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Self And Other In Dylan Thomas's And W.H. Auden's Poetry

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Abstract

This article presents a reading of two twentieth century poems, namely "This Bread I Break" and "Love in the Asylum" by Thomas and "O What is that Sound" and "September 1, 1939" by Auden through Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy focusing on the notion of the face which revolves around ethical awareness and sensibility. These works offer similar images of the self before the encounter and the other's face effect on the subject; however, the speakers come out of the encounter differently: in "This Bread I Break", parallels are drawn between the self and the other's difference (a lack of sameness); in "Love in the Asylum", the speaker simply comes out of the encounter with the other revealing a poverty represented as a woman; in "O What is That Sound", a self/other relationship is based not on respect and trust but on betrayal and dominance; in "September 1, 1939", the poet believes that the absence of love between the self and the other has consequences

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as severe as death. We conclude that though the self/other's relation and the encounters with the face are unfriendly in Thomas' poems, they do not impart the antagonism found in Auden's poems.

Keywords: Dylan Thomas, W.H. Auden, Emanuel Levinas, ethics, the self, the other.

I. Introduction

Dylan Thomas's understanding of the concept of the other was based on personal experiences: he was a Welsh poet living and writing in British society. It seems that until the 50s, no research had focused on the life and works of Thomas. John Ackerman in his renowned Dylan Thomas Companion (itself not published until 1991) writes that in 1953 – a time when he himself was attempting to understand Thomas' poems from his copy of Collected Poems (and the news of the poet's death arrived) – he was the first to "write a thesis on the life and work of Dylan Thomas".[4] Thomas's pantheism, for example, was said to be inspired by his Welsh roots, as he wrote on the lyrical intimations of mortality and immortality, he realized that his poetic inspiration came from Wales.

Naturally, as would be expected, Thomas felt the alienation of being a Welshman among Englishmen. He referred to himself as "unnational." The words he used clarified his status as other – he wrote that he should live in a leper house. He wrote sarcastically that he should wear "red flannel drawers, a tall witch's hat, and a coracle tiepin".[5] Thomas defended himself and his people against the many attacks he experienced among the well-known verbal assaults by Caradoc Evans, who called Welshmen narrow-minded hypocrites. In response, Thomas said: "We are not hypocrites. We are not narrow-minded. We'll show him. I refuse to have his portrait hung in our gallery".[6]

W.H. Auden was, in his own right, avant-garde as well. It is not abrupt that readers pick out themes such as otherness and face-to-face encounters. Auden's plays, for example, were prime examples of breaking away from tradition. His plays went "against bourgeois realism, using notions of charade, tragedy and

[4] John Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion: Life*, *Poetry and Prose*, London, Macmillan, 1991: pp. xiii.
[5] Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion : p. 21.
[6] Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion : p. 22.

melodrama".[7] Thomas' literary works included mockery and imitation of other elements of plays by other playwrights. His comedies also had political elements.

Despite being crowned poet laureate, Auden "did not fit" as Geoffrey Grigson put it. Grigson had quite severe impression of Auden, and he did not shy away from expressing it. He once wrote "Auden is a monster…but he is an able monster…by definition extremely difficult to measure or confine".[8]

Auden's portrayal as an other or at least one who has deep understanding of the other and face-to-face encounters is especially appropriate considering he is the one classic poet that both the British and the Americans want to claim as their own. That he would choose to be the other is an interesting facet of Auden's life, one that has unquestionably made its way into his work. In his life, too, Auden was no stranger to the notion of the other or otherness. Reportedly, his decision was influenced by the creative inhibition that English writers and poets faced. His grandfathers on both sides were clergymen, and in his poems he mentioned religious elements quite a lot. This section of his writings was often met with mistrust or a minimization by his readers. Auden believed strongly in gratitude and even though most of his life was unhappy he did not lean towards pitying himself.

Linking Auden to Thomas, the former was one of the first modern poets of the 20th century. This fact was only realized and acknowledged after his death. He wrote a very large number of poems on a variety of subjects: "by his death he had published four hundred poems, two of which were as long as individual books" (Smith 20). While the latter's original tendencies made it hard to put his work into any one category, "his poetry was rich in meaning, but the illogical and revolutionary syntax made it hard for readers to comprehend his poetry".[9]

Both poets wrote on different themes, with some overlapping subjects. Auden preferred to write poems on love, politics and society, religion (especially morality), and he wrote them in the context of man's relationship with nature and this world. Thomas' main themes were initially drawn upon his career,

[7] Stan Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006: pp. 5.
[8] Smith, The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden : p. 11.
[9] Ackerman, A Dylan Thomas Companion : p. 35.

and he returned to them towards the end of his career: the unity of time, the connection between creative and destructive powers of nature, and how all living beings are part of one another.

According to Levinas, encounters with the other are not neutral or objective. Instead, they are marked by a sense of ethical obligation and responsibility. The presence of the other challenges our sense of self-sufficiency and forces us to acknowledge the vulnerability and dependence of others. Levinas believed that ethical responsibility arises out of the reader's encounter with the other. When the reader encounters the other, it is called upon to recognize the other's unique identity and respect its autonomy. We are responsible for the well-being of the other and must work to promote its flourishing, even at the expense of our own desires and interests. The self, for Levinas, is actually powerful because s/he has the power to kill the other. In addition, Levinas calls the other "orphan" and "destitute".[10]

In the sections that follow, this article will aim to point out one similarity between the two poets that has often been overlooked. This is their interest in encounters and the face, indirect themes of the self and the other, regardless of whether these roles are played by humans or nature, or inanimate objects or even feelings and places. In addition, both poets foreground their subjects – no matter which ones – in the more major discussion of ethics. This shows itself in their poems, especially the ones selected for the discussion.

