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DEATH IN THE POETRY OF DYLAN THOMAS

por

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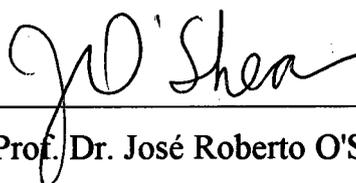
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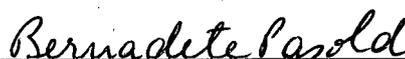
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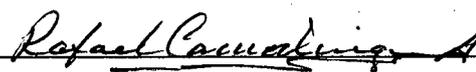
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God, for the mystery of life and the consciousness of death.

## ABSTRACT

## DEATH IN THE POETRY OF DYLAN THOMAS

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The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the attitudes towards death conveyed by eighteen poems of Dylan Thomas, and to compare them with the Christian Protestant tradition, searching for points of similarity and dissimilarity. The theme of death is important and central in Thomas's poetry. In my analysis I conclude that Thomas's poems present ambiguous attitudes towards death, sometimes suggesting resistance, sometimes suggesting calm acceptance, always expressed in terms of Christian metaphors and allusions. Thomas's view of death can be basically understood in terms of re-absorption of the individual in the elements of nature, contrasting with the Christian notion of resurrection of the body.

In the first chapter I present the Christian view of death as it is portrayed in the Bible, in the theology of Martin Luther, in John Calvin, and in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, showing that the Christian view of death is the result of a long historical development. In the second chapter I present the analysis of Thomas's poems, trying to focus on his attitudes towards the death of the self, the death of the other, and the death of the human race. And in the Conclusion I present a comparison of Thomas's attitudes with the concepts and values of the Christian tradition, showing that the poet uses Christian symbols and concepts but he re-interprets them according to his own view of life and death, and according to his aesthetic purposes.

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## Resumo

O propósito desta dissertação é analisar as atitudes de Dylan Thomas perante a morte, expressas em dezoito de seus poemas, e compará-las com a tradição cristã protestante, buscando pontos de similaridade e pontos de divergência. O tema da morte é importante e central na poesia de Dylan Thomas. Em minha análise eu concluo que os poemas de Dylan Thomas apresentam uma atitude ambígua diante da morte, algumas vezes sugerindo uma certa resistência, às vezes sugerindo uma calma aceitação, sempre expressa em termos de metáforas e alusões à tradição cristã. A visão de Dylan Thomas da morte pode ser basicamente entendida em termos de uma reabsorção do indivíduo nos elementos da natureza, contrastando assim com a noção cristã de ressurreição da carne.

No primeiro capítulo eu apresento a visão cristã da morte conforme é descrita na Bíblia, na teologia de Martinho Lutero, em João Calvino, e na filosofia de Søren Kierkegaard, mostrando que a visão cristã da morte é resultado de um longo desenvolvimento histórico. No segundo capítulo apresento a análise dos poemas de Dylan Thomas, tentando focalizar suas atitudes diante da morte do outro, da morte do eu, e da morte da raça humana. E na conclusão apresento uma comparação entre as atitudes de Dylan Thomas e os valores da tradição cristã, mostrando que o poeta usa símbolos e conceitos cristãos mas que os reinterpreta de acordo com sua visão da vida e da morte, e de acordo também com seus propósitos estéticos.

**Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>01</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>Death according to the Christian Tradition</b>	<b>08</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>Death in the poems of Dylan Thomas</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>182</b>

## Introduction

A young man who enters the bedroom to encourage his father who is dying old and blind; a little child totally burnt, dead in the arms of its mother also dead, waiting for milk but drinking death in an anonymous street during a violent war; a boy at the funeral of an old relative; an old man killed by a bomb at the door of his house; boys playing in the seashore unconscious of the passage of time and the coming of death; a thirty-five-year-old man who celebrates his birthday walking on the hills, you can find them in the poetry of Dylan Thomas. They represent the tragedy of the human being in face of death. They have in common the fact of being in the limits of their existence, between word and silence, light and darkness, faith and despair, life and death.

Many poets have dealt with the theme of death, many literary movements have developed the subject of mortality. In the poetry of Dylan Thomas, the reality of death has a fundamental importance, becoming his most recurrent theme and concern. Studying Thomas's poetry it may be possible to identify his major attitudes and viewpoints about the reality of death. In these poems one can find, not only his own experience and personal impressions about mortality, but also some echoes of his cultural background, the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Dylan Thomas was born in Swansea (Wales) on the 27th of October of 1914, and lived always under the impression of a sudden near death, with a clear consciousness of his own mortality, even writing poems under the inspiration of death. Indeed, he had some problems with asthma, and always suspected of having tuberculosis, using it sometimes as an artifice to enact the role of a Romantic poet, the Celtic minstrel, the inspired bard condemned to live a short life. Considered by some critics as the most important English poet of his time, hailed by some of his first readers as the most prominent figure of

contemporary English Literature, Dylan Thomas is one of the most passionate and complex poets of this century. He was exalted because of the exuberance of his rhetoric, his handling of language, the musicality of his poems, the originality of his images, his metaphors, and the mystic impression of his poetry. But he was also criticized because of the excessive concentration of his images, repetitive themes, the complexity of his syntax, taken by some critics as symptoms of superficiality and irresponsibility. His themes are indeed recurrent, but they encompass the elemental experiences of the human existence: birth, life, love, and death, and his treatment of the themes is complex and accurate. Critics like Elder Olson, for example, considered Thomas's poetry very difficult to understand, sometimes seeming irrational, and lacking the necessary discipline. Others, like David Daiches, in spite of recognizing the difficulty with the interpretation of Thomas's poems and the limited number of his themes, images, and phrases, recognize that Thomas's poetry is "magnificent, as well as original in tone and technique, and that he was growing in poetic stature to the last" (24).

Dylan Thomas's poetry was marked by several influences, in different moments of his life and in different levels. One can enumerate names like Blake, Freud, Jung, Joyce, Rimbaud, Kierkegaard, Donne, and many others. He was influenced by surrealism, there are in fact some points of contact between his poetry and the poetry of Rimbaud and Hopkins (Bayley 140). Although Thomas did not recognize being influenced by surrealism, and even denied it in his "Poetic Manifesto," arguing that the surrealists' formula was to juxtapose the unpremeditated without creating images consciously (qtd. in Fitzgibbon 372), resulting in a kind of automatic writing, he was in fact acquainted with the surrealist movement and ideas and even attended the "Great International Surrealist Exhibition" in London in 1936 (Fitzgibbon 21). Indeed, in reading Thomas's poems one can recognize that he wrote consciously, creating some very complex rhyme schemes, using coherently the verbal patterns and using a very rich imagery, however packed and complex. His poems intend to communicate and they do.

Dylan Thomas was also profoundly influenced by his Welsh origin, from which he acquired a distinguished eloquence and a very developed notion of rhetoric as well as the ability of using and creating metaphors, together with his personal and natural sense of humor full of enthusiasm and energy. An important element of the Welsh influence on Thomas is the religious experience which gave him sensibility to the sound of the words, and the rhythm of phrases, the cadence, the musical feelings, the impressive rhetoric. The reading of the Bible contributed to enrich Thomas's repertoire of images, as he himself recognized: "the great rhythms had rolled over me from the Welsh pulpits; and I read, for myself, from Job and Ecclesiastes; and the story of the New Testament is part of my life" (Thomas qtd. in Ferris 30). The Welsh religion, a kind of rural Protestant Puritanism with its preaching festivals, its revivals, its hymns, also gave Thomas a preoccupation with his personal salvation, a very intense conscience of sin, and the notion of God's presence in the world of man and nature. His religious experience emphasized the spoken word and the importance of the individual in direct relation with the Almighty God, the creator and preserver of the world of man as of the world of nature. His religious heritage gave him also the force of his themes and approaches, the richness of his language, and images, and rhythms. The Welsh language also had an important influence on Dylan Thomas's poetry, although it is known that he spoke only English. Nevertheless, the Welsh mythology, the ancient and contemporary Welsh writers, and even the common people of the village, the Welsh miners and labors have to be included in the list of influences. Another important contribution of Thomas's Welsh heritage is his craftsmanship in the use of the poetic language, his constant work and improvement of the word, resulting sometimes in an apparently natural expression, or intense emotion, but being indeed the result of several hours and even days of hard work. Dylan Thomas spent much time and energy collecting words and expressions of the village people, listening to stories, rewriting and perfecting his work of art.

