Dylan Thomas' Early Prose

A STUDY IN CREATIVE MYTHOLOGY

Annis Pratt

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Quotations in Appendix C are from the periodical *transition,* published in Paris, 1927–1938.

For William York Tindall

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Preface

Some question may be raised concerning the scope of this book, in which I limit myself to a consideration of Dylan Thomas' early prose and its effects upon the early and later poetry. Is there not, I have been asked, a prose "canon" making it exigent that I devote as much time to the "beloved" later prose as to the controversial earlier pieces? My position on the later prose of Dylan Thomas should be understood from the outset—I consider it, like the film scripts, an inferior side branch of his total work. Whereas the early prose, finished by 1939, can be taken as a part of the symbolic universe of both the early and later poetry, the later prose—under which I include the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, "Adventures in the Skin Trade" (published in 1941 in *Folios of New Writing* and later as the title piece to a volume of prose mainly of early composition), and

Under Milk Wood—represents a departure into a mode of writing that, had Thomas lived, he might well have developed into a richer branch of his opus. As it stands, however, it represents a number of interesting attempts at what must be taken as a minor genre within his writing. It is not totally unimportant to the consideration of Thomas' achievement, and since in this study I intend to discuss the relevance of the early prose to Thomas' total work, I will devote some space to the later prose in my concluding chapter.

* * *

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I wish to thank New Directions for its permission to quote extensively from *Adventures in the Skin Trade* (1961), the *Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas* (1957), and *The Notebooks of Dylan Thomas* (1967).

Finally, I wish to acknowledge with deepest gratitude the faithful correspondence and continued enthusiasm of Professor Ralph N. Maud of Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, whose advice and scholarship allowed me to penetrate far deeper into the mysteries of Dylan Thomas' work than otherwise would have been possible.

DYLAN THOMAS' EARLY PROSE

"Creative mythology . . . springs not, like theology, from the dicta of authority, but from the insights, sentiments, thought, and vision of an adequate individual, loyal to his own experience of value. Thus it corrects the authority holding to the shells of forms produced and left behind by lives once lived. Renewing the act of experience itself, it restores to existence the quality of adventure, at once shattering and reintegrating the fixed, already known, in the sacrificial creative fire of the becoming thing that is no thing at all but life, not as it will be *or as it* should be, *as it* was *or as it* never will be, *but as it* is, *in depth, in process,* here and now, *inside and out."*

Joseph Campbell, Creative Mythology

INTRODUCTION

Biography and the Problem of Influence

"We can eliminate biography as a relevant fact about poetic organization only if we consider the work of art as if it were written neither by people nor for people, involving neither inducements nor resistances. Such can be done, but the cost is tremendous in so far as the critic considers it his task to disclose the poem's eventfulness."

Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form

I

Dylan Thomas is most often remembered as a Falstaffian, bar-hopping hail-fellow-well-met, an impression which he did his best to encourage in his conversations and autobiographical statements. A considerable number of the memoirs published shortly after his death stress his irrepressible gaiety and social impishness, as if he had been a Peter Pan whom no one had thought able to die.[1] The death that shocked Thomas' admirers would not have surprised the poet, who had early faced the "worm beneath my nail" and incorporated it into a vision which was akin to the tragic gaiety of Yeats. No one is his own best biographer, and if, as in Thomas' case, he is given to weaving myths about himself, his friends become an equally doubtful source of evidence. As Aneiran Talfan Davies pointed out in a refreshingly candid if prophetic note, "Dylan Thomas was a leg-

end *before* he died, and the biographers and academic researchers of the future are going to have a whale of a time sorting things out."[2]

Constantine FitzGibbon's "official biography" appeared in 1965. (The family allowed him the sole access to most of the crucial material which they hold.) It provides a picture of Thomas' life as a psychological totality from the early childhood days to the agon in New York City. FitzGibbon does not intend the biography as a work of criticism, however, and makes little critical connection between the events of Thomas' life and the symbolic, inner world of his poetry and prose. I would hope that someone will step forward to do for Thomas' life and work what Richard Ellmann has so brilliantly done for Yeats and Joyce; for the moment we are left, as in the first decade after Thomas' death, with the spectacle of the formally educated critic doing a mystery dance around the works of the informally educated poet, a spectacle which would have amused the poet. We are, moreover, still badly in need of facts concerning Thomas' early reading (see pp. 10–13) and whatever other sources might have provided the raw material for his personal symbolic universe.

