East From the Gantry opens with Trampas's story of how his uncle Ieu, when a child, had accidentally killed his mother with a shotgun, a traumatic event which affected both Ieu and his younger brother Jim: 'they were never the same again' (169). The bare bones of this story forms the narrative of Thomas's TV play, *Fallen Sons* (1994e). Here the boys, Iorry and Danny, are twins, and it is the father rather than the mother who is killed. The death splits the family as the 'guilty' Iorry is sent to live with relatives and a deep animosity created between him and his brother which lasts through into their old age. The moment of the play is that of their collective birthday, the day on which their father was killed, when Danny escapes the celebrations guiltily engineered by his *parvenu* son, and seeks out Iorry who has lived in an isolation compounded by his trauma-induced stammer. The play closes as Iorry stammers out '*damwain*' (accident); the final image is of the brothers'

laughing reconciliation drifting in a boat on a lake high in the hills. *Fallen Sons* suggests an ability to accommodate even the past's most devastating moments and lay the foundations for a sustaining future; the work is given an extra cultural resonance by the use of Welsh for the moment of reconciliation. It is the clearest expression of Thomas's acknowledgement of his preference for 'epiphany to comprehension' (Davies 1994/95: 61); the piece evoking a mood rather than concluding a thesis. For while as engaged as G. B. Shaw in the failings of his contemporary moment, Thomas is no exponent of the Shavian 'Problem Play', rejecting "'well-made" plays that have an argument and a counter-argument and a message' (Davies 1998: 121) in favour of a theatre that 'should release the imagination for people who want to be taken on a journey' (129).

Although this move away from the desolation of the original stage version of *House of America* was followed in 1995 by the bleak *Song from a Forgotten City*, that play, while open to criticism as 'a resumé of his message about inferiority' (Adams 1998: 148), is the final expression of anguish at no longer belonging to 'a nation that was fucking good at something' (Thomas 1995: 8). *Gas Station Angel* (1998), Thomas's last play to date, was described by him as 'a new kind of play for me. It's very optimistic', and for reasons which set it directly against the stage desolation of *House of America*: '*Gas Station Angel* is about how these two people – white trash I call them – make themselves up and realise they've got their own mythology. The future is theirs, if they come to terms with the past. Instead of the past destroying them like in *House of America*, they survive the past, so it's quite hopeful' (Hitt 1998: 6–7). Surviving the past then becomes a crucial facet of Thomas's sense of a regenerated Wales, one complemented by 'imagination', since '[to] be Welsh at the end of the Twentieth Century you need to have imagination' (Davies 1998a: 118).

The play's central characters, Ace and Bron, are the products of dysfunctional families who are unknowingly united by the finally revealed secret that Bron's missing brother was assaulted in error by Ace before being killed by his mother. As in *East From the Gantry* and *Fallen Sons*, the thrust of the play is towards the realisation of Bron's perception that 'maybe if we faced up to the past then maybe we wouldn't find the world so confusing' (1998: 20). As Ace and Bron become lovers capable of accommodating the knowledge of his and his mother's culpability for her brother's death there is a clear expansion of horizons. While *House of America*'s Sid Lewis can only see the limitations of his homeland,

