

Evelyn J. Broy

## THE ENIGMA OF DYLAN THOMAS

WHEN DYLAN THOMAS DIED of alcoholic poisoning in New York in 1953 at the age of thirty-nine, the dissolute sordidness of the circumstances shocked not only strangers, but the many friends who knew him well. The thousands of words, critical and personal, written recently by his various friends, critics, and admirers, make the tremendous ambivalence in Thomas's nature once more strikingly apparent and, this time, exciting too much curiosity to be ignored. What is the enigma that made one human being out of these two contradictory people: the man who died of an overindulgence in material "pleasures" and the poet, in love with the beauty and pure adventure of the spirit?

Religion is not a word one would readily have associated with the name of Dylan Thomas during his lifetime, and certainly not with the manner of his dying. Yet his poetry is filled with religious symbols and images and with deep, though not orthodox, religious feeling. Some critics have insisted that Thomas was a religious poet; others have asserted just as firmly that he was not. In Ernest Warnock Tedlock's collection of essays, *Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet*, there is to be found every shade of opinion, on both sides, varying, for instance, from John Wain's to that of D. S. Savage. Wain says, "religion seems to me Thomas's worst pitch; he never succeeds in making me feel that he is doing more than thumbing a lift from it." Savage, on the other hand, writes, "Thomas makes central and not merely peripheral use of images and terminology drawn from Christian mythology, history and doctrine. And, of course, his perspectives are themselves those of religious insight." Hyman A. Kleinman, who wrote a complete analysis of the "Religious Sonnets", sums up his findings with these words: "I believe the sonnets are a deeply moving statement of religious perplexity concluding in spiritual certainty. . . . The poem begins with a sonnet mocking the descent of the Word; it concludes in a spiralling ascent of faith." Henry Treece, in *Dylan Thomas: Dog Among the Fairies*, arrives at his own conclusions on the question of re-

ligion in Thomas's poems. Referring to the poem "Vision and Prayer", he finds that "The poet has openly accepted God's love and has rejoiced in his acceptance. . . . This poem ends in a burst of confessional self-abnegation very reminiscent of Francis Thompson's *Hound of Heaven*." Moreover, Treece believes, "his successive poems have testified . . . to his acceptance of religion and his need for prayer."

These opinions, even based as they are on intensive analytical study of Thomas's poems, are merely opinions. Whatever the basic reason for the undeniable presence of religious elements in the poems, the significant fact is this presence. It is not possible to explain it away as insincere poetic convention or even as the influence of religious poets, such as Vaughan and Hopkins, whose work he much admired; nor can it be completely a result of the thorough knowledge of the Bible that he acquired as a child: mere knowledge does not engender good poetry. A poem is a part of the emotional life of the poet; it is more—it is a structure, in words, of his life. If there is religion in this poetic structure, it is because it is of vital significance to the poet.

At this point it should be observed that there is also a sexual element, so strong as to be obsessive, in Thomas's poetry. This is as undeniable as the religious element and, in itself, it poses no puzzle. It is the interaction of the two, the religious and the sexual, that is significant in Thomas's ambivalence. Much has been written about this interaction, and Francis Scarfe, in his essay, "Dylan Thomas: A Pioneer", finds a "dualism" used by Thomas to bring together these two elements:

. . . the life-death problem in Dylan Thomas is as unresolved as the sex-sin problem. These dualisms are again related to a theological dualism, body-soul . . . [implying] here that the triumph of the body is death of the spirit. . . . It is only owing to this primitive interpretation that Thomas is able to confuse sexual and spiritual values in the ten "religious" sonnets.

It is a sentence by Karl Shapiro in *Poetry*, 87, however, that acts as a catalyst for the many different elements of Thomas's life and of his poetry that are revealed by extensive reading of relevant published material. Shapiro's enlightened analysis seems to have achieved the correct perspective on Thomas's ambivalence. Writing of the similarities and differences of Hopkins and Thomas, he concludes by stating that "God, in various attributes is the chief process in Hopkins' view of the world; sex is the chief process in Thomas's view of the world." This is not to exclude religion entirely from Thomas's view, for earlier Shapiro has said, ". . . the ten sonnets . . . reveal most of what we know of Thomas's convictions and what we can call his philosophy. He