The theme of death has central importance in Dylan Thomas's poetry, which can be observed by the frequency of its occurrence and by the

intensity of its images. "I feel all my muscles contract," he confessed, "as I try to drag out from the whirlpooling words around my everlasting ideas of the importance of death on the living" (qtd. in Fitzgibbon 135). Commenting on Thomas's sense of terror by the impression of a premature death, in addition to his weak health and his bad habit of hard smoking and drinking, Fitzgibbon says that Dylan Thomas, his parents and all his friends expected him to die young: "All his life the clocks ticked away his death for him... His father said that Dylan would never see forty" (49). Dylan Thomas died on the 9th of November of 1953, when he was 39 years old. His poems reflect this fear of death which was for him a presence full of menace and terror. But more than reflecting this sense of terror in face of the reality of death, Thomas's poems suggest an alternative to the menace of death, they portray a reaction, they present an affirmative attitude. Fitzgibbon understands Thomas's attitude towards death in terms of a Freudian synthesis of death-wish and life instinct manifested in the urge to procreate, and poetically expressed through psychological, biblical, and astronomical images (100). Indeed the influence of Freud cannot be denied, but I think Dylan Thomas's attitude towards death can also be interpreted according to his religious background, taking in consideration the Christian heritage so evident in his poems. In order to accomplish this task, it is necessary to analyze the Christian concepts of life, death, body, soul, time and eternity present in Thomas's poetry, and then try to determine how they can be related to Thomas's attitudes towards death. Sometimes he seems to present death as a unifying experience with the natural world, sometimes he seems to suggest a very Christian orthodox concept of resurrection and faith. Sometimes the reality of death is so strong to Thomas that he can perceive it even in the birth of a child, suggesting that there is some sort of unity in the movement of life and death, as if they were part of the same process. "Birth," says Thomas "is the beginning of death" (qtd. in Shapiro 176).

Developing the theme of death in his poetry, Thomas uses Christian symbols and creates a kind of religious discourse about death, sometimes re-interpreting these religious concepts and symbols according to his own notion of the holiness of the natural world and his faith in the permanence of life. Some

critics, like Ralph Maud for example, perceive an evolution in Thomas's attitude towards death, from a sense of despair and terror of the early poems to a more mature and resigned attitude in the last poems. Indeed, in poems like "Poem on his Birthday," "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" and "Fern Hill" it is possible to observe that death can be celebrated with happiness, with assurance, and faith. But Ralph Maud thinks that Thomas did not find a solution for the problem of death in the religious alternative, at least not in the Christian religion ("Last Poems" 80). Other critics, like David Daiches, also recognize in the poems of Thomas a consciousness of the unity of life and death, and even the hope of overcoming death as the destructive element of life, suggesting that Thomas achieves a religious attitude towards life and death after a long experience of suffering and disillusion (17). For some critics Thomas shows optimism about the reality of death, for some others he does not; for some he celebrates the unity of life and death, for others he does not build any bridge between life and death, between the self and the world; for some he accepts the Christian tradition as an alternative of understanding the world, for others he denies it. The question seems open to discussion.

The purpose of my dissertation is to study the treatment of the theme of death in some of Dylan Thomas's most representative poems. Considering that the theme of death is important in his poetry, and considering that some scholars think it is the central one in the poetry of Thomas, I decided to investigate Thomas's attitude towards this theme. Considering also that Thomas's poems abound in religious images and allusions to the Christian tradition, I also decided to analyze these religious references, trying to trace a parallel between Thomas's poetry and the Christian tradition. My intention is to compare Thomas's attitudes in face of death with the Christian tradition, specifically the Protestant tradition, in accordance with the poet's Welsh origin, in order to find points of concordance and discordance, or even incongruity. I restricted the analysis of the Protestant tradition to the study of the theme of death in the Bible, in Martin Luther, in John Calvin, and in Søren Kierkegaard, because they are representative of the Protestant vision of the world, the Protestant cosmivision.

Thomas himself acknowledged the influence of the stories of the Bible in his poetry, and the hymns sung in the chapel in his childhood, the rhythms, the myths, the images. Thomas was also influenced by Kierkegaard in his romantic view of life. Calvin and Luther are included because of their importance in the history of the Protestant thought. My hypothesis is that there are some points of contact between Thomas's poetry and his Christian background.

In this dissertation, I present first the study of the Protestant attitude towards death, secondly I present Thomas's attitude towards death, and then the comparison of both attitudes. In order to analyze Thomas's attitude towards death as conveyed in his poems, I use the inductive method, studying each particular poem, then testing the hypothesis, and later tracing some patterns in his poetry. I also use the inductive method in order to study the Christian tradition point of view about the question of death and to establish some patterns of recurrence. Then, I use the comparative method to trace a parallel between Thomas's attitude towards death and the Christian tradition.

In the first part of my dissertation I analyze the theme of death according to the Christian (Protestant) tradition, as it is represented by the teachings of the Bible as the source of the Christian tradition, by the writings of Martin Luther and John Calvin as representatives of the Reform of the Sixteenth century, by the philosophical writings of Søren Kierkegaard as a representative of the later Protestant thought, a critic of traditional Christianity and the precursor of a philosophy which emphasizes existence. In order to be objective, I had to limit my analysis of the Christian tradition to the Protestant movement, considering its historical presence in Wales, and considering its influence on Thomas's work. Inside the Protestant movement, I limited my analysis to the Bible because of its fundamental importance in the Protestant movement, to Luther and Calvin for their historical importance, and to Kierkegaard for his approach to the theme of death, for his emphasis on the human existence, and for his recognized influence on Thomas's poetry. In the first chapter, I attempt to show the evolution of the belief in the resurrection of the body in the Bible, from the Old to the New Testament and to show how it determines the attitude of the

Christian belief towards the reality of death. I also analyze how the concept of individuality pervades the Christian tradition, from the biblical texts to Luther's ideas, culminating in Kierkegaard's philosophy of individuality. And I also attempt to focus on the importance of Christ as a Redeemer from sin and death, and to show how this notion influences the Christian view.

In the second part I interpret Thomas's poems selected according to the criterion of their significance in the treatment of the theme of death, and try to trace some pattern in Thomas's attitude towards death. In the selection of the poems (and a selection was inevitable!) I also considered their importance in the general scope of Thomas's poetry, besides their focus on the theme of death, and their usefulness as extracts of Thomas's several attitudes towards death. For the sake of clarity, the poems selected are divided into three main categories according to their content, which are 1) poems dealing with the death of the self, 2) poems dealing with the death of the other, and 3) poems dealing with the death of the human race. All the poems used are quoted from the *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, edited by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud. The poems are analyzed according to the chronological order of publication, in order to detect any development of Thomas's thought from the early to the last poems.

In the Conclusion I present a comparison between the Christian tradition and Thomas's attitudes towards death as conveyed by his poems, trying to verify to what extent Thomas's attitudes present similarities and dissimilarities with the Christian tradition.

The parenthetical references to the poems are presented according to the poem's structure, and divided into two or more parts, which will be indicated in parenthesis with Roman numerals (I, II, III...). Stanzas and lines will be indicated by Arabic numerals, separated by a full stop (4.7). Then, for example, I can quote the second line of the third stanza of the first part of the poem "Vision and Prayer", and the parenthetical note should be (I.3.2).

## Chapter I

### The Problem of Death According to the Christian Tradition

This chapter deals with the theme of death according to the Protestant tradition as a segment of Christianity. The starting point of the Protestant movement was the sixteenth-century Reform, followed by the establishment of Protestant churches in several countries of Europe—Germany, England, Scotland, Holland, France. Martin Luther and John Calvin were the most important leaders and thinkers of the Protestant tradition; even now they are considered points of reference of the Protestant thought. This chapter analyzes their contribution to the understanding of the problem of death in the Protestant tradition. Søren Kierkegaard was selected because of his criticism on the Protestant Church as a conservative institution that forgot the very essence of Christianity: the existence. Kierkegaard was also important because of his treatment of the question of death. For Luther, for Calvin, for Kierkegaard the Bible with its teachings, prophecies, parables, metaphors, was the great code of their thoughts, the fountain of their basic ideas. Therefore, this chapter starts with the analysis of the theme of death in the Bible, then in Luther, then in Calvin, and finally in Kierkegaard.

The study of death in the Bible is naturally divided into two great lines: the Old Testament, which represents the most important source of the Jewish Tradition, and the New Testament, which is a peculiar synthesis and re-examination of the Old Testament and the most important source of the Christian tradition as a whole and of the Protestant tradition specifically. We will examine Luther's thought according to his re-interpretation of the Bible in the context of the 16th century, when the doctrine of salvation through the grace of God is emphasized. Stressing the sovereignty of God, Calvin's thought about death is

similarly based on the reading of the Bible as a unity, but on the perspective of the New Testament. Kierkegaard also, in his turn, makes his peculiar reading of the Bible, criticizing some elements of the Protestant tradition and reinforcing some others, such as the fundamental importance of faith for the redemption of the individual, the profound and terrible conscience of sin and guilt, the fear of death and despair as human experiences. Starting from the Bible, through Luther and Calvin, to Kierkegaard, it is possible to trace a line of development in the idea of death as a universal problem that affects the meaning of life, the evolution of the idea of eternity and eternal life as a continuation of the physical life, and the importance of faith and hope as forces that help us to overcome death, sin, and despair.

