

Near East University

Faculty of Arts & Sciences

Dept. of English Language & Literature



REFLECTIONS OF DYLAN THOMAS'S LIFE IN HIS WORKS

Undergraduate Thesis

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T.R.N.C.

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PREFACE

I have been majoring in English Language and Literature for four years now, and this period has covered my best years of education after my former three years in the Department of Computer Information Systems in Near East University.

Somehow, I was not so much attracted to computers as I have been to literature. Adding to my own interest in English Literature, the main reason for my success has been the perfect system of education I have been receiving with the help of excellent teachers of the Department of English Language and Literature.

As the topic of my graduation thesis, I have chosen an important poet of the early 20th century, Dylan Thomas. I have decided to write about the reflections of his life in his works, since he was a person who lived the extremes and expressed himself in a wise and unique way in his poetry. I thought it would be interesting to explore such an obscure personality as his. Thanks to my lecturers of literature up to now, I have learned a totally new way of looking into people by looking at the words they use from a different angle.

As my years of being a degree student are coming to an end, I would like to thank Near East University especially for having opened the Department of English Language and Literature, and for having such a Chairperson as Assoc. Prof. Dr. Gül Celkan, perfect in every aspect, especially in the way she has been managing the whole department.

I am proud of being one of the first few BA graduates of English Language and Literature Department in Near East University...

Thanks to Near University once again, and most of all, for its existence.

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INTRODUCTION

"I like things that are difficult to write and difficult to understand", said Dylan Thomas... This may be the main reason for me to decide to write about him. When I learned a little about Thomas himself, his life and his poetry, I must confess, I was more attracted to the poet himself than to his poetry. He was difficult to understand. I am glad to have decided on writing about Dylan Thomas, although it might not be a good idea to try to "understand" him wholly, while nobody in close relationship with him ever managed to understand him during his short life. In 1951, he said that "what the words stood for, symbolized, or meant, was of very secondary importance; what mattered was the *sound* of them as I heard them for the first time on the lips of the remote and incomprehensible grown-ups, who seemed, for some reason, to be living in my world." When answering the important question of how he came to write poetry, he explained "the colors the words cast on my eyes... and though what the words meant was, in its own way, often deliciously funny enough, so much funnier seemed to me, at that almost forgotten time, the shape and shade and size and noise of words as they hummed, strummed, jiggled and galloped along,. That was the time of innocence; words burst upon me, unencumbered by trivial or portentous association; words were their springlike selves, fresh with Eden's dew, as they flew out of the air." The Bible was in his list of things that first made him love language and want to work *in* it and *for* it. He was a man who was truly obsessed with his vocation as a poet : a tormented, exaggerated man, often his own worst enemy, in whom others may recognize their own experiences. His poetry as well as his life went to such extremes that people could recognize. He was determined from adolescence to act like a poet and he had the last laugh in

the end: he wrote boldly and he made his readers and listeners catch their breath.
He was taken at his own valuation. He was an original poet of great power and
beauty.

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A SCHOOLBOY POET

"Give me a sheet of paper and I can't help filling it in. The result, more often than not, is good and bad, serious and comic, sincere and insincere, lucid or nonsensical by the turns of my whirligig mentality, started from the wrong end, a mentality that ran before it walked, and perhaps will never walk, that wanted to fly before it had the right even to think of wings."

"I am man's reply to every question,
His aim and destination."

Dylan Thomas

A SCHOOLBOY POET

It is difficult enough to write about the interior Thomas, especially when he was a child. From the age of fifteen until he was past nineteen it becomes easier, since he had a series of notebooks that preserved about 200 poems reflecting much of his thoughts and feelings.

Little Dylan was pretty, spoiled, the darling of the family. He received much physical affection. Mrs. Thomas liked to kiss and cuddle. When he cried, which happened quite often, Addie, the maid was sent to take him into her own warm bed and cuddle him. To some psychiatrists, such experiences can arouse sexual fantasies, followed by feelings of guilt and inadequacy - especially with an imaginative child like Dylan. This may produce fears about his body and lead him to lose confidence in his sexual powers. This may lie behind his need to prove himself masculine with drink and women. There are phrases in Dylan Thomas's poems, especially the early ones, that suggest a preoccupation with subconscious sexual fears (particularly a fear of having his sex organs mutilated.) These phrases revolve around images of tailors and scissors.

Women played an important part in Thomas's writing, but there's also a failure. He never describes or even implies an ordinary, successful act of sex. In his early story "A Prospect of the Sea" (published in 1937), a boy is sexually terrorised by a gypsy-like girl who's in a torn cotton frock:

"the stain on her lips was blood, not berries ; and her nails were not broken but sharpened sideways, ten black scissors-blades ready to snip off his tongue."

There are two views about Thomas and religion. One of these is that he was a religious poet and his life was a movement towards God. The other, which seems more feasible, is that religion was a stage-prop of his poetry; he used its language and myths, which he had learned in his childhood, without caring much about its main beliefs. But in either case, he was too much involved with religion in childhood, since he was attending the Church even before he was five.

Cwmdonkin Park became one of Thomas's reference points, since it was the first place that mattered to him outside his house. He was being taken there by Addie Elliott, the maid, almost everyday in the pram. Thomas was five or six then, but nothing escaped his attention. Twenty years later, he wrote about the visit to Cwmdonkin Park in his book of more-or-less auto-biographical stories, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. One of these stories is "Patricia, Edith and Arnold" where Edith is the servant girl, a successor to Addie and she takes him with her and her friend Patricia to go to Cwmdonkin to confront their mutual boyfriend, Arnold.

The farm at Fernhill was another place that he often referred to in his stories.

"The Peaches" is one of those *Portrait of the Artist* stories, the first story in the book, and it remained one of his two favourites. The story is about a summer holiday when he was a child. It is based on a true incident, but what made the story were many other tiny incidents, and memories, of many other holidays.

Thomas wrote of Fernhill as "a place with which I have come to associate all the summer of my chil a lovely farm - a lonely farm - and a place with which I have come to associate all the golden - never shone a sun like that old rolling..."

This was found among his manuscript notes, probably made towards the end of his life.

Thomas seems to have taken a pleasure in frightening himself with his childhood dreams which are full of ghosts and vampires. In "The Peaches", there is a demon with "wings and hooks, who clung like a bat to my hair". When he arrives at the farm with his uncle at night, he imagines that "nothing lived in the hollow house at the end of the yard but two sticks with faces scooped out of turnips". Thomas knew the Carmarthen hangman was supposed to have lived in the house towards the end of the 19th century. There is some truth in the story, since the man, Evans, was only an assistant executioner and he never hanged anyone himself. In "The Peaches", the hangman's house is identified as a deserted house down the road. Thomas probably wanted to confuse local readers and stop them recognising Fernhill too easily.

According to his mother, Mrs. Thomas, Dylan was a precocious boy, happy with his pencil and paper and he enjoyed writing poems even before he was ten. By the time he was fifteen, Thomas would reflect his obsessive self-awareness in his poetry. In his "Inspirations", there is a subject-matter which Thomas wrote about the business of writing. He looks at poetry as his personal means of coming to terms with the world. This was his favourite area. Writing poems about poetry and himself the poet shows his self-awareness:

The night is full of poetry and desire,
And eager with unanswerable things:
O that my beating brain could borrow wings,
And shake the shackles of the mind's attire.

For then indeed, my songs might near the touch
More envied than the jewelled crown of kings;
And I should be a happy heart who sings,
Nor questions why, nor wonders overmuch.