"He had the big advantage too over displaced Artists," writes Caitlin Thomas, ". . . that he worked in a fanatically narrow groove, . . . the groove of direct hereditary descent in the land of his birth, which he never in thought, and hardly in body, moved out of. Which handed him his line of approach ready made, and his poems already matured inside him."[3] Although a thorough essay in bio-

graphical criticism is beyond the scope of this study, the early prose is infused with all of the events and influences of Thomas' early life in Wales. In spite of the general acceptance of the fact that Thomas did not speak or read the Welsh language, it seems appropriate to begin with a consideration of the Welsh environment in which he spent his early years.

Dylan Thomas lived in a region that was rich not only in folklore but in the origins of folklore; as a boy he explored a landscape shaped by prehistoric floods and marked by sites of prehistoric, druid, sabbatic, and Christian legend. During his father's boyhood the skeleton of a "red lady" had been found surrounded by mammoth tusks in the glacial age caves beneath Gower Peninsula, near Swansea. The hummock of Cefn Y Bryn with its "druid well" and reputed "King Arthur's stone" also rises out of the Gower Peninsula, while the countryside of Glamorgan and Carmarthenshire, where many of his relatives lived, is full of landmarks reputedly built by the druids.

Dylan Thomas' paternal grandfather, Evan Thomas, was a railway guard at Johnstown, a suburb of Carmarthen.[4] This city had served for a long time as cultural and administrative center for the west of Wales; it was a Roman and Norman stronghold and, before that, the ecclesiastical center of the druid religion. Merlin reputedly presided there as arch-druid, and the *Black Book of Carmarthen* (which Thomas parodies in "The Orchards" as "The Black Book of Llaregubb") was discovered in its priory of Black Canons. The contents of this and other

books of folklore had been expounded at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Edward Davies in *The Mythology and Rites of the British Druids* and *Celtic Researches on the Origin, Traditions and Language of the Ancient Britons.* It has been conjectured that Dylan Thomas might have read these two volumes along with Williams ab Ithel's translation of *Y Barddas*;[5] *Celtic Researches* contains a number of Thomases from the Johnstown area in its original list of subscribers (for what, in Wales, that is worth). Although there is no evidence whatsoever that Thomas actually read these works,[6] the abundance of analogies between his symbolic universe and that romanticized by the nineteenth-century "researchers" has led me to devote Chapters 2 and 3 of this study to the possible influence of Welsh folklore and pre-Christian druid religion upon his early prose and poetry.

Cults of the "horned god," if we accept Miss Margaret Murray's account, continued to exist in Wales alongside of the comparatively austere "bardo-druidic" tradition.[7] "At least one coven of nine wild women seems to have been active in South Wales during early medieval times," writes Robert Graves,[8] and in the 1960's the appearance of Sybil Leek and her Sherwood Forest Covens suggests that witchery in Great Britain has never been dead, merely dormant. In his earliest poems Thomas is in terror of the witches, vampires, devils, and damned who formed part of the folk tradition of South Wales. These supernatural figures play an important part in the stories which I shall consider in Chapter 4.

The strongest religious influence in the Carmarthen area and in Swansea was the Christianity of the Protestant chapels, most of which had been founded during the Methodist revival of the eighteenth century. Mr. and Mrs. Evan Thomas, who attended the Heol Awst Congregational Chapel, were probably as rigorous chapel people as most at that time. In 1904 a revival was set off near Carmarthen and spread to fill the whole of Wales with field preachers and writhing converts (a spectacle not unfamiliar to the American South and West). The souls who would not repent were attacked by larger and larger phalanxes of those who had recently confronted their Maker, and the accounts in the *Western Mail* treat with particular relish the fiery confessions of atheists and agnostics who were finally brought to their knees.[9]