#### [A] Death in the Bible

The theme of death in the Bible has several nuances, since it is the result of a historical development that lasted more than three thousand years, with contributions of many different cultures. The Hebrews entered in contact with cultures such as the Semite tribes, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Persians, the Babilonians, the Greeks and the Romans, among many others. Therefore, the Old Testament which is called by the Jews "*Torah*" (the Book of the Law), the most important document of the Jewish tradition, was written in Hebrew and Chaldee, and contains Psalms, prophecies, narratives of kings, wisdom, stories and traditions of the people. The New Testament, written in Greek by Jews who were disciples of Christ, reflects the influence of the Greeks and the presence of the Romans, and contains narratives of Jesus's life, the history of the early church, letters from Paul, Peter and John, and the prophetic book of Revelation. Together with the Old Testament, the New Testament represents the most important book of the Christian Tradition.

There is a development in the treatment of the problem of death throughout the Bible. In the early parts of the Old Testament, for example, the idea of a resurrection of the body was not present. It came out as the result of a

development, as the people had new experiences in their relation with the God of Israel, as they entered in contact with different realities, different cultures, and as they went across critical moments of their history. From the Old Testament also comes the understanding that life is the supreme gift one can receive from God, the relation between death and sin, and the centrality of the relation with God in terms of life and death. The New Testament presents a clear message of resurrection and takes Jesus Christ as the center of this message, Jesus Christ "the crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). Faith and hope are basic answers found in the New Testament to this message of Christ's death and resurrection.

In order to understand the concept of death in the Bible, it is necessary to study the concept of life. We shall consider first the Old Testament idea of life as the supreme gift. Life is the most important gift one received from God, when God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gen. 2:7). In the book of the prophet Ezekiel, the idea of life as a divine breath is also present, when he writes about the vision of the dry bones, in Chapter 37:10: "So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army." Daniel, in his Chapter 5:23, declares to Belshazzar the king of Babylon that the "Lord of heaven" is "the God in whose hand thy breath is". According to the biblical teaching, God is entirely distinguished from the natural world. He is the Creator, and nature even manifests the glory of God (Psalm 19:1:4), but it cannot be idolized, it cannot occupy God's place, nature is not sacred in itself. The sacredness of the natural world only reflects the sanctity of God, but in eternal dependance of His will and word. So nature is not seen as an autonomous entity, as if life was originated in nature itself. God is the principle of life. Longevity is frequently seen as the signal of God's favor, the blessing of living until a "good old age" (Gen. 25:8; Judg. 8:32). In fact, the death of the righteous man in an old age is seen in the Old Testament as something regrettable but accepted as natural, without protest, for "we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again..." (II Sam. 14:14). Premature death, however, represents an absurd and throws the individual into a terrible crisis. This would

be the most terrible misery: the death of the innocent one, the death of the young one, the death of children, any sudden death, the death without announcement, without time for farewells and preparation.

The Bible presents a notion of time as God's creation, staying always under God's control. God is the Lord of time. Therefore, death and time are under the direct control of God's Providence. Genesis describes the creation of the world and says that it was God who put "lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years" (Gen. 1:14). According to the Bible time has a linear movement, a notion peculiar to the Jewish culture, in contrast with the other cultures which knew only the cyclic notion of time. The linear notion of time gives to the Jewish people a notion of historical movement, the consciousness that time has a beginning in God and an accomplishment in God.

The notion of individuality is another concept related to life in the Old Testament. Life is always my life. Such consciousness of the self is really something central in the Old Testament concept of life. However, this individuality does not survive the present life, and this is what makes death so terrible. Death raises the question of the meaning of life and individuality, a sense of the worthlessness of life:

For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me; for all is vanity and vexation of spirit (Eccles. 2:14-17).

In the Old Testament death is not seen as a natural process, but as an interruption in the process of living. According to Bultmann's understanding of the biblical culture, life is defined as a "temporal extension whose end is death" ("Záo and Zoê" 849), and death is not a natural process by itself but simply the end. Death seems to be only the negation of life, something apart from nature. "The idea that life and death can be regarded in a unity," says Bultmann, "is quite alien" (849). The Old Testament relates the phenomenon of death to the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Throughout the Bible death is seen as the

consequence of sin. It is the result of Adam's attitude toward God, the result of a choice made in total freedom (Gen. 3). The narrative of the Creation seems to presuppose that human beings were created immortal. After the sin of Adam and Eve, death entered man's experience, when God said to Adam "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:22). Death is experienced then as a divine curse, mixed with a sense of guilt and terror, a punishment for sin. There is a certain ambiguity in the Old Testament view of death: God is the Lord of death and therefore death does not have power and meaning in itself, remaining as a relative power, without autonomy. However, faith in God as the fountain of life makes death an intolerable paradox. In the book of Deuteronomy 32:39 the living God says:

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me:  
I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there  
any that can deliver out of my hand.

He is the lord over death. But in most parts of the Old Testament there is a sense in which to die is, in a certain way, to be abandoned by God, to be separated from Him. Psalm 88 expresses it very well when the Psalmist says:

I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man  
that hath no strength: Free among the dead, like the slain that  
lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more: and they are  
cut off from thy hand (v. 4,5).

According to the German theologian Eberhard Jüngel, the idea of life in the Old Testament is linked with the relationship with God (Jüngel 54). One lives in the proportion that God develops a relation with him. Therefore, according to Jüngel, the biblical concept of death is developed from the concept of life as a relationship. Death is the break in this relation, the interruption of every condition of life, therefore, it is "the end of the history of a life," the end of a body, the end of a person, the expression of the littleness of mankind, the return to dust (80). This can be illustrated with the biblical sentence: "For the grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth. The living, the living, he shall praise thee, as I do this day..." (Isa. 38:18-19). (See also Psalm 30:10; 6:5; 88:10,11). Similarly, Bultmann comments that in the Old Testament "the [dead]

righteous are outside the infinitely important sphere of life in which cultic relationship with God is maintained" ("Záo and Zoê" 847). As a consequence and according to the Law of Moses, corpses are considered unclean, out of God's sphere of action, and the contact with the dead is forbidden (Lev. 11:33f.; 21:1; Num. 19:16; Deut. 21:23). There seems to be a separation between the circle of death and the sphere of God's presence. Save from leprosy, the most serious uncleanness was caused by the contact with a corpse (Lev. 13). Even the participation in funerals causes religious uncleanness, which prevents, in a certain way, the cult of the dead in the Israel of the Old Testament. The dead belong to the other world, to the kingdom of the dead, and their presence must be avoided as something dirty.

The concept of death as the separation of the soul from the body comes from the Greeks. The Biblical teaching is different. It is not possible to find in the Bible the Gnostic dualism which considers the human body and all which is material as essentially evil. The concept of the human being in terms of body and soul, the body as a prison, and the consequent notion of death as liberation of the soul comes from the Greeks. For Jüngel, it was Augustin who mixed the Platonic ideas of death with the Christian Theology. Philippe Ariès in his *História da Morte no Ocidente* also recognizes that in the Biblical context death was not considered a separation of the soul from the body (113). In fact, death is seen in the Bible as the separation of man from God. Body and soul were considered a mysterious unity, indivisible.

The essence of sin in the Bible is the choice of disobedience, of living autonomously separated from God. In contrast, love seems to be presented in the Bible as the affirmation of life in spite of the power of death. If death brings separation, love brings communion. If sin and death create the state of non-relationship, love recreates life. Therefore the notion of salvation from death comes in the Bible as a result of God's love. And therefore, in the New Testament, Paul declares that love is eternal:

Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away... And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity (1 Cor. 13:8,13).

The New Testament proposes a solution to the problem of sin and death: the re-establishment of the relation with God through Jesus Christ, for "if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:17). According to Paul, Christ's redemptive death brought peace and reconciliation between mankind and God (Rom. 5:1-11). As a consequence the Christian seems to understand death no more as a curse or a malediction but as a "passage," something really near to a natural process, the end of this life and the entering into another life. Though Paul still treats death as the "last enemy" (I Cor. 15:26), he also speaks of it as "gain" (Phil. 1:21). The death of Christ is the decisive movement, in the Christian tradition, in which death, sin and Devil are conquered.

