

A Virtual Dylan Thomas
By
Bernard Mitchell



Pl.2 Rollie McKenna
 Dylan Thomas, New York 1952
 Photograph

Do not go gentle into that good night

Do not go gentle into that good night,
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
 Because their words had forked no lightning they
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
 Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
 And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
 Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray
Do not go gentle into that good night
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Thomas, (1952:116).n

Type the title of Dylan Thomas's Villanelle 'Do not go gentle into that good night' into the Google search engine on the world wide web; tell it you want those exact words, in that particular order, and it will provide 21,000 direct hits. A few of these responses are scholarly in tone, but most come from individuals stirred by the Welsh poet's passionate protest against his dying father's loss of faculties. Often the text of the poem is written out in full as a memorial to a loved one.

Half a century after his death in New York in November 1953 Dylan Thomas still has the power to move. He always had a special ability to engage his readers and listeners directly, while still providing enough interest, through his intricate word play and rhythms, to excite the most severe of poetry critics. So you can find him depicted on Peter Blake's cover of the 1967 Beatles album, *Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and also represented in the austere pages of *The Criterion* magazine. Not many artists were favourites of both John Lennon and the determinedly high-brow T.S. Eliot.

Dylan Thomas's across-the-board appeal encouraged me to write his biography. As the Beatles recognised, he is an important figure in twentieth century culture, bridging the gap between modernism and pop, between the written and spoken word, between individual and performance art, between the academy and the forum.

Lycett (2003:1)

Thomas died in New York on the 9th of November 1953. During his time there he was recording readings of his poetry for the Caedmon Record Company. The first poem he recorded was '*Do not go gentle into that good night*'. Spoken word records were almost unheard of then. The day after he died, a death mask was made by his friend, the sculptor David Slivka. A bronze cast of this is now in the Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea. No moving pictures are known to survive him. Unfortunately the film footage made for the BBC was later destroyed.

The aim of this project is to produce a 3D talking head of Thomas reading the poem, using the death mask, photographs and voice recordings made at the time of his

death. A strikingly vivid, realistic performance made believable through the medium of 3D computer graphics in digital form that has never been seen before, is the culmination of this project. This short pilot video on DVD, approx 1.5 minutes in time will form the platform from which, the first visual talking book can be made.

A preview of the final head will be shown as part of the MA photography exhibitions in Swansea and London in June. This should ensure the maximum international publicity for both Swansea as a cultural centre and South Wales as leaders in new methods of 3D virtual animation.

This final project has developed during the two years of my Masters Degree at the Swansea School of Art. However, this is only the result of a long journey, which began in the 1960's. It is important to survey this in an historic context, to understand the evolution of the Virtual Dylan Thomas.

Before leaving Swansea in 1965 I had discovered through the paintings of Ceri Richards that Dylan Thomas was the catalyst at the centre of a larger group of artists and writers that emerged from Swansea in the 1930's. During my time at the Berkshire College of Art, Reading, the lecturer in portraiture and lighting was Gilbert Adams, who, like his father Marcus was a master in the control and use of light. He had a great influence on my work at this time. In 1966 I returned to Swansea to produce a series of portraits of the group of friends that surrounded Dylan Thomas, including the artists Ceri Richards and Alfred Janes, fellow poet Vernon Watkins and composer Dr Daniel Jones. The only person missing was Dylan himself. In 1996 I wrote an article, 'The Swansea Gang' for *Planet* magazine No.120.



Pl.3 Bernard Mitchell
Ralph the Books, Swansea 1966
Photograph

The accident of your place of birth is a funny thing. Who would think when travelling down the valley through the grimy terraces of Plasmarl and the Hafod, that you would emerge to the freedom of the Bay and the ever-changing sea.

Out of this magical place came a group of people whose creative talents would help change our view of Wales. But the fact that they were all born in Swansea was not the only common factor. It was more importantly the poetry and friendship of Dylan Thomas which acted as a catalyst to their individual work. Perhaps this story should really start at “Ralph the Books”, Alexandra Road. Walking past the newspapers, cigarettes and washing line of dirty mags, I entered an Aladdin’s cave, past the 1/- paper-backs into a darkly lit emporium where on the wall of books above a small sign stating “Welsh” hung a small oil of Dylan. This was my introduction to the man. I never met him in real life. Further down the road, opposite the Library and The School of Art is the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery; never changing, it stood then as a memorial to art, gilded portraits of the dead, and paperweights preserved in aspic. Out of this graveyard burst with all the joy of spring the work of Ceri Richards with his bright and erotic paintings.

Mitchell (1996:21)

These were the wilderness years when little interest was shown in Dylan Thomas and his contemporaries. The photographs lay in a drawer for thirty years.