Dylan Thomas was never short of friends, but those he had in Swansea remained special all his life. The most important of these was Daniel Jenkyn Jones, who was two years older than him. He later became a professional composer, a doctor of music. Their meeting is described in the *Portrait* story "The Fight". Their fight took place in the "Lower" playground and this started their close relationship. According to "The Fight", on their first evening at Jones house, Thomas read poems while Jones, "like a boy aged a hundred", listened in silence. Thomas also wrote in "The Fight" that "Nobody had ever listened like that before... The future spread out beyond the window, over Singleton Part crowded with lovers messing about, and into smoky London paved with poems."

Thomas and Jones wrote joint poems and plays, organised joke concerts, played with words and generally egged one another on to be cleverer or funnier or noisier or bolder. For their poetry collaborations they invented a lunatic name for themselves: Walter Bram. ("bram" is the Welsh for "fart"). About 200 of these Bram poems survived and this is a quotation from one of them, dated December 27, 1929, when Thomas was fifteen. Jones wrote the odd-numbered lines, and Thomas the even-numbered ones:

They had come from the place high on the coral hills
Where the light from the white sea fills the soil with ascending
grace.
And the sound of their power makes motion as steep as the
sky,
And the fruits of the great ground lie like leaves from a vertical
flower.
They had come from the place; they had come and gone again
In a season of delicate rain, in a smooth ascension of grace.

Orzy, Marlowe, Chums, the Imagists, the Bible, Poe, Keats, Lawrence, Anon., and Shakespeare." When he wrote "Your sweet inducive thighs / And raven hair" or presented himself as the unhappy lover watching a dancer, he was borrowing other people's language:

I, poor romantic, held her heel
Upon the island of my palm

In December 1930, soon after Thomas's sixteenth birthday, he ends his first notebook. He had written and thought about poetry for long enough. He could then regard himself as a poet. Poetry business was serious to him. At the end of the last poem in his first notebook, he was once again questioning his function as a poet, asserting his talent at the same time:

Purpose is gone;
I try to hold, but can't,
Compress, inflate, grow old,
With all the tackle of my certain magic
Stone hard to lift.

For Thomas, writing verse seemed to be a hard discipline. He was the would-be poet searching for a subject. When he found it, his language changed: the lines hardened and the words acquired an edge. The subject was himself, the secret Thomas that only Thomas knew about:

Classic, erotic, and obscene,
Dead and alive,
In sleep and out of sleep,
Tracking my sensibilities
Gratifying my sensualities...

As his days as a schoolboy-poet were coming to an end, he started using occasional biological words in his poetry *grains, blood, seed, sucking, dust, wax, cancer, egg*. He was an adolescent trying to come to terms with his world. In a poem written in 1931, his style was edging towards the "authentic" Thomas:

Where love is there's a crust of joy
To hide what drags its belly from the egg,
And, on the ground, gyrates as easily
As though the sun were spinning up through it.

Dylan's father, David John Thomas (D.J.) wished Dylan would get a high education, for he believed that study was the road to happiness. However, Dylan always disappointed his father with his exam results. The only subject he did well in was English language. By the year 1931, his father had to accept that Dylan was not teachable. He would leave school in summer. University was out of the question.

In the beginning of summer, Dylan Thomas revealed an urgent self-exploration. He became less plaintive and more resolute. The subject was again himself, the poet. There was a powerful sexual image of orgasm and its aftermath, of living and dying. The poem was concerned with his own sexuality, his own nervous system:

High on a hill,
Straddle and soak,
Out of the way of the eyes of men,
Out of the way,

Straddle her wrinkled knees
Until the day's broken -
Christ, let me write from the heart,
War on the heart -
Puff till the adder is,
Breathe till the snake is home,
Inch on the old thigh
Till the birds has burst his shell,
And the carnal stem that stood
Blowing with the blood's ebb,
Is fallen down
To the ground.

On July 28, he warned his non-existent readers that

I shall turn the strongest stomach up
With filth I gather
From the thousand minds, all lust and wind,
Like a beachcomber in the time of light.

Then he left in order to work on the local newspaper, South Wales Daily Post,
later changed to *Evening Post*.

AFTER SCHOOL

While working as a reporter, he became a member of the Little Theatre, which was an amateur group. He appeared in its plays regularly for the next two or three years. His voice was already strong, but soon after it thickened and began to get the boom which made him as famous as his poetry. It is strange that he never refers to amateur-acting days in his reminiscences about Swansea. Obviously, he preferred not to remember himself as an actor.

On losing his job in the *Evening Post*, he didn't stop writing. As a poet and a writer, he was then (early in 1933) living on his wits and his pen. His poems changed from one style to another, writing rhetorically one day and almost conversationally the next. Sometimes he used the "biological" language of nerves and eggs. His themes were the fact of death, the mystery of life and the contradictions of love. He repeats his uneasiness about girls in a few poems. In one poem, he says "Love's a descension of the drawers", and in another he talks of "sawdust beneath the skirts".

*

Another of his themes is madness. In one poem (June 25, 1932) Thomas is the tormented adolescent who can't sleep and who thinks he is going mad. In this poem, there is a lunatic asylum with a raw red tower, which was being built above Sketty where it "leers down the valley like a fool." For Thomas, madness was frightening but also exciting. No doubt he was really concerned about madness, but this did not prevent him from taking pleasure in his fears as well. His notebook poems are an attempt to make some kind of order from his experiences. The poems are without humour. Frequently, the effort produces its

reward for Thomas in the shape of a deeper and richer note, For example, in "Written for a personal epitaph", dated October 17, 1931, he says:

I am man's reply to every question,
His aim and destination.

In the summer of 1932, he is more sustained. His poem is "Out of the sighs", and it was the first poem to be taken from a notebook and published (1936) virtually unchanged. Here, Thomas rides above his uncertainties and finds a sort of comfort in accepting things as they are:

Out of the sighs a little comes,
But not of grief for I have vanquished that
Before the agony. The spirit grows,
Forgets, and cries.
A little comes, is tasted and found good...

On July 1, 1932, Thomas's second notebook comes to an end with the following poem. Its conclusion is not entirely clear, but it has an undeniable authority:

Were this enough - bone, blood, and sinew,
The twisted brain, the fair formed loin,
Groping for matter under the dog's plate -
Man should be cured of distemper.
For all there is to give I offer:
Crumbs, barn, and halter.

In his Notebook 3, one of his subjects was Ann Jones, his aunt at Fernhill. She was dying of cancer in Carmarthen Infirmary. Thomas wrote in his letters to his

friend Trevor Hughes, his reactions to this, wondering why he was "utterly unmoved" apart from "the pleasant death-reek at my negroid nostrils" He asked Hughes, was he callous or nasty? Should he weep and feel pity? The letter reveals how he felt:

There must be something lacking in me. I don't feel worried, or hardly ever, about other people. It's self, self all the time. I'm rarely interested in other people's emotions, except those of my paste-board characters. I prefer (this is one of the thousand contradictory devils speaking) style to life, my own reactions to emotions rather than the emotions themselves.

His aunt Ann Jones died on February 7, at the age of seventy. The following day, Thomas wrote a first version of "Was there a time", and informed himself that "Time has put its maggots on my track. Thomas then wrote "After the funeral". Unlike the famous later version, this was not a sad poem on her death, but a comment on the pointlessness of dying and the hypocrisy of the mourners. In spite of his being too much concerned with himself, he was at least trying to be honest about it.

Later Thomas met Bert Trick of strong left-wing views, a man in his mid-thirties, almost twice Thomas's age, who was active in the local Labour Party. Trick was also interested in literature and wrote poetry in his spare time, which was likely to have Marx and Jesus in it. Thomas was enthusiastic about socialism, because it meant rebelling against established values. However, he made only a few references to his political ideas in his notebook poems, which were not published in his lifetime. By writing "The Western man has lost one lung", he was echoing a thought that Trick put in his own poem, about "lungs

chewed by poison gas". The one poem with a vaguely political content that Thomas published was "The hand that signed the paper felled a city", probably inspired by Hitler, who was in power in Germany since earlier that year, but has a flavour of far-off tyrants, perhaps from the Bible.

