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DYLAN THOMAS

Born: Swansea, Wales; October 27, 1914

Died: New York, New York; November 9, 1953

Thomas is the supreme Romantic lyricist of the English language in the twentieth century, whose love of words and their musical strength gives his poetry a rhythmic power rarely equaled in the history of literature.

BIOGRAPHY

Dylan Marlais Thomas was born on October 27, 1914, in the small port city of Swansea, on the South Wales coast across the Bristol Channel from Devonshire. His father, David John Thomas, was a frustrated intellectual who resented the position that he held as a local schoolmaster, which he believed was incompatible with the life of a cultivated literary gentleman. His mother, Florence Williams Thomas, was a deacon's daughter. She had no interest in literature, but she was extremely devoted to her second child, Dylan. The family lived in a relatively genteel neighborhood when Thomas was born, near the hills and rolling farm country that he was to celebrate in poems such as "Fern Hill" and "Poem in October," and within sight of the horseshoe-shaped coastline that rimmed the sea below the house. Although Thomas often felt the lure of London while living in Wales, the cultural ethos of west Wales remained one of his most important points of reference and sources of inspiration. The lyrical flow of talk in the pubs, the singing in the streets and churches, the cadences of Bible-drawn sermons spoken by local ministers who were often relatives, the feel of the rainy weather, and the look of the land all contributed to his formation as a poet.

David Thomas was determinedly agnostic, but he often recited the Bible to his son in infancy and read him to sleep with selections from the great tradition of English literature: William Shakespeare, the Romantic poets, as well as the contemporary controversial novelist D. H. Lawrence. From the start, Thomas was relatively indifferent to all forms of public education, preferring to browse in his father's extensive library, while behaving in a prankish, mischievous fashion in class. Already verbally precocious (he saw himself as a boy who "swallowed a dictionary"), he was sent to a private school and then to the local grammar school where his father was employed.

His first poems appeared in the grammar school magazine in 1925. By 1928, he was the editor of the magazine and had begun to compile a poetry notebook that would contain in completed or rough form more than two hundred poems by 1933. As he began to think of himself as a poet, his schoolwork deteriorated to the point that he totally failed all of his Central Welsh Board examinations and left school in 1931 to take a job with the *South Wales Daily Post* as a kind of roving reporter and general gadfly. He spent a considerable amount of time with older journalists in pubs and was introduced to the drink-drenched cultural milieu that formed the center of his social life for the remainder of his years. In 1932, he became involved with the Swansea Little Theatre as an actor and writer, and by 1933, when he left the newspaper, he was living in a style that he would essentially maintain for the rest of his life. He effectively removed any impediment to his writing, including any kind of commitment to earning a living, putting himself in the

position of supplicant, which he developed into a personal skill of considerable refinement.

Thomas's disinclination to adopt "regular" hours of steady employment was as much an attempt to reserve all of his energy for writing as it was an attempt to avoid the boredom of routine and responsibility. "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" was published in the *New English Weekly* in May, 1933, his first poem to appear outside Wales, and by August of that year, he had finished twelve of the ninety poems that would eventually appear in his *Collected Poems, 1934-1952* (1952). He moved into a flat in London in November, 1934, with two friends from Wales, and the next month his first book of poetry, *Eighteen Poems* (1934), was published jointly by the *Sunday Referee* magazine and the Parton Bookshop. It was followed by *Twenty-five Poems* in 1936, the year that he met Caitlin Macnamara, whom he married in July, 1937. Dylan and Caitlin lived with friends and relatives in England or Wales, or in their own apartment until funds ran out, their marriage turbulent and tempestuous from the start, their life together "raw, red bleeding meat," in Caitlin's words.