By 1990 however the tide had turned in Swansea. The Glynn was organising the first Ceri Richards Festival, *Dunvant Blossoms*. The gallery purchased four prints of Richards for the brochure and at last my photograph of Swansea's greatest painter hung on the wall of the now Ceri Richards Gallery.
Mitchell (1996:23)

Seeing his photograph hanging on the wall for the first time was a seminal experience. Ceri Richards had died in 1972. My photograph of the now departed painter, had become a *memento mori* of his life. In his book *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes describes the photograph of his dead mother as a "fugitive testimony" .

There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the face I had loved. And found it.
Barthes (2000:67)

Later in her publication *Death's Witness*, Karen Ingham talks of the photographs of her dead father (whom she had not seen for twenty years), as a dilemma of absence and presence.

Absence and presence; the dilemma that is photography. At the time of his death, I had not seen my father for over 20 years. His was an unexpected death, alone in his home, while his wife vacationed in Egypt's tombs of the dead. The note that informed me of his passing was accompanied by a snapshot, a remembrance of things past. I was not witness to the burial of his physical remains, but by entombing his image in my family album, his metaphysical remains are on eternal display. Like most lives, my father's will be remembered through photographs, a *memento mori* of a life, chemically fixed in eternal limbo through the paradox of photography.
Ingham (2000:5)

The realisation of the importance of recording the living artists and writers of Wales for posterity was a turning point in my career, and in 1996 I left my job as a newspaper photographer to concentrate fulltime on the task. During this time, I constantly reviewed the form and content of the portraits. Changing format and searching for ways of expressing an extra element, an emotional response, were my

objectives. The subjects became statues in their own environment, surrounded by personal objects which overwhelmed the individual.

I gifted the photographs of *The Swansea Gang* to the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, and by 1999 they had purchased some one hundred portraits of artists working in Wales.

Time is of the essence, to put together this jigsaw puzzle – so that in retrospect we may be allowed to look back at the lives of the artists in the context of their working and home environments in Wales.
Mitchell (1999:2)

Historian Peter Lord states in the foreword to the catalogue.

For a comparable observation of intellectual life in Wales we must go back over a century to the work of John Thomas – though Thomas’s tradition of studio portraiture was very different from that of Mitchell, who sees his work as belonging to the documentary tradition of Cartier Bresson.
Mitchell (1999:4)

The exhibition, *Photographs of Artists* opened in July 1999 and included some of the early work. Opening on the same day at the Aberystwyth School of Art Gallery was an exhibition of work by the Austrian photographer Erich Lessing. He, like myself, had spent a lifetime career as a photojournalist, and in 1956 his work changed direction. He had embarked on a series of new images that he describes as “Evocations”: studies of absence and presence. Interior landscapes, portraits of the absent dead, was the theme.

My second photographic life actually began in 1956, on Mozart’s 200th birthday. To mark that occasion, together with the filmer Walther Stoitzner, I developed the idea of depicting Mozart’s life theatrically, but with authentic documents. The aim was to recapture something of the atmosphere of the 18th century. This is how the “Evocations” evolved. I know our conceptions could never completely reproduce what life was really like in earlier centuries but all the same I wanted to penetrate a little into those times and to recreate them as far as possible.
Lessing (1995:101)

In an interview with Lessing, Angelica Baumer observes.

You have a dual approach. On the one hand you already have the “frame” in your mind’s eye. In place of the “real” picture you see a landscape, a sculpture, a picture; on the other, if you have thought up an Evocation you are arranging something or making a still life out of a person who has long since died into whose thought and deeds you nevertheless penetrate, to create a story in which the long-forgotten historical aspect is brought to life again. Lessing (1995:108)



Pl.4 Bernard Mitchell
Dylan's Bedroom, Cwmdonkin Drive, Swansea 2003
 Digital print

At this point I had taken the documentary portrait as far as I could, and saw in Lessing’s work the opportunity to recreate the missing link in the *Swansea Gang*, the poet Dylan Thomas. Six interior and exterior landscapes, each photograph printed digitally with lines of his poetry in his own hand writing were the result. These were

shown at the exhibition, *The Great, The Good and the Dead*, at Swansea University's Ceri Richards Gallery in 2003. Two of these images included the poet's empty bedroom in the house where he was born in Cwmdonkin Drive, Swansea, and his death mask outside the Dylan Thomas Centre, with lines from the poem *Do not go gentle into that good night*. Still unsure of my direction, I decided to take two years out, and study for a Masters Degree at the Swansea School of Art, enrolling in October 2003.

On the first page of my visual diary I wrote this statement.

The reason for doing an MA is to take time out and reassess my work as a portrait photographer, which has evolved from the more formal style of my first college days in the 1960's through to the documentary images of the late 1990's. To take a radical step to start from scratch again and examine new working practices, such as video, 3D scanning and recent developments in virtual reality animation as well as new ways of displaying the work using digital technology. Moving away from the physical representation of the subject, to involve an emotional response, deconstructing the content to involve elements of time and space.
Mitchell (2004- 2005: 2)

This dual approach to the investigation raised the same questions of presence and absence. In the first year, my work concentrated on deconstructing the portrait, looking at the work of Bill Viola and the photographer Robert Adams, for ways of expressing the absence of the subject, and its relationship with the internal and external landscape or environment with our outer and inner selves. This resulted in the 3.5 minute video *The Blue Road*. In his book, *Reasons for Knocking on an Empty House, Writings 1973-1994*, Viola observes.