believed in God and Christ; the Fall and death; the end of all things and the day of eternity. . . ." The significant sentence reads, "The activity of sex, Thomas hopes in his poems, will somehow lead us to love in life and in the cosmos." If this is kept in mind while studying the main points of Thomas's writings and his life, the reason for his ambivalence, as well as its nature, will become clear. His prose writings should be considered but not his poetry, which—though basically revealing—must first be stripped of several concealing layers of artistic subterfuge susceptible of many contradictory interpretations. Many critics, indeed, have found Thomas incomprehensible; not so William York Tindal who, in *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas*, elucidates and explicates all the poems with such authoritative insight as to make his book a definitive work on Thomas's poems. Since he knew Thomas well, he is also able to relate the poems to details of Thomas's personal life—a fact which is important, as will be shown.

Dylan Thomas wrote very little prose that is officially autobiographical, and even less that deals with religion. His stories in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* are recollections of his childhood and youth, and—being rich with description and alive with feeling—they reveal much of the nature of the young Dylan Thomas. He is mischievous, scared, belligerent, and warm-hearted; exceptionally curious about the secret, adult world; imaginative to an extraordinary degree and sensitive to beauty; yet fascinated by the ugly, more earthy, Rabelaisian details of life. Any references to religion seem to be connected with his young cousin, Gwilym, who was training to be a preacher. There is significance in Thomas's writing about him, for even though Gwilym, practising his sermons in a barn with a dusty wagon for a pulpit, provides an interesting anecdote, he is also the means by which Thomas communicates something much deeper: his own, perhaps subconscious, conflict between religion and sex. "He [Gwilym] . . . began to talk about the towns he had visited on a religious tour . . . with their lakes and luxury gardens, their bright coloured streets roaring with temptation. . . . 'I met actress after actress', he said." Thomas took his friend, Jack, to hear Gwilym in the barn. Jack said, afterwards:

"I don't like Gwilym, he's barmy."

"No, he isn't. I found a lot of poems in his bedroom once. They were all written to girls. And he showed them to me afterwards, and he'd changed all the girls' names to God."

"He's religious."

"No, he isn't, he goes with actresses. He knows Corinne Griffith."

The young Dylan used a very strange argument to prove that Gwilym was not "barmy", and an extraordinary defence against the accusation of being religious. As in all Thomas's prose writings, it is difficult to separate fact from fantasy; and his tales sometimes soar with sublime magic and then, meeting some great turbulence, plummet into a sink-hole. Whether this story is remembered fact or a later embroidery of fiction, it is clear evidence of the writer's conflict between religion and sex.

In another story, "Who Do You Wish Was With Us", young Dylan says to his friend, Ray Price, "I wish Gwilym was here, too. . . . He could give a sermon to the sea. . . . Oh, the beloved sunset! Oh, the terrible sea! Pity the sailors, pity the sinners, pity Raymond Price and me! Oh! the evening is coming like a cloud! Amen. Amen." Whether these words were really used by the young boy Dylan is not important; they were written by Thomas himself, as a young man, and they are not empty oratory. They reveal religious feelings of a basic rather than a theological kind: the awareness of beauty and of fear, a consciousness of guilt and an apprehension for the future, compassion, and a strong wish to be done with life in a world he already finds too difficult to cope with. There are other examples of what seems to be a yearning to be enveloped in the "cloud" of "evening", the "good, dark night".

The last two stories in this book show Thomas no longer as a child, but as a young man: a very young man in love with the seamy side of life. "Old Garbo" is a brutally clear picture of people at their lowest level of degradation, written in complete objectivity but with a relentless, almost sadistic attention to sordid detail. In "One Warm Saturday" the reader is given a perfect example of Thomas's ambivalence. The young man (obviously the author) engages in what seems to be his first sexual adventure, with a young prostitute. All through, until the stark, anticlimatic ending, both the occasion and the woman are glorified by his inward sight; he quite ignores the reality, which is extremely sordid. Dylan Thomas states, here, that the reality of sexual "love" is depressingly disappointing compared with the glory that the intellect or imagination can make of it, and that in the end, one is left with dirt, decay, and despair. It is understandable, therefore, that Thomas with this viewpoint could never see sex and religion as compatible.

The talks which Thomas broadcast over the B.B.C., between 1943 and 1954, and published under the title, *Quite Early One Morning*, did not refer to sex, and the poems he chose to read were nearly all religious in tone. He was especially fond of reading Henry Vaughan; in 1946, he read "The Night":

There is in God (some say)  
 A deep, but dazzling darkness; as we here  
 Say it is late and dusky, because they  
     See not all clear;  
 O for that Night! where I in Him  
 Might live invisible and dim!