Thomas' "This Bread I Break" and "Love in the Asylum" are poems on the subjects of morals, personal privacy and independence, tyranny and oppression, and loving a mentally ill person. It is through these subjects that the poet touches on themes of recognizing the other without acknowledging the differences between the self and the other, or pretending that there is sameness in both. Levinas believed that the self is inherently egocentric and oriented towards its own interests and desires. This self-centeredness can lead to a kind of blindness or indifference towards the other, which Levinas saw as a fundamental problem in modern society. He argued that we need to recognize our ethical responsibility towards the other in order

[10] Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000: pp. 54

to overcome this indifference and cultivate a more just and compassionate world.

Auden's poems are more obviously suited to Levinas' ideas of self, other and face-to-face encounters. Auden writes about love and loyalty but only as a backdrop to his more important themes: war and politics, which foreground the majority of his poems. "O What is That Sound," and "September 1, 1939" have evident or underlying themes of war. The idea of face-to-face encounters is dominant in his poetry: soldiers, leaders and citizens all face their others, and the result is mostly a violent clash.

Levinas's theory of face-to-face encounter and his emphasis on responsibility of the self towards the other can be identified through parallels as a continuous theme in the poetry of the two poets. Thomas may focus on the more imperious subjects of creation and destruction, and Auden's subject matter may mostly be everyday concerns, like politics and society, and feelings like love, but upon analysis and application of Levinas's ethical ideas, it is suggested that a common strain can be discovered. This is precisely the point that the following section aims to focus on.

II. Self, Other and Face in the Stylistics and Thematics of Dylan Thomas' Poems

"This Bread I Break"

"This Bread I Break" was first published in a collection of poems called Twenty-five Poems in 1936. This selection of poetry was known for Thomas' inner philosophical point of view which he believed in, and contemplative writing at a time he was shifting away from believing in conventional Christianity. The poem, therefore, has clear inferences to Christianity and religions of Christian basis in general. In fact, the poem, albeit short (only three stanzas of five lines each), has several distinct perspectives to be considered.

Thematically read, the first view is the simplest one, taking Thomas' words at face value. At its most basic level it can be said to be about man eating and drinking from nature by spoiling and destroying it. In the first two stanzas the speaker, also the voice of this poem, refers to himself as I. The 'I' of this poem is the one that eats the bread and drinks the wine and oat, grape for which man broke, pulled and knocked down.

This flesh you break, this blood you let

Make desolation in the vein,

Were oat and grape

My wine you drink, my bread you snap… [11]

In the third part, however, we see a sudden shift in tone. The speaker of the poem is now referring to the reader, addressing him rather directly as "you." The breaker of the bread and drinker of the wine now shifts towards the reader. "This flesh bread you break" is how the last stanza starts (Thomas and Goodby 104, line 1).[12]

This version of analyzing the poem calls the reader's attention to using and taking advantage of nature and its crops, without respecting or even giving a second thought to it. The poet takes care to express and point out how happy – "merry," "joy"[13] – these byproducts of nature were before they were inconsiderately torn down by man for his own use. Levinas's philosophy emphasizes the ethical significance of recognizing the otherness of the other person, who is irreducible to any conceptual or theoretical categories. For Levinas, the other person is not an object to be understood or analyzed but a presence that exceeds any grasp or comprehension. This recognition of the otherness of the other person entails a responsibility for the other, a duty to respond to their needs and suffering. These lines can be seen as expressing the alterity of nature, which resists our attempts to control and exploit it. The image of "Laid the crops low, broke the grape's joy" suggests a violent intervention in the natural world, where human beings impose their will on the plants and animals. The phrase "broke the grape's joy" emphasizes the suffering and loss that result from this intervention, as the natural vitality and beauty of the grape are destroyed.

The second perspective from which the poem can be read is the Christian one. Using this spiritual and religious view, the poem reminds its readers of Christ's last supper where he reminds his disciples to follow his path towards salvation. He reminded them that the bread and wine (mentioned clearly in the poem) they were eating and drinking would become a part of their bodies.

[11] Dylan Thomas, "This Bread I Break", in: John Goodbye (ed.), *Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The Centenary Edition*, London, Orion Publishing Co, 2014: pp. 103-104, l. 10-15.
[12] Dylan Thomas, "This Bread I Break" : p. 103, l. 1.
[13] Dylan Thomas, "This Bread I Break" : p. 104, l. 5-9.

In this reading, Christ is the self and the disciples (or us, seen a bit more generally) are the other. This sense is instilled by the fact that the voice of the poem is Christ's, thus centering it as the self. Again, the treatment of the other by the self is a destructive experience: the disciples (Judas, more specifically) betrayed Jesus Christ and this betrayal led to his death. Christ's teachings of honesty and loyalty were also not upheld, thus making the self and the other at odds with each other.

A third and final standpoint from which to view the roles of the self and the other, and the face-to-face encounter, is the relationship between poet and reader. In this case, the bread and the wine can be seen as metaphors for artistic and intellectual property (the poem) that the poet has written and we as readers are consuming or enjoying. Again, the parallel can be drawn between the self and the other's difference (a lack of sameness), which is obvious from the fact that one is cast in the role of mere reader while the other one (the poet) has the privileged position of the creator. The face-to-face encounter in this case is the reading.

This wine upon a foreign tree

Plunged in its fruit;

Man in the day or wind at night

……..

Man broke the sun, pulled the wind down.