Thomas's first attempt to have his poem published outside Wales, was his poem called "The Romantic Isle" sent for a poetry competition at the B.B.C., London. At the same time, he sent the first version of "And death shall have no dominion" to the magazine, the *New English Weekly*. The background to this poem was Thomas's need to find a "philosophy". He wanted a system to believe in like most of the adolescents. His notebook poems show he was indeed aware of life's contrasts. He often used the image of "black" versus "white" and "black" threatened to get the better of him. Thomas contrasts day with night in a poem dated February 1, 1933. It is also stocked with his typical ingredients: maggots on dead flesh, a vulture, a "redcheeked vampire at the neck", a skeleton, a ghost,, and eaten corpse. In another poem, he wrote "I have been frightened of the dark for years", and made up more night scenes, where

a skeleton

Sits back and smiles, a tiny corpse
Turns to the roof a hideous grimace,
Or mice play with an ivory tooth.

Could the "tiny corpse" have been his mother's first child, the baby that died? He knew there had been another child. Whatever the origin might be, the key to the poem was where he wrote

Unless I learn the night I shall go mad.
It is night's terrors I must learn to love...

On February 17, Thomas wrote about Western man with one lung missing, about "exsoldiers with horrors for a face" and "the living dead left over from the war", and he considered the merits of saving the world with some kind of faith, perhaps Christian. The poem ends "Believe, believe and be saved, we cry, who have no faith." It sounds like Thomas was influenced by Trick, the agnostic with the old-fashioned socialist's interest in Christianity.

One day, Trick suggested that they each should write a poem about "immortality". Trick's poem was published in a local newspaper, and Thomas's which was "And death shall have no dominion" was published in *New English Weekly*. The poem sounds more an act of defiance than a declaration of faith: as if he was willing to be optimistic, because it was the only way of preserving his sanity. Perhaps it was part of a lifelong effort to look on the bright side that finally came to nothing.

On April 22, he wrote a poem that declared his new state of mind. He said, for the last five years, he had found "no hope of harmony" or no way of "bridging white and black." A quotation from the poem reads:

..... now this year

Has found a cure.

New music, from new and loud, sounds on the air.

CANCER AND SEX

Dylan's father D.J. Thomas, although he was always careful of his health, was found to have an ulcer on the floor of his mouth below the tongue. On seeing this, his dentist suggested that he see a doctor. A specialist diagnosed cancer, and D.J. didn't have much chance of being alive in five years. Over the following months, D.J. made a number of journeys between Swansea and London for the painful treatment with radium needles. Thanks to early diagnosis, the malignant ulcer was fading by early 1934. D.J. would live for nearly 20 years more.

Due to his father's illness, Dylan used the word "cancer" often in his early poems. In his final poetry notebook, Notebook 4, a poem dated September 12, two days after his father entered hospital, has the opening line, "Take the needles and the knives". On the day his father was readmitted to hospital (October 17), he wrote another poem titled "From love's first fever to her plague", which has the line, "The root of tongues ends in a spentout cancer."

His first complete, full-blooded "anatomical" poem was also the first poem which followed the news of his father's cancer. It is almost certain that the illness had been diagnosed on September 6, according to the notebook. The poem is "Before I knocked", in which he sees himself (or Christ) as an unborn child:

My throat knew thirst before the structure
Of skin and vein around the well
Where words and water make a mixture
Unfailing till the blood runs foul;

My heart knew love, my belly hunger,
I smelt the maggot in my stool.



According to Ralph Maud, who edited Thomas's poetry notebooks, Dylan's concern with death, his morbid self-awareness, had been in the background for a long time. He had come to terms with his neurotic fears. Then, his father's illness gave his imagination something near and frightening. After September 6, he started writing a new kind of poem, like "My hero bares his nerves" and "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower."

Thomas identified himself with natural phenomena such as flowers, rocks, water, wind. Disguises were part of his basic repertoire. He could be the landscape or the weather, the fetus or the egg, the Poet or Man or Christ.

"The force that through the green fuse" was one of Thomas's early poems that he liked, but still he preferred not to look back on them. Later he spoke of their "vehement beat-pounding black and green rhythms like those of a very young policeman exploding". He said he had forgotten why he wrote them, no doubt because they showed an achievement in a short period of time which was never again repeated. Five days after he wrote "The force that through the green fuse" and ten days before his nineteenth birthday, he finished his poem "From love's first fever to her plague" in which he is the embryo, the child, the poet:

I learnt the verbs of will and had my secret;
The code of night tapped on my tongue.

Thomas wrote to his friend Charles Fisher, "I like things that are difficult to write and difficult to understand... I like contradicting my images, saying two things at once in one word, four in two and one in six." He added that poetry should be "as

orgastic and organic as copulation... Poetry is a medium, not a stigmata on paper. Men should be two-tooled, and a poet's middle leg is his pencil." His early poems are full of sexual energy. Their death-symbols, the maggots and ghosts are used together with sex-images - the "rainy hammer" of his father's penis against the worm, or the boy who masturbates, "rehearsing heat upon a raw-edged nerve". Thomas was reflecting his own sexual experience with the act of masturbation in his poems. The way he wrote was aiming for maximum effect. No doubt he was describing what he felt and what he *was* at the age of nineteen.

It is not certain that he had slept with a girl until his nineteenth birthday. However, he claimed that he was sexually experienced at fifteen. If his claim was true, it was probably with a girl from outside his circle. One of his friends said that they took a girl into the sand-dunes, sat on either side and attempted to fiddle her without much success. Thomas describes an encounter with a girl in the last of his *Portrait of the Artist* stories, "One Warm Saturday". The girl is supposed to combine sex with romantic love. Like other *Portrait* stories, this is also full of details of the town. The story probably reflects a mixture of incidents, as in "The Peaches". As a boy of 18 or 19, he sees a girl who is reading a novel in the park. She is sitting "opposite the white-tiled urinal". Though she is "innocent" and demurely dressed, "her smile confessed her body bare and spotless and willing and warm under the cotton." Her name is Lou and he later sees her, in a pub. The story is full of sexual frustration. When he first sees her, he's afraid to speak to her and thinks, "She could drive my guilt out; she could smoothe away my shame." When he sees her in the pub, he wants to go home and dream about her - "But only a sick boy with tossed blood would run from his proper love into a dream, lie down in a bedroom that was full of his shames, and sob against the feathery, fat breast and face of the damp pillow. He remembered his age and poems, and would not move." So he resists the temptation to enjoy

himself with masturbatory fantasies in his bedroom. As the story goes on, his attempt to be grown-up comes to nothing. He leaves her in order to find a lavatory and loses his way. He ends up by himself, as he began, on a patch of waste ground with the remains of houses, "where the small and hardly known and never-to-be-forgotten people of the dirty town had lived and loved and died and, always, lost". This shows Thomas's own sense of loss and defeat. Perhaps he did meet a Lou in Swansea and have more success with her. However, the theme of sexual failure is clear...

Evelyn Jones was a member of the Little Theatre, who acted with Thomas, drank in pubs and walked with him. She said he had never made any sexual advances to her or anyone else as far as she knew. However, he used to say naughty things and make girls blush, but they loved it. He was a joker. On the Little Theatre programmes he wrote "C.B." against the names of girls who were sexually unwilling; "C.B." stood for "chastity belt". On Evelyn's 21st birthday, Thomas, who was in London then, sent her a letter to be read at her party:

Sorry I cannot pavane at the tavern.

I'm off to galliard with a Spaniard.

Here's a toast from me to thee:

A pox upon your chastity.

With the poem, there was an "outrageous drawing" of Evelyn in a chastity belt which was being unfastened by a man labelled "Pox"!...