Apparently exterior, the true extension of any landscape traverses both the exterior and interior of the individual. In short, landscape is the link between our outer and inner selves.
Viola (1995:253)



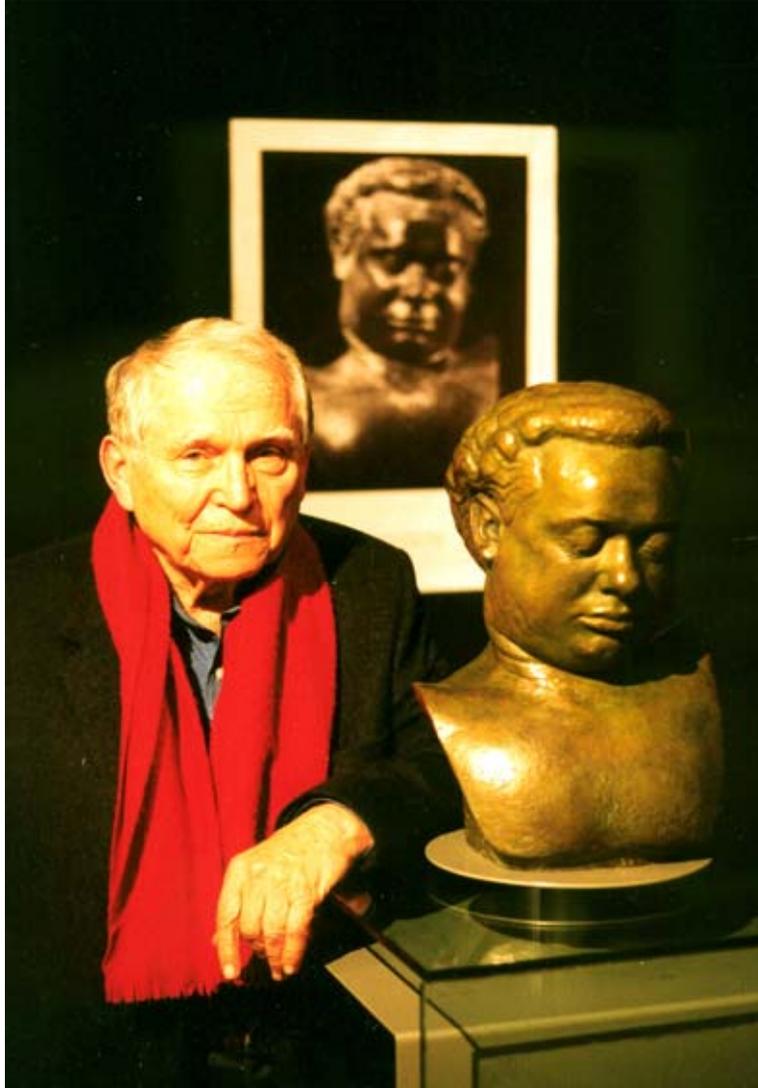
Pl.5 John Gerrard
 Portrait Diptych (Nadia) 2003
 Gallery of Photography, Dublin
 3D image on touch screen

The work of the Irish photographer John Gerrard was of particular interest. His 3D interactive heads, produced using a 3D scanner and software derived from computer games were, like Barthes' and Inghams' an emotional response to the tragic death of a relative: his brother. Displayed on digital flat screens these interactive 3D portraits of real people become detached from the traditional static nature of the photographic portrait into a new genre that can develop as something fundamentally moveable and adaptable. A virtual presence is revealed. In his artist's statement in the catalogue for his exhibition *New Work in New Media* at the Dublin Gallery of Photography in October 2003, Gerrard remembered his discovery of 3D scanning.

Discovering photographic 3D scanning has been a watershed in my artistic development. This allows the artist to create a photograph which exists in three dimensions, a sculptural photograph. The development of photographic-type portraits existing in the round such as those to be showcased in the Gallery of Photography creates a break in the history of photography, in which the single photographic moment, long since detached by computer technology

from ideas of truthful representation, becomes an object. Sculpture and photography begin to collapse inwards upon themselves. This allows the artist to move away from collage and to work with digital media as though shaping a piece of clay, or directly manipulating a face.