This flesh you break, this blood you let

Make desolation in the vein, …[14]

Stylistically, many features of this poem stand out. One is the frequent usage of monosyllables. Almost all of the poem's main words are monosyllabic: even the title comprises of all monosyllabic words: "This Bread I Break". The poem is full of monosyllabic words: 'tree', 'man', 'day', 'night', 'wind', 'broke', 'flesh', 'sun', 'vein' (Thomas 103-104), which lends a curt, dichotomist tone to the poem, much like the contrast between the self and the other. The diction of "This Bread I Break" is also notable, particularly in its simplicity. The words are basic and simple even for a child. They talk of everyday things like bread and wine, grapes and the sun. The diction and vocabulary used are

[14] Dylan Thomas, "This Bread I Break" : p. 103-104, l. 2-12.

complex or even one level more difficult than the simple words which comprise almost the entire poem. These include ‘plunged’ ‘desolation’ and ‘sensual’ (lines 3, 12, 14). The poem’s impact is doubled due to this simplicity.

The symbolism of this poem is more challenging to decipher. The bread and wine could be literally items of consumption. Or they could be stand-ins for the salvation path of Christ (in the religious interpretation of the poem) or even the poem itself – the artistic expression of the poet. In addition, the diction pointing to the imagery is harsh – ‘knocked’, ‘plunged’, ‘broke’, ‘pulled’, ‘snap’. It suggests a mistreatment, a misuse and ruthless taking advantage, reminiscent of how history has seen the other treated.

The vivid images and tendency to picturize while reading the poem is also part of the strong, lasting effect it has on the readers. One reason for this on the syntactical level is the parallelism in the same grammatical synonyms. Parallelism is to demonstrate an equality of importance by using grammatical form. Examples of this in the poem include ‘Man in the day or wind at night’ (line 4), ‘laid the crops low, broke the grape’s joy’ (line 5), ‘This flesh you break, this blood you let’ (line 11), and ‘My wine you drink, my bread you snap’ (line 15).

This parallel, at face value, can be drawn between the same respect and responsibility felt by the self towards the other – regardless of whether the other is mother nature, Jesus Christ or the poet’s artistic endeavor. The elements of this poem’s theme, context and voice therefore comment on the relationship between the self and the other, as well as the morals and ethics of treating each other.

"Love in the Asylum"

“Love in the Asylum” is one of Thomas’ more obscure, abstract poems. The sentence structure is difficult to understand – sometimes it is not even the word structure of English language. An example of this is in lines 1 and 2:

A stranger has come

To share my room in the house not right in the head

A girl mad as birds…[15]

It would appear at first glance that the thing not right in the head is the house, because it follows from that part of the sentence. However, upon close examination it becomes clear that the one not right in the head is the stranger, or the woman. This lends a sort of Welsh musicality to Thomas' poem (the syntax and punctuation found are often Welsh rather than English), but also makes it difficult to comprehend.

She deludes the heaven-proof house with entering clouds

Yet she deludes with walking the nightmarish room,

At large as the dead,

Or rides the imagined oceans of the male wards.

She has come possessed

Who admits the delusive light through the bouncing wall,

Possessed by the skies

She sleeps in the narrow trough yet she walks the dust

Yet raves at her will

On the madhouse boards worn thin by my walking tears…[16]

On the surface, the poem is set in an asylum, a place where mentally ill people are sent to live in isolation. Interestingly, the poem is written in the first person, the narrative voice being "I," which is either the narrator created by Thomas or Thomas himself. In this literal sense, the narrator is living in a madhouse or asylum, and it is here, in the unlikeliest of places, that he finds love. There is a woman in the madhouse whom he is attracted to, and despite her mental problems, the narrator is grateful for the light she has brought into the darkness of the asylum: she has brought "clouds" to the "heaven-proof house," where the floorboards are "work thin" by the narrator's tears (lines 6-15). This reading of the poem is supported by historical events in Thomas' life. Thomas' wife Caitlin was known to have mental illnesses and be short-tempered, but Thomas loved her, even her disorders and madness: as he

[15] Dylan Thomas, "Love in the Asylum", in: John Goodbye (ed.), *Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The Centenary Edition*, London, Orion Publishing Co, 2014: pp. 192-193, l. 1-3.
[16] Thomas, "Love in the Asylum", l. 6-15.

compares it in the last line, madness and disorder are what caused the birth of life on earth (or the setting of fire to the stars).

The notion of the self and the other, too, is best seen through this interpretation: the one where there is a woman in the asylum, who is the object of the men's attraction (line 9), who brings heaven and clouds with her but also is 'not right in the head' (line 2), especially since she is in an asylum with 'bouncing wall' (line 11), which may be a reference to a padded cell. The narrator of this poem, the self, is describing a woman in an asylum whom he loves, the other. According to Levinas, the face-to-face encounter can reveal a poverty. This is certainly the case in "Love in the Asylum," in which meeting the woman who shares his room makes the narrator's life shift drastically. She brings heaven to his nightmarish room (and world), and it is perhaps for this reason that the narrator will love her forever, always remembering the first time he saw her and she brought fire into his life. However, according to Levinas' notion, the human face commands the self into giving and serving the other. In this poem, it seems the opposite is the case: the woman in the madhouse (the stranger, the other) is giving (joy) and serving the Self (the narrator).