PAMELA

Thomas's first serious girl friend was Pamela Hansford Johnson. When Thomas's poem "That sanity be kept" appeared in print, Pamela wrote him to show her admiration to it. This started a correspondence and a love affair. Unlike his letter to others, Thomas's letters to Pamela were the most explicit letters he ever wrote. He was writing her a running commentary on his life and thoughts. He presented himself as an unhealthy little poet with a sense of humour, struggling to write in unhelpful surroundings. He used the word "little" frequently: "I'm an odd little person a thin, curly little person, smoking too many cigarettes, with a crocked lung, and writing his vague verses in the back room of a provincial villa.... little with no health at all... I hardly weigh anything at all ... I look about fourteen, and I have a large, round nose; nature gave it to me, but fate, and a weak banister, broke it..... lonely little person nice little soul... little Welsh ear... little feet.. little poet." In fact, his height was about five feet six inches and he weighed eight stone ten; he was not big, but his mind was largely occupied by the extreme littleness and the feeling of frailty. He made a virtue of it. Perhaps to be small was to be safe and baby-like again.

His letters to Pamela were often very "literary" - heartfelt but carefully written. When writing about his poetry, he wrote "I do not want to express only what other people have felt... I want to rip something away and show what they have never seen." Pamela didn't like seeing his worms and cancers. On her calling his poetry ugly, Thomas pointed out that it was "nothing but the strong stressing of the physical", with its images drawn from

my solid and fluid world of flesh and blood... the greatest description I know of our own "earthiness" is to be found in John Donne's "Devotions", where he describes man as earth of the earth, his body earth, his hair a wild shrub growing out of the land. All thoughts and actions emanate from the body. Therefore the description of a thought or action - however abstruse it may be - can be beaten home by bringing it onto a physical level. Every idea, intuitive or intellectual, can be imaged and translated in terms of the body, its flesh, skin, blood, sinews, veins, glands, organs, cells, or senses. Though my small, bonebound island I have learnt all I know experienced all, and sensed all.

His letters were pessimistic about his future as a poet, because he was writing unfashionable poems in a provincial town. When he sent off his poems to be printed, the puzzled editor told him that the poems had "an insubstantiality, a dream-like quality" that reminded him of automatic writing. Thomas swore he was wrong and his facility was in reality, tremendously hard work: "I write at the speed of two lines an hour. I have written hundreds of poems, and each one has taken me a great many painful, brain-racking and sweaty hours."

In one of his letters concerning his father's health, Dylan wrote that D.J. was about to retire, which meant Dylan had to "face the bitter world alone". In another letter, he wrote that he had to earn money. He was trying to write a novel, hoping that it would be more profitable than poetry. Again he was not optimistic.

In a letter to Pamela, he wrote that he was thinking of becoming an actor or going to Russia with a Welsh Communist organisation. But he knew what would happen: "I sink back into a usual lethargy and continue to write of my

uncommercial maggots." This was nothing like the tone of his early letters to Pamela. He was then writing that "there is no necessity for the artist to do anything. There is no necessity. He is a law unto himself, and his greatness or smallness rises or falls by that. " This was Thomas's true philosophy. But now that he thought himself in love with Pamela, he was thinking about practical bourgeois matters like getting a job.

On May 9, he started writing a long, neurotic letter that was not finished until the 13th. He was telling that he was "ill as hell" and could not sleep at all. He was having trouble with writing: "The old fertile days are gone and now a poem is the hardest and most thankless act of creation." His letter continued:

I have written a poem since my last letter, but it is so entirely obscure that I dare not let it out even unto the eyes of such a kind and commiserating world as your. I am getting more obscure day by day. It gives me now a physical pain to write poetry... I shall never be understood. I think I shall send no more poetry away, but write stories alone. All day yesterday I was working, as hard as a navvy, on six lines of a poem. I finished them, but had, in the labour of them, picked and cleaned them so much that nothing but their barbaric sounds remained. Or if I did write a line "My dead upon the orbit of a rose", I saw that "dead" did not mean "dead", "orbit" not "orbit" and "rose" most certainly not "rose". Even "upon" was a syllable too many, lengthened for the inhibited reason of rhythm. My lines *all* my lines, are of the tenth intensity. They are not the words that express what I want to express; they are the only words I can find that come near to expressing a half. And that's no good.

I'm a freak user of words, not a poet. That's really the truth. No self pity there.

It was Whitsun a week later, and Thomas spent that Sunday with his new friend Glyn Jones, "a nice, handsome young man with no vices". The next day, Whit-Monday (May 21), while Dylan was in the gloomy parish church, he fantasised about Black Masses and satanic rectors. He said he could feel evil "oozing out of the walls." This letter to Pamela was probably written on the same day:

the eye of truth, tired of romancing, turns back with a material squint on myself, and marks the torture in my too-bony hand and the electric livingness in the bodies of the goldfish I carry in the lining of my hat... I am tortured today by every doubt and misgiving that an hereditarily twisted imagination, an hereditary thirst and a commercial quenching, a craving for a body not my own, a chequered education and too much egocentric poetry, and a wild, wet day in a tided town, are capable of conjuring up out of their helly deeps.

Thomas repeats the phrase "helly deeps", and writes a tormented passage about words:

There is torture in words, torture in their linking and spelling, in the snail of their course... In the beginning was a word I can't spell, not a reversed Dog, or a physical light, but a word as long as Glastonbury and as short as pith. Nor does it lisp like the last word, break wind like Balzac through a calligraphied window, but speaks out sharp and everlastingly with the intonations of death and doom on the magnificent syllables. I wonder whether I love your word,

the word of your hair... the word of your voice. The word of your flesh, and the word of your presence.

This strange passage of Thomas reminds his previous deep thoughts about the poem, where "dead" didn't mean dead and "rose" didn't mean rose. He was close to his great obsession. For him, words had a disturbing quality. In his poem "Especially when the October wind", Thomas seemed to enter a nightmare-like state, shut inside "a tower of words". In an early version of the poem, words sounded like a punishment. "Chained by syllables at hand and foot", he tried to escape into an ordinary way of life, and so "be no words' prisoner". A question comes in mind: Was he striking a pose or expressing a true dilemma? According to his friend, Glyn Jones, one of Thomas's favourite quotations was the Biblical "In the beginning was the word." Thomas said his poems began with words, not ideas. He believed that every writer worked either "*out of words*" or "*in the direction of them*", and he said this all his life in his letters, talks and book reviews. He believed poetry should begin "with the substance of words." He was obsessed with the idea.

Thomas loved the horrors of the physical world. He imagined goldfish squirming on his scalp. Wriggling things and small creatures, especially mice, both fascinated and repelled him. He used to invent "tortures". He imagined eating a sandwich of honey and mouse, and being "naked in a bath of white mice". Another of his fancies was a sandwich of dried eyes. Thomas made it enjoyable as well as horrific with his successive layers of a nightmare that becomes the material for the story that frightens him, producing more sensations that he can enjoy talking about afterwards. He would suddenly turn up and say "How *often* have you thought of cancerous meat?" Or he would tell amusing stories about how he poured boiling water on decaying meat and the meat screamed. In one of

the *Portrait* stories occurred a severed lip with a moustache, lying on the pavement.

Thomas, using his morbid imagination, also made drawings in his early twenties, which are now destroyed. People having their throats cut, bad dreams, a world-devouring ghost creature biting out genitals, women with milk coming from them, a half-wit running through a wood obviously came out of the same imagination as his early stories. In his stories, heads burst open, someone drinks a cup of semen and bird's blood, intestines dribble from a rabbit, madmen howl, a doctor grafts a cat's head on to a chicken, mostly managing to be both tedious and unpleasant, but still important to Thomas.