Thomas's second book had received favorable reviews, which helped to alleviate their financial difficulties. Thomas had also begun to deliver readings and broadcasts on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), but no matter how much money was available from royalties, readings, or commissions, splurges, gifts to friends, and general carelessness placed Dylan and Caitlin in perpetual financial distress. Thomas spent most of the years during World War II traveling between London and Wales, writing scripts for the BBC and working on projects for Strand Films, eventually contributing to sixteen scripts. As the war drew to a close, Thomas and his family spent time in Blaen Cwm and New Quay, concentrating on his poetry. In a burst of poetic energy, Thomas completed "Poem in October," "Fern Hill," and "In My Craft or Sullen Art," among more than a dozen of his collected poems, his last period of relatively rapid production. Many of these appeared in *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), and James Laughlin's New Directions Press issued *Selected Writings of Dylan Thomas* (1946) in the United States later in the year.

Through the efforts of friends and patrons, Thomas was awarded a £150 traveling scholarship from the Society of Authors, and he and his family

spent some time in Italy, where he was limited in his socializing by the language barrier but succeeded in writing "In Country Sleep" in Florence. He completed three film scripts in 1948 and earned more than £2,400 that year, but he had never filed a tax return and found himself in a kind of perpetual debt to the Inland Revenue for the remainder of his life. Because he could count on greater earnings from his prose work, he tended to devote more time to it, and, consequently, his poetic production drastically slowed down. Since he had to spend a great deal of time on each work, he would produce only a few more poems, although these included "Poem on His Birthday" and "In the White Giant's Thigh," as well as his great villanelle "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," written in 1951 in loving tribute to his dying father.

In the hope of overcoming his financial difficulties, Thomas made his first of four trips to America in 1950. His exhausting tour of the United States spawned the legend of the wild, bawdy, drunken, raving, romantic delinquent, which made him a celebrity and eventually resulted in what Donald Hall calls "public suicide." Between tours, he began *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (1953, public reading; 1954, radio play; 1956, stage play; pb. 1954), saw his *Collected Poems, 1934-1952* published to exceptional reviews, and continued his contentious relationship with Caitlin. In 1953, his body finally succumbed to years of abuse, and he died in a hospital in New York on November 9.

ANALYSIS

In an unusually candid letter to a student who asked him how he was drawn to the "craft or sullen art" of poetry, Thomas emphasized the allure of words themselves—the "shape and shade and size and noise of words as they hummed, strummed, jiggled and galloped along." Hall has called him "the maddest of word-mad young poets" and describes Thomas beginning a poem from some general idea, sense of place, or pantheistic thought and then building the poem through the sounds of words gradually arranged in the manner that satisfied his ear, as well as some deeper instinct for melody and rhythm. Caitlin Thomas recalls him struggling with single lines in his bicycle shed/studio, "balancing words, line and phrases . . . and he always did this noisily and alone in his shed, chanting and reciting, making each sound fit."

Because of his ability to write poetry that seemed drenched in word-drunk wonder, some critics have asserted that there is no substance behind the “great lyrical voice of his time.” Charles Olson, whose own work depended on a tremendous concentration of mental force, commented, “He is all language, there is no man there.” Olson’s critique indicates the pitfalls of depending on a sensuous linguistic surface, but, although Thomas does not always succeed in going deeper, his methods of composition depended on more than the magic of words alone. In a letter that he wrote to Pamela Hansford Johnson when he was beginning to take command of the singular voice that he possessed, he suggested that a writer worked either “‘out of words’ or ‘in the *direction* of them,’” as if the word was the source of the idea in the poem. In a review written in 1935, he insisted that “the word is the object,” not a symbol or sign of it, and even if he complained that he was “chained by syllables,” he believed that both meaning and sound are bound within language, and that it was through his uses of language that human experience could be brought into poetry. While he was not always successful in capturing the “singing light”—the song and insight interlinked—his best poems combine a mastery of sound with his meditations on the central concerns of his life.