Gerrard (2003:1)



Pl.6 Bernard Mitchell
David Slivka and death mask
The Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea 2001
Photograph

The Death Mask
by
Vernon Watkins

I stop because a footfall with no sound
Passes. The laurel is too young as yet
To feed with berries him it has not crowned;
Nor would he now regret
More tender fingers: praise is not enough,
And though the Sibyl in her rock repeat:
'No, none shall draw his likeness, even in rough',
The death-mask does not cheat

Watkins. (1986: 480)

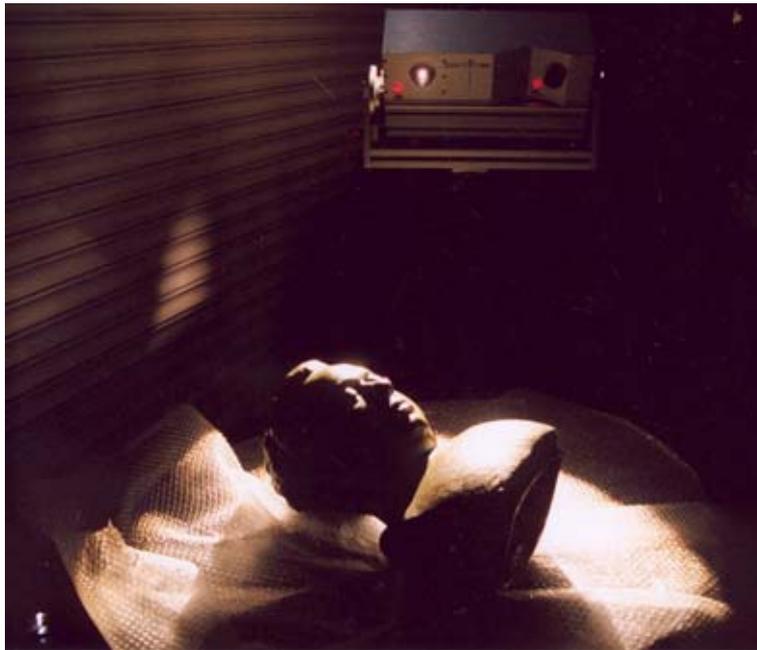
In October 2001 David Slivka visited Swansea for the annual Dylan Thomas Festival. I met and photographed him with the bronze cast of Thomas's death mask that he had presented to the Dylan Thomas Centre. The presence of the head in Swansea gave me the idea to take the work of John Gerrard one step further.

The applications of 3D scanning up this point had been largely used in the fields of medical science in the areas of maxillofacial prosthetics and plastic surgery and in the engineering industry to capture prototype designs, for the production of moulds.

At his exhibition *Sculpture and Objects* at Oriel Myrddin in Carmarthen in January 2004, sculptor, Roger Moss showed some of the results of his work with the research team at the National Centre for Product Design and Research (PDR) at the University of Wales Institute Cardiff, and the applications that this new technology could be used for in the arts. With the aim of producing a 3D computer generated image (CGI) of Thomas, I consulted maxillofacial prosthetist, Peter Evans at Morriston Hospital, who works closely with PDR in Cardiff. On the 24 September 2004 we took the bronze bust of Thomas, created by Slivka from the death mask and presently part of the permanent exhibition at the Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea to be scanned at PDR. It is worth mentioning here the strange story of the making of the

death mask. David Slivka and his wife Rose were close friends of Thomas. At the time of his death at the StVincent's hospital in New York, Catlin (his widow), was an in-patient at the Riverside psychiatric clinic, unaware of Thomas's death, she was picked up the next day by Rose Slivka. In his biography of Thomas, *Dylan Thomas, A New Life*, Andrew Lycett declares:

After returning from Rivercrest, Caitlin stayed with the Slivkas. As a sculptor, David Slivka thought he might help raise money for the support fund by making Dylan's death mask with a well known colleague Ibram Lassaw. Uncertain of Caitlin's reaction, he arranged for someone from the British Embassy to obtain her permission on behalf of two anonymous American artists'. He took a cast at the mortuary where Dylan had been laid to rest in a suit and tie that led Ruthven Todd to quip, 'Dylan wouldn't be seen dead in that'. Later a surreal situation developed where Slivka worked on Dylan's cast in his basement studio, while Caitlin received visitors upstairs, unaware what her host was doing.
Lycett (2003:375)



Pl.7 Bernard Mitchell
3D scanning of death mask
PDR, UWIC, Cardiff 2004
Photograph

With the help of research assistants Domenic Eggbeer on camera and Richard Bibb on computer, the head was scanned some twenty times, rotating it 360 degrees in

both its vertical and horizontal axis. These individual scans were aligned to make a complete 3D point cloud of the entire head, which was then polygonised and exported as an STL file for future use.

On completion I took the STL file to Morriston Hospital where, with prosthetist Peter Evans, we wrapped the polygon mesh with virtual skin, using software normally employed to train neurosurgeons.

I had completed the first step of making a virtual clone of Dylan Thomas, to put together the digital collage that would create a photo-realistic image of him. To complete the virtual head I would also need photographs of Thomas taken around the time of his death and his voice recorded by the Caedmon Record Company.

