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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

NARRATIVE SPACE IN THE POETRY OF GILLIAN CLARKE

BY

SHARON HOWE



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and
Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1992



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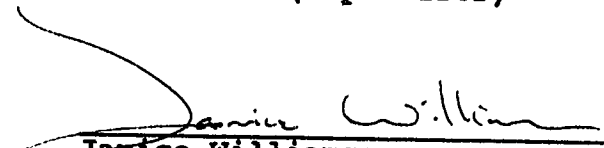
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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Narrative Space in the Poetry of Gillian Clarke" submitted by Sharon Howe in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.


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Abstract

In my thesis, I investigate the writings of the contemporary Anglo-Welsh poet, Gillian Clarke, from generic and feminist perspectives. In the work of Gillian Clarke, the primary goal of the poet necessarily involves finding a balance between the personal need to speak as a woman, and as an individual--"to be more and not less oneself" (Butler 195)--and at the same time, the public need to write with a public consciousness of charting the history, [and] voicing the emotions [and] problems of the tribe" (Schmidt). This balance is manifested in the vivid landscapes that Clarke creates through her writing, and in the poetic speaker's relationship to these landscapes. Although Clarke writes predominantly short lyric poetry, her poems imply a kind of narrative progress within the context of her three original collections, and I use the term "narrative space" to describe the effect of this progress. I approach my close readings of Clarke's collections through considerations of the poetry within the contexts of Anglo-Welsh poetic tradition, the half-hour radio poem, epistolarity, and postmodernism.

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INTRODUCTION

Gillian Clarke has rightly been described as having "pursued an individual career" (Peach 75) that resists easy classifications. She tends to confound postmodernist or feminist expectations as a feminist writer with a strongly traditional patriotic agenda, and as a nationalistic Welsh writer writing unapologetically in the language of the English colonizers--and she does so without any attitude of irony. Any process leading to a final understanding of these contradictions must begin with Clarke's statement about the traditional role of poets in Wales, which also serves to illuminate her own career:

In Welsh-speaking communities poets are still expected to name, to honour, to commemorate, to celebrate, to satirize, to give voice to a community's pride, grief, rage, and laughter.

("Musical Nation" 50)

The ideal of the poet as an active and constructive member of the community is central to this description, and to the motivation of Clarke's own poetry as well. No matter what potentially divisive issue arises in Clarke's own poetry, the promotion of community is always her top priority.

In my thesis, I proceed on the assumption that the examination of poetry in a variety of generic contexts promotes a greater understanding of the works being considered, and that Gillian Clarke's poetry, in particular, repays attention to the contexts of its production and

publication. Furthermore, for the purposes of my thesis, I have largely derived my understanding of the term "narrative space" from Gabriel Zoran's comprehensive approach to the theorizing of space in narrative. Throughout his article, Zoran emphasizes that the essential progression of narrative consistently subordinates the element of space within a narrative to the element of time, thus creating difficulties for critics trying to focus exclusively on the spatial elements of texts:

it was exactly this situation that prompted many discussions devoted to space to deal with characters, ideas, or general interpretation, neglecting their specific issue. (333)

Zoran's theory ignores lyric poetry, with its minimization of the element of narrative time. I would assert that the minimization of the element of narrative progress in lyric poetry allows poets to privilege the element of space in individual lyrics, as Gillian Clarke does in her poetry.

I unabashedly use the term "narrative space" in reference to Clarke's collections of lyric poetry because I believe that close readings of her poems in the context of her structured collections reveal the creation of a kind of narrative, although she primarily writes brief, separate lyrics that are highly traditional in form and style. In Clarke's collections, the interaction of the individual lyrics, through a shared speaker, themes, and image

patterns, creates a consistent larger space, and the suggestion of introduction, progress, juxtaposition, and closure implied by the form of a poetic sequence--as well as the reader's inherent desire for structure and closure (Hutcheon 64, esp. her reference to Perloff)--creates a consistent suggestion of narrative. I will be reading Clarke's poetry from this perspective throughout my thesis.

In Chapter One, I will attempt to further define and support this argument for narrativity with a close reading of Clarke's The Sundial. Here Clarke introduces the themes of family life, Welshness and feminism, and examines them against the backdrop of rural Wales, thus establishing the fundamental pattern of her future poetic collections. In Chapter Two, I will begin an exploration of the different generic approaches for reading Clarke's poetry with an exploration of her long poem "Letter from a Far Country" in its original context as a radio poem written from a conflict of patriotic and feminist agendas. Chapter Three will re-examine the poem in the more literary context of its publication in the collection of the same title. As an epistle and a fragment, introducing a poetic collection, "Letter from a Far Country" determines the thematic unity of the poems that follow and begins a narrative progress from helpless isolation through to a final sense of community and empowerment. In the final chapter, I will look at Clarke's re-examination of the basic themes of her earlier poetry in

Letting in the Rumour, and the stylistic innovations that characterize "Cofiant," the final long poem in that collection.

CHAPTER ONE

"drawn by the place, related by love:"

Narrative Space in The Sundial

In the work of Gillian Clarke the primary goal of the poet necessarily involves finding a balance between the personal need to speak as a woman, and as an individual--"to be more and not less oneself" (Butler 195)--and at the same time, the public need to write with a public consciousness of charting the history, [and] voicing the emotions [and] problems of the tribe" (Schmidt). Whether the attempt succeeds or fails, the struggle to achieve this balance is most often manifested in the vivid landscapes of Clarke's poetry, and in the intimate relationship between poet and landscape.

The full exploration of these tensions cannot be adequately covered in the individual fields of the brief lyrics that make up the bulk of her three original collections. Taken out of context, Clarke's lyrics are most often criticized for failing to follow through; for having "shied away from the full implications of the poems' themes" (Lloyd 124). Her first book-length collection, The Sundial (1978), is especially vulnerable to such criticism, being composed entirely of short lyrics that evoke complex themes, with no long poems to develop or anchor them. When The

Sundial is read as a whole, however, this apparent lack of confidence becomes a pattern of subversion. The poems are carefully and deliberately arranged¹ so that the tight repetition of the same subjects and imagery in different contexts throughout the book creates a larger space in which the traditional values of the speaker's role as mother, wife and farmer in rural Wales are both affirmed and undermined. A close reading of the first ten poems in The Sundial--from the title poem through "Dyddgu Replies to Dafydd"--will firmly establish the nature of this space as the speaker creates it through describing it, and inhabits it with increasing unease.

In the poem "The Sundial," the speaker is a mother entirely absorbed in the fact of her young son's illness, so that there is no "I" in this poem, and almost no reference to the self. The self does not even explicitly define herself as mother within the poem--only the name Owain, and the assumption that the speaker is Gillian Clarke, and that Gillian Clarke's son Owain is therefore the "Owain" described in the poem, can allow for even this much information about the speaker. The sick child in turn absorbs himself in "calculating / The mathematics of sunshine" through an improvised sundial:

Here in his enforced rest, he found
Deliberation, and the slow finger
Of light, quieter than night lions,
More worthy of his concentration.

In the mother's empathy with her child, the sun becomes threatening and alive, like one of the "night lions" of his delirium, "caged in its white diurnal heat / Pointing at us with its black stick." Like looks to like, and the pun on the spoken word "sun" and the implied "son" adds a subtle note of ambivalence to the obvious tension.

In a recent article on Clarke's poetry, Linden Peach notes that "the hot sun is a symbol associated in her work with intense extremes of emotion" (75), and in this poem the unusual heat of the summer sun prevents sleep and curls the grass, and the fever which racks the body of the speaker's son mirrors this enervating effect. The earth revolves around the sun in a relationship of necessity and is damaged by it, as the speaker hovers over her son, losing her self in worry. Together with the archaic images of the sundial and the regal lions, this instance of macrocosm and microcosm linked through disorder invokes the hierarchal Elizabethan world view, and the imbalance of humours on a cosmic scale, manifest in the landscape as in a Shakespearean play. Of course, the poem is too compact to develop these concerns, and the question of ambivalence, of the speaker's possible resentment at not being in the centre and at not being in control, is barely hinted at here. In both situations, the extreme can only be endured, and the speaker expresses her own helplessness indirectly, through her stoic, "intelligently adult" child and his growing

awareness of the inexorable and punishing nature of the passage of time during a period of suffering.

In "Journey," the speaker goes so far as to assume the authority of the first person, although she is again portraying a situation of passivity. She is riding in a car at night, "complacently...swathed / In sleepiness," and being driven by an active other. This other is addressed in the second person and described in a phallic metaphor which has particular meaning in the mining country of south Wales:

...beyond your driving
 Shaft of light it is black
 You are a miner digging
 For a future, a mineral
 Relationship in the dark.

This metaphor, together with the theme of family relationships introduced in "The Sundial," implies that this other is male, a provider, possibly the husband or partner of the speaker. Given this dynamic, the final image reconfigures the connection between the subject and object in a disturbing abdication of all will and control: ". . . As you hurl us / Into the black contracting / Chasm, I submit like a blind / And folded baby, being born." The poem focuses primarily on the exploration of the dark unknown, and the image of birth is a positive one, but the only fixed quantity here is a relationship of unquestioning and uncurious submission.

After poems about being a mother helplessly responsible for a sick child, and being like a baby at birth, with no responsibility, and no control, the subject begins to define itself more actively in "Lunchtime Lecture." The first stanza introduces the object, in the context of a lecturer turning from one exhibit to another: "And this from the second or third millennium / B.C., a female, aged about twenty-two. / A white fine skull, full up with darkness" In contrast to the vastness of the "black contracting chasm" of the previous poem, this darkness is manageable and unthreatening. The speaker considers the circumstances of her encounter with the skull: in a museum, where the emotionally strenuous shock of death has been sanitized "like death in hospital, / Reasons are given, labels, causes, catalogs." Ironically, this place of objectification makes the speaker's easy identification with the dead woman possible. Viewing "her bone / Purity, the light and shade beauty that her man / Was denied sight of," the speaker implies an intimacy with her subject that transcends even the familiarity of a sexual relationship.

Of course, with the object of praise being long dead, this intimacy does not intimidate as a dynamic intimacy with a living woman might. The striking image of the bodies of women transformed into trees reinforces the sense of peace that the speaker draws from this encounter:

She's a tree in winter, stripped white on a black

sky,

Leafless formality, brow, bough in fine relief.

I, at some other season, illustrate the tree

Fleshed, with woman's hair and colours and the

rustling

Blood, the troubled mind that she has overthrown.

The contrast between black and white occurs in "The Sundial," with the shadows cast by the too-bright sun, and occurs in "Journey" as the "driving shaft" of the car headlights cuts through the blackness, affording very limited illumination. Here, however, the speaker finds the image of white bone-tree against black sky to be beautiful, rather than problematic. Although the limitations of black and white are no longer intimidating, the speaker identifies herself as possessing "woman's...colours," in complex opposition to the limitations of light and shade. In later poems, trees, colour, life and blood are associated with the speaker in the present; while death, and shades of black and white are also linked to the self, but "at some other season," past or future.

After the minimizing of the emotional impact of death in "Lunchtime Lecture," "Death of a Young Woman" re-examines the subject with greater immediacy. The opening statement that "She died on a hot day" unites the "Lunchtime Lecture" image of remote death with another colourless and tense "hot day" of watching over illness, like the one described in

"The Sundial." Given the previous acceptance of death as a natural and beautiful part of existence, this poem adopts a reserved tone in the analysis of the death of someone known to the speaker, in an attempt to define "the difference." In contrast to the previous metaphor of the body as a tree in different seasons, the difference between sickness and death in the same body is described as the almost imperceptible difference between a ship that is almost still, and one that is entirely becalmed:

The stretched white
 Sheet of her skin tightened no further.
 She was fragile as a yacht before,
 Floating so still on the blue day's length.
 That one would not know when the breath
 Blew out and the sail finally slackened.

This peaceful image of stillness almost entirely displaces the space of the sickroom. Following the stated conclusion that "The difference was that in her house / The people were broken by her loss," the scene shifts to an image of friends "huddled in pubs" with a mourner. The text never addresses the most important space in the poem, the space that the woman occupied and left empty by her death, but the irony of the last line implies this space: ". . . He was polite, / Isolated, Free. No point in going home." The speaker sustains her extreme detachment throughout, through the avoidance of the use of the first person or any concrete

details about the "young woman" of the title. The tension between this attitude of reserve and the emotionality of the subject remains blatantly unresolved.

With "Blaen Cwrt," there is a sense of regrouping, of a retreat from emotionally difficult themes into a poem of landscape description, that delineates an untroubled domestic space. The opening line sets the poem up as the response to a question asked by an absent addressee, thus hinting at the investigation of epistolary writing that Clarke develops more fully in her later poem, "Letter from a Far Country." In contrast to the subversive complexity of her later use of the epistolary form, the addressee here exists only to become the occasion for simple and unargumentative description: "You ask how it is. I will tell you." The alternation of the first person singular and plural in the poem indicates the minimal and unthreatening level of the speaker's personal involvement. "I" will do as well as "we" in simple declarations that describe basic rural activities performed by hard-working hands and fingers: "We warm our hands / With apple wood"; "I press my bucket through the surface / of the water." This focus on simple sensory details and earthy colours, instead of the complex metaphors and anxious blacks and whites of the previous poems, emphasizes the speaker's positive feelings about Blaen Cwrt, which are closely tied with a greater sense of self-worth that she gains through the nature of her

association with the place. Although the physical labour needed to order and maintain this space is "not easy," the result is worth it:

It has all the first
Necessities for a high standard
Of civilized living: silence inside
A circle of sound, water and fire,
Light on uncountable miles of mountain
From a big, unpredictable sky,
Two rooms, waking and sleeping,
Two languages, two centuries of past
To ponder on, and the basic need
To work hard in order to survive.

By writing from this rural situation, the speaker gains a kind of moral authority as one who desires and maintains this "high standard of civilized living." The speaker represents herself as trying to make a connection with the honourable "two languages, two centuries of past" that she received from rural forebears, by sharing their lifestyle; labouring, and living in close contact with nature, as they must have done.²

Although "Blaen Cwrt" is essentially a poem of self-affirmation, this positive note is undermined by its context in The Sundial. "The Sundial," "Journey," "Lunchtime Lecture," and "Death of a Young Woman" all express the attempts of a consciousness to come to terms with mortality

and helplessness. By contrast, "Blaen Cwrt" emphasizes the speaker's hands, and their ability to accomplish basic physical tasks. Although the speaker thereby becomes active, and achieves a level of physical control over her environment, there is less intellectual or spiritual engagement with the subject. The very use of synecdoche in the reduction of the speaker to a pair of hands implies a reduction of her identity, and its verbal self-expression. Even the promise of rediscovering the roots of the tribe through contemplation of the heritage of the Welsh and English languages, and of the history of the place, is overshadowed at the end of the poem by the necessity "to work hard in order to survive." There will certainly not be any time or room in this plan to address such injustices of nature as the illnesses of children and the deaths of young women.

The sixth poem, "Catrin," marks a transition from this problematic definition of the home space to another poem defining the relationship between parent and child, this time in an address to the speaker's daughter. Where "The Sundial" only hinted at the speaker's ambivalence at the loss of individuality in her relationship with her son, "Catrin" explicitly defines the relationship between the speaker and her daughter in terms of the painful "struggle to become / Separate" that began with the daughter's birth. In the first stanza, the speaker describes her memory of

childbirth as "our first / Fierce confrontation," while the occasion for this memory, a present argument with her daughter over skating "In the dark, for one more hour" is not important enough to be revealed until the final line of the poem. If "Catrin" defines childbirth as a struggle for independence, and later confrontations as continuations of the "first" one, then one of the basic assumptions that this poem makes is that mother / child conflict is natural and inherent in the relationship itself. This assumption serves to recall and highlight the strained tone of "The Sundial," where all potential conflict is sublimated in the speaker's concern for her child.