One of the most striking features of Thomas’s poetry is the absence of any indication that it was written (with the exception of a few topical references) in the twentieth century. Even as Thomas took the ultimate Romantic position that his subject was himself, demanding “Man be my metaphor” and always basing his sense of the human on the “small, bone-bound island” at the center of his own universe, his treatment of the main themes of his art reached back toward some almost prehistoric, semimythic sense of universal human experience. Consequently, when he wrote about his awestruck, ecstatic delight in the presence of the infinitely appealing natural world, his perspective was similar to the rhapsodic declarations of an explorer encountering a garden of paradise. The Edenic aspects of the Welsh landscape in “Fern Hill” and “Poem in October” attest to this. Similarly, when he wrote about death as an inevitable presence in the midst of even the most youthful, vital moments of a person’s existence, his poetry

was less a function of a morbid preoccupation and more a reflection of the same ardor that activated his love for language, the natural world, and other things that he appreciated with passion. The poems “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” and “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” are expressions of his inclination to sing “like the sea” even while enchained by the inexorable passage of Time; they indicate his desire to overcome what John Tytell calls “the anguish of mutability” brought on by an awareness of Time’s constant measure, to which he referred as a “running grave” always with him. The tremendous energy in poems like these, or in “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower,” is a product of both dynamic rhythmic arrangements and Thomas’s feeling that life is yet more sacred because of the inevitability of death. This kind of poem seems to have originated from a perspective prior to or beyond the era of technology.

The extreme body-consciousness and sensuality of Thomas’s poetry also attest to a primal condition of apprehension. In the taut lyric “Twenty-four Years,” his language bristles with the imagery of the skin, his life described as a “sensual strut,” his course illuminated by the “meat-eating sun,” his entrance into the world depicted as from “the groin of the natural doorway.” In a letter to Johnson, Thomas wrote that what she called ugly was “nothing but the strong stressing of the physical,” and that his images were drawn from “my solid and fluid world of flesh and blood.” He praises John Donne’s description of man as “earth of the earth” and insists that “all thoughts and actions emanate from the body.” His eventual disregard for the welfare of his own body may have been as much a rebellion against limits as it was an example of wanton desecration, with his frequent references to sexual matters another illustration of an interest in the fundamental facts of human biological imperatives.

The conjunction in Thomas’s poetry of what Tytell calls “dense pockets of enigmatic surrealistic imagery” wrought from “a chaotic cauldron of language” with the great human themes of Time, Death, Nature, and the skin frequently resulted in some poetic confusion. Early reviewers complained about “chaotic rhetoric” and “remarkable ineptness of technique.” While some poems undoubtedly suffer from what Cid Corman calls “riddled

meanings compiled in stubborn binding rhythms,” it is important to recognize that the obscurity was not intentional or the product of carelessness or lack of craft. Many students have noted the evidence of the numerous work sheets that demonstrate Thomas’s exhausting practice of writing a line again and again, revising and adjusting until he got what he wanted. Some poems took many months, gradually growing by a line or two added in a four-hour work session. In addition, Thomas was somewhat suspicious of what he thought of as free verse and employed both orthodox metrical patterns and a system based on syllabic count but independent of a regular stress pattern. No single system worked for him, and he eventually used what Daniel Jones calls “cadenced verse,” which generally featured an alternation of weak and strong stresses, but which is much more elaborate in its juxtapositions of full rhymes, half rhymes, assonances, and alliterations.

While Thomas ultimately depended on the intricate, sensitive system of his own ear-mind-heart to create the singular, distinctive rhythmic arrangements of his best work, the various designs with which he experimented provided a point of departure, or a means of entrance, and they are a testament to his familiarity with, and dedication to, the complexity of measure in its largest sense. The strongest poems justify their form by their effectiveness and singularity; the less successful ones slide toward unintelligibility or call attention to their cleverness without transcending it. Nonetheless, in almost all of his work, Thomas’s total commitment to poetry—his awareness of its possibilities, his passion for its substance—remains undeniable.

“THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE GREEN FUSE DRIVES THE FLOWER”

First published: 1933 (collected in *Eighteen Poems*, 1934)

Type of work: Poem

The poet expresses his awe before the energizing forces of the cosmos and considers the interconnections between life and death.