Some of the finest photographs and perhaps the most comprehensive record of Thomas's later years, were taken by the American photographer Rollie McKenna, in New York and also on her two visits to Laugharne in Carmarthenshire, from which some rare colour prints survive. A selection of these pictures will be used as visual reference to texture fine detail onto the face of the virtual Dylan Thomas. Whether taken when he was reading his work at the Steinway Hall or relaxing in the White Horse Tavern, these photographs will bring to life the still image of the death mask.

In my own experience photographing the writers and artists of Wales, some become more than just subjects. It was the same for Rollie McKenna, for over the last few years of his life a friendship developed between the photographer and both Thomas and his wife Caitlin. In his introduction to Rollie McKenna's *Portrait of Dylan* her close friend and working partner at the Poetry Centre in New York, John Malcolm Brinnin, describes the method and style of her work.

A photographer who can bring a twinkle to an apostolic eye of T. S. Eliot, catch Robert Frost as the sage of woodlands wild and, from the ageing W. H. Auden, evoke the look of a startled faun, is obviously one able to command

many kinds of attention. How Rollie McKenna does it remains a secret, perhaps even to herself.

So began a friendship that between them made possible a photographic record of Dylan's last years unique in its opportunities and unmatched in its range and variety. The image of Dylan the public man, pouter- pigeon bold on stage in his blue suit and polka-dot bow-tie, is balanced by the Dylan the shy and uneasy *paterfamilias* in a grey flannel shirt, his forehead scarred by just one of the falls- from grace and sobriety- that would lead to his early death.
McKenna (1982:9-10)

Working in New York at this time were two young women, Barbara Cohen and Marianne Roney, with an ambition to record for posterity the voice of Dylan Thomas. Little did they know that they were participating in a historic literary event. The creation of a new genre, great writing, like music is better performed and who better to do it than the poet himself? The talking book as we know it today had arrived.



Pl.8 Bernard Mitchell
Barbara Holdridge and Dylan Thomas memorial
Cwmdonkin Park, Swansea 2002
Photograph

Barbara Holdridge (nee Cohen) founded the Caedmon Record Company with Marianne Roney in New York in 1952. She visited Swansea in 2002 at the time of the Dylan Thomas Festival. I met and photographed her with Thomas's daughter

Aeronwy Thomas and Jeff Towns of 'Dylan's Bookstore' She had come to see for the first time the memorial to Dylan Thomas in Cwmdonkin Park by Swansea sculptor Ronald Cour, which they had commissioned and paid for in 1963 and was dedicated on Thomas's birthday in October the same year. It had taken ten years since his death in 1953 and the patronage of these two American ladies, for the life and work of one of the greatest poets of the period to be recognised in his home town, Swansea. The Dylan Thomas industry was still in its infancy, on the common tongue he was regarded as nothing but a 'no good boyo', a character from Thomas's play *Under Milk Wood* in which actor David Jason played his first cinema screen role. Dylan's rise to mythical status and his rebranding as a cultural icon had still to come. In the review of Brian Gaylor's book *The Wales that Inspired Dylan Thomas* published in *The David Jones Journal, Winter/Spring 2004-5*, I describe the phenomenon.

As Wales emerges from principality to nation-state, new cultural icons are created and cynically manipulated in the unscrupulous hands of commerce and tourism. There is today a flourishing industry which has raised Dylan Thomas to almost mythical status. The face of the once discredited drunken, spongeing bard in Swansea, who died in New York, now adorns tee-shirts, mugs, and plates in the Dylan Thomas Centre. The City Council have rebranded Swansea as the Naples of the north, with golden sands, and a poet with golden hair for cultural credibility.

Mitchell (2004: 180)

American Poet Laureate Billy Collins relates, in his introduction to the boxed set of CDs *Dylan Thomas, The Caedmon Collection* published by Harper Collins in 2002, from previously published Caedmon LP liner notes, the story of how the first recordings were made,

It was at the end of January 1952 when Barbara Cohen and Marianne Roney sat with Dylan Thomas in the bar of the Chelsea Hotel and persuaded him to record some of his poetry.