The creation of space in "Catrin" recalls the complex metaphors used to invoke space in "Journey," "Lunchtime Lecture," and "Death of a Young Woman." The poem opens with the speaker's memory of standing

in a hot, white
Room at the window watching
The people and cars taking
Turn at the traffic lights.

The adjectives "hot" and "white" once again signal emotional intensity that must be controlled, while the traffic intersection within the speaker's field of vision is an image of the order and workable compromise that are as necessary to "civilized living" in the city as the elements of the plan described in "Blaen Cwrt" are to rural life.

Following this concrete opening image, a series of highly emotional and symbolic metaphors indicate the process of childbirth. The umbilical cord becomes "the tight/ Red rope of love which we both / Fought over." The "hot, white" hospital room recalls the "white" deathbed in "Death of a Young Woman," but here the more elaborate terms of description make the space seem far more sterile and unnatural: "a square / Environmental blank, disinfected/ Of paintings or toys." The equation here of "paintings or toys" with infection demonstrates that the blankness of this environment is hostile, and incompatible with the ordinary creative needs of parents or children. The pain and emotional intensity that the speaker and her child experience serve to deface the antiseptic hospital surroundings and make them human:

I wrote

All over the walls with my
 Words, coloured the clean squares
 With the wild, tender circles.
 Of our struggle to become
 Separate. We want, we shouted,
 To be two, to be ourselves.

The portrayal of the speaker writing on walls, and opposing "clean squares" with "wild, tender circles," together with the rebellious--and ironically shared--demand for individuality, translates the experience of childbirth into

a direct subversion of the unnaturally blank space of the delivery room.

The second stanza contains the speaker's realization that this initial "struggle / In the glass tank clouded with feelings" has become an ongoing process of conflict between mother and daughter. The second concrete image in the poem represents the speaker's daughter, as she appears to the speaker during a moment of confrontation:

Still I am fighting
 You off, as you stand there
 With your straight, strong, long
 Brown hair and your rosy,
 Defiant glare

The image of the "red rope of love" that symbolized the umbilical cord in the first stanza returns as the speaker accuses her daughter of

bringing up
 From the heart's pool that old rope,
 Tightening about my life,
 Trailing love and conflict

In this case, the symbolic implications proliferate, as the rope represents both an "old," half-outgrown connection that can still tighten like a noose, and an object retrieved from deep water, "trailing love and conflict" like seaweed. Even the substance of the child's request to be allowed to "skate in the dark" resonates with this imagery, and becomes a

potentially dangerous activity, in terms of a superficial exploration of surfaces versus an investigation of depths, as well as the more literal danger of thin ice.

This complex of imagery attempts to describe the flux of connection and conflict that exists between mother and daughter, but in spite of stresses on the individual personalities involved, there is no demand for resolution here. In "The Sundial" the calculation of "the mathematics of sunshine" superficially controls the threatening sun. Here, however, the perfect compromise symbolized by the regulation of traffic at an intersection happens at a distance from the speaker, and seems to have nothing to do with the conflict going on inside the hospital room. The space of the room itself is restricted to the point of being unbearably dehumanizing, until the chaotic experience of childbirth colours and distorts the regular emptiness. While the mother-child relationship in "The Sundial" is static and controlled by the abnormal circumstances of sickness, the mother-child relationship in "Catrin" represents a dynamic and essentially normal and positive, albeit painful, struggle towards mutual independence.

Following "Catrin," "Snow on the Mountain" and "The Fox" both present idyllic scenes of human interaction with nature that develop into chilling warnings of death and violence. "Snow on the Mountain" opens with an image of perfect relationship with nature: "There was a girl riding

a white pony / Which seemed an elemental part of the snow." The use of comparison in the first two stanzas follows the established pattern of black and white imagery, but here the comparisons are playful, in contrast to the emotionally tense metaphors in "Journey," "Catrin," and "Death of a Young Woman." In a nod to the cliché measuring straight-line distances "as the crow flies," the line of the crow's flight becomes a rope "to pull us up the pale diagonal" of the mountain. In a delightful image that translates the sound of echoes to a visible phenomenon, the speaker reports that the laughter occasioned by the competition to reach the top of the mountain "bounced far / Below us like five fists full of pebbles." The speaker's description of the breathtaking view from the top of the mountain introduces a hint of irony onto the scene through its implication of the social and environmental blackness that the white snow may be covering. Under the superficial sugar-candy beauty of the "clean" snow, the landscape bears reminders of the polluting coal mining industry that shaped the development of modern Wales: "No place could claim more beauty, white / Slag tips like cones of sugar spun / By the pit wheels under Machen mountain." In the final stanza the speaker's "snowboys play," while below the families of coal miners live in black "pit villages" that shine against the snow "Like anthracite," the hardest and most valuable grade of coal. While "Snow on the Mountain" does not explore the

subject of the coal industry beyond these brief allusions, it does hint at the politically and environmentally volatile relationship between the coal industry and the Welsh way of life, and offers at least a partial rationalization for the sudden warning that closes the poem.

The mood of the final stanza offers a powerful ironic contrast with the speaker's joyful experience of the beautiful snowcover, as the playful images of the opening stanzas are swiftly converted into omens of doom:

Completed, the pale rider
Rode away. I turned to him and saw
His joy fall like the laughter down a dark
Crack. The black crow shadowed him.

The girl on a white horse now symbolizes the biblical image of Death riding a pale horse,³ the joy of the speaker's companion becomes a physical object and falls away like the earlier "pebbles" of laughter, and the crow becomes a harbinger of death or decay, where before it was merely an indicator of direction. Although the poem offers no explicit interpretation for this sudden change, the transformation of the elements of an apparently happy family outing into such an overwhelming collection of negative portents must signal an intense source of distress lying beneath the surface of cheerful events, even as the coal-mining landscape itself is covered with a distracting layer of snow.

This sense of foreboding that is abstract in the black-and-white landscape of "Snow on the Mountain" is rendered more personal with colour and specific detail in "The Fox." The poem begins as a romantic landscape poem, with the speaker, speaking in the first person plural, touring the countryside around Blaen Cwrt, in a state of being emotionally open to the impact of natural objects in the landscape--altogether, a very Wordsworthian scenario. Blaen Cwrt has already been established within the context of The Sundial as an ideal domestic space, and the speaker's attitude of open appreciation and security in the poem "Blaen Cwrt" colours the reader's response to this poem, as well.

The opening stanza invokes "Snow on the Mountain," in that it describes a mountain in similarly geometric terms: "flying free and horizontal from the plane of symmetry." Here, however, the predominant colour is red, rather than the blacks and whites of a snow-covered landscape. The "foxwood reds" of the "red larch woods" obscure the surface of the mountain in this poem, and the colour remains "warm in the brain" as the party walks over a wooded hill "Where the ewes shelter to give birth to their lambs." The red "Blood of birth" continues the colour scheme of the poem, and the imagery of maternity recalls the powerful associations of "Catrin," just as "the pale bones of the past" raise the speaker's empathy with the prehistoric

skeleton in "Lunchtime Lecture." The sense here of continuity with nature and the past contrasts with the blank and over-controlled urban maternity room in "Catrin." Although this poem concerns itself with the birth process of animals, rather than humans, the speaker seems more at home here in the natural setting--a theme that is explored further later on in the collection, with "Birth."

All of these positive associations that exist outside the poem, but within the framework of the poetic collection, tend to enhance the reader's vulnerability to the shock of the final stanza, when the speaker's party encounters evidence of violence and violation so close to the home space:

Violence brushed our faces when we found
The vixen hanging from a tree. She was shot.
Her beautiful head thrown back, her life
stiffened,
Her milk dry, her fertility frozen. The reds grew
cold.

In the previous stanza the "white bones" imply deaths of ewes or their offspring during the labour process, an unfortunate occurrence of mortality, but a natural one, which does not profoundly disturb the speaker. The female fox has been unnaturally and arbitrarily interrupted in the process of her life cycle, left "hanging from a tree," in an attitude of crucifixion. The warning against the brutality

of hunters who not only disrupt a harmonious landscape, but destroy the feminine principles of fertility and nurturing, is obvious here, especially given the context of "The Fox" within the collection as a whole.

In a repetition of the anxious transition between "Death of a Young Woman" and "Blaen Cwrt," the unresolved warning of "The Fox" taints the affirmation of positive values that follows in "Community." In both cases, the jarring impact of unnaturally premature death continues to resonate, undermining the speaker's attempts to reconstruct the space she inhabits in a hopefully idealistic way. Here, the speaker returns to the home space defined in "Blaen Cwrt" and expands on that definition by describing the relationships between its inhabitants in abstract, spatial terms:

We came here at random, drawn
 By the place, related by love
 Running like a fine metal
 Chain through assorted beads
 Forming between this and the next
 A separate relationship
 One can stand aside and watch
 The spatial movement, understanding
 Edge forward, falter and change
 Form. Or one can move in and feel space
 Contract, aware of an approach.

This complex description picks up on the geometric terms used to delineate the landscape in "Snow on the Mountain" and "The Fox," and expands on the dynamic relationship defined by "the red rope of love" that links mother and daughter in "Catrin." At another level, the alternatives that the poem presents of being able to either "stand back" from the process of interrelationship or to "move in and feel space contract" offer a touchstone for understanding the spatial dynamic between subject and object throughout The Sundial, and Clarke's poetry as a whole.

Nevertheless, as in "Blaen Cwrt," there is a limiting gap between the ideal described by this model and the possibility that the ideal can be realized in a fulfilling and meaningful way. The relationship between mother and daughter in "Catrin" is based on conflict and the struggle for individuality. The pattern of relationship in "Community" only allows for unifying connection, not for resistance, and certainly not for the violence described in "The Fox," which disrupts the landscape a short distance away from the house.

Furthermore, "Community" plainly fulfils the promise that "Blaen Cwrt" contains of hard work in a rural setting, but here, instead of sexless fingers and hands working together, there is a division of labour that seems to fall along dangerously conventional lines. The speaker assumes the traditionally nurturing female role of a woman feeding

her family:

I lay the plates on the table,
 One before each, each one evidence
 Of my concern for the man or child
 Who pulls forward a chair and eats.

There is no need to develop the isolating and dehumanizing aspects of the roles of housewife and mother in rural Wales that are implied here, since Clarke later explores this topic more fully in "Letter from a Far Country."

Of course, the family-oriented rural lifestyle depicted in "Blaen Cwrt" and "Community" does legitimately serve to celebrate Clarke's respect for the traditional values of Welsh rural life and poetry. However, it is interesting that the writing and reading of poetry are not included in the plan of either poem, and a lifestyle of working hard "in order to survive" that leaves everyone "tired early" at the end of the day is probably not conducive to artistic production. If we assume that the medium is at least related to the message, it is quite possible that the very brevity of Clarke's lyrics in The Sundial and their consistent failure to resolve disturbing themes is symptomatic of the strenuous family-oriented rural lifestyle that the poems describe.

Significantly, the faint implications of sexism in "Community" are followed by "Dyddgu Replies to Dafydd." The strongest of Clarke's earlier poems, in terms of its

feminist concerns, it gives a voice to Dyddgu, one of the objects of the courtly love poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym.⁴ Within the context of The Sundial, this poem contains the only break with the otherwise consistently-maintained persona of rural Welsh mother and wife, while at the same time, it informs this persona. As such, it deserves a detailed reading.

As the implications of the courtly form would tend to indicate, Dafydd ap Gwilym writes very stylized poetry that has at least as much to do with politics as it does with love. The father of the chaste and beautiful Dyddgu is apparently a patron of Dafydd (45),⁵ which implies that the poet's motive for praise might be financial in origin. In a more general political sense, the glorification of Dyddgu can be read as a statement against the English occupation, since she serves as an "embodiment of the native aristocracy, and is consciously associated with the Welsh heroic past" (Fulton 124), which was lost with the conquest of Wales by the English King Edward I in 1282. As for Dyddgu herself, she has no real existence in Dafydd's poems, beyond her function as an idealized type:

She is invariably used to convey traditional courtly values and virtues, whether she is in her father's hall or out in the woodland. But her passivity, her lack of voice or emotion, the absence of any personal or individualizing

information about her, apart from her name and conventional beauty, make her as unreal as the idealized domna of Provencal verse. (Fulton 125-6)

Given the limitations traditionally imposed on the character of Dyddgu, there is certainly a great deal of scope for the writing of a poem which gives a voice to her situation. Although there is no indication that Dafydd ever won the chaste, highborn Dyddgu, "Dyddgu Replies to Dafydd" assumes the physical consummation of their relationship and looks ahead to a time when it is the abandoned Dyddgu, rather than the worshipping Dafydd, who will be writing from a position of unfulfilled desire.

Dafydd's own poetry tends to support the gentle reproach against her lover's absence and faithlessness which Clarke assigns to Dyddgu here: "I would women / had roads to tread in winter / and other lovers waiting." Although she is the noblest, Dyddgu is by no means the only woman Dafydd addresses poems to, and in "Choosing One of Four" (#98), the lover goes so far as to express his concern for "getting some payment" for his attentions:

Whether congratulations,
 Or a fine poetic thought,
 Or gold, though I might excuse it,
 Or something, I'm amusing.
 And even if my tongue be

Weaving tribute to Dyddgu,
 There's for me, by God, no office
 But pursuing fickleness.

The form of a reply suggests that Clarke's Dyddgu is responding to an existing poem of Dafydd's, much in the pattern of Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," which was written in response to Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love." While there is no Dafydd ap Gwilym poem that completely suits the requirements of a previous utterance in this imaginary poetic debate, poem #119, "Invitation to Dyddgu"⁶ does establish the space of the edenic love garden which is central to Clarke's own poem.

The garden of love that Dafydd describes in his invitation adapts the iconography of the love garden from the French tradition of the Roman de la Rose in much the same way that Dafydd's contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer, adapted that space to his own uses in his shorter poems. In Dafydd's poem, and according to medieval conventions, the love garden is a space for aristocratic lovers and court poets only, a place of eternal May, where Old Age, Poverty, and Death are excluded. The garden is thickly populated with deer and songbirds, and its central features include a fountain of water and a private bower constructed of trees and greenery, which can screen the lovers from outside observation.

In "Dyddgu Replies to Dafydd," Dyddgu describes the decay of her relationship with her lover in terms of landscape description, one that reflects both the traditional space of Dafydd ap Gwilym's love garden in "Invitation to Dyddgu" and the space created by the rest of the poems in The Sundial. Phrases like "frescoed forest ceiling" and "forest room" invoke the bower which Dafydd invites Dyddgu to share. Although this space ostensibly exists outdoors, it is very clearly constructed and controlled, like the space of a building, rather than a wilderness. The religious allusions in the third stanza refer to the theme of the lovers returning to Eden, the original Garden of Love which would be another of Dafydd's sources for the iconography of the medieval courtly love garden:

Original sin I whitened from your
mind, my colours influenced
your flesh, as sun on the floor
and warm furniture of a church.

The image of the church here is another constructed space that blends with that of the bower when winter comes: "The forest falls / to ruin, a roofless minister / where only two still worship."