Although Thomas was not especially eager to look back on the poems of his youth, “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” was one of which he remained reasonably fond in later years. It was written in a burst of creative energy when Thomas was nineteen, possibly precipitated by the knowledge that his father had cancer and might not survive. The intensity of his feelings are captured by the propulsive power of the first line, which establishes a link between the awesome natural forces of the universe and the poetic consciousness of the young man who felt that his creative instincts were fired by the wonders of the world around him. When he declares that “the force”—a mystic surge of energy that animates and destroys—is the source of both the “green age” in which his youth glows with promise and the “wintry fever” that bends the “crooked rose,” he has drawn the terms of the paradox that was to haunt him throughout his life. Even in the presence of life at its most vibrant, Thomas detected the signs of death, and the language that he uses in the poem is both destructive (dried streams, rotted roots) and fructuous (a mouth sucking life, pulsing red blood), joining the joys of passion with an anticipation of its eventual dispersal. The poet recognizes the immediacy of a moment of excitement and the realization that everything is temporary as “time has ticked a heaven round the stars.”

The poem is particularly effective because both the passionate excitement and the premonition of extinction are powerfully evoked. The overwhelming rhythmic figure of the first line, typical of Thomas’s ability to fashion a striking start almost impossible to extend or expand, conveys the feeling of uncontrollable motion engulfing and overpowering

resistance. The poet has no choice but to submit and takes a fierce delight in his participation. Each stanza begins with a figure for this force, the third suggesting the “hand” of God, the fourth suggesting an incarnation of eternal progression. Then, the images of oblivion crowd the poet, undermining his exultation in the latent energy of the “green fuse,” Thomas’s symbol for the earth/ womb at the heart of creation. Blood turns to wax, the wind stirs a shroud, the clay (body) of the poet anticipates its eventual decay. The result of the juxtaposition of the dynamic and the arresting leads to a confusion that Thomas describes as an inability to say or speak (“And I am dumb”), an additional aspect of the paradox since the protestation of dumbness occurs in the poem to declare its condition. In response to the poet’s proclamation of his difficulties in finding a language to describe the process of deterioration—an understandable situation since he directly experiences the life-giving component of the force but can only imagine its shattering side—a metaphysical tableau develops in the fourth stanza, which seems to suggest that some version of “Love” will ameliorate the effects of time’s passage.

Since the poem is an investigation of the poet’s involvement with the mysteries of existence, the language that engages these forces is more important than an explanation of their origins. The deft use of sound for emphasis, from the alliteration and repetition in the first line to the use of slant rhyme (sucks/wax/rocks; head/blood; sores/stars; womb/worm) to the rhythmic pulsation produced by the summary phrase, “And I,” is evidence of Thomas’s ability to make poetry that is intensely alive on the tongue and true to the emotional energy that drew it forth.

“TWENTY-FOUR YEARS”

First published: 1938 (collected in *Selected Poems*, 1934-1952, 2003)

Type of work: Poem

The poet contemplates the inevitability of death and sets against it the eternal power of art, which animates his existence.

Because of his almost obsessive preoccupation with death, each birthday was a milestone that

called for a celebration, and on several occasions Thomas composed a poem that expresses his sense of where he stood as a man and an artist. “Twenty-four Years” is his earliest significant version of this celebratory mode, and it is full of both the exuberance of early manhood and his already familiar feeling that death was imminent. As Paul Ferris describes it, the poem is like an abrupt telegram in which a density of texture leads to a compactness that makes each line and image bristle with evocative power. The pattern of the poem is based on the oppositional tension that Thomas believed made a poem noteworthy, and the intermixture of life-enhancing and death-haunted declarations generates the tremendous energy that drives the poem (and the poet) on a journey toward “forever.”