He used this striking imagination of his in his poetry as well. He felt that he was caught in the machinery of his own flesh and blood, and this caused him to produce his anatomical poems. His body was a trap, thus a horror to him. In one of his notebook poems, he wrote of "man.... like a mole within his fleshy prison", and in another, "the jailing skin". One of his friends remember him saying, "To be able to tear off my flesh, to get rid of this awful, horrifying skin we have, to get at the bone and then to get rid of that! What a wonderful thing!", after drinking non-stop for three days. When he became a public performer, he spoke of himself as if someone else, about "that creature whose sad-sack body encircles me and whose fat head wakes up on my pillow every morning".

Thomas was writing letters to a short-lived weekly paper *Swansea and West Wales Guardian*, which was advocating communism, compulsory sterilisation and free clinics for psycho-analysis. In one of his letters, "A Plea for Intellectual Revolution", he wrote about an important name, Stephen Spender:

once I walked with Spender along a desolate London street, late one rainy afternoon. "The streets of London - after the revolution", he said, and pointed to the empty shops, the bare stones and the grey mist over them. And London, to us, was like a city of the dead. We imagined the silence and the distant noise of guns. There would be stillness and greyness, and blood in the streets. On a hill of bones we imagined the last financier counting his pennies before they shot him down...

Spender says that he wanted to meet Thomas after reading his poems. He took William Plomer with him. They found Thomas painfully shy, and Spender said, "We talked above his head, I suppose". He doesn't remember talking about the revolution; they just walked in St. James's Park and laughed at a statue, that's all.

One Saturday, Thomas and his friend Jones went to Aberystwyth to see Caradoc Evans, the writer whose novels and stories about Wales offended his fellow-countrymen. After they had tea with Evans, Thomas and Jones stayed the night in a hotel. While Thomas was lying on his bed, smoking and absent-mindedly burning holes in the sheet, Jones told him the story of Dr. William Price, who was an unusual Welsh man who called his illegitimate son Jesus Christ and burned his body on a hill when the child died. Thomas turned this strange story into a more peculiar one and called it "The Burning Baby".

According to some critics, Thomas's poems are influenced by Welsh verse. It may be true technically, since traces of classic devices which are alien to English poetry are seen in some of Thomas's own poetry. For example, *Cynghanedd*, which is a complex and obligatory system of alliteration and internal rhyme within each line, is claimed to be used in his poetry. Thomas is also said to have

been influenced by Gerard Manley Hopkins who taught him Welsh. Thomas denied it in spite of the fact that he wrote a number of poems within strict patterns of rhyme and metre, which is characteristic of classic Welsh verse. He was usually following the rules that he invented himself for a particular poem, not traditional rules for poets in general. He liked technical virtuosity for its own sake. In "I, in my intricate image" (1935), 72 of the 108 line-endings are variants on the sounds of the letter "L".

In another poem "Prologue" (1952), the first line rhymes with the last which is the 102nd, and so on, going from both ends towards the middle of the poem, where line 51 ends with "farms" rhyming with the 52nd line-ending which is "arms".

Thomas wrote the poem "I dreamed my genesis", which he declared that was "more or less based on Welsh rhythms, and may seem superficially a bit strange at first." The rhythmic basis of the poem is the number of the syllables in each line, not the pattern of stresses which is more characteristic of English verse. Syllable counting is a standard feature of traditional Welsh verse, and Thomas used it in many of his poems. Obviously, there was a connection between Welsh verse and that of Thomas.

THOMAS IN LONDON

In November 1934, Thomas moved to London to share a room with an artist, Fred Janes. In his letter to Trick, he wrote about the district they lived in, that "This is the quarter of the pseudo-artists, of the beards, of the naughty expressions of an entirely out-moded period of artistic importance and of the most boring bohemian parties I have ever thought possible." Thomas always found the raffish and bohemian irresistible and he found the academic a waste of time. So his word "naughty" for other people's outdated ways, was in fact for his own way of doing things. Thomas depicted himself as the naughty boy from the provinces in his novel *Adventures in the Skin Trade*. He started writing it during the war, but never finished it. It is the only piece of fiction that goes on in London; however, London didn't stir his imagination as a subject for he never had the will to complete the story.

After Thomas had his *18 Poems* published (December, 1934), he started receiving attention from the media as a poet. Many favourable reviews were published about him and it was more than enough to launch a poet. Meanwhile, Thomas was doing more drinking than writing. Although he said he loved Pamela, he told her that drink had come between them.

Thomas's circle of friends grew quickly; he met literary journalists, poets, art students, advertising copy-writers, etc. In a letter to Trick in February 1935, he was castigating left-wing intellectuals and politically-committed poets:

Since I've been in London I've come into contact on a number of occasions with intellectual communism and communists... I dislike all of them. Not so much as persons; most of them I assure you would be quite kind to dumb animals; but as revolutionaries and as communists or, born in wealthy, middle-class or upper-middle-class homes, educated at expensive prep-schools, public schools, and universities, they have no idea at all of what they priggishly call "the class struggle", and no contact at all with either any of the real motives or the real protagonists of that class struggle. They are bogus from skull to navel; finding no subjects for their escapist poetry, they pin on a vague sense of propagating the immediate necessity of a social conscience, rather than clear sense of expressing their own un-pro or anti-social consciousnesses. The individual in the mass, and the mass and the individual, can be made poetically important only when the status and position of both mass and individual are considered by that part of the consciousness which is outside both. I shall never, I hope, be mixed up in any of the political ramifications of literary or pseudo-literary London. Honest writing does *not* mix with it. You can't be true to party and poetry - one must suffer. And historically, poetry is the social and economic creed that endures.

Thomas went back to Swansea early in March. He wrote his last letter to Pamela, offering to help in offering to help in editing her second novel - she was a novelist - if she wasn't still angry for "all the silly and careless things I've done". Apology, which appeared in the opening sentence, characterised Thomas's letters. By saying how sorry he was, he was always disarming criticism.

Probably on this same visit to Swansea, Thomas met Vernon Watkins, whom he respected as a poet and a critic. Soon they became close friends, reading their poems aloud to each other and discussing technicalities. Many small details in Thomas's poems are the effect of Watkins. These details were usually single words or phrases like "cloud-sopped hands" in "After the funeral". There may be another reason for their close friendship: Watkins had had a severe nervous breakdown a few years before, and he had been temporarily insane. Madness was one of the subjects that fascinated Thomas. He often referred to it in his early letters and poems and stories. In his story "The Mouse and The Woman", the madman is probably Thomas himself.

In his early days in London, Thomas is said to have had one or two homosexual relationships. According to Oswald Blakeston and the painter Max Chapman, Thomas dabbled in gay behaviour. Chapman, who claimed that they did some kissing, continued "You wouldn't say he was a queer, but he wasn't averse to being affectionate to his own sex if he found them in some way interesting." He also suggested that Thomas at the age of twenty was "more just generally warm and sexual than disposed one way or another. In fact, that technically his ratio of hetero to homo, if any, could not be less than 80:20, which would thus make him accountable as 'normal'." Thomas sent some odd letters to Blakeston fantasising that he was a Rat and Blakeston was a Mouse. In his letter dated March 7, 1936, he wrote, "I haven't seen you for so long, not since we spent an evening in not going to the Queen's Hall, and not since I left you, outside the Cafe' Rat, very rudely for a sillie. I'm coming back, travelling under the seat all the way, nibbling brown paper, at the beginning of next month. Will you meet me? And this time I'll promise not to be bad; I'll powder my snout and not run after hen-rats." It

seems that Thomas was anxious for experience and wanted to have it without any elimination. He was surely drunk.