Once again Thomas evidences a strong desire to be enveloped in darkness, as if he feels an unsupportable *welt-schmerz*; as if he already longs for "that good night" of the poem he was to write on the death of his father.

The letters written by Thomas to his close friend and fellow-poet, Vernon Watkins, should be a reliable sources of authentic information on the man and the poet. These letters, however, are mainly concerned with the poems that Thomas enclosed for his friend's comments. They are nearly all in a light, friendly vein, with brief allusions to domestic and financial matters. Thomas is silent on the subject of religion; even when he discusses the religious passages in his poetry, he concerns himself only with matters of technique. Watkins himself, though he was perhaps the closest to Thomas of all his friends, gives only one detail which could be called personal: discussing Thomas's stated liking for the works of Thomas Hardy, he says: "My own themes were really closer to his [Dylan's]; we were both religious poets . . ." This unequivocal statement from Vernon Watkins should really end the argument about Thomas's feelings about religion, though if evidence from Thomas himself can be added, the case is strengthened. Given the fact that religion was significant to Thomas, it still remains to uncover the conflict and discover its source.

From Thomas's letters it is possible to discern only faintly his personal development from a young single man to a young husband and father. There are, however, two passages in which deeper emotion is hinted at. The first is a happy one; the second reveals a hidden undercurrent of deep anguish. On July 15, 1937, when he was twenty-three, Thomas wrote to Vernon Watkins:

My own news is very big and simple. I was married three days ago; to Caitlin Macnamara; in Penzance Registry Office; with no money, no prospect of money, no attendant friends or relatives, and in complete happiness. We've been meaning to from the first day we met, and now we are free and glad.

Three months later, having moved from Cornwall to Hampshire, he wrote again:

This is a very lovely place. Caitlin and I ride into the New Forest every day,

into Bludebell Wood or onto Cuckoo Hill . . . . We are quiet and small and cigarette stained and very young.

There is a peaceful quiet about his manner of writing, an appreciation of simplicity and youthfulness. It seems as if Thomas's hitherto rather turbulent, unhappy spirit has found a haven. In November, the very next month, however, Thomas mentions writing a poem which was later published as "I make this in a warring absence". It is here that Professor Tindall's understanding of Thomas's poems and knowledge of his personal life help to reveal this incident as the end of a thread which, when followed through Thomas's life to its end, unravels much of the mystery of his ambivalence.

Tindall has grouped this poem with three others, written at intervals, as "a sequence on the troubles of marriage". Domestic discord is of no interest here; what is of primary interest is a letter of Thomas's written to Watkins when he enclosed the fourth of the "sequence", in June, 1940. This letter is more revealing than the poem itself:

Here's a poem . . . . It is a poem about modern love. For some reason, I wrote a note under the poem in my copybook: All over the world love is being betrayed as always, and a million years have not calmed the uncalculated ferocity of each betrayal or the terrible loneliness afterwards. Man is denying his partner man or woman and whores with the whole night, begetting a monstrous brood; one day the brood will not die when the day comes but will hang on to the breast and the parts and squeeze his partner out of bed. Or, as a title, One Married Pair. It's a poem of wide implications, if not of deep meanings, and I want a matter-of-fact, particular title.

Here, surely, is evidence not of who is betraying whom, or even of any betrayal at all, but of a man who is capable of the deepest anguish in a man-woman relationship. This revelation tends to confirm Karl Shapiro's insight into Thomas's nature. If Thomas hoped, in the first happy months of his marriage, that "the activity of sex" would somehow lead him to love "in life and in the cosmos", or to a reconciliation between sex and religion, it seems clear that this hope was far from being realized. There has been no other biographical material published in Thomas's own words. When he died, however, and his wife published a book, it was expected to be at least a partial biography of a great poet, if not of a husband and father.