The first two lines are self-enclosed assertions of the poet’s condition at the moment of creation. Thomas summarizes his life initially by epitomizing its somber qualities and stresses their importance by citing them as a constant source of sadness. Next, struggling to control his fears, he inserts as a chorus/comment the injunction to “bury the dead” so that their shade will not overwhelm everything else. There is a biblical echo in the second line as well, a suggestion that the prospect of death requires sympathy and compassion for a common human dread. Then, in a dynamic reversal of tone, Thomas matches the rhythms of the long second line with a sudden shift to the procreative, placing himself, in an echo of his birth, on the threshold of a poetic path or life journey. In a riveting image, he sees the young poet “crouched” in a posture of readiness, prepared to leap into the light (one of his figures for creative work) of a “meat-eating sun.” His location at the “groin of the natural doorway” fuses the sexual with the poetic; but the fecundity of this conception is immediately undermined by the comparison that the poet crouches “like a tailor/ sewing a shroud”—that is, already preparing, at least subconsciously, for his demise since the light cast by the “meat-eating sun” has the potential for destruction, as well as for creation.

There follows a slight pause, although the poem does not typographically indicate its necessity. The syntax, however, compels a degree of reflective hesitancy before the poet continues his portrait. Although he is “dressed to die,” his poetic life is almost

arrogantly portrayed as a “sensual strut” in defiance of the aforementioned dead who “walk to the grave in labour.” Thomas often uses the word “labor” to connote some kind of burden, and he is calling for a proud stride. The tone of confidence, even brashness, is continued by his claim that his “red veins” are “full of money.” The poet is mocking his recognition that he would never have enough money from his poetry to live as he wished. He is also asserting that, in some utopian situation, “the elementary town,” he could properly profit from his craft. The last lines of the poem extend this note of optimistic idealism. Calling his life/work an “advance,” he insists that its “final direction” or ultimate goal is the time-defying, death-delaying of “forever.” Whether this is a prediction, a plea, or just a series of bold words to combat his fear, the calm measure of certitude substantiates the artist’s claims to be moving in the direction of eternity.

“POEM IN OCTOBER”

First published: 1945 (collected in *Selected Poems, 1934-1952, 2003*)

Type of work: Poem

The poet seeks an appropriate arena in which to celebrate his birthday and recalls the delight that he took in the natural world as a boy.

Thomas wrote very few poems between the taut lyric of “Twenty-four Years,” which marked “my birthday just arriving,” and his famous celebration of what he designated his “thirtieth year to heaven”—the “Poem in October.” In the intervening years of World War II, he was involved with film work in London, and he found that he was generally unable to compose poetry anywhere else but in the familiar home ground of his west Wales landscape. He began the poem in 1941, writing to his friend Vernon Watkins that the first line would be, “It was my twenty-seventh year to heaven” (using one syllable too many, as he must have sensed). He did not, however, complete it until he was again living in the cottage in Blaen Cwm, where he had written poetry since childhood.

During the summer of 1944, when he also wrote “Ceremony After a Fire Raid,” “New Quay,” and

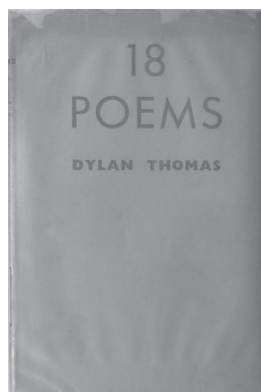
“Fern Hill,” Thomas had reached a kind of midpoint in his life and realized that his tremendous excitement and feeling of wholeness in observation of the realm of nature might be receding beyond recollection. Both as a means of fixing this feeling permanently and as a strategy to remain in contact with one of the originating forces of his artistic passion, Thomas wrote what Donald Hall has called “a long and gorgeous rendition of weather and landscape, bird and water.” What makes the poem so successful is the fact that the familiar sentiments of a very common human emotion have been placed in a form that is uniquely Thomas’s, and that the rhapsodic language at which Thomas excelled has rarely been as well suited to a subject.