That the woman is described as the symbol of the other is clear from the first line of the first stanza, when he calls her a 'stranger' (line 1). Strangers or unfamiliar persons are the ones whom we normally label as the other due to their difference from us; however, in Levinas's philosophy, the other is not simply different; s/he is absolutely other, beyond any logic of sameness and difference. The self (the narrator) considers this woman to be crazy ('mad as birds', line 3) as opposed to how he thinks of himself. While an interesting contradiction that the narrator, himself in an asylum (because the women shares his room, line 2), is calling another person in the same asylum crazy, he makes a distinction between the two women. While the woman is delusional, mad and raving, the narrator himself is sad, depressed and living in a nightmare. In other words, he is not crazy, not like the woman, or the other.

> And taken by light in her arms at long and dear last
>
> I may without fail
>
> Suffer the first vision that set fire to the stars.[17]

[17] Thomas, "Love in the Asylum", l. 16-18.

However, the woman is not just a person the poet's narrator is describing. He loves her, and the depth of his feeling becomes evident at the end of the poem when, in his lover's arms, he says he wishes to "suffer the first vision that set fire to the stars" (line 18), or enjoy the first time he saw her and she made an impression on him as momentous as stars alighting. In this poem, then, the self and the other have had an encounter. The face of the other (the woman) is studied by the self (the narrator), and he has found her to be exotic, crazy, and the bringer of happiness. The question is whether he acknowledges her sameness or not. In one way, it could be said that he takes responsibility for her (in the end of the poem it is as if he swears to love her forever no matter how difficult it may be for him). However, focusing on her illogical actions, like 'bolting' the door with the 'plume' of her hand (line 4), comparing her to the dead (line 8), calling her possessed (line 12) may suggest judgment and not understanding.

A different analysis of this poem since its publication has suggested that the asylum or the madhouse mentioned in the title and referred to in the entire poem is not literal. Perhaps it refers to the world, as the lovers seem crazy in the world because of the depth or the quality of their love. The conflict that the lovers' devotion for each other implicates is demonstrated by the diction: in a poem about love set in an asylum, the poet repeatedly uses the word "delusion" (lines 6, 7, 11).

Another rather self-portrait interpretation of "Love in the Asylum" is that this is a poem about two sides of Thomas himself – and there is actually no literal woman or asylum involved. The love mentioned is self-love, encompassing the two sides of the poet himself: the side of him "not right in the head" (line 2) and the other side that is like the angelic part of the woman described, who "admits the delusive light." However, it is noteworthy that this light is still delusive, which suggests a mistake or a false impression. In this reading of this poem, the asylum is Thomas' own mind which feels like a madhouse to him.

The diction and imagery used in the poem can be considered discriminatory towards the other; whether it is judgmental vocabulary against mentally ill people in particular or this woman in the poem in particular is not clear. Examples of this include words like mad, deludes, comparing her to the dead, calling her possessed, even the last lines, a testament to the narrator's feelings for the woman in the madhouse, and beginning

with “suffer,” as if seeing her was a suffering and has led to that suffering since the first time.

Both Thomas and Auden were poets who lived during the same era and explored similar themes in their work, such as the relationship between the self and the other. However, their attitudes towards this relationship differ in some ways. According to Levinas, the other is always beyond our understanding and cannot be reduced to an object of knowledge or desire. The ethical relation with the other requires a willingness to be responsible for their well-being, even at the expense of one's own desires and interests.[18]

On the one hand, Thomas, in his poetry, often portrays the other as a source of beauty and wonder that inspires the self to greater heights of creativity and self-expression. For example, in his poem "Love in the Asylum," he describes a man’s love experiences as a kind of idyllic paradise in which he is immersed, a world of natural beauty and wonder. However, while Thomas may acknowledge the other's importance in his work, his attitude towards them is often aesthetic and romantic rather than ethical. On the other hand, Auden's poetry often reflects a more ethical and responsible attitude towards the other. In his poem "September 1, 1939," Auden reflects on the horrors of war and the need for human solidarity in the face of suffering. He recognizes the importance of a relationship with the other that goes beyond the aesthetic or romantic, and emphasizes the ethical responsibility to care for the other. This is exemplified in the line, "We must love one another or die."

III. Self, Other and Face in the Stylistics and Thematics of W.H. Auden’s Poems

"O What is That Sound"

Published in 1930s, this poem is a ballad-style poem about a couple looking out of their house window onto what can be assumed as a village. Their main point of interest is the soldiers who are marching, their object (supposedly) unknown. In the poem, one party from the couple talks to the other, but it is not clear which is which. The first voice, which many assume is the

[18] Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*: London, Cambridge University Press, 2002: pp. 76.

women because of the timid nature and need for reassurance at stake, asking the man where the soldiers are going and what they are going to do.

O what is that sound which so thrills the ear

Down in the valley drumming, drumming?

Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,

The soldiers coming…[19]

One by one, the man replies to her, describing their actions and where they are stopping, their scarlet eyes (eyes full of rage, perhaps, denoting the violence of soldiers and wars) and how they are stopping at their neighbors' houses.

As the soldiers in "O What is That Sound" pass by the doctor's, the parson's and the farmer's (who lives near the couple), the couple tries to guess what they are here for. However, the soldiers increase their pace after leaving the farmers', and the poem ends with two significant incidents. Firstly, the soldiers have broken the gate of the couple's house, and it is now clear that they are here for their house. Secondly, one of the spouses leave the other, despite the other pleading loyalty. The reader realizes that they are married only when the partner who has to stay asks, "Were the vows you swore to me deceiving, deceiving?" (line 30).