Grigson and Cameron, two of Thomas's friends, wanted to separate Thomas from Comrade Bottle. Grigson took him to Ireland for a summer holiday. They spent a couple of weeks together, before Grigson returned to his newspaper, leaving Dylan there alone. Thomas worked on stories and poems. His usual fancies were there again in his letter to Daniel Jones, dated August 14:

... it was so late when I came back that I padlocked out the wild Irish night, looked through the window and saw Count Antigarric, a strange Hungarian gentleman who has been scraping an acquaintance (take that literally) with me lately, coming down the hill in a cloak lined with spiders, and, suddenly very frightened, I hurried to bed. This is written in the cold of the next morning, the Count is nowhere to be seen, and it is only the thin mouth-print of blood on the window pane, and the dry mouse on the sill, that brings the night back. It's hard to pick up the night threads; they lead, quite impossibly, into the socket of a one-eyed woman, the rectums of crucified sparrows, the tunnels of coloured badgers reading morbid literature in the dark, and very small bulls, the size of thimbles, mooing in a clavichord.....

When he was back in London in February, 1936, he was in and out of pubs, sleeping wherever there was a spare bed or couch. "I've got death in me" he used to say, for he was unhealthy. Thomas drank beer and told stories, providing instant entertainment. Many people found him the funniest man they ever heard. One of his friends remembers this poem of Thomas to his saloon-bar audience:

There was an old bugger called God
Who put a young virgin in pod
This amazing behaviour
Produced Christ our saviour
Who died on a cross, poor old sod.

By the end of the winter of 1936, Thomas's friends in London thought it was time to send him off for a holiday in the country again, because he was showing signs of stress. His friend Blakeston introduced him to Mrs. Henderson, who had a cottage in Cornwall. She was a writer, a typographer and a publisher, who knew everything about artists - their vagaries and bad habits. When Thomas was back in Wales, early in March 1936, she wrote to him, inviting him to the cottage. Thomas's reply was: "it sounds just what I want it to be, and I can write poems, and stories about vampire sextons deflowering their daughters with very tiny scythes, and draw rude little pictures of three-balled clergymen, and go to pubs and walks with you. It's too lovely to be good; and I'd enjoy it so much." She aimed to look after him and try to stop him going out and drinking too much. He stayed there for a couple of months, working on his final poems for his new book. Around this time he also wrote stories about "vampire sextons", and his fantasies that he produced there in the mid-1930's, were his nearest approach to surrealism, full of nightmarish scenes, hallucinations and dream-episodes.

CAITLIN

*

In 1936, Thomas met Caitlin Macnamara, a dancer, of Protestant Irish parents, who was almost a year older than him. Caitlin was the girl he would marry. Thomas said that their innocence went "awfully deep, and our discreditable secret is that we don't know anything at all, and our horrid *inner* secret is that we don't care that we don't." He stressed the innocence: they were not to be corrupted by the world's dirty devices. In June 1937, they decided to get married and Thomas wrote to his parents as he usually did when an important decision had to be taken:

There's no doubt whatever that I've been a careless, callous, and quite unreasonable person as regards letting you know about myself since I left you at the beginning of April, and, as usual, I've no excuse, and you know me well enough to realise that if I did genuinely have one I wouldn't be long in explaining and elaborating it... I'm staying here with Caitlin Macnamara..... in a cottage.... The cottage is in Lamorna Cove, a beautiful little place full of good fishermen and indifferent visitors. I suppose that I'm piling on the shocks and surprises in this very late letter, but I must tell you too that Caitlin and I are going to be married next week by special licence... Everything will be entirely quiet and undemonstrative, two of the villagers here will be witnesses, and neither of us, of course, has a penny apart from the three pounds which we have carefully hidden in order to pay for the licence. We'll stay on here until the end of the month,

then for a time Caitlin will go home to Hampshire and I'll come back to Wales until I can make just exactly enough money to keep us going until I make just exactly enough money again. It may, and possibly does, sound a rash and mad scheme, but it satisfies us and it's all we ask for. I do hope it won't hurt you; though I know I'm a thoughtless letter-writer and..... a pretty worthless son...

The decision was unwise and a shock to everyone, including Dylan's father and Caitlin's mother. Probably because they didn't have the three pounds for a licence, they were not married until July 11, 1937.

Thomas felt jealousy because of Caitlin's ex-boyfriend Augustus John and he made it obvious even before Thomas and Caitlin started going out. In the year of their marriage, Thomas wasn't much creative. He revised "The spire cranes" and worked on a new poem called "Poem (for Caitlin)", which was completed towards the end of the year. It was a poem with complex half-rhymes, and was later known with its first line, "I make this in a warring absence." It took him almost a year to write this poem which seems to be occasioned by jealousy of Caitlin. The "warring absence" is their separation and the poem reflects something of Thomas's feelings about the former relationship of Caitlin with Augustus John.

From time to time, Thomas seemed to be worried about being unemployed, since he had no regular work. William Empson, a teacher poet, wrote that Thomas told him "how frightening it was always to have nothing to do next day : sometimes, he said, 'I buy a Mars Bar, and I think tomorrow I will eat that, so then I can go to sleep because I have a plan.' I did not much like this highly polished bit of tear-jerking, but there is little doubt that unemployment would have driven me to

drink too." Thomas asked for a job at the B.B.C., but he had the wrong sort of attitude to be a B.B.C. employee.

In 1938, he wrote mostly stories. They were not the kind of stories he had been writing since adolescence. Those stories, which were fantasies and nightmares, should have been published by then, but the printers were afraid of being prosecuted for obscenity. Thomas wanted to know which particular words, phrases or passages were found objectionable. One of the troublesome sentences appeared in a story about clergymen, "The Holy Six", was "The holy life was a constant erection to these six gentlemen." The book was never published.

Thomas continued writing stories that gave him trouble the next year. He wrote a book of prose and poetry called *The Map of Love* which included stories the Church refused to print. One of them was "A Prospect of the Sea" because it had "unwarrantable moments of sensuality." When the story was finally published as the title story of a Thomas collection in 1955, two years after his death, a reference to masturbation, "the death from playing with yourself", was omitted. One thing they didn't recognise was in "The Orchards", an extravagant story about a poet called Marlais. In this story, Thomas invented a few innocent place names and one of them being Llareggub could be read back-wards. Nobody noticed "Llareggub" at the publishers. He liked the joke so much that he used it again later in *Under Milk Wood*. When the publishers realised it, they insisted on spelling it Llaregyb, but this was only after Thomas's death.

The stories he wrote in 1938 and 1939 were published as *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. In these stories, Thomas abandoned surrealism and turned to autobiography in the shape of fiction on the suggestion of Church, who asked for "a tale of the world where your early years have been spent." The story about the

"clean old man", "A Visit to Grandpa's" was the least factual and probably the least successful of the stories. It was taken as an account of D.J. 's father, Thomas the Guard, but according to Florence it was about Thomas the Guard's father, William, who lived in Johnstown until he died, long before Dylan was born. D.J. told Dylan about him.

Another two *Portrait* stories "One Warm Saturday" and "The Peaches" (summer of 1938) were written at Sea View, where he lived with Caitlin after their marriage. "One Warm Saturday" was on the surface about sex but really about loneliness. The Fernhill story, "The Peaches" was "a long story about my true childhood" Thomas said. He called these stories "illuminated reporting" and "mostly potboilers".

Between the spring and the autumn of 1938, Thomas wrote little prose and five poems. One of these poems, "A saint about to fall" was about Caitlin's child that would be born in the New Year. The poem was written in September when Germany invaded Czechoslovakia and there was talk of war. Thomas said "this is a poem written to a child about to be born... and telling it what a world it will see, what horrors and hells... It's an optimistic taking-everything poem. The two most important words are "Cry Joy". The verse he wrote during that period was still difficult with one exception: a short, disturbing poem written for his birthday at the end of October, "Twenty-four years". After all the complicated images of the other poems, the message he was giving was apparent life means death.

Thomas wrote a poem called "January 1939" which was regarded as nonsense by hostile readers. It began with the lines:

Because the pleasure-bird whistles after the hot wires,
Shall the blind horse sing sweeter?