There are two specific features of Thomas’s style of composition notable in the poem. The first is his manner of constructing a frame in which details accumulate gradually while the narrative consciousness of the poet remains at a distance; then, when the full dimensions of the image have been developed, the poet’s perspective on the scene is introduced. In the first stanza, Thomas follows the opening declaration (“my thirtieth year”) with a series of sounds that are an invitation to the poet to join the waking world. Then, after the features of the harbor town have been recorded, Thomas gathers the poet, who has already expressed a proprietary interest by the use of the word “my” in the first and second line, into the scene in an immediate present narrative by summarizing “Myself to set foot/ that second” as he sets forth. This technique is used in many of the following stanzas, which are actually written as an extended, continuing line broken by divisions into separate subunits.

The second feature is Thomas’s use of a kind of compound adjective, as in the well-known description of the seacoast as the “heron priested shore” where the “net webbed wall” marks the boundary of land and water. In later stanzas, he continues this practice with such figures as the “rain wringing wind” and a “lark full cloud” or a “blue altered sky”—the latter figure including a double meaning recalling his lyric beginning in “Altarwise by Owl-Light.”

The long rhythms of each stanza contribute to a song effect in which the interplay of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance within the line help to maintain a high energy level; each linguistic device is like a chime in a series of sonic highlights.

The frequency of these sound pulses parallels the surges of excitement that the poet feels as he is overwhelmed by a display of nature's infinite variety, a phenomenon that he regards as a personal benediction, as if all he sees is a tribute to his being. "My birthday began," he starts the second stanza, as if the world is on show for him, and his description of an ascent from the harbor to the "hill's shoulder" is presented as a climb from birth through a life of "fond climates and sweet singers" toward a summit envisioned as a "wonder of summer."



The action of the poem in the first three stanzas proceeds upward beneath a "springful of larks in a rolling/ Cloud" in a journey that approximates Thomas's life before the intrusion of adult consciousness into the child's world of pure wonder. From the "parables/ Of sun light" through "twice told fields of infancy," Thomas's expressions of "the truth of his joy" as a youth are rendered with a purity of recall that places no distance between the sensation of the experience and its re-creation in the poem. Then, in a pivotal middle (fourth) stanza, there is a sudden shift as "the weather turned around." From this point, the recall of the adult is more like a review, in which the experience is seen again through the double perspective of the adult reflecting on the child's experiences. The motion now is reversed, so that the child begins to recede into memory. The focus of the second part of the poem is less a descent (for a youth, in the "sun born over and over," as Thomas puts it in "Fern Hill," there is no summit, merely the possibility of going higher). It is more an awareness now of precipitous possibilities. The goal of the adult poet is to keep the summit in sight.

The turning of the weather parallels the change of seasons from summer to autumn, indicating the passage to the poet's maturity that has occurred in

the span of poetic time. There is also an added element of poignancy in the poet's recollections, because his awareness of death and time makes him even more sensitive to the temporary beauty of the natural world. The "twice told fields of infancy" relived in the double vision of the man in his thirtieth year permit the poet legitimately to claim of the boy that "his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine." The images of the poem wrought in Thomas's highly charged lyric language are a proof of this sentiment, a convincing demonstration through poetic art that "the mystery/ Sang alive/ Still." This peak of emotion is followed by a pause of reflection. The poet repeats that, amid his recapitulation of the marvelous, "the weather turned around," but that the poem itself has been the occasion for the "long dead child" to emerge and sing "burning in the sun" of a youth temporarily regained. As the poem concludes, Thomas fuses the two moments that he has celebrated, his "thirtieth year to heaven" and his "summer noon," by syntactically pulling the present and the past together. He revivifies the experience of the moment by describing the "town below . . . leaved with October blood"; the autumnal phase of the poet's life is still colored with the passion of creative action.