The themes of this poem are war and violence, but also betrayal and faithfulness. The poem cannot be placed in any time – it is for that reason that its effect is all the more magnified: it could be talking about the World Wars, "Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia, or… Franco's invasion of democratic Spain".[20] However, the poem is dated at a time in October 1832, which means it was written before Hitler took power in Germany. A poem reminiscent of tragic world wars, soldiers and violence lends itself particularly well to ideas of the self and the other. War, after all, is a direct result of the self refusing to acknowledge and take responsibility for the other. The perceived superiority of the self over the other ends in conflict and bloodshed, which are symbols of war.

Down in the valley drumming, drumming?

[19] W.H. Auden, "O What is That Sound", in: Edward Mendelson (ed.), *Selected Poems: New Edition*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979, pp. 26-27 , l. 1-4.
[20] Smith, The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden : p. 11.

Over the distance brightly, brightly?

What are they doing this morning, this morning?

Why are they suddenly wheeling, wheeling?

Haven't they reined their horses, their horses?

Is it the parson, is it, is it?

It must be the farmer so cunning, so cunning?

Were the vows you swore me deceiving, deceiving?

O it's the gate where they're turning, turning;[21]

One of this poem's astounding feats is to write it in ballad-style, a love poem in question-answer format, where the lovers separate (usually the man forsakes the woman, and she pleads him). Even the repetition of words in the second line of each stanza, from the first stanza "Down in the valley drumming, drumming" (line 2) to the last "O it's the gate where they're turning, turning" (line 34) softens the harsh subject of the poem and brings it in line with a ballad, which is domestic and forgiving. The idea of using a ballad to describe war and conflict is an interesting choice. Attempting to write about people who directly faced war and its consequences is, after all, writing about the other, as Auden does not write from first-person experience. To mention only sentiments and not dates or historic events, in other words to make the poem timeless, is in effect an admission of inadequacy and incapability to write about, or understand, the other. This idea is in favor of Auden's thoughtful treatment of the other in his poems.

If "O What is That Sound" were to be taken literally at face value, it is about a couple, h of whom does not stay faithful to the other when the soldiers come to take him/her away. The encounter between the self and the other (or soldiers and citizens, in this case the couple represents the latter) is one full of tense anticipation, fear, and second-guessing. It is not a pleasant encounter. The soldiers, whose target ought to be the guarding of the city and its residents, are instead marching on with red eyes (presumably full of rage) in a threatening manner, their march and their drums striking fear in the hearts of the citizens.

[21] Auden, "O What is That Sound", l. 2-32.

This is a typical situation of self/other encounters: hostility, rage and lack of understanding (or any desire to do so) are prevalent, instead of Levinas' respect and responsibility. The self, represented either by the soldiers of whoever has given their orders, is focused on conquering, winning and dominating. The others are left fearing for their lives and their freedoms. Any kind of desire or endeavor to understand the other person is utterly unethical according to Levinas. So, if there is any lack of understanding, then the agent involved is "other. In addition, Levinas does not try to define the other and make us understand this entity; instead, he tries to "unsay" everything that has been ascribed to the other in the history of philosophy, and replace it with a unique sense of openness and acknowledgement.

Moreover, the self/other relationship may be attributed to the couple speaking to each other throughout the poem.

O what is that sound which so thrills the ear

Down in the valley drumming, drumming?

Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,

The soldiers coming.

O what is that light I see flashing so clear …[22]

The Self/Other relationship may be attributed to the couple speaking to each other throughout the poem. While the gender of either has not been made clear (perhaps Auden wished to convey the universality of such sentiments), one is timid and the other wishing to avoid the truth and burying their head in the sand. In the beginning, the encounter between the self/other (the couple) seems as one and united. The poem shows the appearance of self/other that they are a team until at the end, one of them decides to abandon the other at the crucial time when the soldiers have broken down the gate and are literally at their door. This, too, is a self/other relationship based not on respect and trust, but betrayal and dominance (inferred from one of the spouses needing constant affirmation).

The tone and diction of "O What is That Sound" are deceptive. As mentioned previously, it is in ballad-style, and the use of the word "dear," (lines 3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31), and the question-answer format misleads the reader into believing that it

[22] Auden, "O What is That Sound", l. 1-5.

is a poem about love or domestic life, or the relationship between a couple. In any case, the tone, the diction and the structure give the impression of a romantic poem, including the first stanza “O what is that sound which so thrills the ear” (line 1). The reader quickly realizes that the word “thrill” is used in the content of anticipation – the fearful, and not pleasurable kind. The diction in the middle of the poem, some of which take some effort to be focused on because of the overall contradicting style, betray the poem’s veiled subject. The soldier’s eyes are “scarlet” (line 3) or burning with rage, the sun glints off the soldiers’ weapons menacingly – “flashing” (line 5) despite the initial image of the sun shining brightly.

Another fact that stands out about "O What is That Sound" is that it is in the voice of the other, that is to say, the other is speaking and narrating the poem, and it is their (his or her) perspective that the readers of the poem get to see. Whether the self is the soldiers or their commander, or the second-person spouse being addressed in the poem, poems are normally written in first person and from the perspective of the self. We see their hostility and assumed superiority from their actions and their vocabulary. However, in the case of this poem, we see it from the eyes of the other, hearing them narrate and feeling their fear, and anticipating with them the eventual destruction that will follow.

Other dictions that suggest conflict and describe the kinds of face-to-face encounter taking place include “warning” (line 12), “kneeling” (line 16), “wounded” (line 19), “cunning” (line 26), “running” (line 28), “deceiving” (line 30), “splintered” (line 33), and “burning” (line 36). Taken as the key words for a story, it plays appropriately as the tale between the self and the other, their treatment of each other (one dominating, one fearful; one warning, one kneeling etc.) and the encounters that take place between them. It appears that Auden’s careful dealing with the subject of warfare and battles reveals a lot about the reality of our world when it comes to the face-to-face encounters.

