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THE POETRY OF DYLAN THOMAS: ORIGINS AND ENDS OF EXISTENCE

JOAN MONTGOMERY BYLES

*Death and evil are twin spectres.
What shall destruction count if these
are fixtures?*

—JOHN DONNE



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THOMAS PRESENTS TO US, with unusual insistence and intensity, the problem of the relationship between the inner and outer life. This is essentially a philosophic and psychological problem with a long history. The relationship between mind and external reality has been given a great deal of attention in the history of Western thought. My own interests are mostly in the psychological aspects of this problem. Thomas was deeply aware of the unconscious mind, and through his poetry he was able to draw on it as an instinctive and intuitive source for creating his poetry. Most of Thomas' poems are extremely personal; the outer world and everything and everyone in it are seen in relation to himself. It is only in his greatest poems that he really achieves an outer vision in which objective reality is the starting point for a vision which, including the poet's own subjectivity, then reaches out to the world around it; the effect is a radiance of vision unsurpassed in twentieth-century British poetry. As many commentators have pointed out, Thomas had affinities with D. H. Lawrence in his understanding of the unconscious mind. However, Lawrence thought of the unconscious as directly opposed to the conscious, instinct versus intellect, and he sought to use instinctual knowledge to change the world. To analyze emotion or the instinctual life was the way to kill it, Lawrence thought. Thomas has no interest in society as such. As a poet he seeks to fuse, to unite the unconscious and conscious modes of being, which is why his language is so dense and difficult. It is why, I think, his poems have little development in themselves; they are based around a central image or mood or feeling. One pronounced theme in his work is the serious implacable role of death, which is seen as a process of aging; his poetry puts dying rather than death at the center. Death and birth are one for Thomas—a going into darkness and a coming from darkness. The theme of death allows him his greatest development as a poet. It is the serious focus of his imagination and accounts for much of the pressure of his imagery and the feelings behind it. The theme of birth allows him to explore the origins of life and to celebrate childhood.

The double vision that includes child and adult in Thomas' poetry has much to do with his perpetual need to express the continuity of his own evolving identity. (In the man himself there was undoubtedly a serious weakness—his inability to deal with life adequately—but that is a fact above criticism.) In the poem "If my head hurt a hair's foot" the poet celebrates, with his mother, his birth:

*'If my head hurt a hair's foot
Pack back the downed bone. If the unpricked ball of my breath
Bump on a spout let the bubbles jump out.
Sooner drop with the worm of the ropes round my throat
Than bully ill love in the clouted scene.*

*'All game phrases fit your ring of a cockfight:
I'll comb the snared woods with a glove on a lamp,
Peck, sprint, dance on fountains and duck time
Before I rush in a crouch the ghost with a hammer, air,
Strike light, and bloody a loud room.*

*'If my bunched, monkey coming is cruel
Rage me back to the making house. My hand unravel
When you sew the deep door. The bed is a cross place.
Bend, if my journey ache, direction like an arc or make
A limp and riderless shape to leap nine thinning months.'*

*'No. Not for Christ's dazzling bed
Or a nacreous sleep among soft particles and charms
My dear would I change my tears or your iron head.
Thrust, my daughter or son, to escape, there is none, none, none,
Nor when all ponderous heaven's host of waters breaks.*

*'Now to awake husked of gestures and my joy like a cave
To the anguish and carrion, to the infant forever unfree,
O my lost love bounced from a good home;
The grain that hurries this way from the rim of the grave
Has a voice and a house, and there and here you must couch
and cry.*

*'Rest beyond choice in the dust-appointed grain,
At the breast stored with seas. No return
Through the waves of the fat streets nor the skeleton's thin ways.
The grave and my calm body are shut to your coming as stone,
And the endless beginning of prodigies suffers open.'*¹

In the first three stanzas the unborn child gallantly offers to stay where he is should his birth give his mother pain. In the remaining three stanzas the mother replies that, once started, the process of life must continue to the end. There is no going back. There are many conflicting images in the poem: the child bumped "on a spout" and "forever unfree" must be "bounced" from the womb into life. The rim of the grave is both tomb and womb, both of which are crying houses. There is no choice, once born, but to live, no physical act that corresponds with regression. There is "no return" and the last line of the poem celebrates this "And the endless beginning of prodigies suffers open." Significantly, a poem about enclosures, exits, and entrances ends with the word "open."

In the splendid poem "Fern Hill" Thomas celebrates not how it feels to be young, but how it feels to have been young. Time, which elsewhere Thomas sees "murdering me," broods over the poem. Time is our indomitable enemy; it steals up on you when you are not looking and steals your life away—day by day, hour by hour; there is no escape, only endurance. Youth

1. Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems*, rev. ed., ed. D. Jones (London: Dent & Co., 1974). All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

is an ignorant escape that time allows for a short period. Like Shakespeare's great sonnet sequence on the theme of time, "Fern Hill" is a poem, an art object that can defeat time. The poem is Thomas' triumph over his lament for lost youth, for the inevitable process of aging and dying. The green and golden joy of childhood and the gloomy sorrow of maturity become a timeless art object: the poem itself that transcends time. Yet the poem insists that, led by time and at his mercy even when "young and easy," the poet knows now that time has always "held" him. Once green he was dying like all green things, as the sea sings in its chains of moon and sun, so the young boy sang then the tuneful morning songs that time allows. Waking to death, the poet still sings in the prison of his flesh and his psyche.