This poem refers to blinding song-birds to improve their singing. Perhaps Thomas is the blind horse. According to his friend, Watkins, the poem originated in one of Thomas's dreams that a blind horse began to sing and a man said, "He sings better now". There are various possible interpretations of the poem, but in general it looks like it's another version of the Poet contemplating himself, his poems and his past, started by the dream and the New Year. The poem is rather esoteric, but not nonsense.

In the autumn of 1942, the Battle of Britain was being fought in Southern England. Thomas was frightened, though he was in, Marshfield, a hundred miles from London. The thought of German troops marching silently up the street terrified him. Invasion seemed about to happen soon that September, and he had nightmares about it. "Deaths and Entrances", a harsh poem about invasion, is one of the few poems he produced during this time.

In a letter to a friend, Thomas wrote, "Today the pipes burst, and Caitlin, in a man's hat, has been running all day with a mop from w.c. to flooded parlour, while I've been sitting down trying to write a poem about a man who fished with a woman for bait and caught a horrible collection." This was completed a few months later and it became the "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait", the longest poem Thomas ever wrote, with 216 lines.

Thomas worked as a script-writer for a company called Strand Films and he was out of poetry business for some time. Then Thomas the Poet was back again. He wrote "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" in which he used familiar ingredients. The subject was a wartime death of a newborn child. At the end of the poem, he raised his voice with:

Glory glory glory
The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder.

There are Biblical references in the poem:

I know the legend
Of Adam and Eve is never for a second
Silent in my service
Over the dead infants

"Vision and Prayer" was a long poem showing a shift towards a Christian position. Perhaps it was a sign of the way Thomas would have liked to go, looking for a solution to believe in, but never managing to do so. Thomas seemed to change his usage of language in "Poem in October". He was being too obvious by making direct statements. Perhaps he was more sure of himself as a poet, perhaps he was trying to get rid of his obscurity. He might as well have been frightened of the war, his drinking and his uncertain future. He needed to feel safe and he thought that some sort of God and childhood might help.

The four poems "This Side of the Truth", "The Conversation of Prayer", "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" and "A Winter's Tale" were ready to be published in a new collection called *Deaths and Entrances* in 1945. "A Winter's Tale" was a tale about death and rebirth. "The Conversation of Prayer" was based on the important line "God works in a mysterious way", a comment on how arbitrary life is. "This Side of the Truth" was a despairing advice to his infant son about the moral indifference of the "unminding skies". "A Refusal to Mourn the Death" had the equivocal last line "After the first death, there is no other". When the poems are read altogether, it seems likely that Thomas gave out the message that death was final. Another

possibility is that the last line might suggest his uncertainties, that he didn't know what to think.

In the same book, there appeared Thomas's probably most famous poem "Fern Hill", which is nostalgic for lost beginnings. The poet will wake to death and "the farm forever fled from the childless land." Thomas was probably responding to unhappiness, also referring to his bad memories of machine-gunning at Majoda. It was a long backward look.

In 1937, Thomas and Caitlin, taking their two children with them, rented a house outside Florence. On the hills, among pine and olive trees where the sun shone, Thomas worked on a poem "the slowest in the world". Here in this place, where there was a swimming pool, fresh food and beautiful views, they were living in luxury when compared with cold cottages and borrowed flats in which they used to live. However, Thomas was restless and uncomfortable. In his letters, he was complaining about the heat, insects and screaming children. In July, he wrote to T.W. Earp in verse:

In a shuttered room I roast
Like a pumpkin in a serra
And the sun like buttered toast
Drips upon the classic terra

adding that he was "awfully sick of it".

"In country sleep" is a poem he wrote during that time. It seems to be addressed to a child, presumably their second child, Aeron. The poet is reassuring someone and warning her at the same time. She is threatened by an unidentified Thief, which is thought to be Time or Death. Thomas told a woman that the poem was not addressed to a child, but to his wife, and the Thief was jealousy. On another

interpretation by one critic who said the poem was about "how it feels to be a father", Thomas is said to have wept, showing a possibility for the remark of being true. On the other hand, his explanation to a reporter was rather different: "Alcohol is the thief today. But tomorrow he could be fame or success or exaggerated introspection or self-analysis. The thief is anything that robs you of your faith, of your reason for being." In short, what is clear about the poem is the idea that faith is being threatened.

C. Gordon Glover, a journalist friend of Thomas, sent him a draft of the article about Thomas which was going to appear in a magazine called *Band Wagon*. Thomas wanted to get it right by taking a straightforward view of himself, so he wrote him a letter on May 25, 1948:

Thanks for "A Poet in a Pub". The titles you boys think up!... It is true to say that I often cover perhaps a hundred sheets of paper in the construction of one poem. But what I said was, that I often covered more than a hundred sheets of paper with drafts, revisions, rewritings, ravings, doodlings and intensely concentrated work to construct a single verse. Nor is this anything to be proud, or ashamed, of. I do not think any better of a verse because it takes weeks, and quires, to complete it. It is just that I work extremely slowly, painfully, in seclusion... Finally, as a "Profile", your admirable article should, I think, have taken, however parenthetically, other aspects of this impermanent, oscillating, rag-bag character into consideration: aspects, I admit, of which you, with great good luck, could have little first-hand knowledge: my basic melancholy; sullen glooms and black studies; atrocious temper; protracted vegetable comas, silences

and disappearances; terror of death, heights, strokes,
mice; shyness and gaucheness; pompous, platitudinary,
repetitive periods of bottom-raking boredom and
boorishness; soulburn, heartdoubt, headspin; my all-
embracing ignorance; my still only half squashed and
forgotten bourgeois petty values; all my excruciating
whimsicality; all my sloth; all my eye!... What a fellow I
sound! Thank God I don't have to meet myself socially,
listen to myself, or except when reluctantly shaving, see
that red, blueberry circle mounted on ballooning body,
that down at soul hick, hack, hock-loving hake which
now inscribes itself.

POEMS FROM THE HUT

In the spring of 1949, the Thomases settled in the Boat House in Laugharne. He immediately wrote a poem to celebrate his return. It was "Over Sir John's Hill", which is the most topographical of his poems. He used the view from the hut, where he sat down and wrote his poems. He wrote about a heron at the water's edge, the songbirds, and the hawk that will strike them - He wrote the last one in order to write about mortality. The heron mourns as dusk falls and so does the poet, "I young Aesop fabling to the near night." Birds, especially the heron had special significance in Thomas's poems. "Over Sir John's hill", with its elegiac statements and natural scenes, is related to "Fern Hill" and "Poem in October" written when he last lived in Wales. In the poem, there's a feeling of divine or fateful judgement.

Early in 1951, Thomas went to Persia for a job. He would write a film for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, about the benefits that British oilmen were bringing to a poor country. When he returned in February, either he never wrote the script, or the film was never made, even if he did. In April, he prepared material for a B.B.C. radio program, called "Persian Oil". The script was highly evocative, mostly about poverty, but included nothing unkind about the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company: "On the blue, boiled water the dhows sail out of the Bible... The vast tribes move, with the heat of the sun, from their winter grounds to the high green places ... Engineers curse their dehydrated ale in the income-classed clubs. The rich are rich. Oil's oily. The poor are waiting."

That spring, Thomas wrote a ribald poem, "Lament", which he described as "coarse and violent". The poet looks back on his sexual life from his death-bed. The poem has a chorus-line that Thomas raised his voice in his reading performances: "Sighed the old ram-rod, dying of women" - in succeeding stanzas, of bitches, welcome, downfall and strangers. Obviously, it reveals Thomas's current frustrations with life. According to one critic, it is an attempt to examine his "inner experience" in an "honest and coherent" way. i.e. His fears of castration and impotence that may have been buried in his earlier poems.

