DYLAN THOMAS (1914 – 1953): A REAPPRAISAL

Mervyn Smale



Having been told that Fernando Serrano has now retired from his post in the English Department of Granada University, I am grateful to GRETA Journal *for giving me the opportunity to include in its pages a contribution to mark my having known Dr Serrano for more than thirty years. I have chosen to consider a writer, Dylan Thomas, a complex character who in his prose and poetry revealed both a love of English Literature and of the English Language.*

In the 1950's and 1960's, Dylan Thomas's influence was enormous, particularly felt in the writing of the new generation of writers then setting out on their careers. Such was his appeal that a young and unknown would-be poet and folk singer adopted the name of this Welsh poet and essayist and became world famous as Bob Dylan. In the 1960's I too became aware of Dylan Thomas and, in a vain attempt to write poetry myself, sought to imitate his fecund use of adjectives and daring verbal gymnastics. And now, at the commencement of the twenty-first century, what is there that remains of Thomas's once substantial reputation?

This is not an attempt to write a biographical essay on the Welsh poet, but is rather a re-examination of his work and an investigation of my own responses now to that which I once valued so highly. Where shall I begin? Perhaps in Wales in 1964, in Laugharne, Camarthenshire, on a pilgrimage to Thomas's home overlooking the Laugharne Estuary. I have no idea whether that house is now open to the public; it certainly was not forty years ago but rather suggested that it and Thomas had turned their backs on the world. An old countryman pointed out the churchyard where Dylan Thomas had been buried. There was little difficulty in finding the grave, a small wooden cross standing out against the ornate stone monstrosities surrounding it. I had been impressed then by the deliberate simplicity. So this was the REAL Dylan Thomas, so different from the public image of the alcoholic who had swilled away his life, dying in New York a few days after his thirty-ninth birthday. I know now that a contrived act of theatrical simplicity can be more ostentatious than the loudest fanfare of trumpets. That little wooden cross I now see as being as bogus as the thunderous declamations that are Thomas's readings of his own verse preserved on recordings. Did he really speak like an irate dictatorial God when beer drinking with his cronies or in moments of intimacy with his wife, Caitlin? The wooden cross and the booming voice both proclaim "Here's a Poet!"

In 1952 Dylan Thomas had issued his "Collected Poems: 1934-1952"; by the November of the following year he was dead, a proposed

collaboration with Igor Stravinsky unattempted along with numerous large-scale dramatic works never to find their way onto paper. What he had produced up to the moment of his death is now to be seen as a prologue to something greater never to materialize. Looking back over the whole corpus of his work, I sense, with one major exception, that here is a potentially great writer in embryo, a relatively young man flexing his muscles, luxuriating in an undoubted gift for language, all too often intoxicated by that gift as much as by the liquids he poured down his throat. His poetry and his essays all hint at a young and highly sensitive man, one eager to express his reactions to the world around him and yet reluctant to give direct, naked expression to those feelings, preferring to peep out from behind those fortifications of words and images that come so apparently easily to him. Let me present examples of this, drawn from some of his most well-known poetry.

What initially brought Thomas recognition was his poem "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower". The philosophy is drawn from early nineteenth century Romantic poetry, particularly that of William Wordsworth, and may be summed up in that Man is an integral part of Nature and that all aspects of Nature are bound together. What makes the poem effective is its multi-coloured and forceful vocabulary which, on closer inspection, is by no means an aid to our understanding. The opposite is rather the case; this is an oratorical flourish, a suggestion of profundity where thoughts really lie in shallow water. There are cadences which are reminiscent of Shakespearean rhetorical devices and also the suggestion that Thomas has turned to the Bible for tricks of language. Verbal echoes finding their origin in the English Bible are even more noticeable in the poem "And Death Shall Have no Dominion". Here Dylan Thomas is clearly in debt to the ranting rhetoric found in the Book of "Revelation". The title of another poem, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London", informs us that we should brace ourselves for another dose of Thomas's verbal pyrotechnics. A recording of the poet himself reading reveals all the majesty of sound latent in the piece but, reading the poem, I find it *"full of sound and fury signifying nothing"*, if I may borrow Shakespeare's very apt expression.

Writers often produce their best work when writing autobiographically about their struggles to create lasting works of Literature. The Renaissance poet Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet "Loving in Truth" is a prime example, as is "When I have fears" by John Keats. Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his "Frost at Midnight" beautifully and poignantly catches the mood of the lonely writer in conflict with himself, and Ted Hughes in his "The Thought Fox" brilliantly captures the moment of artistic creation. How then shall I judge Dylan Thomas's "In my Craft or Sullen Art"? On re-reading I find the poet, as so often, posturing, writing not what is felt but what is expected to be felt. Here is very much our conventional image of a poet, alone physically and spiritually, writing for a select band of sensitive beings who alone will understand his words.