In fact, Caitlin Thomas's book turned out to be very little more than an outpouring on the subject of Caitlin Thomas. Since this was the woman whom Thomas loved, it is important to know something about her. At the beginning of her book, she does speak frankly of her life with Dylan, but

it seems nothing but gossip, and sometimes quite vicious gossip. She describes their fights, "which were an essential part of our everyday life, and became fiercer and more deadly at each onslaught." The picture of Caitlin Thomas which emerges is that of a hard-drinking, raging, insatiably lusty, rebellious, violent woman. It is very different from Thomas's first description of her, of them both, as quiet, small, and very young. Such a man as Dylan Thomas would understandably need a change from an even, harmonious level of daily life; but this change seems extreme, and one wonders if there was a vital reason for such strife. Caitlin referred to the women around Dylan in New York on his last visit as "thieves of my love", and complained of the jealousy she suffered. She says:

Dylan felt as badly as me, in this respect, at the inconceivability to him of me even distantly contemplating anybody else; and he reacted more abominably than me; no cruelty or physical mutilation was too much, for such an unpardonable crime. It seems extraordinary to me now that we did not kill each other outright, we certainly got dangerously near to it, on those bloodthirsty vengeance.

This is more evidence of Thomas's failure to achieve the coalition of the two forces which drove him and which pervade all his poetry. Religion has no place in that marriage; and the sexual love in it is not holy.

Caitlin's book shows a tremendous anger at being robbed of her Dylan. At first this is directed at the world in general and at some of Thomas's American associates, in particular; and then she turns her violence on to herself. By publishing the frank account of her life after Dylan's death, she damages her self-respect, her reputation and, worst of all, she desecrates her memories of Dylan and, posthumously, their marriage by the openly admitted sexual interludes with a surprising number of the men she met on the small island to which she retired. These ranged in age from an elderly retired gentleman, living there with his wife, to a young boy of nineteen with whom, she writes, she fell deeply in love. One wonders that she could, in all seriousness, apply the word "love" to both this escapade and to her lifetime relationship with Dylan from whose loss she still, most strangely, vowed she would never recover. If this was the woman Dylan Thomas never ceased to love, his anguish begins to be understandable.

There have been hundreds of essays, reviews, and memoirs written about Dylan Thomas, but it is, perhaps, not very useful to attempt to evaluate his nature from any but those written by his closest friends. Even these may not have known the true Dylan. He had more than average ability to assume the role expected of him in any given situation; yet he could—and did—rebel on

occasion, and go to the other extreme. For this reason, not all views are valuable. John Brinnin knew him well, but the view he gives of him, in clinical detail, is the picture of a man slowly dying, half-crazed, in the last stages of alcoholic poisoning, and it surely cannot be taken as a truly representative likeness. There are other accounts of his excessive drinking, which gradually grew more serious. It seems surprising, even allowing for some "wisdom after the event", that no-one could see the rapid deterioration and foretell the disastrous end.

Philip Burton, not only a close friend, but one of long standing and a collaborator in a radio play and other works, was with Thomas in London just before he left on his last trip to America. Although their drinking was quite heavy, Burton speaks of Dylan's vitality, eagerness, and enthusiasm for plans concerning an opera libretto and a stage play. Bill Read, another good friend who stayed at Laugharne with Dylan and his wife, remarked on the difference between Dylan at home and Dylan in America, and summed up his visit as follows: "In spite of many evidences of domestic discord that no one attempted to keep from the eyes of a visitor, Dylan had been a gracious host, a warm paterfamilias, and even a Welshman proud of his native countryside." Many of his best friends, including Augustus John, Cecil Price, and Roy Campbell, knew him only as a man of personal charm, a witty and interesting companion. Roy Campbell writes, "Dylan was not only a great poet . . . . He was a deeply religious and great-hearted man who put love and friendship before everything else. He was never out of love with his beautiful wife and muse, Caitlin . . . ."

These few pen portraits show Thomas to have been, in his outward life, a normal, balanced person—when sober. The conflict inside, however, did not go quite unnoticed. There is Thomas's own, widely-quoted reason for writing poetry. He described a shepherd making, from within fairy rings, ritual observances to the moon to protect his flocks. When asked why, the shepherd replied, "I'd be a damn' fool if I didn't". Thomas added, "these poems, with all their crudities, doubts and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God—and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't." This phrase, differently worded, appears again in a manuscript reproduced in a collection of poems written in honour of Thomas after he died, *A Garland for Dylan Thomas*, and reads: "The joy and function of poetry is, and was, the celebration of man which is also the celebration of God." Whatever his motive for "celebrating God" with his poems, it had to be something very much stronger and more emotional than mere appeasement—but he was