FROM HIS EARLIEST POETRY, such as "If my head hurt a hair's foot," Thomas had an acute sense of the need to create relationship—for poetry. Wordsworth said, in a memorable phrase, that the poet carries everywhere relationship and love. These two capacities should not be separated; indeed, they should remain indivisible. Thomas' sense of relationship and love within human time allowed him to progress poetically from the early poems on death and dying as a totally unacceptable end to a gradual realization and discovery that life and death, childhood and old age, the unconscious individual life force (Eros) and its opposite, the unconscious death instinct (Thanatos), are all aspects of a rich mutuality. This realization forced Thomas to write the poem that made him famous, "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower," published 12 October 1933 in *The Sunday Referee*.

*The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.*

*And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.*

*The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
Turns mine to wax.*

*And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.*

*The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.*

*And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.*

*The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.*

*And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.*

*And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.*

The poem is a marvel of denseness and clarity. The theme is familiar. Life and death, says the poet, are parts of the natural process that links him to all that is in the external world, links inner with outer, and links that which is below the surface with that which is above and on all sides. The poem is nothing short of an anatomy of the world whose elements of water, wind, rocks, and plants fuse with vein, mouth, hand, lips, womb, tomb, and worm. Such unity and duality, conflict and union speak for that struggle between conscious and unconscious modes of being, for the need for unity, and for that relatedness and love of which Wordsworth spoke. The poem celebrates not only the elemental in the world of nature, but the elemental in the nature of human beings, the dual forces of love and death, Eros and Thanatos. These dual forces, Freud has taught us, are the basic forces in our psyche. They are also the basic forces and motivating power in Thomas' poetry. He was an elemental poet, concerned ultimately only with life and death: "light and dark are no enemies, but one companion." The rhythmic insistence of the poem and its repetitive syntax suggest universal force and inevitability. But the effect of much of the imagery is to express the poet's emotional resistance to that message. His difficulty is to make a position for himself which will free him from the role of passive victim of age and the aging process. The poet must find that element of freedom within himself which will enable him to control through endurance the overwhelming sense of time as a violent enemy. The persistent acceptance on the one hand and the questioning of the ultimates of existence on the other suggest a deep awareness of the contradictions that life offers. As well as joy in a sense of oneness in the poem, there is also anxiety, doubt, and despair. In this poem the poet is dumb to tell; yet, he must speak out, must articulate about the silence of the life processes of decay and death.

Thomas was not an orthodox Christian, but in some of the later poems he implies that death is redeemed by love. Although Thomas writes of love, he is not an erotic poet; however, sex is central to his thought. He is less erotic than D. H. Lawrence, almost clinical at times. Sex is essentially a mystery to him. Without it all is separate, and no living thing can overcome this separateness; by it, all things are made one:

*And taken by light in her arms at long and dear last
I may without fail
Suffer the first vision that set fire to the stars.*
(*"Love in the Asylum"*)

Thomas sought complete identification with his inner and outer worlds. When he achieved this there was a sort of oneness most of us experience only in our dreams. Our dreams are full of images from our external everyday world; yet to understand them we need more than language. As Freud suggested, we need to re-enact our dreams in our waking world. Thomas tries to do this in his poetry, hence the ever-present moment sense in his poems even when he is writing of the past. This helps explain his sense of the relationships between conscious and unconscious mind, between the individual and his life-history and experience, and of the intensity of the relationship between subject and object. There is a dynamic interplay in the best of his poetry between these forces, and it is in the language that the relatedness is to be found, sometimes clearly and sometimes obscurely. Discovery

of the self in time is inseparable from discovery of the world in which one finds oneself. The limitations of this world are love and death. Love and death, the poet discovers, are aspects of the same power.

THOMAS' HABIT OF WRITING POEMS on his birthday shows a keen sense of the passage of time. As the years go by, it is quite natural that one's birthday should put in mind death; one is usually acutely aware of the diminishing years. Thomas wrote four birthday poems, the first in 1934 when he was twenty, "Especially when the October wind," the second in 1938, "Twenty-Four years," the third in 1944, "Poem in October," and the fourth in 1951, "Poem on his birthday." The theme of his first birthday poem (as of many of his other poems) is poetry and the writing of a poem. Making a poem is a defiance of death, the word being time's only foe. The important verbs are make, tell, and spell. Thomas was born at that time of the year "when yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang, / Upon those boughs which shake against the cold" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 73), the time of the year's decline into winter. "Twenty-Four years" concentrates many ideas and feelings, and emphasizes words like years, fears, and tears. The poet's history begins in the third line. As embryo tailor he sews the "shroud" for his life and death. His journey, a walk to the grave, is under the "meat-eating sun" of time. Shroud is both flesh and winding sheet, and the grave he advances toward is sexual experience as well as tomb. "Dressed to die" in his shroud of flesh, he is dressed to kill, dressed for death, and, by a familiar pun, dressed to make love. The final direction of the last line is his end in two senses: death and his chosen course in life.