And so, where do I look to find the poet Dylan Thomas, a poet who will stand to test of time? To begin with I would turn to "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night". This poem, written on the death of his father, forcefully reflects the feelings of a son watching a loved parent die, one whose life is gently slipping away as if death were an easy, welcome release. Painfully, Dylan Thomas watches impotently as his father drifts towards death without a struggle, as if longing to leave the world which still holds a living son. The poet cries out in angry frustration and anguish:

> *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.*

The Living and the Dying are becoming increasingly separated, the poet more and more abandoned. The poem concludes:

> *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.*

Any reaction from the moribund world is preferable to this calm surrender to the Enemy

of Man, this apparent indifference to life, this voluntary severing of all human ties. We are left with a view of the poet desperately alone, longing for some recognition from the dying man, a recognition that does not and will not come. The writing is sincere, direct and the emotion unrestrained; there is the stirring of a major talent very evident here.

A minor work, but nonetheless successful is "The Hunchback in the Park", which reveals not only Thomas's sympathy for the lonely social outcast, *"The old dog sleeper"*, but also an awareness of the cruel innocence of childhood, *"wild boys innocent as strawberries"*, that ridicules physical deformity. This poem, like the previous, reveals more of the baroque verbosity that mars so much of Dylan Thomas's output.

"Poem in October", a highly personal utterance, is a good example of Thomas's gift of linguistic compression when functioning to perfection and a "Shakespearean" inventiveness. Here we find, for example, *"The heron priested shore"*, *"The net webbed wall"*, *"the lark full cloud"* and *"The town below lay leaved with October blood"*. In this most beautiful poem, the thirty years old poet, on his birthday, finds again the child that he once was and learns, as did Wordsworth before him, that *"the child is father of the man"*. Hot tears of rekindled memory run down his cheeks, burning them.

The same feeling of a lost childhood innocence pervades the nostalgic "Fern Hill". Thomas recaptures here a time when he was *"young and easy under the apple boughs"* and *"happy as the grass was green"*. On the farm that was Fern Hill he had been free, Time the Master had not as yet made him aware of his chains. The world that embraced him could only be described by the poet of language as "lovely", that all embracing thoughtless word of childhood to express great appreciation. Those were *"Lamb white days"* of innocence and the future a closed book; *"I sang in my chains like the Sea"*, says the mature man looking back on lost innocence.

I do not feel, then, that there is enough greatness in Dylan Thomas's poetry to guarantee him a place in posterity, although there are undoubtedly some highly worthwhile productions. The best qualities of Thomas the poet are to be found also in his prose and to this I shall now turn. During his lifetime, Thomas's reputation rested upon his poetry, those verses known to a select but influential body of readers and for this reason I have spent so much time over that aspect of his work.

Readers of "quality" journals and magazines dedicated to the Arts would have been aware too of Dylan Thomas the essayist and short story writer. He was also an occasional broadcaster, but his excursions on the radio tended to be restricted to BBC Wales, although there broadcasts were finally issued in book form. Considering first these broadcasts, we should remember that they were aimed at a minority audience of Welshmen like himself. His work for the BBC came under two categories: short essays delivered via the microphone and talks of a more critical nature on authors and the art of writing.

Of the aural "essays", his "Memories of Christmas" stands out, Dylan Thomas frequently finding his best form when writing nostalgically on the festive season. A quite remarkable piece is his "Quite early one morning" with a little Welsh village becoming a microcosm, its inhabitants portrayed with amused affection. I shall return to this important work a little later. Concerning literary themes, he touched on, among others, writers as distinct as the poet of the First World War Wilfred Owen, Walter de la Mare (as a writer of prose rather than a mystical poet) and Sir Philip Sidney. The choice is idiosyncratic and, if we look for enchanting insights such as we encounter, for example in the literary criticism of Virginia Woolf, we are destined to be greatly disappointed. "On Reading one's own Poems" could have been enlightening but, in fact, is revealed to be an excuse for Thomas to read his poems "There was a Saviour", "If my head hurt a hair's foot", "Poem in October" and "After the Funeral". Similarly, his talk on "Welsh Poets" also becomes an excuse to read the poems of Henry Vaughan, Edward Thomas, W. H. Davies, Idris Davies, Alan Lewis and Glyn Jones with very little commentary. Clearly Dylan Thomas resisted the opportunity of reading poetry aloud – his own and that of others.

Today, if Dylan Thomas is to hold a place in the history of English Literature, it must be as a master of both poetry and prose and certainly, when we turn to his published prose works, there is much that merits attention, much that carries his distinctive voice. Of all his prose works, the most substantial is his "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog" (the title obviously parodying James Joyce's famous work of autobiography). It is a work of fiction in that Thomas the child, the schoolboy and the young man in Wales before his coming to London is clearly larger that life and the Welsh world and its inhabitants more colourful and idiosyncratic than in reality. What is noteworthy is the humour that is forever revealing itself, a humour sadly lacking in the declamatory verses of Thomas the Poet. Another major feature is his ability to recapture lovingly the Welsh character and the turns of Welsh speech. Dylan Thomas's Wales is indeed memorable. If I were called upon to single out one "tale" as characteristic of the writer in this work, it would be "A Visit to Grandpa's" where an old man is shown as being as capable of living in his own world of fantasy as is any child.