ashamed to admit it. Cecil Price explains this: "Thomas was the grandson of a Welsh preacher. It seems to me an important fact, explaining what he revolted against and what he loved. In Wales the preacher is associated with the puritanical outlook, a code that Thomas mocked and feared." Thomas himself once told a group of students that his father was an "atheist, not in the sense of disbelief, but in the form of a violent and personal dislike for God; he would glare out of the window and growl: 'It's raining, blast Him!'" Thomas appeared to be impressed by the thundering, religious exhortations of the Presbyterian Church, and one can imagine him, his head full of Biblical stories and the threats of hell-fire, hearing his father, whom he loved very much, defying the Almighty at such a dreadful risk. He was admittedly afraid of many things: of mice, strangely enough; of war and of violent death. If he had wanted to rebel like his father and shout thrilling defiance to the heavens, there must be no chance of being punished for eternity, so he had to believe that God—and Hell—did not exist. This "front" of his wore very thin, many times. His atheism is never quite believable; at most, he was an agnostic, playing it safe: "I'd be a fool if I didn't".

As he grew older, his attitude to religion in his poems became more positive. He had planned a long poem to be called "In Country Heaven", and had written some parts of it before he died: "In Country Sleep", "Over Sir John's Hill", and "In the White Giant's Thigh". The projected poem, according to Professor Tindall, was as religious as many others are irreligious. If, however, Thomas's religion was emphasized in his poetry, his preoccupation with sex and his obsessive drinking were very evident in his life. This contradiction was one of many. He was happiest when he was quiet; yet he craved excitement and drunken brawls. He loved his beautiful wife; yet he fought with her constantly. His poetry is full of religious feeling; yet it sometimes seems to reject, or at least rebel against God. He had an insatiable hunger for a love that was mortal and earthy; yet he dreamed of a "bread-white, snow-white" love with bird wings. If he accepted the Christian way of life which, for him, meant a narrow, bigoted, puritanical existence, he had also to accept the fact that sexuality, quite as important to him as religion, was ugly and reprehensible. This he was not prepared to do; and he seems to have tried to resolve the problem, as Karl Shapiro has suggested, by making "the activity of sex lead to love in life and in the cosmos." A sexual relationship, if it is to be compatible with religious feeling, however, must be strictly monogamous and must be a union on an emotional and spiritual level, as well as on a physical one. If this had been possible for Thomas, his ambivalence may well have

disappeared. His discordant life with Caitlin, which he appears to have loved and hated at the same time, will perhaps never be completely explained. It is possible that she was too responsive to his craving for excitement, providing too much and of a kind that was too unpalatable. His real need, revealed in his poetry, was much more deeply buried than the brawling, exaggerated violence of his surface demands. If he longed for her fidelity and devotion, no matter how little he deserved them, and yet drove her to lose both, and knew the loss to be irretrievable, his deep anguish was inevitable. It would explain his thinly-disguised desire for death, for being enveloped in a darkness, a cloud, a good night; it would explain his escape, backwards, to his "green and carefree" fame "among the barns" of his innocent childhood; it would explain his weeping, for himself and for Caitlin, even in the midst of his own infidelities. There is tragic evidence in Brinnin's book, and in Caitlin's, that the reality of his life was very different from the vision his ultra-sensitive, longing-for-love-and-beauty poet's eyes saw on the unattainable horizon.

This, then, could have been the conflict causing the powerful emotional tension which is the mainspring of creative work, and which produced his greatest poetry. Thomas's creative work, being an extension of himself and so, in a sense, a structure of his life, shows unmistakably the aspects of both his real life and the life of his unattainable vision. He was able, in his poetry, to achieve a synthesis of the two; in his life, he was not. This failure to make his vision a reality could have been the reason he went, impulsively, to the opposite extreme, indulging in the mad and desperate excesses which finally destroyed him.

It might be said that he cut off his life to spite his love; but both endure in the vigorous poetry he wrote to celebrate God, and his fellow man.

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## SQUIRRELS

*Richard Emil Braun*

In August, hickory; acorns in September.  
 Frantic squirrels fumble and glut. They force their cheeks taut.  
 Rains of bitten chunks scatter down branches.

Always, several squirrels fall. At least one fat one, twirling,  
 face and feet too full, lands on its back. Rain flattens it.  
 Next spring, stunted grass will show its outline.

Similarly, during that August-September craze,  
 the perfect circular waste where mandrakes have withered  
 reveals last year's oak leaves lying intact.