The biblical concept of resurrection is the result of a gradual development. The idea of resurrection is not present in the early parts of the Old Testament, but comes later and is fully developed in the New Testament. Some of the Jewish people already believed that they could expect resurrection as something that God could do if He wished (Bultmann "Záo and Zoê" 848). This expectancy of resurrection was based on the personality of God, on His essence. Job, for example, gazing at his desperate situation, the death of his sons and daughters, the loss of his richness, the lack of his health, says:

For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me. His promise cannot fail (Job 19:25).

In the last parts of the Old Testament the concept of resurrection is developed, but always based on God's grace and essence. The vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 seems to indicate the resurrection of Israel as a nation (see Hos. 6:2; 13:14 and Ps 72:17). However, in Daniel 12:2, we have the prophecy of the resurrection of those who will receive grace and of those who will receive condemnation, individually, when he says that "many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and

everlasting contempt." The concept then is developed to a general resurrection of saints and sinners (see also Isaiah 26:19).

In the New Testament the concept of resurrection is fully developed. The Christian idea of the resurrection of the body is completely different from the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul (Guthrie 819). The New Testament, like the Old, sees the human being as an integrity, being the body an essential part to this integrity. God's promise is presented in terms of physical resurrection, and not merely spiritual existence in another dimension. Christ's resurrection is fundamental in this hope of a general resurrection (I Cor. 15:13,14). What is peripheral in the Old Testament is central in the New Testament: the hope of a resurrection of the dead based on the victory of God over death. Immortality, for the Christian tradition, must "include the body, in however transfigured form, as it did in Jesus' resurrection" (Frye 20). The resurrection of the body provides a new understanding of death, no more as the end of existence, but as the entering into an eternal life. The Christian experiences this paradox of having already passed from death to life (John 5:24; I John 3:14), even in spite of dying physically, because "he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25).

Another important element of the Christian thought is the concept of faith as a positive answer to God's offer of salvation, as a positive attitude towards death. Faith and commitment are based on Christ's death and resurrection. Christ's death gives the believer the opportunity to face his own death with faith. According to this message, the believer, receiving the pardon of his sins, feels free to live without the "bondage" of the fear of death, which includes the possibility of dying with courage and optimism, courage of not closing the eyes before the necessity of dying (Jüngel 89-90). The believer does not run away from death. In fact, he knows that he will die physically, but believes that he will be resurrected, risen from the dead. The book of Hebrews declares in Chapter 11 that by "faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death" (v.5).

Besides the exercise of faith as an answer to the message of salvation, the Christian hope, expressed in the looking to the future, in the waiting for the life to come, represents another important element of the New Testament teaching. Paul refers to this link between faith and hope when he says:

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:1-2).

Later he says that "we are saved by hope" (Rom. 8:24). This is the paradox of the eternal life, something already conquered and something to be established in the future (Bultmann "Záo and Zoê" 865-6). There is always this present and future dimension. This future life will be corporal, but also spiritual, in a new earth and new heaven. According to the Christian perspective, there is an end to history, and this end of history must be understood as an accomplishment of God's will. The earth will cease to exist, not because of its own decadence or corruption, but because of the accomplishment of God's plans. The catastrophic events portrayed by the book of Revelation are only a preparation for the end, and are presented as signs of God's interference in human history. The end of the world will come as a manifestation of God's judgement and not as a human action, or a pure natural phenomenon. In the same letter Paul explains the nature of his hope of the coming of Christ "who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (Phil. 3:21). The Christian knows that death is not the end, there is a resurrection, the day of judgment (Heb. 9:27), the eternal life or the eternal death (I Cor. 15:22-24; Rom. 2:5-13; I Thess. 4:15f.; II Cor. 5:10).

Throughout the Bible one can observe the centrality of the tension between life and death, and the complex movement from despair about the nothingness death brings to life, about the understanding of death as the punishment for sin, to the challenge of faith in Christ as the saviour from sin and death, and the hope of the final resurrection of the body and the everlasting life. It is also possible to distinguish the growing of the consciousness of individuality,

since in some parts of the Old Testament the destiny of the self seemed to be overthrown into the tomb and into forgetfulness, and in some other parts resurrection was understood only in terms of national, political revival. However, in the last parts of the Old Testament and in the New Testament as a whole, the idea of an individual survival from the experience of death is fully developed. Faith, hope, and commitment to a life in the service of the living God are the attitudes encouraged by the Bible as positive answers to the message of salvation. In other words, according to the New Testament, faith in Jesus Christ helps the individual to overcome the problem of death.

### [B] Death in Luther

Martin Luther, in his "Um Sermão sobre a Preparação para a Morte," an early work written in 1519, uses a very graphic approach to the theme of death. His focus is not death itself, but its representation to the Christian in the moment of dying. In this sermon, Luther's concern is more pastoral than theological, and his language more figurative than literal. Using biblical references and expanding the ideas of the Bible, Luther sees death in very negative terms, as "the last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26) and the "wage of sin" (Rom. 6:23). In fact, Martin Luther's world is dominated by diabolic forces that intend to destroy human lives and to separate them from God. Luther, making reference to the biblical tradition, comments that the Devil is murderous and a liar, not allowing man even an hour of rest, and always trying to wound the Christian all the time with arrows, lances and knives (*Catecismos* 495,6). The Devil never stops tempting, attacking, and pursuing relentlessly each Christian, in order to destroy his body and soul. This world is full of risk and menace, a world of terror, in which death represents the most serious harm the Devil can do men. In his *Catecismos*, commenting on the Lord's Prayer, Luther says that the expression "deliver us from evil" includes any attack, oppression, and temptation of the kingdom of darkness, such as poverty, shame, death, and all the miseries and suffering that exist abundantly on the earth (473). Luther says clearly that the

Devil attacks constantly the Christians' lives, because the Devil is a murderer, provoking accidents and physical damage, from a broken neck to insanity, drowning, suicide and other terrible things (473).

In his "Sermão" Luther identifies three deformities that the Devil creates and presents to the dying man: the horrible image of death, the terrifying and multifaceted image of sin, and the unbearable image of hell (388). Each of these images increases in size when subjoined to the other. When the image of death is engraved on the mind of the individual, he feels desperate, and cannot resist the sense of terror. The Devil comes at that time and assaults the human soul with temptations, imposing the image of death, bringing fear and terror. To the image of death, the Devil adds the images of the sins that the individual has committed, images of personal failures, mistakes of the past, weaknesses, despair, together with the remembrance of God's wrath and the preoccupation with the worldly life, distracting man's attention from God's mercy, making him fear, hate, and run away from death. The more death is beheld, the more difficult it is to face it (388). Luther refers to the meditation on death at the moment of dying as a dangerous exercise. He says that the meditation on death is appropriate only when the moment of death is far off; when death is near, it is not time to think, imagine, and contemplate death, it causes only despair (388). Luther considers the resistance to death a terrible sin. The Christian has to accept death in obedience to the will of God. He shall not resist the coming of death, he shall not cling desperately to physical life. He must be prepared to leave, if this is the will of God.

The contemplation of sin, to behold it excessively, besides the contemplation of death, is the second great temptation at the moment of dying. The vision of sin, together with a guilty conscience, leads to despair. And here also Luther perceives the Devil's strategy, the enlistment of sins, until man despairs at his faults and despairs of God's judgment and forgiveness, resisting physical death ("Sermão" 388-9). Another risk pointed by Luther, at the moment of death, is the temptation of paying attention to the images of hell. When it happens, despair becomes more and more intense. It is here that Luther points out

the curiosity about man's predestination as a dangerous temptation. The Devil, he says, moves the soul to think about its predestination to heaven or its damnation in hell, and to speculate about God's purposes (389). This way of thinking brings risk to the soul. For Luther, the thought about God's previous choice comes from the Devil as a pernicious suggestion. For Luther, it is dangerous for the dying person to follow the Devil's thoughts and to blaspheme against God, becoming a victim of the despair of not being chosen, or wishing to know, like God, what only God can know. Luther continues, suggesting that the Christian resist those images, maintaining his eyes closed to them, and letting God be God, and letting God be greater than man, letting God know much more about man than man.

Luther invites the Christian, at the moment of death, to meditate on the image of Christ, who experienced the despair of death, sin and hell, vicariously, for the salvation of all humanity. There, on the cross, Christ conquered death and defeated the power of the Devil, because he suffered the punishment for the sins of every human being, the malediction. When God resurrected Jesus from the dead, death was no more final. In the image of Christ, hell and predestination have no importance, and bring no doubt, redemption is achieved ("Sermão" 391). Making an analogy with the biblical text of Luke 19:43ff. which contains Jesus's words about the siege and capture of Jerusalem, Luther comments on the constant menace of death like a siege around the city, like soldiers in trenches, on the presence of sin like the enemy's persecution, on hell and despair like a desolate city in which there is no "stone upon another" (393). Luther suggests also that the Christian shall focus his attention on images of life, and concentrate his thoughts of the heart and all his senses on the vision of those who conquered the despair of death and died under God's grace, mainly on the image of Christ, and all his saints (390). One image against the other, this is the teaching of Luther in order to neutralize the despair of death in the human heart. Then, he says, the Christian heart will find peace to die quietly with Christ and in Christ (390).