It is this image of the passing seasons, measured and controlled by the changing position of the sun, that disrupts the perfect stasis of the springtime love garden in

"Dyddgu Replies to Dafydd:" and reflects the imagery of earlier poems in The Sundial.⁷ The strong awareness of the inevitability of natural cycles of the seasons and birth and death recurs throughout the collection, within poems like "Lunchtime Lecture" and "The Fox," and through the juxtaposition of poems that take place in similar rural settings but in different seasons, like "Storm Awst" and "Beech Buds." The image of the sun overhead in the opening stanzas that describe love fulfilled, and then the "dropping sun" in autumn, and finally the "winter stars" that shine over the lover's departure, marks the decay of the relationship, as well.

This complex interlinking between the love relationship and the seasons culminates as Dyddgu relies on her hope that the lover will come back to her with the coming of spring:

A raging rose all summer falls to snow,
 keeping its continuance in
 frozen soil. I must be patient
 for the breaking of the crust.

I must be patient that you will return
 when the wind whitens the tender
 underbelly of the March grass
 thick as pillows under the oaks.

The repetition of the formula "I must be patient" highlights the difficulty of patience in such a situation, just as her

previous wish that "women had roads to tread in winter" as well as men emphasizes Dyddgu's awareness of the unfairness of such limitations. The very fact that Gillian Clarke wrote this poem emphasizes the fallacy that only men can be travellers and poets, but the character of Dyddgu remains ironically unaware of this contradiction.

Like the speaker in "Journey," who submits herself to a lack of control like a "baby, being born," Dyddgu abdicates independence and responsibility through her resignation to the hope that the changing seasons will restore her lover to her. Like the rose bush in winter, she herself is evidently reduced to dormancy in Dafydd's absence. This would be an ideal reaction for the medieval courtly love object that Dyddgu is supposed to represent, but it would be difficult for any contemporary reader to respect such passivity as a positive trait.

Altogether, "Dyddgu Replies to Dafydd" serves as a touchstone within The Sundial for feminist concerns and as a kind of turning point within the progress of the collection. Retroactively, if Dyddgu's helplessness and passivity read as negative qualities, then the oppressive helplessness of the speakers in "The Sundial," "Snow on the Mountain" and "The Fox," and the complacency of the speaker in "Journey" must also be suspect. As the collection moves forward, the grandiose and problematic plans of "Blaen Cwrt" and "Community" are displaced by numerous poems that describe

specific details about the speaker's active engagement with rural life. The speaker in "Nightride" occupies the same situation as the speaker in "Journey," that of a passenger riding in a car at night, but in "Nightride," the speaker is more aware of her surroundings, and is responsible for a sleepy child on her lap, rather than becoming like a sleepy child herself. The vague warnings of "Snow on the Mountain" and "The Fox" cease, and the speaker generally assumes more interactive and controlling roles with her subject, becoming less of an object, acted upon by circumstances, and more of an active agent herself.

In poems like "Going Away," "Harvest at Mynachlog," and "Last Rites," the subject of death is dealt with in more personalized and immediate contexts than in "Lunchtime Lecture," while the recurring motif of seasonal death and rebirth dispels some of the tension remaining after "Death of a Young Woman." Readings of the strongly affirmative "At Ystrad Fflur," an elegy for Dafydd ap Gwilym, and "Beech Buds," a love poem based on springtime nature imagery, are coloured and subverted by their position following "Dyddgu Replies to Dafydd." The speaker explicitly defines herself as a poet in "In Pigsah Graveyard" and even the speaker's absorption in her role as mother is subtly undermined by the poem "Babysitting," and its humorously shocking statement that "I don't love / This baby." Even without continuing a program of poem-by-poem close readings through the remainder

of the text, we can clearly see a progress of confidence in the attitude of the speakers in The Sundial, as the same physical and emotional spaces are revisited again and again.

Although the form of a short poem is self-contained by definition, lyrics within a collection such as The Sundial tend to inform each other through shared image patterns, subjects, and settings. This interrelationship builds up a consistent image of the conceptual space of the speaker's experience of life in rural Wales that the poems all seem to share, a space that the reader and the poet both become more familiar with as the collection progresses. As demonstrated by this reading of the first ten poems, the general statements that these poems make about death, nature, and the role of the speaker within her family and community sometimes convey a kind of naive finality within the individual lyrics, that are usually too short to develop the implications of these themes. The juxtaposition of these short poems within the collection opens the way for the poems to be read as statements of competitive and contradictory discourses, co-existing in the same space. This level of dialogue serves to enrich the individual poems in The Sundial through the revelation of the complex patterns of affirmation and subversion of traditional Welsh values that underlies the poetry of Gillian Clarke as a whole.

CHAPTER TWO

"Not wholly ready to count myself as one of the grown-ups:"

"Letter from a Far Country" as a Radio Poem

1

If the strength of Clarke's construction of the Welsh landscape in "The Sundial" relies primarily on the narrative space created by recurring image patterns linking brief lyrics together, the strength of Clarke's construction of Wales and Welshness in her first long poem, "Letter from a Far Country" depends equally on the generic contexts of its production and publication. This chapter will focus on the significance of "Letter from a Far Country" as a public utterance addressed to the people of Wales, through Clarke's appropriation to the causes of feminism and Welsh nationalism of the familiar spaces of radio, and Dylan Thomas's famous radio poem Under Milk Wood. Welsh nationalism.

"Letter from a Far Country" has certainly been the most important single poem in Gillian Clarke's development as a poet, precipitating the change in her status: from being classified by an editor of Anglo-Welsh poetry as a "younger writer whose reputation is still growing" (Adams 11) to earning the title of "a writer of repute both within Wales and without (Garlick and Mathias 20) in the first definitive anthology of Anglo-Welsh poetry. It is most prominently

significant as a kind of feminist manifesto for women living conventionally restrictive rural lives, both in Wales, and elsewhere, and Clarke herself usually describes it as her "contribution to feminist literature" (Schmidt). In a 1985 interview, however, Clarke named "Letter from a Far Country" as being her most successful poem to date, in a far more traditional sense (Schmidt):

In Wales it's very much [that] the poet is the voice of the tribe. There are plenty of voices for every tribe, there are tribes of voices, but you're one of them, so you're really charting the year, or charting the history, or voicing the emotions, the problems of the tribe, and I think I've done that in that poem better than any other.

This speech defines "Letter" as an affirmation of the historic values of Welsh society, as well as emphasizing Clarke's awareness of the oral origin of Welsh poetic traditions through her repetition of the word "voice." As a woman, Clarke writes in protest against the confining and marginalizing traditional roles imposed upon Welsh women, while at the same time, as a poet, Clarke perceives herself as speaking from the centre in a unique fulfilment of the traditional role of the poet in Wales. Although it was first published in her 1982 collection of the same title, "Letter from a Far Country" was originally written as a half-hour radio poem, commissioned jointly by the BBC and

the Welsh Arts Council (Butler 195), and broadcast in the spring of 1978. An examination of this important context helps to illuminate the apparent contradiction which the poem embodies.

Early in 1978, at the time when she was presumably working on "Letter," Clarke wrote an editorial in her capacity as editor of the Anglo-Welsh Review that obliquely reveals some of the pressures surrounding the composition of the poem, through brief examinations of four seemingly-disjointed issues. The first paragraph of the editorial speaks out in defence of the teaching of creative writing at all levels of education, as a means of promoting a greater base of support for the arts in general and literature in particular: "This is how a literate adult audience might be made. . .In a writing group to write is normal and literature is the material of life."

The second paragraph cuts to an anecdote, apparently from Clarke's own schooldays, that begins like a traditional children's story: "A long time ago in a Glamorgan sixth form there was a strange girl who, in a class debate, proposed the motion that Wales should have a measure of self-government." The general confidence in the perceived strength and virtue of British imperialism defeats the proposal of self-government, as Clarke cuttingly states, in a continuation of the euphemistic tone:

. . . a race of people which had set its bounds

wider still and wider until an impressively vast area of the world map had been dressed in its livery was sure to be better at arranging civilization than those who had experience of nothing more than mining and agriculture.

Clarke proceeds to roundly condemn this prevailing "deference" to "the grown-ups...in London."

In the third paragraph, Clarke attacks recent changes in the format of BBC Wales, which lower the intellectual standards of the programming and generally weaken the function of that station as a central support of Welsh nationalism and Welsh arts: "Trivia with a Welsh accent is neither essentially Welsh, nor satisfying to the large audience" With the threat that discriminating listeners will switch to English radio, choosing a kind of cultural exile over Welsh inanities, Clarke hints at a more personal anxiety over the reception of her own poem: "the half-hour radio poems due to begin in March seem unlikely to have an audience at all." More broadly, Clarke implies that without a strong Welsh arts-oriented broadcasting network, Wales can never "grow up" as a nation.

The final paragraph picks up on the passing mention of radio poems in the previous paragraph with the provocative question: "Will commissioning poems for radio ever again produce a popular classic like Under Milk Wood?" Clarke uses the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the

death of Dylan Thomas to lament the relative unpopularity of Dylan Thomas within Wales itself and the lack of satisfying Welsh readings of his classic works.

The assumptions underlying the reserved and concise language of this editorial help to convey the fullness of Clarke's sense of the responsibility that she, as a poet, owes to her "tribe," the Welsh people. A Welsh writer ought to teach writing and generally work to promote literature and the arts in Wales,⁸ despite "the danger of the writer's creative energy becoming exhausted by so sharing it." (This "sharing" of creative energy evidently extends to the work of editing a prominent literary journal, and thereby becoming an active agent in the regional writing scene.) A writer ought to be involved in the education system, and use it to promote the arts and nationalistic political values-- and she ought not hesitate to become involved in politics, pointing out flaws in the political machine or in the attitudes of her Welsh compatriots. Beneath the understated tone of this editorial, Clarke is clearly speaking from a position of moral authority, as a writer who actively involves herself in the politics of the arts on all these different levels.

On the other hand, Gillian Clarke, like Dylan Thomas, leaves herself open as a writer to possible criticism from more extreme nationalists by writing in English rather than Welsh⁹--just as she leaves herself open to possible

criticism from more extreme feminists by her insistence on working and writing from within politically and artistically conservative situations. Politically, Clarke would certainly define herself as a Welsh nationalist, frustrated by what she sees as a Welsh sense of inferiority to England and English values, since she regards some degree of home rule as necessary for the Welsh community to achieve "grown-up" status. In a typical ending for a Gillian Clarke editorial, frustration is carefully contained within the limits of constructive optimism. Clarke concentrates the energy of her editorial to provide her readers with a small, but concrete goal to work towards, through her suggestion that radio programming that promotes a Welsh cultural identity will help achieve the goals of Welsh nationalism.

Interestingly, Clarke narrows her focus at the end of her editorial to the issue of praise for the work of the world-renowned Welsh writer, Dylan Thomas, and the assumption that the best kind of programming for radio that reflected the concerns of Welsh culture would be a long radio production in verse, in the tradition of Under Milk Wood--certainly the most famous literary representation of Welshness ever written, as well as the most famous of all radio plays. In this editorial, Clarke clearly sees a need for artistic representations of Welshness that would help to unite the Welsh community, both internally and internationally. "Letter from a Far Country," written for a

public radio broadcast to an audience which she hopes to maximize through the demands of her editorial, evidently responds to that need, as well as responding to Under Milk Wood as a highly-successful model of Anglo-Welsh writing.

2

There is a general shortage of vocabulary for the discussion of the artistic qualities of radio broadcasts,¹⁰ which renders the analysis of this aspect of Clarke's career difficult. A radio broadcast produces an oral experience that vanishes as it unfolds. As Walter Ong points out, radio is dependent on writing and print, and the nature of the English language is so determined by the fact of literacy that "we seldom feel comfortable with a situation in which verbalization is so little thing-like." Given the limitations of the critic's need for some kind of written or recorded "residue" to analyze (11), I will attempt a discussion of the measurable characteristics of "Letter from a Far Country" that have contributed to its success as a radio poem. All references to the poem itself will be taken from its first printing in the 1982 collection of the same name.

Nicholas Zurbrugg's "Regarding Recorded Literature" offers one of the most recent and comprehensive attempts to deal with the issue of developing a vocabulary for the critical discussion of radio broadcasts. Zurbrugg prefers the term "recorded literature" to "radio literature" in this

context, since

if the sociological characteristic of radio literature is that it is broadcast by the mass medium of radio, the formal and the creative quality of radio literature--be this drama, prose or poetry--is not so much that it is broadcast by radio, (since it might equally well be communicated on records, on tape-cassettes, or by telephone), as the fact that it has been technologically edited and recorded. (62)

This important distinction between the "sociological" and "formal and creative quality" of literature written for radio relates to the case of "Letter from a Far Country," which has had a very limited broadcasting history, compared with its success on tape and at public readings. My discussion of "Letter" concerns the qualities that make it a particularly powerful poem when presented in an oral context, as much as it concerns the dynamics surrounding the original production of the poem.

In his own analysis of these "formal and creative qualities" that make a work suitable for radio, Zurbrugg primarily concentrates on experimental writing that makes creative use of sound recording technology in order to create effects not duplicable in live performances. Judging by the recording of "Letter from a Far Country" made available by Carcanet Books in 1985, the use of special

sound effects is not present in this case. It would not be difficult to imagine a recording of this poem edited with added sound effects to simulate the noises of wind, water, and birdsong, just as it is printed with pages of text alternating with appropriate photographs in Susan Butler's 1985 anthology, Common Ground. Such effects would not be likely to significantly enhance or alter the listener's experience of the poem.

Zurbrugg does cite a classification of "unedited" recorded literature which "seems to serve the documentary function" (71) of making conventional forms available to wider audiences, but he does not explore the "creative qualities" of style or organization that might make such a text especially suitable for radio. Gillian Clarke, on the contrary, displays a strong awareness of the demands of the medium of radio, but in "Letter from a Far Country" she chooses to respond to them with devices that manipulate language to its best advantage in an oral situation rather than with devices that rely on technological intervention. Part of the reason for this choice might stem from a desire to control the ultimate artistic product, and thereby to avoid unnecessary intervention by BBC producers. Most of the writers that I have cited in this chapter as writing about poems or plays for radio note the lack of control or input that BBC writers have over the finished production of their scripts.

In his "General Introduction" to The Dark Tower and other Radio Scripts, first published in 1947, Louis MacNeice creates one of the earliest commentaries on the craft of writing for radio. Although he is mainly concerned with the characteristics of good radio drama, some of his premises are applicable to a reading of "Letter from a Far Country" as recorded literature. In the first place:

What the radio writer must do if he hopes to win the freedom of the air is to appeal on one plane--whatever he may be doing on the others--to the more primitive listener and to the more primitive elements in anyone; i.e. he must give them (what Shakespeare gave them) entertainment. (9)

In her admiring reference to Under Milk Wood as a "popular classic," Clarke is certainly aware of a need for audience appeal, and a common thread throughout her editorial is the desire to create a popular taste for poetry and the arts in Wales, both through education and available radio programming. With the relative simplicity of the language, organization and ideas that Clarke develops in "Letter from a Far Country," it would certainly be categorized with Under Milk Wood or MacNeice's The Dark Tower in a grouping of recorded literature designed to appeal to a broader base of listeners. This grouping contrasts strikingly with the grouping of more difficult and artistically experimental recordings of works by Samuel

Beckett, William Burroughs and the Dadaist poets that Zurbrugg cites.

A further point that MacNeice makes, about the levelling of subjective and objective spaces in radio drama, also has some bearing on Clarke's work:

[W]hen no character can be presented except through spoken words, whether in dialogue or soliloquy, that very spokenness makes this distinction between subjective and objective futile . . . once, to use a horrible piece of jargon, the subjective is ~~objectified~~, you can get away with anything (10)

The democracy of spaces created by this fact of "spokenness" is demonstrated admirably in "Letter from a Far Country," as the concrete public space of the speaker's temporarily empty home is replaced by the more powerful private spaces created by the speaker's imagination, memory, and rage. These spaces, each described with an equal clarity of detail, are realized with equal clarity in the experience of a listener, so that they seem to co-exist, as on the symbolic level, they surely must.