Of the published writings found in magazines, I would select "A Prospect of the Sea", from the time when Thomas had first come to live at Laugharne, which itself was by the sea, and "Conversation about Christmas", which again reveals not only the writer's love for the season but also his sympathy for the world and philosophy of the Child. The latter piece was probably Thomas's most known journalistic effort, first appearing in the weekly magazine "Picture Post", which was, in the 1940's, of mass circulation. Those writings, as with the great majority of Dylan Thomas's prose works, benefit in that the medium of prose necessitates a more direct, uncomplicated form of expression than found in the obviously more indirect and frequently obscure and ambiguous world of poetry.

And so I finally come to that work which I left unnamed near the commencement of this article but said that it was the great exception amongst Thomas's output, a work which did not suggest a future great writer but which clearly proclaimed greatness. The work to which I refer is "Under Milk Wood", the one work which I feel will guarantee the status of Dylan Thomas as a major voice for future generations. The work itself had already been hinted at, as we have seen, in that "radio essay" which is "Quite Early One Morning". Thomas had worked on what he called "a play for voices" intermittently for nearly ten years, but the play was only completed a month before his death. It has been said that he liked small towns by the sea best, and small Welsh towns by the sea best of all. The fairy-tale village of Llaregyb is modelled on the very real Laugharne, New Quay and many other similar spots. The play carries us through a spring day, from the darkness before dawn to the setting of the sun and, in that day, we find opening out for us a little Welsh world and its people, much as James Joyce shows us the world of Ireland in a Dublin day. True, it is a Welsh village that Thomas presents to us, but the voices that we hear (for we must remember that this is a RADIO play) are the voices of humanity and are timeless. A narrator, perhaps Thomas, perhaps the village itself, is our companion as the day progresses. In the darkness that introduces our play the narrator says:

> *only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night. Only you can see, in the blinded bedrooms, the combs and petticoats over the chairs, the jugs and basins, the glasses of teeth, Thou Shalt Not on the wall, and the yellowing dickybird-watching pictures of the dead. Only you can hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers, the movements and countries and mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes and flight and fall and despairs and big seas of their dreams.*

We enter the dreams of the old and blind Captain Cat to whom the drowned dead speak. We share the hopes of Myfanwy Price, the dress-maker and sweetshop-keeper who is visited in her dream by Mog Edwards, a draper *"mad with love"*. We are introduced to the twice-widowed Mrs Ogmore-Pritchard who, in her dream-world, meets both dead husbands simultaneously and

gives them orders as when they were alive. And so we gradually meet the inhabitants of Llaregyb, Butcher Beynon and his school-mistress daughter, the sensual Gossamer, Organ Morgan the organist, Ocky Milkman, Police Constable Attila Rees, Willy Nilly the Postman, the ever-pregnant Polly Garter, the gentle Mr Pugh who dreams of poisoning his tyrannical wife, old Mary Ann Sailors who loves life so dearly, Nogood Boyo the dropout and the Holy Innocent, Reverend Eli Jenkins who begins and ends each day not with morning and evening service but a poem, a paean of praise to his village, which is very much a prayer of thanks to God.

The hours pass and our narrator, wizard-like, conjures up voices of the people of the village to reveal their loves, hopes, fears and anxieties, their love of life and fear of death, memories of yesterday and longings for tomorrow. What is ultimately revealed is their great humanity in a language that is both colloquial and poetically beautiful. And so the great human kaleidoscope rotates until evening descends and the reverend Eli Jenkins addresses once again his God:

Every morning when I wake,
Dear God, a little prayer I make,
O please to keep thy lovely eye
On all poor creatures born to die.

And every evening at sun-down
I ask a blessing on the town,
For whether we last the night or no
I'm sure is always touch-and-go.

We are not wholly bad or good
Who live our lives under Milk Wood,
And then, I know, wilt be the first
To see our best side, not our worst.

O let us see another day!
Bless us this night, I pray,
And to the sun we all will bow
And say, good-bye - but just for now!

A parody of an amateur attempting to write or speak poetry perhaps, but no-one can deny that the words are heart-felt and that Dylan Thomas deeply respects his innocent little priest, his love of life and his gratitude to his maker. Certainly Thomas never wrote more simply and, perhaps, never more profoundly. How fitting that Eli Jenkins's "prayer" should come at the end of Dylan Thomas's short life and should be a conclusion to what, for me, is a major work of English Literature of the twentieth century. The poet may have locked the door of his house at Laugharne against prying sight-seers, but "Under Milk Wood" is not only his poetic testament - it is also a glimpse into the man's very soul.