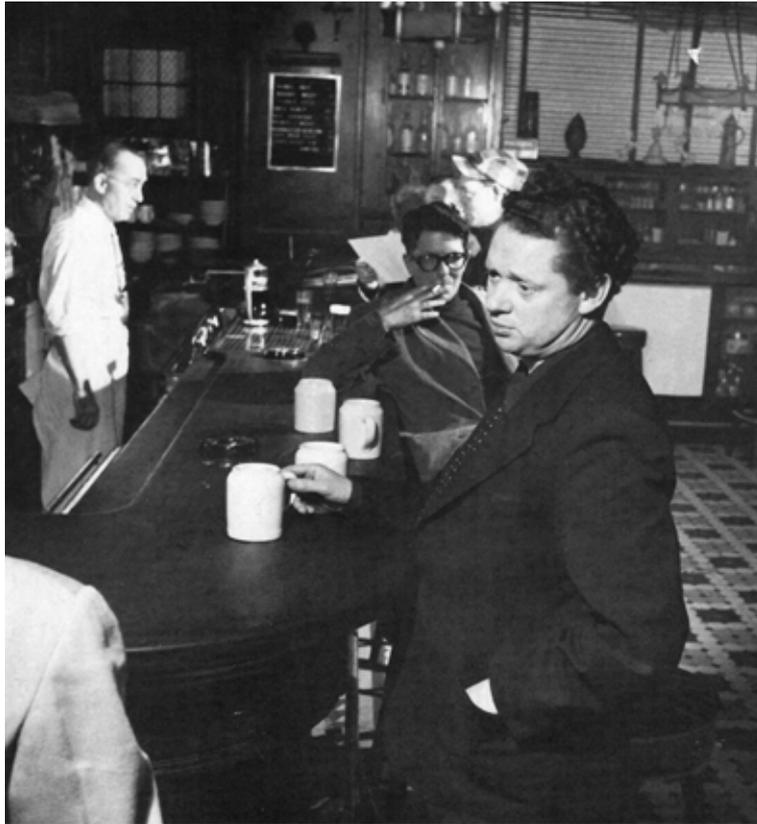
Spoken word records were almost unheard of then, and Miss Cohen and Miss Roney fresh out of college, must have seemed to Thomas like two more of the groupies who threw themselves in his way wherever he travelled in the United States reading his poems. The girls were, in fact not groupies at all, and did not even know that Thomas was a stage-door lion. They knew only that Thomas's poetry was shocking, moving and important, and that they wanted to record it to preserve the sounds Thomas heard in his head when he wrote. Between the offer to record him and that meeting at the Chelsea, they heard Thomas read at the 92nd Street Y. There they discovered what all those know who have heard him on records since – and these listeners far outnumber those who have read him in print – that Thomas was unique: at once the contemporary poet and the traditional bard. He wrote to the thunder of his voice. His poems are nearly inconceivable without that voice.

With the promise of five hundred dollars, and much coaxing and cajoling, a recording session was arranged. Thomas selected the poems, writing the list in his tiny round letters in Miss Roney's appointment book for Friday, February 15th, 1952. Caedmon Records was born the next week, named, appropriately enough, for the first poet to write in the native language of Old England. ("Oh", said Dylan Thomas later with his typical concern for business niceties.) February 15th came and went without Thomas. A friend claimed to have put him into a taxi *en route* to 57th Street, but he never made it – the White Horse Tavern was closer and beckoned in a friendlier way. It is difficult to imagine how much nervous energy was expended in trying to find the lost poet and rescheduling his recording session.

On February 22nd Thomas was accompanied by a messenger who delivered him more or less on time. The recording was made by Peter Bartok, son of the composer Bela Bartok, who set up his equipment in Steinway Hall. The books of Thomas's poems – thin, more binding than poetry – came perhaps from the only store in New York to stock them, the Gotham Book Mart.

Thomas began the session with "Do not go gentle into that good night." Mr Bartok had perhaps expected a quavery poet's voice, but instead he got a French horn. After some consideration, he adjusted the microphone for a symphonic recording to accommodate Thomas's sonorous voice.

Collins (2002:1-3)



Pl.9 Bunny Adler
Dylan Thomas, The White Horse Tavern, New York 1952
Photograph

To create a virtual Thomas, by necessity means bringing together the skills of different practices, which are difficult to master, especially in the time scale of this project. In the introduction to his book *Moving Pixels* Peter Weishar comments

But think of orchestra conductors. While they do not play every instrument or produce a single sound in a symphony, they are still master musicians. To the uninitiated, it looks like all they do is wave a wand in the air while the orchestra magically plays beautiful music. Computer art looks just as easy. Just a few well-placed key strokes, and *poof!* Photo-real images appear on screen. But as Mickey Mouse discovered in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, there is much more to it than just waving that wand around.
Weishar (2004:11)