The great number of professed nonbelievers in Wales in the early twentieth century was due not only to the lax years that preceded the revival but also to a wholly modern phenomenon, the "new learning." In the late nineteenth century the works of Spencer, Darwin, and Huxley had been translated into Welsh, and at the same time that the 1904 revival was raging the liberal agnostics had quietly taken over the Welsh educational system from university to grammar school.[10] With the new learning came a new pantheistic theology, preached by R. J. Campbell, who insisted upon the "Immanence of God instead of the Transcendency of God —i.e., that God was not a person, standing outside the creation and looking down from heaven upon

man, but was, in fact, in the universe and part of it, to be found in all things animate and inanimate."[11] Reverence for the innate goodness of nature was not new to Wales and Ireland. As Joseph Campbell reminds us, and as we shall explore further in Chapter 3, the bards and druids had combined Christianity with their own more stoic theology, retaining a conviction of the divinity in man and nature that gave rise to the Pelagian heresy.[12]

The liberal movement in theology impressed both Thomas' great-uncle and his father, who probably accomplished the first rebellions in the family from traditional piety. Great-Uncle William Thomas, Evan Thomas' brother, became a Unitarian minister. "Liberal in theology" and "radical in politics," he was also a schoolmaster and poet, thus combining the theology, politics, and vocations of his nephew, David John, and his great-nephew, Dylan. He gave himself the bardic pen name of Gwilym Marles, the surname being the name of a stream near his birthplace in the west of Wales.[13] Thomas did not tell any stories about this remarkable relative, perhaps because he wanted to be thought of as the first rebel-poet in his family. Instead, he told everyone that Grandfather Evan was a preacher, thus inventing a mythical combination of grandfather and great-uncle, who as Aneiran Davies rightly prophesied "is going to stomp around quite a lot of future writings on the poet." Great-Uncle Gwilym Marles was transformed into Marlais of "The Orchards" and perhaps also into the promiscuous great-uncle, Jarvis, whose home, like Great-Uncle William's, was in the

country fields of Wales, and who is the progenitor of several of Dylan Thomas' prose heroes.

Whereas William Thomas was a Unitarian preacher, David John Thomas, his nephew, became an atheist. He left Johnstown for the University of Wales, where he received an honors degree in English literature. He devoted his life to the grammar school system, taking up his first position as English master at Swansea in 1899 and remaining there, except for a year at Pontypridd, until his retirement in 1936. He was an instructor of rigorous standards, beloved for his scholarly enthusiasm if not for his irascibility. His son Dylan, who decided early to be a poet, shared his love for literature, if not for things academic.

Although it has been assumed—undoubtedly at his own suggestion—that Dylan Thomas "fell" straight from the chapel to the pub, it seems likely that his upbringing was considerably complicated by his father's earlier transition from country to city and from piety to atheism. At some time in his early boyhood Dylan may have willingly participated in chapel and Sunday school (he describes a Sunday school certificate which he was later ashamed to have hanging on his wall). Certainly his absorption of biblical material suggests more than token piety. His mother was devout, and he was thus brought up in the same type of family tension as William Butler Yeats, whose mother tried to offset his father's freethinking. He may also have experienced the conversion of personal confrontation with Christ so common to Welsh Methodism, for

two of his finest poems, "Vision and Prayer" and "In country sleep," are written from a passionate conviction of the existence of a saviour in whom he does not want to believe. Personal confrontation with the diety might have engendered Thomas' always personal approach to Christ, but if indeed he experienced a religious crisis, it was soon mingled with the other strands of a unique theology which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

Thomas' London acquaintances tend to be scornful of the idea that he read anything but detective stories, thrillers, and his own poetry at any time.[14] Daniel Jones, on the other hand, mentions W. H. Davies, Yeats, Aldington, Sacheverell Sitwell, Lawrence, Hopkins, and many others as poets whose works he read and imitated.[15] From the evidence of the early Poetry Notebooks I would add the imagists, Auden, and Blake. The *Selected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, edited by Constantine FitzGibbon, reveals a young man so well read that literary references merge naturally with the other topics of his correspondence. "My education was the liberty I had to read indiscriminately and all the time," wrote Thomas, whose readings must have included the library of his father's "brown study," where they took place; "I never could have dreamed that there were such goings-on, such do's and argiebargies, such love and sense and terror and humbug, such and so many blinding bright lights breaking across the just awaking wits."[16] What might have been the contents of David John Thomas' library? The final examinations at Swansea Grammar School involved