The major theme of MacNeice's "Introduction" is an argument against a prevalent distinction between creating radio plays and features for the BBC and creating art. Christopher Holme notes that this was a major concern for MacNeice, who was defensive about "the low esteem in which

broadcasting and the BBC are held by his fellow writers and the intellectual world" (44). Rather than expressing a modernist's need to explain a shameful excursion into popular literature and public commission, Gillian Clarke's editorial seems to regard a commission from the BBC as an opportunity to fulfil the highest duties of a writer in the Welsh poetic tradition.

Of course, this contrast in attitude at least partially reflects the increase in prestige that writing for radio has enjoyed," but these two opposing viewpoints are also affected by widely diverging views about the role of art in society. Even a cursory comparison of the works of Clarke and MacNeice reveals the very different kinds of stylistic intertextuality that the two writers employ. In The Dark Tower, MacNeice blatantly borrows his subject from Browning and his use of iambic pentameter form from Shakespearean drama, then subversively manipulates these devices to heighten the poignant irony of his story. In "Letter from a Far Country," Clarke avoids overt literary allusion and instead subtly adapts the techniques of traditional Welsh and English oral poetry to the straightforward purpose of making her poem more effective.

Gillian Clarke herself expresses a strong awareness of her assimilation of stylistic techniques that were originally used by ancient Welsh poets, who composed for a largely oral presentation:

I'm very fond of the seven syllable line, and I've got that from Dafydd ap Gwilym, and from others like him, though not necessarily consciously. And I don't use rhymes at the endings of lines, but at other places in the line, and that, too, is a very Welsh characteristic. I love using cynghanedd¹² . . . [which] puts an extra tremor or richness into the line. (Butler 196)

All of these techniques are present in "Letter from a Far Country," but the use of cynghanedd is particularly evident, especially with the use of the letter "s" in the opening lines:

They have gone. The silence resettles
slowly as dust on the sunlit
surfaces of the furniture.

At first the skull itself makes
sounds in any fresh silence,
a big sea running in a shell.

I can hear my blood rise and fall.

The sibilance in this passage requires a slow and slightly exaggerated enunciation when read aloud, and the resulting hissing sound does indeed resemble the noise of "a big sea running in a shell."

Clarke employs another device prominently throughout her poetry--the tight repetition of the same words and verbal patterns in varied contexts in order to convey a

broad thematic impression, in a way that recalls the formulaic repetition of half-lines in Old English poetry. In "Letter from a Far Country," for example, the early image of the speaker's grandmother being imprisoned in a churchyard introduces a theme of confinement: "Father and minister on guard, / close the white gates to hold her." The following lines cut to the image of "A stony track" that "turns between ancient hedges narrowing." A few verse paragraphs later the speaker repeats the word "narrow," again in a context of landscape description: "From here the valley is narrow."

The following ten minutes of poetry contain a loose meditation on rural domesticity that constantly returns to dwell on images of physical confinement, such as "rivers / Inside mountains" and preserved "fruit pressing / their little faces against the glass." Finally, the word "narrow" recurs again, this time in the context of a woman's suicide:

Middle-aged, poor, isolated,
 she could not recover
 from mourning an old parent's death.
 Influenza brought an hour
 too black, too narrow to escape.

This use of "narrow" gains visual impact from the previous images of the narrowing path and the narrow valley while at the same time it introduces the emotionally confining state of depression. References to shackles, blood, and "breaking

the surface" work in similar ways throughout the poem. This kind of repetition, which can seem like overkill to a reader of the poem, helps a listener to realize that the continuing flow of images of confinement and constriction is symptomatic of the speaker's own emotional state as the poem develops.

Hinting at more contemporary influences, Gillian Clarke's editorial displays an underlying awareness of the half-hour radio poem as a particularly Welsh kind of contemporary literature. In the course of an essay on Idries Davies, Anthony Conran enumerates over twenty examples of the Welsh "radio ode" in English (106-107), which was typically commissioned as "a half-hour poem for radio, for three or four voices" (106). This interplay of voices makes the "radio ode" an essentially dramatic form, frequently offering conflict and resolution within the space of a performance and lending itself to theatrical production in the most successful examples, such as Thomas's Under Milk Wood, and Vernon Watkins' Ballad of the Mari Lwyd. So far as I have been able to determine, these half-hour radio poems also tend to represent particularly Welsh myths, situations and places.

Although Conran's essay was not published in its final form until 1982, it makes sense, given the small writing community in Wales, and her own experience with the form, that Clarke was aware of this Welsh tradition of "radio

odes" in English beyond the work of Dylan Thomas. In "Letter from a Far Country," she breaks from the typical model that Conran describes, in that her poem is written for one voice, and would therefore not be as easily adaptable to the demands of a theatrical performance. The only dramatic tension in "Letter from a Far Country" is found in the implied conflict between the speaker, voicing the response of a Welsh woman to the general expectations of men and society in general, and the addressees of the letter, as represented by the "husbands, fathers, forefathers."

Peter Lewis's article, "'Under Milk Wood' as a Radio Poem,"¹³ was likely a more direct influence on Clarke's idea of what constitutes the form of a radio poem, since it describes the poem that Clarke adopts in her editorial as the model for Welsh radio writing, and since, in her capacity as editor of the Anglo-Welsh Review, Clarke selected it for publication. First published in the Anglo-Welsh Review 64, in 1979, Lewis's article is evidently one of the essays on Dylan Thomas that Clarke refers to in the 1978 editorial as "patiently waiting in the files" for publication.

Lewis enters the debate over the literary merit of Under Milk Wood with the argument that Thomas's "play for voices" has wrongfully been judged by the same traditionally "literary" criteria that have been used to judge poetry, theatrical drama, and even novels:

Under Milk Wood was conceived and written neither for the stage nor the page but for radio, not for the eye but for the ear. Aural impact is consequently of primary importance. (74)

Lewis insists that the best classification for Under Milk Wood is the form of "radio poem," and Clarke was apparently sympathetic to this argument, since she does refer to Under Milk Wood as a radio poem in her 1978 editorial.

Lewis's passing statement that radio "permits easy and rapid transitions between different levels of reality" is reminiscent of MacNeice's comments on subjectivity, but Lewis makes his most interesting point when he notes that these "rapid transitions" best resemble the transitions possible in the medium of film:

the extremely rapid shifts from one location to another and from one character or group of characters to another . . . is more cinematic than theatrical or literary. (75)

He proceeds to note that the two Narrators in Under Milk Wood behave like "verbal cameras," especially in the famous opening passage, "tracking," and "panning" to show a broader picture of Llareggub, and "zooming" in on highly particularized details. All the time, the listener is kept closely involved through frequent use of the imperative ("Listen!" "Look!") and the second person ("Only you can hear and see...").

Gillian Clarke makes similar use of "verbal camera" effects in "Letter from a Far Country." As the speaker's creative reverie begins, early in the poem, the mood becomes imperative as the speaker controls the listener's perceptions. This passage of description sets the scene for what follows, in the manner of the First Narrator's opening speech in Under Milk Wood, albeit in a much more concise use of language:

As I write I am far away
 First see a landscape. Hill country
 essentially feminine,
 the sea not far off. Its blues
 widen the sky. Bryn Isaf
 down there in the crook of the hill
 under Calfaria's single eye.

The visual image created by this passage begins with a composite shot of the hills, sea, and sky taken from a distance, and then narrows to focus on a single community in "the crook of the hill. It is not difficult to imagine filming a version of this scene.

Furthermore, Clarke is as deliberate as Dylan Thomas about using concrete visual and aural language in order to help a listener "see" and "hear" what the speaker of the poem experiences. She uses Welsh place names, and the odd Welsh word, and draws on a common vocabulary of signs which are likely to be understood by people of a rural background

almost anywhere in the western world:

I made very clear things you could see, which is why I put things in like the blue bag kept in a broken cup, and in fact, when I read that to people I notice that all people of a certain age smile slightly because they all remember that their mother kept a blue bag in a broken cup.

(Schmidt)

In "Letter from a Far Country," the use of "verbal cameras" and concrete, easily-visualized language contrive to make the poem as accessible as possible, just as they do in Under Milk Wood. In "Letter from a Far Country," however, these devices purport not only to entertain, but to convey the speaker's message of frustration with a greater degree of clarity. Thomas's narrators have no other apparent existence beyond their role as creators of the setting of Llareggub, but Clarke's speaker cannot properly begin her polemic until the morning housework is out of the way, and she does not have the luxury of time to create lengthy passages of description. The tightly organized visual details in "Letter from a Far Country" tend to lead to larger images of confinement. On both the textual and thematic levels, "Letter from a Far Country" often directly subverts the values that Under Milk Wood represents.

The experience of listening to Under Milk Wood conveys the impression of a carefully choreographed harmony, as

seventy-one voices alternate in accessible snatches of argument, verse and song. None of the characters has a big enough part in the proceedings to become anything other than a comical stereotype, although further development of almost any of the voices would have turned the poem into a tragedy--as the "Fourth Woman" says, "There's a nasty lot live here when you come to think." Characters in particularly dysfunctional situations include Mr. Pugh, who constantly fantasizes about murdering his nagging wife, and Polly Garter, a promiscuous single mother of many children, who is forced to scrub floors for the "Mother's Union Dance" that respectable married townswomen prevent her from actually attending. The female characters, especially, offer scope for devastating feminist readings that illuminate the elements of social and sexual repression that shape their lives in this sexist supposed comedy. However, the fast pace, and cheerful sing-song rhythms of Under Milk Wood, together with the sense of objectivity that a listener experiences with the need to balance the concerns expressed by seventy-one different voices, tend to deter any serious consideration of the various personal or social blights that affect the lives of people of Llareggub.

With "Letter from a Far Country," listeners face a reality created by a single female voice, with little option but to accept that voice's concerns with respect, and ultimately to become involved in a sense of shared

subjectivity. The speaker in "Letter from a Far Country" and the female speakers in Under Milk Wood superficially share comparable situations, as women living in small Welsh rural communities. However, the ladies of Llareggub primarily concern themselves with their own lovers and husbands, or those of other people, while the business of raising families and doing housework largely seems to accomplish itself in this somewhat idealized location:

"Noses are wiped, heads picked, hair combed, paws scrubbed, ears boxed, and the children shrilled off to school." The speaker in "Letter from a Far Country," on the other hand, examines the hard work that generations of rural wives and mothers have performed, and expresses her resentment over the lack of regard shown for this labour.

Discordant rhythms of language in "Letter from a Far Country" emphasize the speaker's discontent with her domestic lifestyle. The opening verse paragraphs establish the varied, but easily flowing, sound that characterizes Clarke's poetry, but this flow is disrupted in a way that symbolizes the speaker's disruption of the smooth pattern of unquestioning female acquiescence to the demands of the roles of wives and mothers. Early in the poem, she refers to "the boy in the rhyme, his stick / and cotton bundle on his shoulder" and immediately begins to imp the sing-song rhythm of "the rhyme," only to interrupt it with a deconstructive reflection on the social order that the rhyme

represents:

The minstrel boy to the war has gone.

But the girl stays. To mind things.

She must keep. And wait. And pass time.

Punctuation dictates five full stops in these last two lines, which slows the previously constant pace enough to draw the listeners' full attention to the speaker's implied, but unarticulated, awareness of the injustice of this situation.

The next verse paragraph reinforces the same point in the same manner:

There's always been time on our hands.

We read this perfectly white page

for the black head of the seal,

for the cormorant, as suddenly gone

as a question from the mind,

snaking under the surfaces. . . .

After an immeasurable space

the cormorant breaks the surface

as a small, black, returning doubt.

The strong accents on "small," "black," "turn," and "doubt," together with the jarring pauses indicated by the punctuation, slow down the final line of this passage in order to strengthen the meaning of the cormorant as a symbol of doubt.

For all of Gillian Clarke's respect for Under Milk Wood

and her traditional Welsh heritage, "Letter from a Far Country" emerges as protest poem, speaking out against the frustrated lifestyles of women who are forced to "mix rage with the family bread." Under Milk Wood describes a day in the life of the mythical but quintessentially Welsh village of Llareggub, while "Letter from a Far Country" describes that limited part of the housewife's day that she has to herself, after finishing the housework, before her husband and children return from work and school.

Both works leave a listener with the impression that although the experience of listening has been intensive, in the end nothing has changed or been resolved. Peter Lewis notes the "essentially static quality about Llaragyb, for all the activity that takes place" (77). He concludes from the absence of any major conflict or resolution that

Under Milk Wood is really a hymn of praise for the imaginary Welsh village . . . , for the varieties and vagaries of human nature, and for the Spring with its promise of renewal and fertility. (82-83)

In "Letter from a Far Country," the situation is more problematic. The first twenty minutes of the poem build up the speaker's sense of frustration to the emotional climax of the poem; what can only be read as a call to revolution:

At high tide I am leaving.

The women are leaving.
 They are paying their taxes
 and dues. Filling in their passports.
 They are paying to Caesar
 what is Caesar's, to God what is God's.
 To woman what is Man's.

The "dead grandmothers" immediately negate this impulse to journey, by "haul[ing] at the taut silk cords" to keep their descendants in their homes, "mixing rage with the family bread." To leave would be to abandon the children, as well as the grandmothers, and Clarke's speaker, speaking for all of the women of rural Wales, simply can not bring herself to this point. She rationalizes that leaving her family would be a physical impossibility, since her entire being is tuned to the needs of her children:

We are hawks trained to return
 to the lure from the circle's
 far circumference. Children sing
 that note that only we can hear . . .

The implication that the speaker must choose between living with her angry frustrations or painfully abandoning her growing children and the heritage of her Welsh grandmothers leaves no room for compromise. Of course, the poem seems to end prematurely, when the return of her children from school interrupts the speaker's act of composing the poem:

Today this letter goes unsigned,
unfinished, unposted.

When it is finished

I will post it from a far country.

The speaker's final commitment to return later and finish her epistle does hold some promise for a resolution in the future. Of course, since no resolution takes place within the space of the poem, the negative reading that household and family duties so consume the speaker's time that she never returns to her letter, or the issues developed therein, is equally possible.

An ending that comes across as inadequate in a written text, can be entirely appropriate to the demands of radio, however. "Letter from a Far Country" works as a product of the Welsh poetic tradition, and its need to "voice the emotions, the problems of the tribe" even if it does not present any solutions beyond an implied promise to devote renewed attention to the problem. It also works as a radio poem because Clarke relies on very concrete and visual detail in order to maximize the effectiveness of the poem for an audience of listeners rather than readers. The assumed form of a letter serves the same purpose, in that it gives the long work direction, while allowing for a very loose narrative structure that would minimize confusion or listeners. Any further sense that the poem is overly simplistic, or complacent, from a feminist point of view,

can be explained with reference to popular radio literature, whether the "radio ode" that Conran describes, or the "radio drama" that MacNeice concerns himself with, as a form that primarily intends to entertain, rather than to disturb. A poem that went beyond the gentle subversion of "Letter from a Far Country" to become an outright call to a feminist revolution would probably tend to alienate most audiences, and would never become the heartwarming "popular classic like Under Milk Wood," for which Clarke's 1978 editorial in the Anglo-Welsh Review saw such a pressing need. The fragmentary form allows the listener to imagine beyond the end of the poem and construct his or her own idea of what happens next.