The final line is a universal prayer for favor and continuance from the forces of the universe. Yielding completely to the ultra-Romantic spirit of the poem, Thomas begins the last line (which is divided into a triad) with the unabashed "O" of countless effusions of feeling. His fervent wish is that his "heart's truth"—the sum of his desire as a man and a poet—will still be sufficient cause for him to "sing" (that is, to write poetry) from a position of strength and confidence ("on this high hill") when another year has passed. There is more than irony in this last wish, since Thomas often stated his fears that his days would be short. In accordance with the mood of the entire poem, he has let the "long dead child" speak at the close. Knowing quite well that he was enchained by circumstance and temperament, he could still choose, as he put it in his other great pastoral celebration of the same year, "Fern Hill," to "sing like the sea."

“IN MY CRAFT OR SULLEN ART”

First published: 1945 (collected in *Selected Poems, 1934-1952*, 2003)

Type of work: Poem

The poet explains the conditions of composition and for whom he writes.

Along with the prologue that he wrote for the first edition of his *Collected Poems, 1934-1952* (1952), “In My Craft or Sullen Art” is a carefully designed declaration by Thomas of what he wanted the future to think of him as a poet. The conscious intent to shape his persona, however, does not betray his real convictions, though it tends to direct the reader toward certain areas of concern that he preferred to emphasize. The dual focus of the first line properly stresses the care for craft and the almost mystical connection to what Hall calls “a dark river flowing down there somewhere.” Yet the use of the word “sullen” is a typically inspired choice, revealing the frustrating and unsatisfying aspects of the gift that he carried. The poem continues with the conventional Romantic emblem of the artist at work by night, his passion an antisocial one (“only the moon rages”), his energy drawn from the love/grief of humanity. It then turns abruptly to the kind of booming declaration of power that both Thomas and his audience treasured: “I labour by singing light,” he proclaims. Then, in contradiction to most of the actions of his life and most of the more honest confessions of his poetry, he insists that it is not “the strut and trade of charms” that drives him, but the heart’s truth that he has often celebrated. The mastery of rhythm and the powerful emphasis of careful rhyme are so seductive that the appealing message becomes the reality, although it is important to

note that Thomas is actually speaking for some idealized poet as much as for himself.

The second stanza, which, like the first, is as much one long flowing line as it is separated shorter ones, continues the theme of the artist as social exile, denying an interest in political power (“the proud man”) or posterity (“the towering dead”), while emphasizing again the call to poetic expression that originates in the heart’s core. Using the technique of opposing forces, which he found to be one of his most successful structural devices, Thomas sets the superficial reasons for artistic endeavor in sufficiently impressive terms (“towering dead”) that his ultimate commitment to “the lovers” becomes a heroic act of humanistic compassion channeled into poetic art. The relatively unselfish nature of this choice—the lovers “pay no praise or wages/ Nor heed my craft or art”—suggests the Romantic ideal of art for art’s sake, which Thomas implies actually serves the interests of humanity in its support of “the lovers” since his craft/art springs from and validates the human need for love. As in the first stanza, the carefully controlled pattern of rhythmic emphasis and the sure ear for rhyme that makes its appearance inevitable instead of obligatory contribute to the seductive power of the song.

SUMMARY

Even those writers who have strongly supported Dylan Thomas’s work have had their reservations about his accomplishments. Yet the gradual recession of the legend of the wild bard into time and the postmodern regard for the possibilities of meaning in language beyond traditional conceptions of coherence have given Thomas’s work an enduring appeal beyond many original estimates. His great love of language and his ear for the musical, rhythmic power of words produced a body of work that has solidified his stature in the history of English literature.

Leon Lewis

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DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Dylan Thomas make “Poem in October” a birthday poem for himself yet avoid egoism?
- Examine the significance of the color green in “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” and in “Fern Hill.”
- Study the relationship between the meter and the rhythm of Thomas’s poetry, especially in “Fern Hill.”
- What is a villanelle? How does this complicated poetic form contribute to “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”?
- What does the subtitle signify in Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*?
- Listen to recordings of Thomas reading his own poems and determine how much the experience expands an understanding of them.

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