The Christian, according to Luther, can not only overcome the fear of death, but he can even mock death, defy it, laugh at its defeated power,

because the death of Christ "has disarmed" death in the name of God. Because of Christ's death, death is dead, says Luther, "and hath nothing terrible behind its grinning mask. Like unto a slain serpent, it hath indeed its former terrifying appearance, but it is only the appearance; in truth it is a dead evil, and harmless enough" ("The Second Image" 148). The Christian can mock not only death but also sin and hell, because he believes in the victory of grace and thus transcends fear and guilt. Death loses its power over life, and this is what Luther calls the spiritual mockery on death. "So," says Luther:

a great fiasco happens to the Devil, since he finds only straw to tread on. Why do you fight, Devil? Do you think of accusing my good works and my sanctity before God? Buuu! I do not have either one or the other! My strength is not my strength, I do not know sin or sanctity in me. Nothing, nothing at all I find in myself except exclusively the strength of God (Luther qtd. in Jüngel 92).

The images of grace, life, and heaven present in Christ, and the mockery of death become possible only through the instrumentality of faith. The Christian has to believe effectively in order to overcome and defy death. Faith is the basic condition without which the images of grace are not efficient. Through faith, the Christian can see the glory, the grace and the mercy of God, and see death and sin defeated by Christ. Faith is a personal decision which implies a total surrender unto God, which implies the identification of the believer with the love of God revealed in Christ (Luther "Sermão" 390-1). Luther's concept of faith is very concrete, pictorial, it is the self-surrender into the hands of God, it is the vision of Christ on the cross. Faith for Luther is tested and exercised in life, day by day, and at the final moment of death. Salvation is possible only by faith in God's mercy and word of love.

Luther compares death with birth, a new kind of birth, a kind of being born to another world, through a narrow passage, to a wider world ("Sermão" 387). Our victory over death is spiritual, exercised within the limits of our human reality, which means that "my soul can improve in everything, so that even death and suffering will help me with my salvation" (*Liberdade* 15). This is what Luther calls freedom. There is a reabsorption of death, a recasting of the experience of dying. Free from guilt, the believer faces natural death

optimistically. Free from the fear of spiritual death, he faces physical death without guilt (24, 28-9). In the last moment of life, Luther suggests that the Christians praise and love God, "because praise and love mitigate death" ("Sermão" 398). The Christian is not alone at the moment of death, he is helped by God, his angels, the saints, the sacraments, the images of life. This spiritual assistance helps him overcome death, sin and hell, by offering consolation (396). Luther argues that the belief in the immortality of the soul is present in the Old Testament, even in the early parts of it, denying then the idea of a historical or cultural development, because he understands that the one whom God calls by the name (cf. Isa. 49:1) belongs to God in eternity (Isa. 43:1), "therefore, those to whom God speaks, in wrath or in grace, are really immortal. The person of God, Who is the speaker, and the word indicate that we are creatures with which God wants to speak eternally" (Luther qtd. in Jüngel 48-9). The consciousness of being an individual before God helps to transcend the limitations of physical death. To enter in relationship with the Eternal God is to overcome time, physical life and physical death.

For the Christian the concept of death changes from a frightening experience to the understanding of death as a blessing, because of his hope of resurrection and eternal life with God (Luther "Christian Songs" 287). Death is seen by the Christian as a "deep, strong, sweet sleep," the coffin is "our Lord Jesus's bosom," the grave "a soft couch of ease or rest" (287-8). Therefore, there is no time for mourning, vigils, processions, purgatory, despair, but for singing hymns of consolation, songs "of forgiveness of sins, of rest, of sleep, of life, and of the resurrection of Christians who have died" (288). Faith in resurrection makes possible the vision of death as a blessing, as a momentary passage, a transition to another life. Luther understands that death, which was the punishment for sins, becomes for the Christian "the end of sin, and the beginning of life and righteousness" ("The Second Image" 149-50). Death is seen no more as a punishment for sins but as an instrument in God's plan to annihilate sin. Therefore, Luther can say that this is a "brave spectacle, to see how death is destroyed, not by another's work, but by its own; it is stabbed with its own

weapon, and, like Goliath, is beheaded with its own sword" (150). Sin produces death, death destroys sin.

### [C] Death in Calvin

Calvin's theology is rooted basically in a close reading and in a total acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God. Like Luther, his writings were the result of an intense reading of the Bible in the original language (Hebrew, Chaldee and Greek). Both of them gave great importance to the translation of the Bible to their contemporary languages (German and French). Calvin's thought, as Luther's thought, was also very indebted to the theology of Augustin who emphasized the wicked nature of man in contrast with the holy grace of God revealed in Christ.

For Calvin, similarly to Luther, the soul is immortal, and the body is compared to a prison, showing a clear influence of Plato's ideas (*Institución* 115; 120). The soul is the immortal essence of the human beings (114). The soul is not only the breath of life, the strength, the energy given man by God, but an independent entity. For Calvin, the soul is the image of God in the human being, according to the biblical tradition of the creation of the world, even though the body also reflects the glory of God (*Institución* 116). With the fall of man, this image was deformed (118), and only Christ restores this image. In fact, for Calvin there are two moments in the history of human nature, one pure and perfect when the world was created and the image of God was clear and visible in the individuals, before the Fall of Adam, and the other after the fall, when this image was deformed and sin transformed the world into malediction and misery (113). Sin brought death, misery, ruin and corruption to all humankind (166-7). The Fall of Adam affected his free will, his intelligence, and mainly his relationship with God, bringing death (199), misery, crimes, the total corruption of nature (197-8). Human beings, then, experience death as a malediction, as the consequence of sin, as the separation from God (165). Sin affected the human race as a whole (168), and became an active force in human life (169). Every

soul is affected by evil, not only the body and its sensual dimension, which is really a pessimistic view of man. Death is a reality caused by sin, disturbing the relation of man with God (170). Death is seen as a break in the relation with God, i. e., to sin is to become an enemy of God, and to become an enemy of God is to die. For Calvin, salvation can only mean the return from death back to life (Bouwsma 480).

For Calvin, following the biblical teaching, Christ's death provides the solution to the problem of death, sin, and malediction (a characteristic of Calvin's doctrine is the forensic aspect of the relation between man and God, in which terms like guilt, punishment, absolution, condemnation, redemption, advocate are present). Christ's death provides salvation, because Christ dies in the place of the sinner, and gives life, defeating death. The Christian dies with him and resurrects with him, so that his life comes from Christ's death (*Institución* 379-80). Christ's death was not only physical, natural, but also spiritual, since he experienced the separation from God and died as a condemned man, cursed, far from any consolation, any hope of freedom. He experienced death as God's punishment, satisfying God's wrath and sense of justice, taking on his shoulders the faults of all humankind (382). Calvin says that "the Son of God was surrounded by pains and anguish that are the result of the wrath of God, which is the principle and origin of death" (382). Christ experienced vicariously all the metaphysical anguish of death (383), in order to give man back the life that was lost in Adam (166). Christ's death and resurrection saved man from death, because his death was peculiar, unique, bringing life, setting man free from sin and condemnation (373ff.). This means that, for the Christian, liberation from death is the result of a battle, a divine-human effort, full of pain, suffering, and fear. Christ's death was efficient to set man free from the terror of death and its power because of the resurrection which gives confirmation of this victory and hope of an afterdeath life (386).

Based on the the work of Christ who defeated the power of death, the Christian can carry his cross with the hope for a final resurrection, an idea also found in Luther (Calvin *Institución* 784). After conquering death, Christ has

brought hope of life and immortality to those who believe. The hope of eternal life gives consolation to this life (642-3). The knowledge of God generates a response in the Christian in terms of adoration and hope of a future life in heaven (76). Although he recognizes that in the New Testament the teaching on resurrection is clearer (329-30), Calvin can see in the Old Testament signals of hope in eternal life. He argues that behind the concrete language in terms of material gifts and hope, like the possession of the land of Canaan, the promises to Abraham's descendants, blessings to Zion and prosperity to Jerusalem, there is a spiritual dimension of which this material language is a symbol (331-2). For Calvin, the simple fact that God's promises were valid also to the future generations confirms that his blessings were not limited to the present time, "to the limits of the earthly life" (318). For Calvin, the doctrine of predestination does not bring despair, but hope and consolation in face of death and sin. And here Calvin's point of view differs totally from Luther's, since for Luther the preoccupation with predestination is a dangerous temptation, and for Calvin it is a fountain of encouragement. For him, God's sovereignty in salvation is fundamental. Salvation is not something that human beings do, but something they receive from God. The Gospel is not limited to this present life, it transcends towards the hope of immortality, of a new reality (313-4). The Christian faith is the search for transposing this line, this wall. Therefore, the Christians' attitude towards this earthly life is compared to that of a pilgrim's. They live provisionally, without attaching themselves to material things, in their pilgrimage towards the kingdom of heaven (552). Therefore everything here is relative, limited, temporal, imperfect.