Similarly, the symbols and imageries in the poem point towards domestic life being disrupted and destroyed by war, or the actions of the self. At the beginning of the poem, the imagery remains almost stubbornly domestic: there are mentions of valleys, the sun, the road, and the houses of neighbors in the supposed village: the doctor, the parson and the farmer.

O it's broken the lock and splintered the door,

O it's the gate where they're turning, turning;

Their feet are heavy on the floor

And their eyes are burning.[23]

Until almost the very end, the poem maintains the imagery of normal, everyday life, building up the tensed anticipation towards the final scene when it is suddenly and shockingly revealed that that the house the soldiers are marching towards is the house of the couple speaking in the poem. It is further surprising when the poem turns into a betrayal of love and loyalty, one of the spouses abandoning the other to what one can only assume as their horrific fate at the hands of the soldiers. This foreshadowing is done when the poem's imagery starts to shift, albeit only slightly, until it reaches a peak at the end of the poem: instead of mentioning the village life and nature, in the last stanza we now have "broken the lock," "splintered the door," "feet are heavy on the floor" and "eyes are burning".[24] Overall, this poem demonstrates the way in which encounters with the other can inspire and shape the creative and ethical lives, and the vital role that poetry can play in helping to understand and navigate these complex relationships.

"September 1, 1939"

In the beginning, the speaker of the poem is sitting in a dive. There is a smell of death and fear in the air as it is the day Hitler invaded Poland. The speaker feels his hopes melt away as the "dishonest decade" (line 5) draws to a close with this horrific act of Hitler's which has "darkened the earth" (line 8). However, Levinasian ethics goes beyond logics of difference and celebrates "alterity", The line is a reference to the self oppressing the other, failing to recognize that difference is what unites humans and forcing sameness upon people, like when Hitler wanted to eradicate the Jews so that no Jew was left on earth. He was not only exterminating Jews but differences among humans. This poem has been a symbol of political justice and against indifference in difficult, tragic times in history.

In the second part, the speaker goes into the background of this historic event. Levinas thought people ought to be like

[23] Auden, "O What is That Sound", p. 27, l. 33-36.
[24] Auden, "O What is That Sound", p. 27.

Hitler, that dictators are hostile towards the other instead of taking responsibility and acknowledging their difference and living with the other in harmony. The speaker believes the scholars (historians) will do one day in the future, making a connection of the Germans being capable of going along with Hitler's ideas to Martin Luther King and his transformation of Protestant Christianity, as well as Hitler's own childhood place – "find what occurred at Linz" (line 16) – and how this must have affected his beliefs and actions, and turned him into the horrific dictator he has become today. The speaker offers a simple explanation for this:

I and the public know

What all schoolchildren learn,

Those to whom evil is done

Do evil in return…[25]

This this is one explanation of how dictators like Hitler become who they are: the self is too traumatized to see the other as human, or to acknowledge his responsibility in the case of a face-to-face encounter with the other.

The elderly rubbish they talk

To an apathetic grave;

Analysed all in his book,

The enlightenment driven away,

The habit-forming pain,

Mismanagement and grief:

We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air

Where blind skyscrapers use …[26]

Subsequently the possible justification for atrocious crimes against humanity, according to the speaker, lies in a person's childhood, and also in historical events that keep repeating itself in one way or another. This idea of history repeating itself is referred to in the mention of Thucydides, the

[25] W.H. Auden, "September 1, 1939", in: Edward Mendelson (ed.), *Selected Poems: New Edition*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979, pp. 86-89 , l. 19-22.
[26] Auden, "September 1, 1939, l. 27-35.

ancient Greek historian. Thucydides was exiled from the government of Athens due to a military failure – yet another "other" of history long ago – and the speaker of "September 1, 1939" claims that Thucydides knew, even 2,000 years ago, of the "elderly rubbish" (line 27) that governing ministers and people in power sprout. He is referring to political rhetoric and empty promises made in government at the time of election, when after they are elected these public officials (the self) take advantage of the public (the other) which makes it possible for them to do so because they simply do not care. Governing, then, is full of "mismanagement and grief" (line 32). The speaker alludes to history repeating itself and says that as humans we must suffer all of this once again. This idea of history's repetitive patterns is also seen in the poem's structure itself: all nine stanzas have exactly eleven lines, with repeating consonant sounds in each stanza. This apathy and indifference that lets political leaders use people and their lives for their own advantage is a classic example of self/other encounter. This is apparent in the case of Hitler, who cast Jews as other to the extent that he gave the widespread order to hunt them down and kill them. The speaker comes back to New York and its "blind skyscrapers" (line 35) in America, which sits in its "neutral air" (line 34). This is significant; America had not entered the World War II until the time this poem was written, only getting involved in 1941, which means at the time of writing America was still neutral in the war. Auden links this neutrality to apathy and even jealousy: in his view, people are too jealous to seek justice for others. This, again, is a self/other parallel. Since the self privileges itself over others, considering they are safe from political evil (perhaps because they are not Jews), they do not consider raising their voice for justice for their fellow-man. This is especially poignant in the results of this invasion of Poland: eventually, it overtook all of the world by turning into a World War, so that no one was safe. Rather than being united and using "the strength of the Collective Man" (line 37), humans have chosen diversity and competition against the other which leads to political leaders using this to their advantage and further oppressing the other, a prime example of this being the world watching as Jews were hunted, brought to concentration camps and gassed to death.