rejecting the idea that he could ride to Pembroke – ‘don’t give me Pembroke, what happens when you reach the sea, the end of the line?’ (1994b: 44) – Ace is capable of imagining beyond Wales while remaining firmly within it. ‘I could see for miles’, he says, ‘all of Europe spread out in front of me’ (1998: 75). Thomas’s own desire for Wales’s future to be as ‘an eclectic, modern European society’ (Davies 1998a: 117) is captured in Ace’s declaration ‘I felt in my bones that the times are a-changing. Maybe I can soon call myself a European. A Welsh European, with my own language and the rudiments of another on the tip of my tongue’ (1998: 75). This inclusive sense of Welshness echoes Raymond Williams’s hopes for a modern, ‘European’ Wales; what he termed ‘the moment when we move from a *merely retrospective* nationalist politics to a *truly prospective* politics’ (1989: 118, original emphases). However, while Ace can recognise what Williams called ‘the living complexity’ (118) of a changing Wales and echo verbatim Thomas’s dictum that to be Welsh in the twentieth century requires imagination, there is no decisive advance into action. Despite the acknowledgement that youth in this society has ‘no roots ... no morality ... no religion ... no family ... no values ... no hopes ... no desires ... no dreams’ (1998: 32), there is no suggestion as to the alleviation of that condition beyond the power of imagination. The limitations of this are captured, albeit unintentionally, in Ace’s stated preference for stories: ‘[life] in storyland I could control, the on-going war against the sea and real life I couldn’t’ (11).

Thomas has expressed his distrust of art ‘that tells you what to think’, acknowledging that he doesn’t ‘claim to be prescriptive’ (Davies 1998a: 122). His rejection of the role of the dramatist as being equivalent to that of ‘journalists discussing the issue of unemployment in the south Wales valleys’ is legitimised by the claim that his fictions ‘contain possibilities of telling certain truths or reflections about the world’ (Davies 1998a: 124). As noted above, the redemption of individual and social malaise is realised through imagination and the ability to first face and then transcend the past. The difficulty with this analysis is that Thomas sees the past only as the source of debilitating memories rather than a resource on which the present can draw.

At the time of *Song From a Forgotten City* in 1995 the reviewer of the *Socialist Campaign Group News* commented ‘[whether] they [Y Cmwni] will want to address current economic and social issues any more concretely seems doubtful’ (Trott 1998: 236). In large part this is because Thomas’s dramas are essentially domestic rather than social, his characters frequently traumatised by the deaths of parents or siblings with the

social and economic dimensions to those tragedies, while alluded to, never becoming central to the work. This is in striking contrast to the works of 1930s South Wales writers such as Lewis Jones, who has the protagonist of his novel *We Live* make the fervently socialist declaration 'Keep close to the people. When we are weak they'll give us strength. When we fail, they'll pick us up and put us back on the road again' (1979 [1939]: 144). Thomas's dramas are set in the moment of that community's descent into extinction in which Jones's belief that the Red Flag 'shows the way to revolution and freedom' (1979 [1939]: 139) has become an embarrassing anachronism. There is then a painful realism to Thomas's projection of Wales into a future fuelled by imagination as for him the past is 'fucked-up' (1998: 20), and progress only a possibility when it is transcended.

Thomas is at one with Gwyn Williams in his advocacy of an imaginative shaping of a Welsh future, but he lacks his social(ist) engagement with the community's history as a repository of possibilities; a severing of the connective tissue binding the intellectual to the community which Williams locates as occurring at the onset of Wales's disappearance into Britain when 'Welsh politics had ceased to exist'. While 'most Welsh intellectuals since the eighteenth century had served as organic intellectuals ... [the] votes of 1979 dramatically registered the end of that epoch' (Williams 1985: 297). Stephen Knight has commented on the extent to which the socialist novel exemplified by *We Live* saw 'a tapering off in the post-war period, mostly into sentimentality or nihilism tinged with despair' (1993: 84), and Lewis's activism might appear redundant in the face of Wales's post-1979 exposure to 'the radical restructuring of an increasingly multinational capitalism in Britain' (Williams 1985: 297). The dismantling of Wales's industrial base and the social collapse consequent on this 'radical restructuring' has been addressed in recent drama, in Alan Osborne's *Redemption Song* (1999), or most notably in Patrick Jones's *Everything Must Go* (1999) in which the young protagonist attempts to inspire some resistance to the occupation of the valleys by the 'kabashio tv and video' company through his evocations of 'fucking chartists meeting in the rain soaked caves up in fucking cwm and brymawr ... aneurin bevan uppona hill speaking to fucking thousands of people bout life an stuff' (9). And it is Jones's comment on *House of America* which brings Thomas's intention to create a Welsh future into sharp focus: 'I don't think it was political enough really – I think it could have been a lot more angry, a little bit more politicised' (Parry 1999: 7).