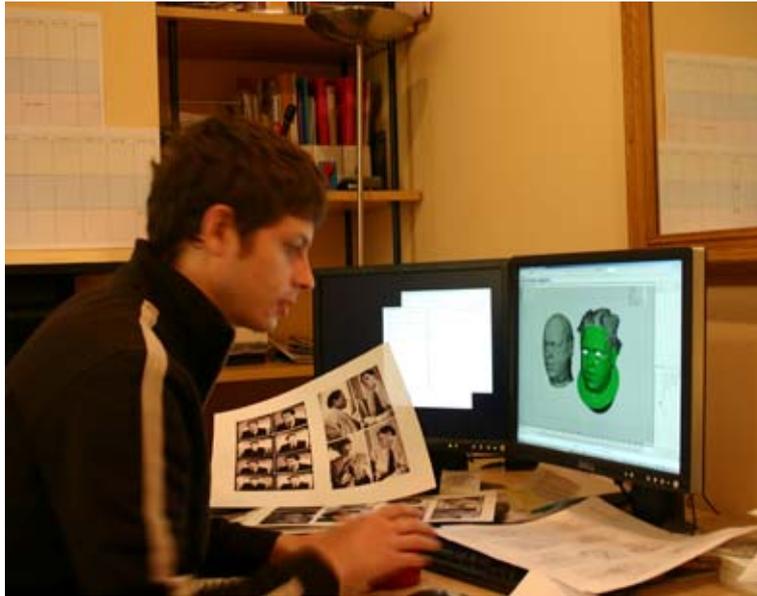
My first approach was to Martin Capey. (Head of School of Digital Media at the Swansea Institute, based at the Mount Pleasant Campus, part of which was the original Swansea Grammar School where Thomas was a pupil). He explained the complex nature of 3D computer generated images (CGI) and the implications of cost

in both time and software that were required to put together the virtual head of Dylan Thomas, within the Institute.

In November 2004 I attended the five day Sand: Swansea Animation Days Conference, an annual event organised by the School of Digital Media at Swansea University. One of the many interesting speakers was Luc Froehlicher, head of the 3D Department at La Maison, France. Froehlicher had worked in the CGI industry for fifteen years and was responsible for the computer graphics in the award winning film, *The Man Without a Head* in 2003 by Juan Solanus. This twenty minute film, was four years in the planning and two in the making, but showed the potential for a similar venture of a virtual Dylan Thomas using blue screen technology.

At the conference I met Jake Major, of the Swansea based 3D animation Company 'iCreate Ltd.' Major had graduated from the School of Digital Media in 3D animation in 2003 and with Dawn Lyle who was a graduate in media, launched iCreate Ltd. Also working for the company is 3D animation graduate Liam Tandy.

Time is of the essence in putting together this jigsaw puzzle. I sought advise from 'iCreate' regarding costs in creating the virtual head, within the limits given to launch the project in New York in November 2005. The following words are from iCreate's proposal.



Pl.10 Liam Tandy
 Jake Major, Creative Director, iCreate Ltd., Swansea 2005
 Photograph

We propose to create a photo-realistic, believable performance of Dylan Thomas reading his poem: *Do not go gentle into that good night*, through the medium of 3D computer graphic animation. It is important to us that our final product is of the highest quality and it is for this reason that we will be using the original Caedmon recording of Dylan Thomas reading the poem and a 3D scan of Dylan Thomas's authentic death mask, currently on display at the Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea. We will be basing our animation performance on motion capture and video recordings of a professional actor delivering a reading of the poem in the style of the audio recording. We believe that the bringing together of these elements and the technical and artistic skills of our computer animation team will enable us to recreate Dylan Thomas in a strikingly vivid, realistic way that has never been seen before.

It is our hope that this project will make the work of Dylan Thomas accessible to a new generation of Welsh artists. We also see that this high profile project will play a role in establishing Wales as a centre for high-end computer graphics animation. We expect the project to attract media attention. The recreation of an animated Dylan Thomas in digital form.



Pl. 11 Bernard Mitchell
Bob Kingdom prepares for filming
The Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea 2005
Photograph



Pl. 12 Bernard Mitchell
Filming facial movement and lip-syncing
The Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea 2005
Photograph

To complete the project in the time scale for my Masters degree and launch the virtual head in New York in November, was an ambitious scheme. However with iCreate's enthusiasm, I began the task of raising the money to pay for the production costs. An initial application to NESTA for funding was turned down. However, with a £1,500 grant from the Welsh Development Agency, match funded by myself, work on the first stage of modelling the virtual head began in May.

On 18 of May the actor Bob Kingdom, well known for his one man stage depiction of Thomas, was filmed at the Dylan Thomas Centre Theatre. Two broadcast quality video cameras were used to capture the facial movement, operated by Nigel Burden of Pro-Vision Video Productions. To protect the intellectual property rights of the virtual Dylan Thomas, and promote the future development and use of the animated head, I formed the production company Bvirtual Ltd.

To give momentum to the second stage of fund raising to complete the lip-syncing and animation of the head, I decided to take advantage of Bob Kingdom, dressed in bow tie and wig, to launch the Virtual Dylan Project to the media on the same day. The results were impressive, with a full page in *The Western Mail*, a mention in *The Evening Post*, BBC Wales radio, BBC Wales/News website and BBC television, *Wales Today*. Unfortunately this was rescheduled to a later date because of the announcement on the same day of the bequest of Richard Burton's papers to Swansea University. Two famous Welshmen on one day was just too much!