Cling to their average day:

The lights must never go out,

The music must always play,

……..

Children afraid of the night

Who have never been happy or good.[27]

The speaker is emphatic that the responsibility of this lies not only with the authoritarian dictators (like Hitler) but with us, who are all responsible for the other: people who "cling to their average day: / The lights must never go out, / The music must always play" (lines 46-48). In reality, readers are children morally lost in the forest, afraid and uncertain like the first line of the poem: "Who have never been happy or good" (line 55).

In this poem, there is another instance of self/other pairing. There are two references to homosexuality, one of which is veiled, in the first stanza, about the gay dive bar the speaker sits in, and although he does not mention this by name, the address is revealing. The second is in stanza six, about the ballet dancer Nijinsky and his lover Diaghilev. The speaker's point is that humans are selfish and want to be loved themselves alone, instead of a common love that can benefit everyone. Since 1939 homosexuality was still a crime punishable by law and led to arrests and fines, and perhaps another other of the poem is homosexuals, as they are othered by the self, or heterosexuals, who are in majority and therefore dominant of all other groups.

All I have is a voice

……..

We must love one another or die.

……

Ironic points of light

Flash out wherever the Just…[28]

In the last two parts, the speaker expresses hope for the situation and for humanity. Anyone who raises a voice, like the speaker, is contributing to change, even if it is one solitary opinion – "All I have is a voice" (line 78). In the last stanza the speaker compares this poem to a flash of light – even if the poems regarding this subject are spread out and scattered, they still function as pinpricks of light that "flash out" with "the Just" or the

[27] Auden, "September 1, 1939, l. 46-55.
[28] Auden, "September 1, 1939, l. 78-93.

ones purporting justice (Auden 88), in the same way that New York's skyscrapers are pinpricks of light that are scattered throughout the city and not uniform, but this still make the New York City skyline.

The eventual message of this poem, however, is unclear. Is Auden encouraging America to go to war, in support of the Polish and against the Germans? We must remember that at the time this poem was written, America was as yet neutral in the World War II that Hitler's invasion of Poland was to cause. The last line of the eighth stanza, which suggests a solution, is "We must love one another or die" (line 88). This is relatively clear; Auden believes in love between the self and the other, and hints that the consequences of not doing so are as severe as death. However, what is interesting is that in a later publication of this same poem, Auden changed this last line to "We must love one another and die" (line 88). The replacing of the word 'or' with 'and' changes the meaning. It is a more pessimistic outlook, suggesting that even if we do as Levinas suggests, take responsibility and acknowledge differences between self and other, what awaits us is certain death in either case. This, then, is the poet's point: since we are to die one day either way, the only thing left is to love one another before we succumb to the universal inevitability of death.

Levinas's philosophy of the other centers around the idea that our encounter with another person generates an ethical obligation towards him/her. The other is someone who is fundamentally different from ourselves, and this difference cannot be reduced to our attempts to comprehend or assimilate the other into our own world. In the context of poetry, Levinas argues that the poet's encounter with the other is a key source of inspiration and creativity. The other disrupts the poet's sense of self and opens up new possibilities for thought and expression.

In the case of the poems "This Bread I Break" and "Love in the Asylum" by Thomas and "O What is that Sound" and "September 1, 1939" by Auden, there are clear connections to Levinas's philosophy of the other as we discussed. All of these poems deal with themes of love, loss, and ethical responsibility towards the other. "This Bread I Break" and "Love in the Asylum" explore the intense emotional connections that can arise between people, even in the face of mental illness or other forms of personal struggle. Similarly, "O What is that Sound" and "September 1, 1939" grapple with the ethical dimensions of

political and social upheaval, and the responsibility that the reader has towards others in times of crisis.

IV. A Comparison of attitudes towards Self/Other between the poems of Dylan Thomas and W.H. Auden

Dylan Thomas and W.H. Auden were both familiar with the concept of the other in their own personal lives. They had experienced being other, not simply as visionary poets who think ahead of their time (although perhaps this was a particularly poignant othering) but in aspects of their private lives. Only seven years apart, the two poets lived during the same period, and had a rivalry that was altogether not unfriendly. Their poetic subjects overlap in some ways; while they had individual subjects they each wrote on – Thomas preferred love, innocence lost and grief, while Auden wrote more politically especially about the horrors of war - their views on grief, death and human predicament were quite similar.

Both poets have the theme of self and other in common throughout their poems. They write of the face frequently, which is a Levinasian thought, often through their poem's narrators or speakers. The poems are full of face encounters with the other. The other sometimes being human and personified human, and sometimes abstract or inanimate like nature or even a facet of human personality. In fact, the reader of the poem and the poet are set in a self/other pairing as in Thomas' "This Bread I Break", where he likens the act of reading of his poem to breaking bread and plucking fruit from a tree. While the themes and subjects are what this study primarily focuses on in analyzing attitudes towards the self/other in selected poems of Thomas and Auden.

Sometimes the self/other pairings are represented in humans and there is no obscurity in it, such as Auden when he writes on war and tyranny. In "O What is That Sound", which is a general war situation not specifying the two sides, he paints a picture of the fear that war brings, with a couple watching from their window as the soldiers approach their house. Both the couple and war/people could be candidates for the self/other pairing in this poem. When writing on Hitler's invasion of Poland in "September 1, 1939" the self is the authority that is waging war (the soldiers, in the former case, and Hitler and his soldiers in the latter), and the other is the people subjected to this war, in the latter case German Jews. Thomas, too, writes of recognizable and

palpable human pairings of self and other sometimes, like “This Bread I Break”, a poem about how an apparently simple hand can be responsible, through a harmless thing as a mere signature, for the death of thousands of people and mass destruction in the lives of many.