Like Luther, Calvin recognizes human life as being surrounded by countless dangers, death, sickness, tragedies. "To any place we go," he says, "everything around us, is not only suspicious, but also almost openly threatens us and attacks us mortally. If we enter a boat, between us and death there is no more than one step. If we ride a horse, only a stumble can put our life in danger..." (*Institución* 145). Calvin evokes the biblical image of the lamb in the slaughterhouse in order to represent the risks in which the Christian is involved

day by day, living under the menace, under the real possibility of death. But he invites us to transcend these risks, looking beyond the frontier of this present life, to heaven, overcoming the perspectives of this world, "in the rest of His kingdom" (*Institución* 551). To the menace of death Calvin opposes faith in God's Providence. For him, the Christian overcomes the despair of death by trusting God's Providence, by understanding that the heavenly Father has everything under control, ruling and directing the universe (*Institución* 146). Behind the menace of the Devil and death, the believer sees meaning in the powerful hands of God. Calvin comments:

... as various tempests of grief disturb us, and even sometimes throw us down headlong, or drag us from the direct path of duty, or at least remove us from our post, the only remedy which exists for setting these things at rest is to consider that God, who is the author of our life, is also its preserver (*Psalms* 1: 502).

God controls the elements and movements of the natural world. Calvin continues by saying that "he who shall entrust the keeping of his life to God's care, will not doubt of its safety even in the midst of death" (*Psalms* 1:503). The Providence of God is His ability of taking care of everything He has created, his power to "defend His people, supply their wants, feed them in a time of famine, and preserve them alive when they are appointed to death. The Christian can see life in the middle of death, because God "will quicken us in the midst of death every moment of our lives" (*Psalms* 5: 204). He may preserve the believer "in the grave, where nothing is to be seen but destruction" (1: 503). He also says that "although the world may threaten us with a thousand deaths, yet God is possessed of numberless means of restoring us to life" (1: 185).

Calvin recognizes that the resurrection of the body goes beyond the limits of reason, it is "difficult to believe," since human understanding cannot comprehend it (*Institución* 784). The only way to accept the resurrection of the body is through faith, by the example of Jesus Christ, and by the omnipotence of God. Christ is the model of our resurrection (785). The power of God will guarantee our resurrection (787), "because God did not say that He would create new bodies from the material present in the universe, but said that he would call the dead from the tomb where they were buried" (*Institución* 792). Calvin also

suggests that our understanding of natural death be natural, realistic. The Christian shall consider death not with horror, according to the human imagination, but face death directly, seeing it how it really is. If we look at death face to face we will see it as completely different from what the artists paint it (Calvin qt. by Ariès 2: 329). The individual shall meditate on his death during his life, even in the moments of good health, in order to be prepared for the moment of death. Calvin considers a shame that many Christians, instead of accepting death, feel horror about it, "as if death were the most terrible misfortune that could happen" (*Institución* 549-50). There is inside each Christian enough light to overcome the fear of death. It is necessary to leave this world. Death, then, shall be seen as a passage (550).

The concept of faith in Calvin is related to knowledge, something that happens in the intellect (*Institución* 419-20), a clear and firm knowledge (420). Calvin also relates faith to certainty. Faith is a "firm and stable" knowledge, a "complete and firm certainty, like the evident and well based things" (420). It is an "undoubted assurance of eternal salvation" (*Psalms* 1: 230). Since doubt is present and there are moments of hesitation, there is a constant fight against doubt (*Institución* 422). Faith is thus a constant interior battle (424-5), a battle in which the individual reaffirms his own conscience and follows the testimony of the Word of God in spite of the opposition of the whole world (*Psalms* 1: 511). Faith implies then an act of resistance, an affirmation of the individual against the menaces and perils of the environment, fixing his life in God's hands and confessing toward Him: "Thou art our God" (511). This Faith is based on the benignity, on the mercy of God and not on the strength of the individual (Calvin *Romans* 119). Faith cannot be conformed to an abstract knowledge about God but to the very deep and sure knowledge of God's mercy presented by the Gospel (*Romans* 119-21). Faith is also a personal commitment to God as the Saviour and the Lord of life, since the function of Faith is to see life within death, eternity within time, and Salvation in the middle of perdition (*Psalms* 5: 204). Faith then includes elements of the mind, of emotion, and of individual responsibility, taking the person as a whole.

### [C] Death in Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard was born in Denmark in 1813 and since his childhood attended the Lutheran Church. Having studied theology, and before starting his work as a Danish minister, he gave it up and started his career as a writer. His religious experience was characterized by a traumatic, puritan emphasis on suffering and guilt. In his writings he relates death with the concepts of despair, sin, and faith. For Kierkegaard despair and sin are universal concepts, ontological realities, and faith is the solution. Kierkegaard defines faith as a human experience full of passion, emotion, and volition, an experience which transcends rationality and overcomes despair by the total trusting in God's existence and promises.

Kierkegaard starts his *Either/Or* with the story of the tomb with the inscription: "Here lies the unhappiest man." The tomb was empty. Kierkegaard comments that the unhappiest man is the one who cannot die and adds that death is not the most fearful thing: "we fear not death; we know of greater misfortunes, and first and last and above all—life" (180). He concludes saying that "the unhappiest man was the one who could not die, the happy, he who could; happy he who died in his old age, happier, whoever died in his youth, happiest he who died at birth, happiest of all he who never was born" (180).

Kierkegaard's writings can be very contradictory sometimes. What he seems to say is that existence is the fundamental problem of human life, and death becomes a problem because it affects the existence as a whole. Death cannot be objectively apprehended by the individual, like a general knowledge, and the unhappiest man is conscious of that; it is rather a subjective matter, a problem to be faced by the self. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard comments that the individual can know the causes of death, he can know objectively the death of another person, but he cannot understand his own death (147-8). Kierkegaard adds:

...the fact of my own death is not for me by any means such a something in general, although for others the fact of my death

may indeed be something of that sort. Nor am I for myself such a something in general, although perhaps for others I may be a mere generality (149).

The individual can meditate on it, he can make important ethical decisions in face of it, but he cannot overcome the uncertainty of this experience and the threat it brings to the self. And Kierkegaard comments: "in spite of this almost extraordinary knowledge or facility in knowledge, I can by no means regard death as something I have understood" (147-8). Death is the uncertain, it is what brings crisis to existence, it cannot be objectively apprehended, not the death of *myself*, not *my* death. And this uncertain phenomenon makes life uncertain:

If death is always uncertain, if I am a mortal creature, then it is impossible to understand this uncertainty in terms of a mere generality unless indeed I, too, happen to be merely a human being in general (148).

According to Kierkegaard, the fundamental challenge of human existence is to become a subject and thus live according to his own will, in freedom and responsibility. To understand death as a subject is to take it as a mystery, to face it as an uncertainty that makes life uncertain, an existential problem that affects all other existential problems (150). Although it is impossible to find a firm knowledge about death, it is possible to find "an ethical expression for the significance of death, and a religious expression for the victory over death" (150-1). Although death of the self cannot be objectively understood, it can be subjectively dealt with in terms of existential significance. Similarly, the problem of immortality is related to the subject, to the self, therefore Kierkegaard comments:

...the question of immortality is essentially not a learned question, rather it is a question of inwardness, which the subject by becoming subjective must put to himself. Objectively the question cannot be answered, because objectively it cannot be put, since immortality precisely is the potentiation and highest development of the developed subjectivity. Only by really willing to become subjective can the question properly emerge... only the subject who wills to become subjective can conceive the question and ask rightly, "Do *I* become immortal, or am *I* immortal?" (*Postscript* 154-5).

The problem is that the question of death cannot be systematically dealt with, it is nonsense. Only the subject, the human being as a free and conscious individual, can understand immortality and the meaning it brings to *his* life (155-6). Ethical values aim at immortality, and so do metaphysical values to (156-7). Without them existence is swallowed up by nothingness.