3

Since "Letter from a Far Country" is so open-ended, it requires a juxtaposition of this text with other texts produced by Gillian Clarke in order to reach a full understanding of the impact that this poem had on her career. Given the context of promoting a stronger Welsh identity and producing a possible "popular classic" for radio, as well as the context of the very restrained feminism that Clarke displays in her earlier work in The Sundial, the powerful expression of female resentment in "Letter from a Far Country" represents a considerable breakthrough for Clarke in her writing.

In a 1985 interview with Susan Butler, discussing "some of the motivating forces behind the poem," Clarke uses the word "Welshness" in connection with "Letter from a Far Country," but she uses the word "anger" just as often:

The anger arose because of the difficulty of actually writing the poem. I realized when I did it that I couldn't do anything at a long stretch because I had so many duties, so many things that broke up my day, because of working in a house The anger eventually was against those who assumed I had all the time in the world and that all women have all the time in the world to do things simply because they live in a house and work in a house which is clearly a place where nothing goes on. It was also to do with the low valuation that is given to what women do. (195)

These insights that Clarke gained through the process of writing "Letter from a Far Country" are certainly not new to mainstream feminist discourse, but they do begin to inform Clarke's own writing in transforming ways. Whereas in her 1978 editorial, she saw only one object of deference to complain of in the "grown-ups in London," she finds another cause for a sense of inferiority in the 1985 Butler interview:

Being a woman and Welsh, and therefore in two senses not wholly ready to count myself as one of

the grown-ups, not easily able to feel I was permitted to be myself, to be a writer, an artist, I was a very late developer. (196)

Clarke's profound new awareness of feminist strategies for interrogating received positions first becomes evident in another editorial, published in 1979, in number 65 of the Anglo-Welsh Review. Clarke notes that "this is almost, by coincidence, a special number for women writers" and proudly points to the strong representation of woman writers in Anglo-Welsh periodicals "in comparison with other British journals." She invites a "lively correspondence" on the issue of defining "the feminine perception as demonstrated in the arts" and then moves to the primary purpose of her editorial: an examination of the reasons why woman writers often "disappear into obscurity." Clarke puts forward the suggestions that women writers, for whatever reasons, tend to have "striven less for fame" and public recognition in the first place, and that the domestic subject matter which most women are familiar with is regarded as non-literary by male critics.

Clarke then presents a brief biography of Jean Rhys, to mark the occasion of that writer's death in May of 1989, and presumably also as a kind of case study of the issues that she has raised thus far in her editorial. The most striking aspect of this passage is the writer's obvious ambivalence towards her subject. While she has nothing but praise for

Rhys's novels, Clarke seems faintly repelled by the seediness of her lifestyle, and more specifically, by her apparent need "to depend on the dangerous dark side of femininity" and to make herself "abject for the attentions of third-rate men." Clarke seems to be constructing her subject from many sources, including a sensational television interview in which she perceives an amplified "image of Jean Rhys presenting herself as a victim." Although she previously complained of the relative obscurity of women writers, Clarke makes a clear distinction here between Rhys's fame as a writer, which she supports, and the image of Rhys as a tragic victim who led a sordid life, which Clarke does not wish to promote, even if the writer promoted this image of herself.

Clarke ends her passage on Jean Rhys with a fascinating return to their common identity as Welsh woman writers:

Her longing for the past is not surprising.

Displaced in adolescence by the death of her father and the start of a drifting life, she never found happiness or a country of her own.

This echoing of the famous Virginia Woolf title implies that in order to fulfil themselves, woman writers need a strong sense of a patriotic national identity, of a spatial location on the public map of the world, as much as they need a private space to write in.

The editorial ends with Clarke's brief presentation of

yet another small, but concrete proposal towards solving the problem of the obscurity of woman writers, which again refers primarily to Welshness:

In an effort to prevent the like disappearance or neglect of the writers of Wales in the future, a Companion to Welsh Literature is currently being prepared. Readers' attention is drawn to a letter published at the end of this magazine appealing for information that will help the editors of the volume to trace certain writers.

This kind of linking of Welshness and feminism, her two strongest concerns, typifies the writing of Gillian Clarke from "Letter from a Far Country" to her 1989 collection, Letting in the Rumour. Her insistence on ending a text with some kind of a positive plan for action is also typical of Clarke's writing. Her poems, as well as her editorials, are very public utterances, and her choric voice, consistently speaking in support of her political agenda, uses known personal material as evidence, but avoids subjectivity for its own sake. Patriotism and feminism are more often than not regarded as antagonistic terms, and these themes frequently threaten to conflict in Clarke's poetry. Nevertheless, whether she is insisting upon her pride in her femininity or in her Welshness, Gillian Clarke refuses to abandon either space, or to compromise either facet of her identity.

CHAPTER THREE

Bridging the Space Between: The Epistolary Frame of Letter From a Far Country

Having established the context of the creation of "Letter from a Far Country" as a radio poem in the previous chapter, it remains to examine the poem in its more literary contexts as an epistolary work and as a literary fragment. This discussion will prepare for an analysis of the poem as the thematic touchstone in Clarke's 1982 collection of the same title, where it creates the space that the following poems inhabit.

If, as a radio poem, "Letter from a Far Country" reflects a perceived need for radio poems that promoted Welshness, then, in the later contexts of its various publications, the poem reflects Clarke's growing feminist consciousness as she experiments with the effects of imposing various kinds of closure on this essentially open-ended poem. The resulting interrogation of the balance of patriotism and feminism in "Letter from a Far Country" is most complete and successful in the 1982 collection, where it results in the production of Clarke's most thematically unified collection.

Defined as an epistolary text by its title, "Letter from a Far Country" is nevertheless difficult to classify according to prevailing definitions of epistolary forms. In

her "Introduction" to a collection of critical essays on woman writers of epistolary literature, Elizabeth C. Goldsmith asserts that traditionally, "male commentators have noted that the epistolary genre seemed particularly suited to the female voice" (vii). The texts in this collection, as well as most other critical texts on epistolarity, tend to concern themselves with epistolary fiction and collections of personal letters, rather than poetry, however. Works like Janet Altman's Epistolarity speak to "Letter from a Far Country" in an indirect way, and therefore they can be no more than a jumping-off point for a discussion of the qualities of the poem that derive from the letter form.

Taking another approach, "Letter from a Far Country" could be read as a contemporary feminist type of the Coleridgean verse letter--but the comparison becomes unsatisfactory when the juxtaposition between Coleridge's verse letters and Clarke's "Letter from a Far Country" reveals the essentially unrelated contexts of their creation. Poems like "The Eolian Harp," "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison," "To William Wordsworth," and "Dejection: An Ode" are all essentially personal letters written in verse. The addressees inscribed within these poems, including Sara Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Wordsworth, and Sara Hutchinson, were all known intimates of Coleridge; and each poem was apparently written to commemorate a very specific and personal occasion. Furthermore, the hundred and fifty

years that have passed since the death of Coleridge have given scholars ample opportunity to discover even more information about the private contexts in which these poems were written than the poems themselves reveal. The stories of the quarrel between Coleridge and his wife that preceded the composition of "This Lime Tree Bower my Prison," and the fact that "Dejection" originated as a love letter in verse to Sara Hutchinson, in particular, have been footnoted in all modern editions of these poems until these anecdotes have become an inseparable part of the contemporary experience of reading the poems.

"Letter from a Far Country," on the other hand, is written from a very public space. A radio commission from the BBC and the Welsh Arts Council occasioned its writing and its addressees are the general "husbands, fathers, forefathers" that are mentioned in the opening lines. If any significant personal subtext exists within the poem, we do not, at any rate, have access to the keys for decoding it at this time, and this may be the root of the inadequacy of most critical discussions of epistolarity in this situation. Epistolary literature is assumed to consist of personal letters written between particularized individuals, and it becomes more difficult to pin down the implications of a text which purports to be written by any Welsh woman to any Welsh man.

Besides writing "Letter from a Far Country" in the form

of a letter, Clarke writes the poem in the form of a fragment, which further complicates the matter of interpretation. The earliest published version¹⁴ ends with the speaker ostensibly being interrupted in the act of writing her letter, by the return of her children from school:

Today this letter goes unsigned,
unfinished, unposted.
When it is finished
I will post it from a far country.

Within the space of the poem, then, the speaker partially writes the letter, but this act represents a failure of communication, since she evidently never actually completes or mails the letter. Given its essentially unresolved ending, the text strongly depends on the context of publication for the ultimate meaning that it conveys.

Gillian Clarke has experimented with several ways of presenting the poem. "Letter from a Far Country" appeared in Clarke's 1988 Selected Poems with this italicised epilogue following the final lines of the poem:

If we launch the boat and sail away
Who will rock the cradle: Who will stay:
If women wander over the sea
Who'll be home when you come in for tea?

If we go hunting along with the men

Who will light the fires and bake bread then?
 Who'll catch the nightmares and ride them away
 If we put to sea and we sail away:

Will the men grow tender and the children strong?
 Who will teach the Mam iaith and sing them songs:
 If we adventure more than a day
 Who will do the loving while we're away?

This ending speaks to the addressees of the poem in a coaxing tone, almost as if trying to soften a possible backlash against an overly-frank earlier expression of anger. As the nursery-rhyme rhythms of these stanzas indicated, this ending tends to oversimplify the concerns of the poem and to negate the impulse to journey that the speaker expressed earlier, with her statement that "The women are leaving." This impulse is at least as powerful a force in the poem as the impulse to perform the domestic acts of homemaking and mothering, and there is therefore a definite feeling of self-betrayal about these closing lines. The sense of closure that these lines provide works against the integrity of the poem in a written context, but this ending might serve as a kind of envoy or summary in an oral presentation.¹⁵

In the 1991 anthology, The Bright Field, contemporary Anglo-Welsh poets prepare selections from their own works. Clarke closes the selection of her poems by printing the

last third of the original version of "Letter from a Far Country" and then following it with "Overheard in County Sligo," which Clarke describes in the introduction to her selection as "a feminist nursery-rhyme." This poem shares the concerns of "Letter from a Far Country" insofar as it is written in the voice of a discontented housewife, who has given up her dreams of a career as a writer or actress for an unfulfilling domesticity, and, like the speaker of "Letter from a Far Country," longs to journey:

. . . the road runs down through the open gate
and freedom's there for the taking . . .

But I turn to fold the breakfast cloth
and to polish the lustre and brass,
to order and dust the tumbled rooms
and find my face in the glass.

I ought to feel I'm a happy woman
for I lie in the lap of the land,
and I married a man from County Roscommon
and I live in the back of beyond.

Reading this poem as a continuation of "Letter from a Far Country," gives the same placement of the speaker as the previous ending does, as remaining in her domestic situation beyond the end of the poem. This closing, however, allows for the admission that this is an imperfect solution, and

the nursery-rhyme form here contributes to the irony. Most children's rhymes do not present their subjects as fundamentally discontented with their situation in life, and the simple form of a nursery rhyme tends to imply that the situation presented therein is a natural and universal one-- thus creating the image of the unfulfilled housewife as a universal type.

Beyond all question however, the context that most completely satisfies the indeterminacy of the ending of "Letter from a Far Country" is the context of its publication as the opening poem in the 1982 collection of the same name. As the introduction to the collection, it serves as a powerful manifesto for the poems that follow, recreating all of their landscapes and themes as spaces within the "far country" that the speaker of the title poem names and inhabits. From the place that Wordsworth's daffodils holds in the mind of the withdrawn labourer in "Miracle on St. David's Day" to the beautiful, but dangerously unfamiliar vacation settings in "A Journal from France," the collection becomes a study in various "far countries" of escape and self-reflection. Furthermore, the fragmentary nature of "Letter from a Far Country" and its open ending allow for the poems in the rest of the collection to be read as continuations of the various discourses of "great works," feminism, social criticism, ecological conservation, familial heritage, and the ever-

present natural cycles of rural life and death, as they originate in the opening poem. These frequent returns to issues that were left as unresolved points of anxiety in the opening poem serve to empower the speaker and provide a transition between the physical and emotional situation that she occupies in "Letter from a Far Country" and the very different spaces of the final sequence "Journal from France."

The "masculine question" of the gulls in "Letter from a Far Country," who demand of the women, "Where . . . are your great works?" is ironically addressed in later poems which refer to the "great works" of William Wordsworth and Shakespeare. Clarke does not begrudge these authors their identity as male English poets, nor does she take advantage of the opportunity to deny the validity of their writings in favour of the "great works" of women, or of Welsh poets. Instead, "Miracle on St. David's Day," "Llyr," and "Mrs. Frost" emerge as strong affirmations of the ability of poetry to hold personal significance beyond the text itself. In each case, however, the poet does appropriate the relevant "great work" to a particularly Welsh context, and the female speaker of each poem does act creatively as a necessary mediator who makes possible the recreation of the "great works" that allows for the communication of specific meaning between a dead author and a live audience.

All three poems represent poetry being communicated in

an unusual performance setting--a poetry reading in the garden of a mental asylum in "Miracle on St. David's Day," a memory of a performance of King Lear, seen in childhood and re-enacted in the mind of the adult thirty years later, in "Llyr," and a reading of Merchant of Venice to a blind and bedridden geriatric patient in "Mrs. Frost." The familiar moods and spaces of the "great work" in question are evoked in each poem in turn, in order to comment on the present situation.

"Miracle on St. David's Day" begins with a quotation from Wordsworth's "The Daffodils." The political subtext of the poem clearly contains a reference to hopes for Welsh nationalism, with the St. David's Day national holiday, and the daffodil, which holds "the status of a national symbol" (118) according to the Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales. The moment when the labourer stands to speak, in response to the speaker's poetry and the spring daffodils, is thus weighted with political undertones, since he chooses to speak in English, rather than Welsh, and through the words of a poem from the very centre of the English canon that he was made to learn in his schooldays, "by rote." On a more literal level, the moment is a victorious one, however, since the withdrawn labourer does manage to achieve some degree of meaningful interaction with his environment, and the blissful remembered daffodil field of Wordsworth's poem compliments the triumph of the labourer remembering

"that once there was a music / of speech and that once he had something to say."

In the same way, the tortured landscapes and emotions of a remembered performance of King Lear become the "word" which can be used to refer to the domestic passions which the speaker sees inscribed in the landscape of modern Wales. Here, the speaker notes that it was the Welsh subject of the "great work" in question, "the river and the king, with their Welsh names," that first made the play meaningful to her. As she remembers the childhood experience of watching the play at Stratford, she is standing "on the cliffs of Llyn," reading the themes of the play in the Welsh landscape, which is

. . . marked with figures of old men . . .

Here and there among the crumbling farms
Are lit kitchen windows on distant hills,
And guilty daughters longing to be gone.

This process claims King Lear as an essentially Welsh text, by creating a powerful intuitive reading of the play that transcends even the magic of the remembered nighttime performance at Stratford.

In "Mrs. Frost," the reference to Shakespeare's play is limited to the mention of Portia, but the name is enough to invoke the perfect classical balance of Portia's wisdom, beauty, fortune, three caskets, and three suitors. The striking contrast between the "perfectly remembered" image

of "just / and gentle" Portia, as shared between the minds of the speaker and the patient, and the obvious indignity of the old woman's decaying body and the impersonal hospital ward invokes the problematic theme of mercy from the original play in order to comment on the ungentle and unjust fact of old age. The action of each of these poems, then, serves to retrieve the relevant "great work" from the centre of the canon of English literature by presenting it in a context where it can have immediate and vital relevance in the obscure region of Wales for such an incongruous group of people as a mentally disturbed labourer, a child, and a blind old woman.