"Do not go gentle into that good night" was addressed to his father, who was then very ill, mainly because of heart trouble. It was written as a villanelle, which was rarely used in English verse, where two rhymes only are used in stanzas of three lines, ending with a stanza of four lines:

Rage, rage against the dying of the light...

Do not go gentle into that good night...

Thomas used this form in order to contain an exhortation to his father to die with anger, not humility. Thomas wrote in a letter that "the only person I can't show it to is, of course, my father, who doesn't know he's dying". In the last stanza, one can see Thomas's concern for the proud man with only "frail deeds" to offer, whose word is still crucial to his son:

And you, my father, there on the sad height,

Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

In both "Lament" and "Do not go gentle into that good night", Thomas was writing plainly on one subject. In the latter case, the subject was his father, who had concerned him deeply all his life. They had a complex relationship. Both

these poems were written in a period of domestic unhappiness, due to quarrels with his wife, Caitlin, and accumulating debts. Perhaps they were an act of boldness, an attempt to confront the demons and break out of the despair that enclosed him.

In the period of summer and autumn of 1951, Thomas wrote or completed only one poem titled, "Poem on his birthday". He took his birthdays seriously ; he was similarly inspired by his birthdays in at least two of his earlier poems: "Twenty - four years" and "Poem in October", just as in "Poem on his birthday". He was waiting for death, passively hoping for the best, counting his blessings on trembling fingers. Thomas also wrote a manuscript summary of the poem. It says, the poet "celebrates, and spurns, his thirty-fifth birthday". Actually, in the summer of 1951, Thomas was approaching his 37th birthday. He must have started working on the poem earlier, perhaps in 1949, but it was substantially written in 1951. The manuscript then continues:

.... Birds and fishes move under and around him on their dying ways, and he, a craftsman in words, toils towards his own wounds which are waiting in ambush for him....
Now exactly half of his three score and ten years is gone...
he looks back at his times: his loves, his hates, all he has seen, and sees the logical progress of death in every thing he has seen and done. His death lurks for him, and for all, in the next lunatic war, and still singing, still praising the radiant earth, still loving, though remotely, the animal creation also gladly pursuing their inevitable and grievous ends, he goes towards his. Why should he praise God, and the beauty of the world as he moves to horrible death? He does not like the deep zero dark and the nearer

he gets to it, *the louder he sings, the higher the salmon
leaps, the shriller the birds carol.*

In the synopsis, he sang the world's praises in a despairing attempt to hide the approach of death. In the poem, he made the despair gentler in effect, declaring that

... the closer I move
To death, one man through his sundered hulks,
The louder the sun blooms
And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults;
And every wave of the way
And gale I tackle, the whole world then,
With more triumphant faith
Than ever was since the world was said,
Spins its morning of praise...

Some of the phrases suggest Thomas's mood:

Yet, though I cry with tumbledown tongue,
Count my blessing aloud.

Dylan Thomas was rapidly gaining fame, especially in the last few years of his life. He was being invited to different places to read his poetry himself.

Therefore, his reputation was growing rapidly. Apart from a few exceptions, the media's praises were uncritical. A reporter in the *Observer* wrote that Thomas was "the greatest living poet" in English. While he was in Llanelli: to read poems to the theatre club, a local reporter asked what he thought about the phrase "greatest living poet". Thomas modestly said that he must have meant somebody else. This was perhaps more than modesty. He seemed to lose his confidence.

Soon after, in November, he wrote a long, purple-prose letter and talked about giving up writing altogether:

My need - as I imagine it - to write, may be all conceit.
The bellows that fan the little flicker is nothing but wind,
after all... Ach, my endless bleating of private woes
because I am not allowed to write, as though the trees
would grow in-ward, like toenails if I renounced this
passion for selfglorification. "Peace, let me write. Gag the
tradesmen, I must write. Alms, for the love of writing.
"Perhaps I should be better off pulling teeth. But even
this momentary disgust I blame upon the weather. And
even this disgust is "material for writing" just as trees,
and toenails, and glorification, and teeth.

Thomas lived in Laugharne for four and a half years before he died in November 1953. He wrote only six poems during that time, with the subject being himself as usual. He also filled the poems with scenes and creatures from nature, celebrating the world, but seeing death in the living: "Now curlew cry me down to kiss the mouths of their dust."

In the last year of his life, Thomas's health was not satisfactory at all. He often suffered from chest problems, like flu, bronchitis and "breathlessness", which was the result of asthma and smoking. He also had gastritis and gout, but never consulted the family doctor for any health problem, since he was going to appear in several campus reading and public performances in Boston, New England, New York and Cambridge.

He finished his radio play *Under Milk Wood*, which was destined for the B.B.C. The Americans wanted it for stage performance and since they paid better, it was

performed on stage with Thomas himself as "First Voice." Thomas said to a journalist that it was "prose with blood-pressure."

On his father's death, Thomas worked on a poem called "Elegy" which was not finished:

Too proud to die, broken and blind he died
The darkest way, and did not turn away,
A cold, kind man brave in his burning pride
On the darkest day...

Found in his notebook, there were some manuscript notes that went:

The magnificence of suffering.
Live, Damn you, again.
Dying in agony.
His body burned until he died
And then she slid into the fire

What were his eyes saying? My son, I am burning.

There were also some verses, about his parents, showing sadness in a pitiful way. Perhaps Thomas wrote when he was drinking; perhaps he wrote for relief while the children played beyond the house and artillery thumped on the Pendine range:

Come back, come back, Mother
Oh Mother Oh Mother Oh Mother
Come back to your only son
And sorry for what he done.

AT DEATH'S DOOR

When Thomas went to New York in October 1953, his health got worse. Probably for his symptoms of general malaise and his gout, he was given an injection of ACTH, which was a new treatment at the time. As he was aware of the seriousness of his ill-health, he started calling Caitlin "my widow", and he said in a conversation that he would have to "give up something"; he meant life. He was seen to be avoiding alcohol at a party and when he was asked why, he said, "It's just that I've seen the gates of hell, that's all." However, he did continue drinking and appearing in his performances, although he had to stay in bed quite often. Even in bed, he was drinking. When his pain became unbearable, his doctor gave him a sedative which was morphine. There has been a debate ever since, because morphine is too powerful and addictive to be used as a treatment merely for discomfort and malaise. Under no circumstances would it be given for gout or gastritis. Adding to that, the doctor gave him a large amount of morphine. In order to relieve acute pain, one-sixth of a grain is the normal dose. However, Thomas was given half a grain of morphine, which is three times as much, and the effect could be catastrophic if he had difficulty in breathing.

Meanwhile, between doses, Thomas was saying that he had been having "the horrors", and he was speaking about "abstractions, triangles and squares and circles", echoing his words to Pamela long ago, when he told her how he lay in the dark and thought of "God and Death and Triangles".

On November 5, he was under intensive care in a private Roman Catholic hospital, where he lay in a coma for the following four and a half days. At lunch time on Monday, (November 9, 1953) Thomas died. According to the post-mortem, the primary cause of death was pneumonia, with "pial oedema" which is the pressure on the brain, as the immediate cause and a fatty liver which is the sign of a heavy drinker, as an "antecedent". There were other signs associated with alcoholism, and Thomas's death was classified under two headings : "Acute and chronic ethylism", which means the same as alcoholism, and "Hypostatic bronchopneumonia". As far as the pathologist was concerned, Thomas died of drink...

Dylan Thomas was a brilliant talker and reader of poetry, a joker, a reckless and impulsive man whose life was full of emotional ups and downs. He died young enough for tears, having kept up his performance or caricature to the last. His obituary which appeared in the London Times, was provided by his friend, Watkins : "Innocence is always a paradox, and Dylan Thomas presents, in retrospect, the greatest paradox of our time."

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