Pl. 13 Jake Major
First 3D model of the virtual head
iCreate Ltd, Swansea 2005

The virtual head of Thomas was taking shape in the offices of iCreate, his eyes now open again and real hair growing on the bald head of the initial model. Major telephoned to ask if they could photograph my face for close-up skin texture, apparently my blood shot eyes and beer blotched skin were ideal material to wrap the virtual Thomas's time worn face! Like Thomas, my life seems to revolve around a never ending struggle to raise enough funds to survive, and this ambitious project is typical. I plan to show the textured virtual head at the Second Year Photography Exhibition at the Townhill Campus and at the Old Brewery Gallery in Brick Lane, London in June. Moreover funding achieved the animated talking head is scheduled to be completed by the end of July.

Thomas's iconic face like that of Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych*, has been seen so many times that, some even say that they have seen it move. But in its movement, this reconstruction of Thomas, is not a *memento mori*. Through the quasi-filmic nature of the poem, *Do not go gentle into that good night*, it questions the issues of presence and absence, arising from the way its visual images are 'framed' by the two repeated refrain lines, 'rage, rage, against the dying of the light'. This is not an elegy for the death of his father, for an elegy laments what is past, but what's called a proleptic elegy, that is the mourning of an event before it happens. His father's and his own short-comings before his own yet to be premature demise.

The advent of digital imaging over the last thirty years combined with ever increasing computer power and software development has revolutionised the traditional practices of photography and 2D graphics. Today we are at the beginning of a new era of 3D computer generated images (CGI). Initially developed and used in medicine and the engineering industry, it is rapidly being taken up by artists and film makers. In his book *Moving Pixel*, Peter Weishar describes the growth of the

CGI industry.

Mention the European Renaissance, Cubism, Abstract Impressionism, or any other major art movement and art history students can name the artists and thinkers who consciously help shape it, both intellectually and by example. The same will be true for CGI. It has not become what it is out of happenstance or merely as the result of increased computer speed coupled with better software. It is a new way of making art, conceived and brought to life by brilliant and dedicated individuals who one day will be recognised alongside the other great artists who have developed our culture. Filmmaking, photography printing, architecture, and design have already been transformed by the digital image. In the twenty-first century as CGI becomes a dominant art form, it will become a ubiquitous part of our lives not only for entertainment but for information, and education as well. Weishar (2004:14)

In my own career as a photographer since the mid-sixties, I have witnessed the progress from glass plates to digital cameras embodied in mobile phones that can transmit an image across the world in minutes. In the film industry, Sony, Pixar, Industrial Light and Magic and other major visual entertainment companies have created virtual actors, some digitally resurrected from the dead for a posthumous acting career. In January this year, digital animator Daniel Robichaud exhibited his sixty second film *Digital Marlene*, at the Science Museum in London exhibition *Future Face*. This beautifully made black and white virtual talking head of Marlene Dietrich was created in the style of a 1930's movie for Virtual Celebrity Productions, now the licensing and merchandising company Global Icons which aims to protect and merchandise the celebrity as a brand. Computer generated virtual celebrities had become a reality. In her book *Future Face* Sandra Kemp writes of the attempt by Princess Diana's estate to patent her image:

Even commentators usually at loggerheads agreed that Diana had been 'the most photographed and debated woman on earth... the most cherished icon of the modern era' (Andrew Morton, Diana's biographer) and that 'the degree of her celebrity eclipsed even global super stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley'. When lawyers from the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund sought to establish Princess Diana's face as a trade mark, 26 pictures of her which 'sum up her life in the public eye, capturing her unique charm and

appeal' were sent to be registered ('Bid to patent Diana's face', ran the headline in the Daily Mail.) When the attempt failed, Diana's estate then attempted to patent a virtual Diana made out of a composite of the 26 images, but this too was turned down by the courts.

Kemp (2004:131)



Pl.14 Daniel Robichaud/Global Icons
Digital Marlene
 Science Museum, London 2005
 3D wall projection

The reconstruction of Thomas's virtual head does not have the advantage of moving pictures taken from life, but is constructed using the physical facts of the death mask, and photographs taken at the time. His voice is his own, but even that is the voice he used when reading on stage and not in every day conversation. It would be foolish to claim that I have brought to life again the real man. Until recently, animators have tried to create the perfect face based on the standard ideas of beauty. It is however a fact that no human face is totally symmetrical and free of any imperfection, and this is certainly true of Thomas. It is not my wish to create a new iconic vision of the dead poet, but merely to bring into existence a believable performance of him reading his work. Once finished, the virtual head has many applications, and could possibly be shown at the permanent exhibition at the Dylan Thomas Centre. It must be considered as work in progress, for the finished head could be placed on the body of an actor and used to produce the first commercial

DVD of a virtual poet reading his work. Thomas could walk again in Cwmdonkin Park or relax over a pint in the bar at Browns Hotel in Laugharne. He could be the first of many writers to be recreated, the Caedmon Record Company carried on to record other writers, including Ernest Hemmingway, and T.S. Eliot.

With the growth of mobile phone technology, could the virtual 3D head of a poet be more interesting than a dancing frog?

Bernard Mitchell.