Clarke's fondness for authorizing such characters, who exist on the bare fringes of society proper, is reflected in the disturbing images of female paupers, frustrated female creativity, and women driven to suicide out of a private sense of despair, which haunt the title poem of Letter from a Far Country. These images are not resolved specifically within the collection, but most of the following poems do reflect a continuing discourse of feminist themes and language. While Clarke's consistent belief in absolute equality,¹⁶ together with her willingness to write from a feminist perspective, makes virtually every poem she writes an oblique feminist statement, there are three poems in particular which deal more openly with feminist concerns by mythologizing images of powerless, outcast women.

Significantly, the title characters of "Blodeuyn," "Blodeuwedd," and "Sheila na Gig at Kilpeck" are all elusive Celtic figures, women in pain who do not have a voice and who exist only in the dark memories of a place, in a myth of guilty transformation, and in an ancient stone image in a church.

"Blodeuyn" describes a journey on foot to visit a place called Blodeuyn, and an abandoned home, "empty / sixty years, an animal quiet / in it, of old women stooping / at the door they shared with cattle." The pain associated with this place and these women is never explained, but the path to it is a "dark wound in the corn," and the place affects the visitors with the force of personality, as they are rendered speechless by an unnamed emotion: "we stumble home through smells / of the barley's bowed wet heads, / Blodeuyn's silence in us." Where the apparatus of literacy is not available and no one survives to communicate the story of these women, the supernatural imprinting of a sense of "animal quiet" and profound emptiness is the only means left to hint at an ancient tragedy.

In "Blodeuwedd" a nocturnal barn owl rising in daylight becomes a woman out of Welsh legend, who was created from flowers and later turned into an owl for the crime of adultery. The absolute isolation of Blodeuwedd is represented in the poem by the juxtaposition between the lonely owl "following her shadow like a cross" and the warm

and enduring relationship of a

. . . comfortable sisterhood
of women moving in kitchens
among cups, cloths and running
water while they talk,

as we three talk tonight . . .

heap washed apples in a bowl, recall
the days work, our own fidelities.

The contrast here is reminiscent of the same guilty
complicity with the moral judgements of the tribe that
Seamus Heaney expresses in his famous address to the body of
the prehistoric adulteress found in a bog in "Punishment:"

I almost love you
But would have cast, I know
The stones of silence . . .

I who have stood dumb
while your betraying sisters
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

Compared to "Blodeuwedd," "Punishment" is relentlessly personal and precise, focusing throughout on describing the violated body of the bog woman and what has happened to it. The body of the bog adulteress represents itself as prehistoric evidence of a merciless act of tribal violence and also becomes an emblem for the continuation of a tradition of tribal violence in contemporary Ireland. In the "far country" of Welsh myth that Clarke enters through her poem, the violence of such persecution and the guilt of such a speaker are gentled with a story of the adulteress' transformation into an owl. This metaphor makes this poem more comfortable to read than "Punishment," but it also assures that the most profound experience of pain belongs to the victim, rather than to her punishers. While Heaney's bog woman is beyond the reach of her tormentors in death, Blodeuwedd's loneliness, represented in the cry of the owl, is elemental and everlasting:

Her night lament
beyond conversation . . .

Blodeuwedd's ballad
where the long reach
of the peninsula
is black in a sea
aghast with gazing.

"Sheila na Gig at Kilpeck" presents a female figure

whose pain is physical rather than spiritual. Clarke's poem interprets an image found in a church at Kilpeck of a female figure "leaning over, holding open a largely exaggerated labia" (Smith 57). Instead of the more traditional Christian image of the crucifix, it is Sheila na Gig enduring the pain of childbirth who becomes the centre of the parish, whose elements "distantly revolve / outside her perpetual calendar." Where the image of Christ's pain promises heavenly salvation, her pain guarantees earthly fertility. She is "mother of the ripening barley" and the motivating source of the natural cycles of life, death and growth: "everywhere rhythms / are turning their little gold cogs, caught / in her waterfalling energy." As a woman, the speaker reverences the figure, and at the same time feels personally related to it, as if they were "sisters cooling our wrists / in the stump of a Celtic water stoup." Clarke's poem is wholly celebratory of the figure, creating Sheila na Gig as a goddess, an embodiment of the principle of motherhood and fertility.

The vulnerability of the image of Sheila na Gig is never apparent within the poem itself, but emerges in the juxtaposition of Clarke's poem with others on the same subject in The Kilpeck Anthology, where it originally appeared under the title "She." Kenneth R. Smith points out the terms of masculine estrangement used by Jonathan Williams, Jeff Nuttall and Seamus Heaney in the same

anthology to describe the same figure: "The Celtic Pussy Galore," "The Whore of Kilpeck," "the Mother of Red Muck" whose "hands holding herself / are like hands in an old outhouse holding a bag open." According to the artist's rendering of the figure in the Kilpeck Anthology, the figure is abstract enough to admit both of these different interpretations but, significantly, whereas Clarke reads the figure's posture and enlarged labia as a sign of childbirth, the male authors read it as a sign of promiscuity. Although Clarke's poem was apparently written in response to the statue itself, rather than to any of the other responses, the shocking contrast between the language of her poem of praise and the male poems of degradation provides a telling illustration of the essential vulnerability of the figure of Sheila na Gig, and of the other female figures of pain. Clarke's respectful mythologizing of agonizing aspects of the female experience may mute the emotional impact of "Blodweuyn," "Blodewuedd," and "Sheila na Gig," but her treatment allows more dignity to her subjects than the voyeuristic attention which Seamus Heaney affords to the adulteress in "Punishment" and is certainly more meaningful than the heavy-handed wit of the male poets in The Kilpeck Anthology.

Side by side with these landscapes influenced by male literature and female myth, Clarke develops more realistic spaces which she uses to contact the history of post-

industrial Wales in general, and of her own family in particular, subjects which she goes on to explore more fully in Letting in the Rumour. The speaker in "Letter from a Far Country" originates this theme within the collection by establishing an ambivalent relationship between the Welsh landscape and human industrialization. A century ago "the parish was rich with movement, / Water-wheels milled the sunlight / and the loom's knock was a heart behind all activity." In the present day, however, the wealth of industry is gone, with the obvious negative effect of a loss of prosperity, but with the positive effect of leaving the inland stream free of pollution. Although the stream has been left to purify itself, however, the seashore is now open to the pollution of an oil spill: "the unfolding rose of the sea / blooms on the beaches, wave on wave black, track-marked, / each tide a procession of the dead." In the words of "East Moors," Wales is "quieter, cleaner, poorer from today," but it remains helplessly vulnerable to the vague threat of the outside violence of ecological disaster, which would translate immediately into human disaster as well, in a landscape where the awareness of the poet is so fully in tune with the cycles of nature.

Clarke is not usually described as a political poet, but in this volume there are more poems that develop this sense of helplessness against an uncontrollable threat, in order to convey strong themes of social criticism, than

there are poems on any other single theme. Beginning with the speaker's unexpected experience of "the starved stare of a warning I can't name," on opening the morning paper in "Sunday," oblique warnings of the approach of a systemic disaster occur frequently, whether the threat is ecological or political. The speaker of "Siege" almost breaks under the pressure of radio news of "conflagrations far away." "Cardiff Elms" forebodes that the destruction of a stand of elms in a city park will be "the start of some terrible undoing." "Miracle on St. David's Day," "East Moors," and "Suicide on Pentwyn Bridge" all hint at the social effects of the hard times caused by de-industrialization, while in "Jac Codi Baw," the speaker weeps at the destruction of an unused warehouse for a confusion of reasons:

. . . the handwriting
of a city will be erased.

. . . Too much comes down
in the deaths of warehouses. Brickdust,
shards of Caernarfon slate. Blood on our hands.

On a more subtle level, in a region where birds are almost the only wildlife left to become extinct, poems like "Chalk Pebble," "Cardiff Elms," "Scything," and "Bluetit and Wren" emphasize the fragility of avian populations, and human ones by extension. Wales was once, after all, the country of the coal mines and the proverbial canary that served as an indicator of the presence of conditions

inimical to human life. Reading birds in Clarke's poetry as indicators of the state of the physical environment, then, turns the speaker's near-collision with a heron in "Heron at Port Talbot" into a very positive sign, indeed. In spite of the polluted landscape where the "steel town's sulphurs billow / like dirty washing," the heron has returned to act as

. . . a surveyor
 calculating space between old workings
 and the mountain hinterland, archangel
 come to re-open the heron-roads.

The description of the heron as an angel, heralding the return of the species to an industrial area, is a contemporary ecological echo of the Welsh version of the myth of eternal return, as Kenneth R. Smith describes it:

This is the Arthurian legend that Arthur is not dead but sleeping on the Isle of Avalon, waiting until he is needed again . . . The prophecy keeps alive the hope of Welsh survival. (Smith 50)

The most essential and personal goal of the ecological conservation that Clarke's poetry advocates here is to insure personal survival, and survival through family. The vital link between generations is certainly one of the most fundamental concerns of Clarke's poetry. In this collection, this theme is strongly introduced through images of the speaker's mother and grandmothers, and the speaker's

children, and through the more general image of generations of women linked together through the domestic activity of "counting, / folding, measuring, making, / tenderly laundering cloth." This sense of continuity with the past is strongly developed in three later poems, through the juxtaposition of present landscapes and landscapes created by the memories attached to physical mementos of the past. Interestingly enough, after the strong emphasis on the female line in "Letter from a Far Country," "Taid's funeral," "Siege," and "Login" describe the speaker's connections to three generations of male relatives--her grandfather, father and son. In "Taid's Funeral," the finding of a yellowed baby dress in a drawer brings back the memory of the grandfather's funeral with the strength of revelation: "a day opens, suddenly as light." The rediscovery of details remembered with the clarity of a small child's vision--the roughness of a stone wall, a handful of gravel, daisy chains around her wrists--is distorted by an adult's understanding of the event:

. . . Fears repeat
 in a conversation of mirrors,
 doll within doll; and that old man too small
 at last to see, perfect, distinct as a seed.

The portrayal of individual death in this poem is thus deliberately reduced through a telescoping of images, until the dead relative becomes a seed, containing the promise of

the vegetable rebirth of new generations, although without identity or personal continuity.

A similar fear of the annihilation of personality manifests itself again in "Siege," where the fear is extended to include the annihilation of family and civilization as an equivalent horror. In this poem, the act of sorting old family photographs, while listening to bad news on the radio, and watching the sun set over a blooming spring garden, is the trigger for a complicated interaction of these incongruous activities within the mind of the speaker. The two photographs of the speaker's father holding the child as a baby, and the speaker's mother as a young girl, posing in a harvest field where her brothers are working, are simultaneously alive in the past and present, as the speaker links the present "year of blossom" with the past landscapes of natural fertility and fruition.¹⁷ Despite the evident success of garden and field, the description of both present and past landscapes conveys the restless tension of the speaker's mood, as indicated by the poem's title, and the speaker's feeling that she is somehow wasting time in her activity of reflecting on the past. When the violence of the bad news on the radio finally breaks into the speaker's peace of mind and "sheaves of fire / are scorching the grass and in my kitchen / is a roar of floors falling, machine guns," the reason for the tension is clear. Although the wren repairs the breach with a

repetition of "that song / of lust and burgeoning," the threat of destruction remains to menace the security and continuity of the family, extending both backwards into the past of the photographs and forward into an uncertain future.

"Login" is another poem about generations that turns on the image of a photograph, but in this case the tone of the speaker's reflection is far more optimistic. This time, the trigger is a family pilgrimage, a visit to a farmhouse where the speaker's father once lived. Standing with the old woman who had known her father, in a place where he had lived, the speaker watches her son running ahead "into the light," and has a sense of the continued progression of generations to come. She imagines her son running ahead of her into the future and turning back

. . . to wave and wait
 for me, where sunlight concentrates
 blindingly on the bridge, he'd see
 all this in sepia, hear footsteps
 not yet taken fade away.

In its illuminating confidence that events will indeed continue to progress to the time when the speaker's son will find himself investigating the present with the same attention that the speaker is now focusing upon the past, this poem offers the most concrete and positive vision of the future in the entire collection.

The concluding sequence, "A Journal from France," mimics the epistolary form of "Letter from a Far Country," while at the same time addressing some of its concerns from a new perspective. The form of a journal, first of all, is significant because Gillian Clarke describes her creative process in general in terms of writing a journal: "Each poem is a journal entry to record the way I thought, what I saw, with dark pages between where nine poems out of ten were discarded along the way" (Bright Field, 54). "A Journal from France" establishes itself as an epistolary work in its title, which specifies a journal written "from France," not "in France," and in the presence of an addressee, who is referred to with "you" in the opening poem and "we" throughout the sequence. The journal with an inscribed addressee is certainly a well-established subcategory in epistolary literature by woman writers, whether the addressee is a real person, like William Wordsworth, in Dorothy's Grasmere Journal, or the imaginary "Kitty" in Anne Frank's diaries.

The speaker in "Letter from a Far Country" was frustrated in her impulse to go on a journey, and it is immediately clear in "A Journal from France" that the speaker is writing from France, a physical "far country." The least complicated assumption that a reader could make is that the original impulse to journey has finally been accomplished, with all of the liberation from confining

traditions and self-expectations that this implies. In the first poem in the sequence, "September 9th," the speaker describes herself as "navigator" in the unknown territory of rural France. Being in control of where she wants to go does not guarantee ease or contentment, however, and the tension between the speaker and addressee is both stated and present in the speaker's description of the alien landscape, which is damaged by heat like the landscape in Clarke's earlier poem, "The Sundial":

There I was happy and you were not . . .

Tonight in Aubas, I can't sleep
 listening for the shriek of the kite.
 About us in the hot, dark fields
 each sunflower, chin on clavicle,
 blackens, scorched in its own flames.

The relationship between the speaker and addressee seems to be in jeopardy here, but the specific details of the relationship are not available within the poem, which implies a personal subtext in a way that "Letter from a Far Country" does not. The unnamed other may be a specific one of the general group of Welsh "husbands, fathers, forefathers" who are addressed in "Letter from a Far Country," but there is no way to be sure. Neither the addressee, nor the speaker, for that matter, are described in gender-specific language, and the reading these poem

within the context of the rest of the collection provides the reader's only hope of fixing such details.

The relationship between speaker and addressee, does seem to improve within the rest of the sequence--either that, or the experience of being together as strangers in a strange land serves to sublimate the differences. "The Village," "La Cirque de Paris," "Seamstress at St. Leon," and "Kingfishers at Condat" are written exclusively in the first person plural, as the speaker and her addressee are united in the curiosity of tourists trying to observe and decode strange surroundings. In "The Kingfishers" the two travellers are reminded of their common foreignness by the unfriendly behaviour of some youths at a cafe, and respond with an air of private conspiracy:

Excluded, uneasy at their stares
and the outbreak of laughter, we carry
our drinks outside, read their newspaper
in revenge, like a bill of right.

These poems all contain subtle reminders of the discourses of "Letter from a Far Country," including the picture-perfect village, which brings back the "verbal camera"¹⁸ effects of the opening stanzas of the long poem; and the kingfishers, who join the catalogue of symbolic birds in this collection that began with the gulls and curlews in the opening poems. The seamstress is obviously one of the sisterhood that processes cloth, although she is

not simply doing the laundry of her family, as the women of "Letter from a Far Country" do, but rather sewing pieces from fine "embroidery cloths," "lace," and "silks," as a way to make a living that must be creatively satisfying as well.

In "Rouffignac" and "Font de Gaume" the speaker uses the first person in order to record the strength of her response to the underground river Vezere. This recalls the personal feeling in "Letter from a Far Country" that the underground river is an image of confinement and claustrophobia, reminiscent of a boy who drowned in a swimming pool pipe:

. . . I never
forgot him, and pity rivers
inside mountains, and the children
of Hamelin sucked in by music.