The concept of despair connected with the notion of death is fundamental in the Kierkegaardian philosophy. This notion of "despair" is central in Kierkegaard's understanding of the human condition in terms of consciousness of the self and consciousness of death. Kierkegaard quotes the biblical passage of John 11:1-46 which contains the history of the sickness and resurrection of Lazarus, in order to build the concept of mortal sickness. Mortal sickness is usually defined as an illness that ends in death, therefore it is related with some sort of despair, but Kierkegaard uses this expression in order to say the contrary: mortal sickness brings despair precisely because of the impossibility of dying (*O Desespero Humano* 199). Kierkegaard's statement is really ambiguous. He says that despair comes just because of the impossibility of death. If there were death, there would be an end to the human dilemma, but since there is no death, because the self cannot be destroyed, then despair comes with strength (199). If there is no hope of dying a final death, then life becomes a problem; death would probably be a solution. He does not refer to physical death but to the death of the self, of the individuality, of the personal identity. "Mortal sickness" means for Kierkegaard this contradictory suffering, this sickness of the self, the experience of this constant movement of dying without a peaceful finishing movement, without a real death (199). Despair exists because death no more releases, since the concept of despair comes from the notion of eternity contained in the consciousness of the self (201). Therefore despair denotes an absolute anguish, without solution since man's self is eternal because of its spiritual nature. Man's self is not made of blood and bones, or any physical element. The body can die, not the self. Death is defined by Kierkegaard as "the never-ending end" (201) which makes sickness and death mean not to being able to die. Life has no hope because there is no death, because our consciousness of the self is eternal, it is

not biological. The individual cannot be separated from his own self, it is infinite (199).

Kierkegaard understands despair as a universal experience of humanity. For him, every human being lives in a world full of despair. There is no escape from this situation, no escape for this dilemma\*. Kierkegaard represents human life in terms of the agony of a mortally sick individual. This individual is always in the process of dying, but without the relief of death. Physical death cannot rid human beings of feeling despair, because they cannot manage their own death. They cannot project it, they cannot be the subject of their death. Death is something that occurs to them, externally, without their decision. Despair is the loss of hope of dying (*O Desespero Humano* 199). Therefore death, for Kierkegaard, is not the absolute risk of the human existence, the supreme possibility. But despair is the supreme risk, the great dilemma, the absolute impossibility. Despair is not only ontological, it is also universal. Everyone is touched by the hands of despair. Everyone feels this anxiety, this sense of disharmony, this anguish about the possibilities of the existence, about the self and about death. Even a rich, beautiful, and happy life is not complete if the individual doesn't feel the bitterness of despair (*Either/Or* 126). Despair is the signal of human beings' superiority over the animals, a surpassing of the animal dimension of humanity (*O Desespero Humano* 197). And since despair distinguishes the human being from the animal, the consciousness of despair distinguishes the Christian from the natural man, and the overcoming of despair distinguishes those blessed with faith (197). Happiness, innocence, peace, they are all moments infected by this sense of despair, by the menace of eternity and nothingness, this mortal sickness. Human existence is therefore a constant movement in despair.

An important element of the human being, for Kierkegaard, is the use of freedom. Freedom is a characteristic of the human being, but always taken in dialectal terms, not fixed, motionless, but always moving between reality and

\* Some of his critics who belong to the Marxist circle comment that this notion of despair as a universal dilemma is only a problem of moral crisis of a social class, the bourgeoisie, tormented by bad conscience (Finkelstein *Alienação* 31).

the desire for change, an imposition of nature and the intention of transformation (*O Desespero Humano* 207). Human beings live in a determined situation striving to change and transform their situation, accepting or rejecting their condition, interacting with external and internal circumstances. Despair comes exactly from this way of being, from this movement between the sense of being physically finite and the desire of being infinite (197-8; 208). The self exists always in relation with God, the Infinite, the Absolute, in a conscious synthesis, in a permanent contact with the Creator (208). The individual is always trying to be himself, always searching for his own self, in transition, in movement, on a voyage without a finish, and despair comes from this situation (208).

Kierkegaard also relates the concept of despair with the notion of sin. For Kierkegaard, sin is linked with one's will, and not with one's intellect or with one's ability to comprehend and to acquire knowledge (*O Desespero Humano* 252). He defines sin as one's attitude of not wanting to be oneself or wanting to be oneself (252). In both cases, sin is always in relation to oneself and to one's will. Sin is despair, and to despair of one's sin is another sin, because it is to be confined to one's sinful condition, refusing any contact with what is good (264). Human existence is the existence before God, and the notion of sin comes from this staying before God. This "transparency" before God gives what is known as conscience which denounces what is right or wrong (273-4). Sin is despair before God (239). God, in Kierkegaard's understanding, is not external to the self, but internal, inhabiting the inner part of man (242). This concept of God links the sense of eternity to the notion of the self. The self of human beings reconciles the elements of both divinity and eternity. Sin is not a particular action, but a constant state of being before God, in relation to God, in transparency, being constantly seen by Him. Therefore sin is not an action of the flesh, of the body, but an attitude of the spirit, a disposition of being or not being oneself (243). To despair of sin is to be enclosed in the condition of a sinner, rejecting the possibility of salvation, of any grace, any desire of changing reality, any chance of repentance (291). Since the first step of sin is the separation from any good, the second step is the impossibility of repentance, of coming back, of

searching for grace and mercy (292). To despair of sin is to reject God's forgiveness and favor, is to be too proud for that (292-3).

In the "Exórdio" of his book *O Desespero Humano*, Kierkegaard mentions the Gospel of John 11:14, which describes the paradox of Christ when, having already declared that Lazarus's sickness was not mortal, he then says that Lazarus was dead. Christ was ambiguous—Lazarus sleeps, and Lazarus is dead. Lazarus is dead, although his sickness was not for death (191). The point is that Christ was expecting the miracle, and the miracle overcomes death, neutralizes the "mortal sickness." In fact, what Jesus is saying is that death itself is not mortal, it is not final (191). Christ will operate the miracle: "Lazarus, come forth!" (11:43). The simple fact of the presence, the existence of Jesus Christ is a confirmation that death is not the end, it is not mortal, it is not absolute. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life for everyone who believes in Him. Lazarus's sickness is not mortal not because of Lazarus's resurrection, but because of Christ's presence (191). While people think that death is the end of everything, the Christian says that death is not the end of all, not even a lost episode of the eternal life. In fact, for the Christian death brings much more hope than life does, because of the presence of Christ in the world, which guarantees his victory against the mortal sickness (191).\* Christ is the Redeemer of the human despair, He is our hope of overcoming the dilemma, the miseries of life, death. Therefore, for the Christian, death is not the mortal sickness, nor are the temporal tribulations: anguish, illness, miseries, adversities, physical or spiritual tortures, sorrows (191). Death is not mortal. The presence of Christ guarantees life. Nothing is final to the Christian, neither tribulation, nor despair; there is no real mortal sickness, because he believes in Christ and overcomes despair (192). The Christian lives beyond physical death and temporal despair, in spite of suffering the mortal sickness of the consciousness of his self, the despair of his individuality, which is part of the human condition in this world (192).

\* Mortal sickness means here the unavoidable despair present in the human existence, which comes from the consciousness of individuality and from the consciousness of death.

The figure of Christ is fundamental in the thought of Kierkegaard because he is the incarnation of the human drama, the most complex and passionate paradox of the human history. "The natural man can enumerate at his will all that is horrible — to exhaustion, the Christian will laugh at the amount" (*O Desespero Humano* 192). Because of his belief in eternity, the Christian is fully conscious of the mortal sickness in all its intensity, he is aware of the human fright and affliction before the infinite, the eternal, and of the despair of the infinite, the real mortal sickness (192). Christ in the cross experiences the great and intense human dilemma. He drinks the bitter calyx of death. He who was immortal had to experience mortality. This is the acid drink, more acid than vinegar, without any consolation (*Migalhas Filosóficas* 200). Therefore, Christ is the decisive point of reference for those who are saved and for those who are lost. When the self is conscious of Christ's presence, when it knows itself as being "before Christ," consciousness becomes more elevated (*O Conceito de Angústia* 267).

According to Kierkegaard, faith is the only successful option to despair. Kierkegaard understands faith as an act of will, a strong desire of the human heart. When man believes that for God everything is possible, he can overcome the dilemma of the mortal sickness, i.e., despair (213). Salvation is impossible for the human beings by themselves, but for God everything is possible. Faith is the power which can create the possible and give salvation. Salvation is not what is probable, possible, but what is impossible. To have faith is to let God help and operate the salvation, the redemption, the miracle of life in the middle of death (214). Besides, faith is the genuine desire of believing in the miracle of God's intervention. For Kierkegaard only the true Christian can overcome despair (203-4). Only faith can stand the vision of eternity, the vision of nothing (205). Only faith in the impossible, in the absurd, in the miracle can overcome the reality of death. Salvation happens when one faces oneself, wants to be oneself, and jumps, in transparency, into the arms of the Creator (196), when one accepts one's own self and, conscious of one's weakness and limitations, surrenders to God (229). Human beings need to know themselves as a

spirit, eternal, individual, in the presence of God (218). It is necessary to build themselves experimentally in God, and then achieve the meaning of the self (233).