Throughout his first two books of poems, *Eighteen Poems* (1934) and *Twenty-five Poems* (1936), the themes of time's irrevocable passage and death's inevitable approach are dominant, and his fear of death keeps him somewhat Christian even though he longs to move away from the "spent lie." But over the years his attitude toward death became pantheistic, which is clear in his last two birthday poems. "Poem in October," written in 1944, begins the celebration of childhood that was to culminate in "Fern Hill," that marvelous green and golden world of ease and innocence. The quality of light in the poem is impressive in its contrast with the darkness of many of Thomas' preceding poems whose themes had been birth and death. There is an intense and radiant sense of connectedness between the poet, the natural world of the heron, the gull, and the sea in all its moods and symbolic significances. The poem is flooded with holy light and a lyrical sense of oneness with nature: "My birthday began with the water- / Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name." The poet climbs heaven's hill toward sunlight in the autumn rain, a birthday "shower" of all his days, as the heron, returning to water, dives. The radiance of the poem has much to do with its water images, "the sea wet church," the "heron / Priested shore," and the beckoning morning, "water praying." There are two times and two weathers in the poem: time past and present, the weather before and after it turns around. "Turning," the great word of transformation and time, is the last word in the poem.

"Poem on his birthday" (1951) is the fourth and last of the birthday poems; birth and autumn again remind the poet of death and "fabulous, dear God." God is precisely that, fabled and mythical, rather than the orthodox Christian

God of the early poems. As the poet celebrates and spurns his birthday, herons, parodying him, “spire and spear.” The time is, of course, October, whose sun is yellow, small, hot as “mustardseed,” and inconsiderable as “sand-grain.” The day is full of motion, and the motion is a journey on the sea of death. As the animals, the seals, and the fish in the sea “work at their ways to death” so the poet “sings, towards anguish.” “Far at sea” with minnows, dolphins, and seals, the poet works like his animal companions to a common end. But the end is not so much “eternity” in the face of a “fabulous” god but poetry itself. In the “drowned ship” the voyager hears his age struck by a sunken ship’s bell. The poet once more emerges in light from darkness as the poet of “Vision and Prayer.” But as in the earlier poems, both God and heaven remain vague. Thomas’ long struggle through the dark of “midlife” seems accomplished, but there is still much confusion in this light. He is not secure in it, but lost in it, and it is fitting that he should be lost in this light on a “voyage to ruin,” to oblivion. The greatest blessing is the view his pantheism allows him: his delight and interconnectedness with nature, especially with the “ramshackling sea” that is also that sea of unconscious yearning for death, which “hides his secret selves / Deep in its black.” The last stanza of this poem suggests Thomas’ paradoxical vision of life and death, faithless yet faithful as he “sails out to die.”

I HAVE DELIBERATELY NOT DEALT at any great length with Thomas’ most famous poems, those in all the anthologies, but they also suggest the serious and implacable role of death and dying as the primary focus of his poetry. In “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London” and “Do not go gentle into that good night,” powerful poetic utterances are shaped by a dignified defiance of age and death. In particular, the latter poem, addressed to his father, is a deeply felt and rarely expressed tribute of a son to his father who is near death. The simple theme of “Do not go gentle” is embodied in two rhymed words, “night” and “light,” death and life. Do not, he tells his father, accept death quietly, but, raging, affirm life while dying. Yet the night of death is also “that good night,” the rightful end of a natural and inevitable process, and Thomas suggests that even when we rage against it we must accept it. “Good night” is also good-bye, an implicit prayer. The four tercets that follow the first speak of four different kinds of men who all meet death in their own ways: “Wise men,” philosophers perhaps, who knowing death “know dark is right.” The “Good men” seem moralists, who having avoided the pleasures of life cannot accept death after such a life. The “Wild men,” lovers of life and action, grieve at the thought of death and dying. “Grave men,” the most important of all and the climax toward which the poet has been writing, are the poets themselves. Grave means serious, concerned intimately with birth, life, and death, whose proximity increases their gravity. But in their closeness to death comes a blinding light, one that ensures vision but also makes it impossible to see.

Dylan Thomas died when he was forty; he never had to go through the actual process of aging. Yet, in imagination he had been where most of us go along the path of three score years and ten, leaving us with these dubiously comfortable last words:

“After the first death, there is no other.”



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