In the shorter poems, the speaker expresses an attitude of awe at the power of the underground river, which she describes as "a throat choking with water, / a power, drill at work." The anxious need to feel sympathetic "pity," as if for a trapped creature, is replaced by a need for new forms of expression, in order for the speaker to fully describe the landscape created by the river: "The imagination's caverns cry for symbols, / shout to the hot sun in the present tense."

The poem ends with an image of community as the speaker apostrophizes the river as a fellow artist: "Brother,

grinding your colours by tallow light / I hear your heart
 beat under my collarbone." This expression of a common
 identity with an entity defined as male would not have been
 possible for the alienated speaker of "Letter from a Far
 Country." In a similar way, the sense of a shared identity
 with prehistoric artists struggling towards meaning in "Les
 Combarelles" transcends any considerations of gender:

Hieroglyphics

words flowered, calcite

crusted to first poems.

We made a doe, drinking

at this natural stream

It was not quite what we meant

but it was a beginning, a source.

In the final poem in the collection, "'Summer's going
 quickly now,'" the speaker's encounter with the old French
 woman is characterized by easy communication, in spite of
 the language barrier. Unlike the lions, or the youths at
 the cafe, she is welcoming to the speaker and her party--as
 all the older women throughout this collection tend to be--
 asking only for conversation. The speaker begins the
 exchange with reference to the point of her Welshness, and
 therefore, her foreignness in France. This does not prove
 to be a barrier, or even important, since with her desire to
 communicate, the old woman has acquired a demystifying
 familiarity with things Welsh: "Strangely, she knows

already. / A Welshman passed this way two days ago." The French phrase, "L'ete va vite maintenant," which is repeated twice in French and translated in the poem's title, for good measure, is a strong reminder that the tourist season is ending, and therefore the travellers must return home to Wales with their new attitudes and impressions.

The epistolary form works in Letter From a Far Country according to the parameters of Janet Altman's definition of the basic action of the form:

Given the letter's function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasize either the distance or the bridge.

(Altman 13)

Read on its own, the original fragmented and open-ended form of the poem "Letter from a Far Country," definitely emphasizes the distance between sender and receiver, foregrounding the speaker's helplessness even to complete the opening act of a written epistolary dialogue in the face of the confining traditional roles of women in Welsh society. When read as a whole, however, the collection Letter from a Far Country emphasizes the bridge, as the speaker empowers herself through frequent returns to the complex issues and subjects that helped to create her frustration in the opening poem. Poems of praise and celebration, like "Llyr," "Sheila na Gig at Kilpeck," "Heron

at Port Talbot," and "Login," in particular, help to relieve some of the pressure of the negative themes of "Letter from a Far Country" by providing more positive alternatives to some of the unresolved problems introduced by the long poem. The concluding sequence, "Journey from France," entirely reconfigures the epistolary form to the model of a bridge rather than a barrier, through the juxtaposition of Welshness with Frenchness, the resolution of some points of anxiety left open from the opening poem, and the frequent use of the first person plural throughout. The numerous attempts in the final sequence to bridge the gaps between self and other, and to locate and concentrate on common ground, allow the speaker to redefine herself as Welsh artist, rather than repressed female victim. This provides a strong ending for a book, with plenty of scope for positive new beginnings waiting beyond the end of the written text.

CHAPTER FOUR

Not "a history of small importance:" The
Postmodern Direction of Letting in the Rumour.

Gillian Clarke's 1989 collection, Letting in the Rumour, represents a physical return from the far country of France to the home space of Wales. It also represents a thematic return to the definitions of community, family and domestic spaces contained in The Sundial, but from a new and more confident perspective, derived in part from the open engagement with the conflict between Welshness and feminism developed in "Letter from a Far Country" and the later collection of the same title. Instead of writing in the generalized public voice that characterizes "Letter from a Far Country," Clarke particularizes her situation as a poet, with the frequent use of proper names, specific events, and personal dedications, in order to assert her belief that the perspective of a Welsh woman writer living in rural Wales and writing in English is at least as valid as any other perspective. In this chapter, I will first briefly examine some of the ways in which Clarke redefines spaces previously established in The Sundial through the shorter lyrics that constitute the bulk of Letting in the Rumour and then present a reading of "Cofiant" as a poem written with a postmodern attention to form and history, which nevertheless

preserves the integrity of the artistic responsibility that Clarke assumes as a "voice of the tribe."

As the opening poem in the collection, "At One Thousand Feet" announces the new perspective on the speaker's engagement with the world that characterizes Letting in the Rumour. The poem clearly defines the speaker as being physically isolated in rural Wales and yet at the same time positioned at the centre of world events through the action of radio, telephone, and mail delivery:

A-road and motorway avoid me.

The national grid has left me out.

For power I catch wind.

In my garden clear water rises.

A wind spinning the blades
of the mill to blinding silver

lets in the rumour,
grief on the radio.

America telephones.

A postcard comes from Poland.

Given the significance of radio in the composition of "Letter from a Far Country," as discussed in Chapter Two, and of the use of epistolary forms in the collection Letter from a Far Country, as discussed in Chapter Three, it is

hardly surprising that the two media of radio and mail are included here as bridging devices. These devices allow the speaker to involve herself in global concerns through long distance information-gathering and personal contact. The high degree of physical self-sufficiency implied by the speaker's reliance on her own power and water supply partially fulfills the plan for creating a perfect domestic space put forward in Clarke's earlier poem "Blaen Cwrt," but the disturbing "rumour" indicates that domestic independence does not guarantee security.

As a brief lyric carrying the weight of being the first poem in a Gillian Clarke collection, "At One Thousand Feet" recalls "The Sundial," and closer comparison reveals completely contrasting portrayals of the speaker's universe and her position within it. In "The Sundial" the speaker exists in a subordinate position, as a kind of satellite orbiting her sick child in a universe controlled and determined by the damaging sun. In "At One Thousand Feet," the speaker exists at the centre, as a portentous "comet / flowers to perihelion over the chimney," and she is able to manipulate the perceived universe in order to gain information: "I hold the sky to my ear to hear / pandem'num whispering." Like "The Sundial," "At One Thousand Feet" creates a mood of tension and danger, but in the latter poem, the speaker places herself in a position of greater power, not distracted from the systemic threat by

domestic responsibilities but rather poised to understand and confront the threat.

The sense of a community that links nations, and not merely the small domestic circle implied in "Community," recurs in "Neighbors" and "Fires on Llyn." In both cases, response to a crisis emphasizes the interdependence of human populations, but the feeling of community in "Neighbors" derives from the mutual dependence on one ecology that is disrupted by the nuclear accident at Chernobyl:

Now we are all neighbourly, each little town
in Europe twinned to Chernobyl. . .

In the democracy of the virus and the toxin
we wait. We watch for bird migrations,
one bird returning with green in its voice.

"Fires on Llyn, by contrast, and with less overt didacticism, conveys a more complex message of spiritual and moral interdependence. The speaker and her companion stand on the top of cliff at Llyn, in a space sanctified by its connection with a poem by the Welsh poet, R. S. Thomas, who found "the footprint of God / warm in the shoe of the hare" near this spot. The speaker reports a discussion of Welsh history in relation to Irish history:

Facing west, we've talked for hours
of our history,
thinking of Ireland
and the hurt cities,

gunshot on lonely farms.

Meanwhile, the terms of landscape description serve to inscribe the elements of the Irish conflict in the space around the speaker:

Three English boys throw stones.

Choughs sound alarm.

Seabirds rise and twenty thousand saints
finger the shingle

to the sea's intonation.

"Done with cliff-talking," the speaker and her companion turn to go home, expecting to find a secure and peaceful domestic space, "the hearth / quiet for the struck match, / our bed spread with clean sheets." Instead, the reflection of the setting sun on distant farmhouse windows momentarily transforms the expectation of security to the shock of violence and destruction: "Suddenly / we shout - the farms burn." In a landscape charged with religious significance, the speaker's transitory experience of the kind of trauma brought about by civil or sectarian violence carries the weight of a divine admonition to translate the substance of political "cliff-talking" into a deeper realization that even in peaceful Wales, she exists in a worldwide "democracy" of political violence.

The same kind of repetition of one pattern of imagery in multiple contexts that we saw in The Sundial, recurs in Letting in the Rumour with the image of the hare, introduced

in "Fires on Llyn" as evidence of the presence of God in the landscape. The image of the hare returns in several poems throughout the collection, ultimately becoming a symbol of suffering and victimization. In "The Hare," an elegy for Clarke's friend, Frances Horovitz, which personalizes and perfects the restrained expression of emotion in the earlier poem "Death of a Young Woman," the uncannily human-sounding voice of a dying hare inspires a nightmare in the dying woman, which reveals "all the suffering of the world / in a single moment." The memory of the dying woman's dream and the vision of "the dumb and stiffening body of the hare" become touchstones for the speaker, reminding her of the lost friend.

"Hare in July" and "Trophy" describe the vulnerability of the hare to dogs who have been bred and trained to hunt hares by generations of humans. In "Hare in July," a dog owned by the speaker brings a dead hare as an unwanted "gift." The speaker's restrained sense of guilt works itself out in "Trophy," in which the speaker recreates the illogical cruelty of a 1928 hare hunt, in which a pack of well-cared-for beagles hunt a hare for three hours, for no better reason than the creation of a hunting trophy. The final image of a hare in Letting in the Rumour occurs in "Night Flying," as a low-flying jet destroys the peace of the speaker's rural home, uniting the "hare / with the moon in its eye" and the speaker herself as victims of this

terrible intrusion. In all of these poems, an essentially guiltless hare becomes a victim of cruelty and a warning about the vulnerability of the innocent.

Besides the image of the hare as evidence of the presence of God, the use of Christian symbolism as a way of describing and giving meaning to indications of war and violence continues in "Night Flying," and "In January." In both poems, the flight-paths of military jets disrupt the domestic space which the speaker inhabits, casting ominous shadows in the shape of a cross. The image of the cross comes in the final lines of the poems, not allowing for the development of the symbol beyond an image of suffering and violence.

The sense of warning common to all of these poems discussed so far recalls the earlier warnings of "Snow on the Mountain" and "The Fox" in The Sundial, and "Siege" and "Sunday" in Letter from a Far Country. In Letting in the Rumour, however, the threat becomes more specific than "the starved stare of a warning I can't name" that menaces the speaker in "Sunday." The threat of political violence, war, and nuclear devastation create the mood of "anger shored / against helplessness" that the speaker finally confronts in "Times Like These." In this poem, the speaker not only defines the mood, but proposes a solution to the depression brought about by this feeling of helplessness. Not surprisingly, the recipe for consolation involves a renewed

concentration on the self-perpetuating cycles of family and nature: "In times like these we should praise trees and babies / and take the children walking in beech woods."

The final lyric poem in the collection acts both as a fulfillment of this suggestion to praise nature and children, and a final revisioning of "The Sundial." "Clocks," like "The Sundial," places the speaker in the role of caregiver to a small child, and each poem concerns cycles of time, as the titles make obvious. The most striking difference between the two poems is the sense of a positive and dynamic interaction between the child and his environment in "Clocks," as compared to the tension and restraint of "The Sundial." In "The Sundial," the "wave of fever" and the hot, slow sun teach the child "silence / And immobility for the first time" while the child in "Clocks" "learns the power of naming" through the whimsy of blowing dandelion clocks. The latter method of education proves more congenial for both the speaker and the child concerned, and the child in "Clocks" concludes by recognizing a sophisticated interrelationship between sea, moon, and flowers, in the example of "natural piety" that Wordsworth would have loved:

'What does the sea say?' I ask.

'Fwfff! Fwfff!' he answers, then turns

his face to the sky and points

to the full-blown moon.

In its obvious allusions to "The Sundial," "Clocks" concludes a progression in Gillian Clarke's poetry from the unnatural inhibition and confinement of the former poem to the authorization of the child and the speaker as active agents with the power to name and interact with a unified and benevolent natural environment, as described in the latter poem.

If "Clocks" can be read as a revisioning of the space created in "The Sundial," empowering the speaker in the process, then the concluding long poem "Cofiant" serves as a similar revisioning of Clarke's previous long poem, "Letter from a Far Country." "Cofiant" is as much a statement about what it means to be a woman of Welsh heritage as "Letter from a Far Country," but "Cofiant" illustrates a radical new approach in Clarke's poetry. Instead of generalizing her experience by writing in the voice of "any woman" (Schmidt), as she did in trying to convey the frustrations of Welsh rural women in "Letter from a Far Country", in "Cofiant" Clarke openly writes her own history and the history of her family, complete with names, dates and quotations. Instead of the simple organization and traditional use of language and form that are designed to maximize the accessibility of "Letter" in an oral presentation, "Cofiant" offers a barrage of names and dates, and a complex, fragmented form, which on the surface, would tend to make it a less accessible poem. It is important to note, however, that there is no

expression of anxiety about the possibility of effecting communication in "Cofiant" that would correspond with the anxiety expressed in the fragmented and interrupted ending of "Letter."

The essential alteration in poetic method revealed by the contrast between the two poems can be better explained with reference to Linda Hutcheon's description of postmodern developments in historical narrative. This passage provides a fine analogy to the artistic transition between the "totalizing and universalizing impulses" of "Letter from a Far Country" and the "particularizing and contextualizing" of "Cofiant:"

While both historians and novelists . . . have a strong tradition of trying to erase textual elements which would 'situate' them in their texts, postmodernism refuses such an obfuscation of the context of its enunciation. The particularizing and contextualizing that characterize the postmodern focus are, of course, direct responses to those strong (and very common) totalizing and universalizing impulses. But the resulting postmodern relativity and provisionality are not causes for despair; they are to be acknowledged as perhaps the very conditions of historical knowledge. (67)

The final implication here that the specificity of the

postmodern approach creates a more positive and constructive approach to the reconstruction of history than the traditional "erasure" of textual elements that would tend to situate the author within the text, is borne out in "Cofiant," which is a more confident and thematically comprehensive poem for its detailed engagement with historical material.

Clarke's introduction to "Cofiant" in Letting in the Rumour announces her use of historic material, and makes it quite plain that the material concerns her own family:

Cofiant means biography. . . In this poem I refer to Cofiant a Pregethau y Parch. Thomas Williams, Llangynog. It was written by his eldest son, and the eldest of his nineteen children, my father's namesake, John Penri Williams and was printed in 1887. Thomas Williams was my great-great-grandfather.

Actually, Clarke's first use of this narrative of her paternal genealogy, in an Anglo-Welsh Review editorial,¹⁹ goes to considerable lengths to avoid claiming this history as a personal one. It is introduced as a "history of small importance, chosen because it is known, told because it is typical," and its language conforms to the "universalizing and totalizing" paradigm that Hutcheon describes postmodernism as reacting against. In the context of the editorial, this "typical" story is appropriated to the cause

of devolution, and Clarke offers the story as proof that there is a cultural identity tied to the geographical space which defines Wales:

A map traced with the movements of just one family across three centuries covers the whole of Wales with lines like marks on the snowbound hills, yet just as strangely the tracks of this branch-line stay within the country, as if Offa's dyke were a sea and there were no traversing it.

In "Cofiant" Clarke claims this family history as her own, and takes its relevance as an argument for Welsh nationalism one step further, by inscribing her own personal relationship to the spaces inhabited by her ancestors, and by confronting the problem of her relationship as a Welsh woman to a family lineage described exclusively in terms of the Welsh male line.

Although "Cofiant" is defined as a poem, if only for its inclusion in a collection of poetry, Clarke employs a clear and consistent methodology in her presentation of history. The opening stanzas establish the hypothesis that identity is largely determined by the physical spaces that one inhabits:

Houses we've lived in
inhabit us
and history's restless
in the rooms of the mind. . . .