There are, however, many instances – both poets were prolific writers – when the subjects of the self, other and their encounter are not personified but rather abstract, requiring more imagination. This is especially true in the case of Thomas’ poetry, which is filled with obscure imagery, Welsh sentence structures and references which are sometimes hard to follow, and a sense of abstractness that gives his poems the otherworldly quality that Thomas is known for. In “This Bread I Break”, for example, his self and other pairing could be interpreted in several different ways depending on how the reader views it: it is the poet (the other) who is talking about his art being consumed by the reader (the self), humans (self) plucking and taking from Mother Nature (other) without giving back or even giving a thought to their actions, or even, as some critics have pointed out in a religious reading, Christ (other) telling his disciples and all people (self) to remember him as they break bread together on their last night with Christ still alive, at the last supper. In Thomas’ “Out of the sighs” and “This side of the truth”, too, are instances of non-human self and other pairings or face encounters. While in “Love in the Asylum”, a particularly abstract poem of Thomas’, the self and other are not clear. It is either to be the speaker (self) and the madwoman he loves (other), or the poem is to be about two sides of the human personality, one an angel and one a demon, or, in another reading, mental illness and our attitude towards it could be cast as the other with humans as the self.

The difference in attitudes towards the self and the other in Thomas’ and Auden’s poetry is also noteworthy. In Auden’s poems, the other and the self frequently have hostile encounters. In "O What is That Sound", for example, the soldiers, who march through the village with eyes “scarlet” with rage (line 3) are clearly not here for a pleasant purpose. Every house they stop at _ the doctor, the parson and the farmer _ is a moment of anticipation for the couple whose dialogue makes up the voice of the poem. They are afraid for their neighbors but also relieved, because it means the soldiers are not here for them. In the end, it turns out the soldiers are headings towards the couple’s house. Once again,

there is a hostile encounter between the couple: one of them (not specified in the poem which one) abandons the other: “No, I promised to love you, dear, / But I must be leaving” (line 31, 32). Presumably the former is a way of saying the reader will never be able to accomplish anything, and the latter may be a threat, although this is unclear. The last poem in this study’s selection, “September 1, 1939” is also on the subject of war, foreshadowing almost certain antagonism in the relationship between self and other. An alternative title to this poem is “September 1, 1939”, or the day on which Hitler invaded Poland. The poem talks about the smell of death and fear in the air, and how Hitler’s horrendous deeds have “darkened the earth” (line 8). Once again, we can observe the unfriendly relationship between self and other, portrayed in this poem by Hitler and the Jews, or even the world.

Attitudes towards the other and Face encounters with the other in Thomas’ poems vary, notably since he does not often write explicitly about war and its horrors, or its consequences on the everyday lives of citizens and the world. His style is more abstract and his themes more obscure than Auden, which would explain why the opposition of self and Other is not immediately apparent. In “This Bread I Break”, which can be interpreted in several different ways, the surface interpretation of misusing and disrespecting nature (the other) is unfriendly, suggesting humans (the self) do not pay heed to “Laid the crops low, broke the grape’s joy” (line 5) when eating bread and drinking wine. However, it seems that the relationship between self and other is reparable, unlike in Auden’s poems of war; at the very least the damage inflicted is not purposeful and malicious, and perhaps sometimes even unavoidable.

V. Concluding Notes

As mentioned previously, both Dylan Thomas and W.H. Auden were not unacquainted with the concept of the other in their own personal lives. Thomas was writing in English but with a Welsh influence. Auden was writing against war and self-diagnosed himself with symptoms of what today we know as Asperger’s syndrome, describing this in his diary which he wrote in code (Smith 12). This has brought the theme of self, other and face encounters between the two into both their work. This article discussed at length the underlying subject of self, other and face encounters in two selected poems of Thomas: "This Bread I Break"

and "Love in the Asylum", and two poems of Auden: "O What is That Sound," and "September 1, 1939".

While in some instances the self and the other are represented by human beings, and the relationship and the characters who play the roles of self and other - as well as the moment when the face encounter takes place _ is evident, in some instances this is not the case. Manifest, human faces of the self/other are more commonly found in Auden's poetry, especially those on the subject of war. In those poems, the self is the ruling authority _ dictators, army commanders, soldiers, Hitler _ and the other is the citizens or Jews that are subject to this dictatorship. In the selected poetry of Auden and Thomas above, there are also many instances of self and other relationships that are obscure and require imagination and interpretation. This is generally more true of the poems of Thomas, where his self varies – it may be humans in general, but it may also be Christ or a lover or a part of the human personality – as does the other: Mother Nature, the other lover or even a different aspect of the same human personality. The face encounters in this case are not as obvious and more open to interpretation.

The attitudes demonstrated in the poems of the two poets _ attitudes of the self towards the other, and representations of instances of face encounters _ differ from each other. This can mainly be attributed to the subjects each poet confronts in his poems: Auden writes explicitly about war and its effects on domestic life, like refugees and betrayal. Thomas' apparent subjects are obscure and often open to interpretation; while he might be referring to the relationship between humans and Mother nature, he may also be making a Christian commentary. The attitude of the self towards the other in Auden's poems can generally be described as openly hostile, with face encounters ending in tragedy or death. The approach of the self and the other relationship, as well as the encounters with the face in Thomas' poems, while unfriendly, do not convey the antagonism that Auden's poems do, and the consequences of Thomas' self/other relationship are reparable and not nearly as disastrous as in Auden's poetry.

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