Heike Roms has argued that Thomas is committed to a political

cause, but that his work should not be confused with 'the often crude literalness that characterised the agitprop theatre of the 1960s and 1970s' (1998a: 131). The rejection of naturalism in his work, the fluid use of space and preference for non-linear narratives is all part of a search for a distinctly and innovatively Welsh theatre, one which, for Thomas, 'is part of the argument for a new and invented Wales' (1994c [1991]: 17). In rejecting imported images and dramatically invoking individuals' power to override inherited limitations and inhibitions Thomas intends to provide a theatrical parallel for a Wales which will be 'fast, maverick and imaginative, and innovative ... a grown-up Wales, which is self-defined and not stereotypical' (Davies 1998a: 117). Thomas has argued that he 'very much agree(s) with Gwyn Alf Williams's view of the history of South Wales' particularly of Welshness as 'an idea that is constantly being reinvented' (Davies 1994/95: 56). However, while both Thomas and Williams advance a view of what Williams termed 'Welsh making and unmaking of themselves' it is only Williams who argues that 'a sense of history has been central' (1985: 304). And in the moment of post-modernity that sense of history is crucial.

Thomas's open-ended compositional technique, in which 'plays mutate in text, in form, in medium', has been cited by David Adams as 'a clear example of what postmodernists mean when they assert that all writing is a rewriting' (1998: 156). Moreover, according to Katie Gramich, Thomas's plays embody the 'postmodernist ideology' explicated in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*: 'We no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date' (1998: 170). While the end of the grand narratives may have proved a liberation for many, the implications of an end of any 'totality' for a historically validated sense of national identity and difference are obvious. History may have a part to play in the world of the postmodern but, according to Gwyn Williams, it is on the level of 'pits turned into tourist museums' and is 'rarely to be brought to bear on vulgarly contemporary problems'. This, he concluded, 'is not to encapsulate a past, it is to sterilize it. It is not to cultivate an historical consciousness; it is to eliminate it' (1985: 300). And this prophetic sense of Welsh history and identity as commercial commodities is made chillingly apparent in the pronouncement by the International Officer with the Welsh Arts Council that

the image of Wales abroad as represented by its artists is one of a distinctive, individual culture, of a dynamic, self-confident and risk-taking people, a place of innovation as well as tradition, richness and diversity.

These attributes are of interest to potential investors both in terms of representing the positive qualities of our people – self-motivation, commitment and flexibility – as well as providing an interesting environment in which to relocate. (Vaughan Jones 1997/98: 46)

As argued by Fredric Jameson, postmodernity's malign reality is that of 'the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world' (1984: 57) in which 'historicity and historical depth, which used to be called historical consciousness or the sense of the past, are abolished' (Stephenson 1989: 4). The threat of such a 'thinning' of the historical consciousness is seen by Jameson as being as disastrous for the individual as for the nation; indeed the former is the paradigm of the latter:

when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers [and as] personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me; and second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves through its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of our sentence, then we are similarly unable to fulfil the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. (Jameson 1984: 72)

In shedding the 'old Wales' of Max Boyce, male-voice choirs and daffodils Thomas aims to enable the unencumbered nation to make the leap into the future. However, there is a risk that along with the past of tired stereotypes goes that of the regenerative possibilities evoked by Gwyn Williams, as Wales has 'repeatedly employed history to make a usable past, to turn a past into an instrument with which a present can build a future' (1985: 304). Wales may now be cool enough for Lou Reed but what may be generated through cultural 'chilling' alone is open to question.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to the generosity of Ed Thomas and Patrick Jones in providing me with copies of the unpublished *Song From a Forgotten City* and *Everything Must Go* respectively.