How can you leave a house?
 Do they know, who live there,
 how I tread the loose tile in the hall
 feel for the light the wrong side of the door
 add my prints to their prints to my old prints
 on the finger-plate?
 How at this very second,
 I am crossing the room?

A catalogue of places where Clarke and her ancestors have lived begins the investigation of the past, and the organization of the poem offers a careful system for engaging with history, or, to continue the original terminology, for proving the hypothesis.

The reconstruction of the past begins with evidence that can be elaborated with the aid of the speaker's memory. The speaker both admits the faultiness of her own memory and implies that she can intuitively transcend the barriers of possible historic knowledge through her strong feeling that she must have somehow attended the wedding of her parents, which she sees represented in an old photograph: "a year before my birth / Wasn't I there in the June heat?" Poems about the speaker's father, paternal aunt, grandfather and grandmother follow; and in each case, the speaker juxtaposes memory with landscape in an attempt to reconstruct something essential about the person concerned, as well as following each "historical" poem with a poem about the speaker's own

experience with the place.

In "Wil Williams (1861-1910)" in particular, the element of memory is especially remote, being only the recollection of a daughter's comment on revisiting the home of Wil Williams: "How sad, she said, / to see my mother's house so shabby." Instead of presenting a reconstruction of Wil Williams, the poem therefore becomes an acknowledgement of the fact that much of the past, and the history of women and the home spaces in particular, is lost beyond all recovery:

Down through the tunnels along the line
they run away from us,
the rooms, the women who tended them
the dressers of glinting jugs
the lines of sweet washing between trees.

This acknowledgement establishes a context for the feminist arguments of "Letter from a Far Country" within the history of the male line in "Cofiant," but the context of investigating the male line definitely subordinates any feminist context within the poem.

When the retreat into the past goes beyond even secondhand connections to living memory, the fragments of biography and family history find their sources in documentary evidence. This evidence is presented verbatim, through secondary references, or, again, through the speaker's present experience of landscapes that were

significant to her family history. "Thomas Williams (1800-1885)" alludes to letters which presumably exist in the cofiant that Clarke refers to in her introduction to the poem, and such a letter is reproduced within the text of the poem. Present tense poetic fragments describe the speaker's visits to the places where Thomas Williams was baptized, and where his wife Jennet "stood, to marry or mourn / three husbands, or see her son baptized."

By this point in the poem, several omissions in method become evident, that would tend to mark the failure of "Cofiant" as a strictly historical project. From the frequent references to aunts, daughters, wives and cousins, it becomes clear that the progression of poetic fragments does not strictly follow the men of the genealogy backwards in a direct line. The speaker does not recognize or apologize for this lack of regularity within the poem, however, and neither does she question the truth of the documentary evidence.

In a discussion of the "Cofiant" project in the Butler interview, Clarke both admits the probability of self-aggrandizement on the part of an ancestor who wanted to believe that "this little tribe of farmers was descended from the Welsh princes" and dismisses this as a possible problem for her poetry:

Whether they were or weren't is irrelevant,
because it contains in any case, a marvellous

image of what has happened to Wales. The genealogy is a thing of great beauty, there are marvellous names. . . . Suddenly, in 1725 an English surname is imposed. (197)

Paradoxically, the possible falsification of family history at some point in the past makes the genealogy more authentic in terms of its representation of a type of Welshness and the Welsh family, without the poet herself having to alter the historical record in order to create such a type. The "imposition" of an English name on the Welsh lineage also represents an intrinsic part of the Welsh identity, rather than the loss or contamination of that identity. By similar reasoning, the inevitable failure of documentary evidence as the genealogy progresses backwards in time becomes a kind of affirmation of Welshness as well through the final poetic fragment that defines the landscape of Wales itself as a text being worn away and reconstructed by the action of the sea:

The sea wastes words
 where the tide's fretwork
 has worn half the hill-fort away

 it drafts and re-drafts the coast
 and is never done
 writing at the edge

The poem concludes with a reproduction of the Williams

genealogy, a document that represents the essence of patriarchy through its exclusive authorization of the firstborn son for thirty generations. In a graphic example of the feminist impulse to write women into sexist representations of history, Clarke subverts the impact of this document by putting herself at the top of the list: "Daughter of Penri Williams, wireless engineer of Carmarthenshire and Ceinwen Evans of Denbighshire." This act comes close to articulating an assumption that underlies the entire poem; that, since the family history begins and ends with the speaker herself, she is the reason for this history, and the ultimate purpose of the generations that have preceded her has been the production of herself. While this assertion may seem self-evident, in the context of "Cofiant," and Gillian Clarke's poetry as a whole, such a conclusion represents a statement of pride and of the poet's willingness to declare herself as "one of the grown-ups" (Butler 196), despite the twin setbacks of being born a woman, and Welsh, in a society that favours male Englishmen.

Although the tone of "Cofiant" superficially reflects a tone of an abstract historical investigation, this pretence breaks down as the poem ends, since it is clear that the poet is finding exactly what she set out to find in the first place. In the case of a traditional historical treatise this conclusion would represent a probable failure of historiographic method, just as in the case of a

traditional artistic reproduction of a family history, this conclusion would represent a failure to dig up pleasantly shocking family skeletons, and in the case of a traditional feminist investigation of history, this conclusion would represent a failure to reject the destructively stifling limits of patriarchal history in favour of an entirely woman-centred reconstruction of events. Although Clarke does not assume the rigorous ironic interrogation of all received positions that most essentially characterizes postmodernism, insofar as postmodernism can be defined as the subversion of traditional genres and readers' expectations of them, "Cofiant" is definitely a postmodern work.

Despite the pervasive warnings and the ever-present danger of a world-wide systemic collapse, whether due to unresolved political unrest, or the unresolved ironies inherent in received positions, the world view that Gillian Clarke creates in Letting in the Rumour is more complete and affirmative than that presented in either of her previous volumes of poetry. With the opening lyrics of Letting in the Rumour, the poet positions herself at the physical and political centre of her universe in the present, and with the closing long poem, the poet positions herself temporally as the triumphant end product of a long line of Welsh ancestors. Clarke then turns this virtual excess of self-empowerment to the purpose of re-presenting the unique brand

of feminist patriotism that she originally developed in The Sundial and Letter from a Far Country. Whether or not Clarke chooses to pursue the postmodern directions indicated in the break with previous forms in "Cofiant," it seems only reasonable to expect that the promotion of a Welsh national identity that has remained Clarke's constant goal, will continue to figure prominently in her work in the future.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the terms "narrative" and "space," taken separately and together, represent both theme and method in the poetry of Gillian Clarke. Although Clarke openly reconstructs the circumstances of her own life's narrative in fragments throughout her poetry and editorials, the examination of the subjective lyrical moment is definitely not her most important goal. Her writing primarily works to define her identity as a poet in relation to the rest of the world. Therefore, the most important kind of space in Clarke's poetry is the space between subject and object, whether the relationship involved be that of mother and child, woman and nature, woman and history, poet and community, or woman and man, in the context of a male-dominated society. In most of her poems, the attempt to bridge the distance between self and other succeeds to some degree, but where it fails, the failure tends to undermine the moments of success. Nevertheless, the goal of defining the values of the community does not allow for the admission of failure, nor for the cessation of the all-important quest for relationship and contact.

In terms of form, her three original poetic collections exhibit a general progress towards open narrativity. The Sundial begins with a collection of interrelated lyrics that create and share the same space, Letter from a Far Country provides an optimistic context and the implication of

closure for the radio poem "Letter from a Far Country," and Letting in the Rumour re-examines the themes of the earlier volumes and concludes with "Cofiant," which carefully investigates a historical narrative, even if it is not a narrative itself. Along the way, with the increasing use of particularized language, and the frequent returns to the same spaces from slightly different perspectives that culminate in the final postmodern direction of "Cofiant," there occurs "an opening up of poetry to material once excluded from the genre as impure: things political, ethical, historical, philosophical" (Hutcheon 64).

If we continue to read this progress towards narrativity according to Linda Hutcheon's program for attitudes towards narrative in postmodern art, then Gillian Clarke manages to have the best of both worlds in terms of "the urge to foreground, by means of contradiction, the paradox of the desire for and the suspicion of narrative mastery--and master narratives" (64). The growing tendency towards narrative throughout Clarke's poetic collections satisfies the "desire" while the avoidance of sentences, paragraphs, and any conventional narrative links reassures the "suspicion." With "Cofiant," however, Clarke achieves the essential postmodern contradiction by approaching the personal narrative of her own family history through a series of poetic fragments that attempt to transcend narrative by linking present and past through descriptions

of significant landscapes. In "Cofiant," Clarke creates a new form for the expression of her goals as a Welsh poet, in an effort to attain a perfect balance of extended meaning through implied narrative, and essential subjective truth through the form of lyric poetry.

NOTES

¹Twenty of the poems in The Sundial are reprinted from the 1971 Triskel Poets Five pamphlet Snow on the Mountain. The poems are ordered differently and alternated with newer poems in The Sundial, although there is a stronger concentration of reprinted poems in the first third of the book.

²The unspoken guilt that these good resolutions imply is informed by Clarke's own position as an English-speaking child of Welsh-speaking parents, and by the ongoing debate between Welsh versus Anglo-Welsh writers that permeates modern Welsh literary history and criticism, over the question of whether it is valid to write a national Welsh literature in the language of the English oppressors. Anxiety over this question is indicated specifically in Sam Adams's brief biographical "Introduction" to Clarke's Snow on the Mountain, where he notes that "Though she does not speak Welsh, she is very conscious of her Welshness and has begun learning the language"(1). This conflict continues as a vital theme in Clarke's writing throughout her career.

³See Revelation, chapter 6.

⁴Here is the summary of the achievements of Dafydd ap Gwilym, who flourished in the mid-fourteenth century (1320-

70), as given by The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales:

The most distinguished of medieval Welsh poets and perhaps the greatest Welsh poet of all time. During the Century of political and social turmoil which followed the loss of independence he brought innovations to the language, subject-matter and metrical techniques of poetry which gave a new dimension to the poetic art in Wales. He accomplished a bold synthesis by integrating elements from the European concepts of Courtly Love into the bardic tradition, thus drawing Welsh poetry, albeit briefly, into the mainstream of European literature.

See Helen Fulton's Dafydd ap Gwilym and the European Context for more discussion of European influences.

⁵The conventional system of reference numbers the main body of Dafydd ap Gwilym's poems from 1 through 154. I have used the translation by Richard Morgan Loomis as the basis for my reading in this paper.

⁶Here follows Loomis's translation of #119:

Shining girl of gifted nature,
Dyddgu with the black smooth hair
Inviting you (the melancholy hospitality of hidden

passion)

To Manafan meadow am I.

No meagre invitation suits you
 It won't be a glutton's invitation to a hut.
 Not the spread of a reaper's pay,
 Not of corn, green, bright mixed corn,
 Not part of a farmer's dinner.
 Not like a Shrove Tuesday meat-bound,
 Not an Englishman's visit with his friend,
 Not the feast of a villein's son's weapon of beard.

I don't promise, a good conclusion,
 My gold one anything but a nightingale and mead;
 A gray-backed nightingale of light cry
 And a stout thrush of cheerful language;
 A frowning thicket and a room
 Of fresh birches, was there a better house:
 While we're out under the leaves,
 Our fine, strong birches will sustain us.
 A loft for the birds to play,
 A gentle grove, there's the way it is.
 Nine trees of beautiful countenance
 Are there of trees altogether;
 Below, a round circle;
 Above, a blue belfry.

Under them, a desirable home,
Fresh clover, Heaven's manna.

A place for two, crowds worry them
Or three for the space of the hour.
Where roebucks resort, the breed raised on oats,
Where a bird sings, it's a refined place.
Where blackbirds' lodgings are thick,
Where trees are bright, where hawks are nursed,
A place of new, good wood-building.
A place of frequent passion, a place of heaven here.
Place of a verdant water, a cool smokeless place.
A place where (a wild land)
A flour-beggar or a long-legged cheese-beggar is not
known.

There tonight, colour of wave,
Go we two, my lovely girl,
Go if we go, pale, glad face,
My girl, of eye of bright ember.

⁷It is worth noting that this is an established pattern of subversion, as early as the later Middle Ages. Female narrators use the device of introducing changing seasons and bad weather into the Garden of Love in the anonymous fifteenth century English romances, The Floure and the Leaf

and The Assembly of Ladies, in order to undermine the conventions of the genre.

⁸As Clarke herself does through her role as editor of the Anglo-Welsh Review.

⁹The colonial literature in Wales has been called "a perversion of normality...a grunt or a cry or an odour rising from a cultural wound of a special kind." Bobi Jones, quoted in Tony Bianchi, "R. S. Thomas and his Readers," 74-- this article offers a good survey of the history of tensions between Welsh writers writing in English and in Welsh.

¹⁰The essays in John Drakakis's British Radio Drama (1982) provide an invaluable historical survey of their subject, but tend to avoid theoretical leaps.

¹¹See David Wade's "British radio drama since 1960" for an account of the evolution of the prestige of writing for radio in Britain.

¹²According to the Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales, cynghanedd is

an ancient and intricate system of sound-chiming within a line of verse . . . [which] involved the

serial repetition of consonants in a precise relationship to the main accents in a line, together with the use of internal rhymes.

¹³This article was later revised and published in British Radio Drama in 1982, under the title "The radio road to Llareggub."

¹⁴In the collection, Letter from a Far Country.

¹⁵The 1985 recording also contains this ending.

¹⁶Clarke affirms this attitude in the Michael Schmidt interview recorded on the 1985 tape of her Selected Poems.

¹⁷Assuming that Clarke herself (b.1937) is the baby in the first picture, the image of her as a toddler with her father in the garden would have neatly coincided with the spring of aggression leading up to the outbreak of World War II in Europe, just as the image of the speaker's mother in a summer field with her brothers could occur at the same time as the outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914.

Whether or not this speculation is significant, there has certainly never been a shortage of news reports of violence in the twentieth century.

¹⁸See Chapter Two of this thesis.

¹⁹From the Anglo-Welsh Review 64, 1979, 1-5:

First, though, here is a history of small importance, chosen because it is known, told because it is typical. In 1650 in Llanbedrog in Caernarfonshire there lived a farmer called William Jones. He had several children, among them two sons. One was clever and was sent to an uncle for care and education. His name was Rowland Jones. He became a lawyer, a linguist, and went to London. Another son took his father's Christian name for surname and was known as Williams Williams, farmer. The line continued, generations of Williams farming in Lleyrn, moving no further from home than a few miles. But in the nineteenth century Thomas Williams, born in Lleyrn, became a Welsh Baptist Minister, married twice, fathered seventeen children, and took his line to the South, to LLangynog in Carmarthenshire. The railways had come and his many children found work as farmers, railwaymen and one was a Minister. By 1934, the son of Wil Williams, a railwayman was moving East to Cardiff, where the British Broadcasting Company was opening

its first studio in Wales, and new jobs glittered. His mother tongue, Welsh, was that of all his forefathers. The geography of the landscape in which they lived made sure of it. Their work also had protected the language and held them to the land. The first in the line to move from LLeyn was the Minister, but Welsh was the medium of his work and Carmarthenshire was as Welsh as LLeyn. Even the last Williams of the male line used Welsh as the language of his life and of his working day. But for his children, born in Cardiff in the Second World War, the mother tongue was English. Their mother, was from a Welsh-speaking Denbighshire family, all farmers, all, by now, turning to English as the forces of North-East Wales give way to the weakness of its border position. (1-2)

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