Kierkegaard's concept of faith is related to the notion of paradox, suffering, courage, and decision. Kierkegaard refers to the biblical figure of Abraham as the model of the man of faith. In a context of absurdity and anguish, Abraham did believe that God would give him a son, a land and a long life (*Temor e Tremor* 120-4). In a criticism against the institutionalized Christianity of his time and its concept of faith as an intellectual acquiescence to a doctrine, Kierkegaard defended the idea of faith as a jump beyond what is rational, a decision made in the absurd of the individual existence. Those who believe run the risk of failure. Abraham did. Faith is the constant decision and movement by virtue of the absurd (130). For Kierkegaard, faith is different from resignation. Resignation is what is achieved through the consciousness of the eternity of the self, merely a philosophical movement. But with faith one receives what is beyond one's consciousness. Kierkegaard calls this a paradox (137). Resignation implies renunciation; faith implies grace, gift, blessing. Resignation is the renunciation of what is temporary in order to gain what is eternal, but faith implies the paradox of gaining what is temporary through the absurd. Abraham did not renounce Isaac, on the contrary, through faith he regained him (137). Faith implies the undeserved receiving of good (138).

It is important to explain that for Kierkegaard faith is absurd just in the perspective of the human existence, from the point of view of the individual, because from the perspective of God, of eternity, faith is truth. Through faith one achieves the consciousness of being a spirit, a self, one understands the existence of God and relates with Him (*Migalhas Filosóficas* 206). Before death remains only the fundamental question of life, the problem of despair, the problem of the human being as an individual surrounded by an objective and confused world (206). The Christian understands death as a passage, a voyage to life, and does not see it with terror, as the final reality (199).

Thus, according to the Protestant tradition as represented by the Bible, by Luther, by Calvin, and by Kierkegaard, death symbolizes a universal problem that must to be solved. Death is basically understood as a consequence and punishment for the sin of Adam and therefore mixed with a sense of guilt, fear, and separation from God. Life is a divine gift and has a superior value. Death, much more than a natural phenomenon, is seen as an accident, a break off in the natural process of life, a frustration of the original plans of God. Slowly, the idea of the resurrection of the body and of eternal life developed in the later parts of the Old Testament, and became established doctrine in the New Testament. Jesus Christ is presented in the New Testament, and re-affirmed by Luther, Calvin and Kierkegaard, as the solution to the problem of death, sin, and the devil. Christ brings life, because he is "the resurrection and the life" (John 10:11; 11:25). And the message of Jesus Christ as the redeemer of life from the terror of death waits for a positive answer in terms of faith, hope, and commitment. Through his faith in Jesus Christ as the savior, the Christian overcomes the fear of death, finds support to the hope for an eternal life, and paradoxically submits to a program of continuous mortification of his body. Luther and Calvin developed this biblical teaching, trying to give it form and logic, Luther trying to emphasize the free grace of God, and Calvin the sovereignty of God. Both re-affirm their faith in the "resurrection of the body" and in the "eternal life," according to the Apostolic Creed. Both preach the importance of faith as the Christian's genuine answer to the message of the gospel and as the only instrument of salvation for the soul. Kierkegaard received this Protestant heritage and articulated his understanding of the problem of death, sin, and despair. He also gives great importance to faith as the authentic answer to the message of Christ, and analyzes how this answer is rare, difficult and paradoxical. For Kierkegaard, faith is not a matter of thinking, of rational understanding, as it was for Luther and Calvin, but a matter of volition and emotion, something that implies the integrity of life. Besides, differently from Calvin and Luther who emphasized the sovereignty of God over the history of humankind, Kierkegaard defended the priority of the individual over the general,

and his concept of faith shows the absurdity of the individual prevailing over society, institutions, doctrine, moral, and the nothingness of death. The concept is different, the symbol is the same: Jesus Christ is the incarnated God, the synthesis of God and man, and the redeemer of life.

## Chapter Two

### Death in the poems of Dylan Thomas

I intend to analyze in this chapter some poems of Dylan Thomas, trying to grasp his attitude towards death, and then to compare his attitude with the Christian tradition. In order to organize my analysis, I divided the poems into three main categories: 1) poems in which Thomas expresses his feelings and attitudes toward his own death; 2) poems in which the poet talks about the death of another person – a beloved one, a relative, his father, or even an unknown child in the streets of London–; 3) and poems in which the poet develops the theme of the annihilation of the earth, the death of humankind, the death of the race, the end of the world.

#### [1] Poems dealing with the death of the self

Dylan Thomas wrote some poems dealing with the reality of his own death, some of them inspired by special dates as his birthday, some by the contemplation of the natural world around him. I have selected the poems "I see the boys of summer," "The force that through the green fuse," both poems published in Thomas's first book *Eighteen Poems* (1934), "And death shall have no dominion," "Poem in October," for the occasion of his birthday, "Fern Hill," dedicated to the farm of his aunt Annie Jones and the memories of his childhood, and the poem "Poem on his Birthday," also a birthday poem.

## [1.1] "I see the boys of summer"

The poem "I see the boys of summer" is considered by Ralph Maud one of Dylan Thomas's process poems, those poems dealing with mortality, with the changes caused by time (*Entrances* 80). In this poem Dylan Thomas focuses not on the death of a specific person, but on the problem of death and change in his own life. The poem presents a dialogue between the poet and the "boys of summer" playing under the sun, unconscious of the reality of death and time. In this poem Thomas makes clear the inter-dependence existing between creation and destruction, life and death (Cox 4). Cox classifies this poem as one of the "dialogue poems" in which a debate between two opposite visions of the world is seen, through two different kinds of image, an image of creation and an image of destruction (4). For Ralph Maud, the theme of the poem is the existence of death from the perspective of the present cosmos, without any concern with eternal life or a religious point-of-view (*Entrances* 19). The poem really deals with the reality of death and with the renewal of life in the natural process of growth and decay, but the emphasis of the poem, I think, lies on the balance between the forces on the unity of the process. The poem is divided into three parts, the first two containing four stanzas of six lines each, and the last part containing only one stanza. The poet says:

## I

I see the boys of summer in their ruin  
 Lay the gold tithings barren,  
 Setting no store by harvest, freeze the soils;  
 There in their heat the winter floods  
 Of frozen loves they fetch their girls,  
 And drown the cargoed apples in their tides.

These boys of light are curdlers in their folly,  
 Sour the boiling honey;  
 The jacks of frost they finger in the hives;  
 There in the sun the frigid threads  
 Of doubt and dark they feed their nerves;  
 The signal moon is zero in their voids.

I see the summer children in their mothers  
 Split up the brawned womb's weathers,  
 Divide the night and day with fairy thumbs;  
 There in the deep with quartered shades  
 Of sun and moon they paint their dams  
 As sunlight paints the shelling of their heads.

I see that from these boys shall men of nothing  
 Stature by seedy shifting,  
 Or lame the air with leaping from its heats;  
 There from their hearts the dogdayed pulse  
 Of love and light bursts in their throats.  
 O see the pulse of summer in the ice.

## II

But seasons must be challenged or they totter  
 Into a chiming quarter  
 Where, punctual as death, we ring the stars;  
 There, in his night, the black-tongued bells  
 The sleepy man of winter pulls,  
 Nor blows back moon-and-midnight as she blows.

We are the dark deniers, let us summon  
 Death from a summer woman,  
 A muscling life from lovers in their cramp,  
 From the fair dead who flush the sea  
 The bright-eyed worm on Davy's lamp,  
 And from the planted womb the man of straw.

We summer boys in this four-winded spinning,  
 Green of the seaweeds' iron,  
 Hold up the noisy sea and drop her birds,  
 Pick the world's ball of wave and froth  
 To choke the deserts with her tides,  
 And comb the country gardens for a wreath.

In spring we cross our foreheads with the holly,  
 Heigh ho the blood and berry,  
 And nail the merry squires to the trees;  
 Here love's damp muscle dries and dies,  
 Here break a kiss in no love's quarry.  
 O see the poles of promise in the boys.

## III

I see you boys of summer in your ruin.  
 Man in his maggot's barren.  
 And boys are full and foreign in the pouch.  
 I am the man your father was.  
 We are the sons of flint and pitch.  
 O see the poles are kissing as they cross.

The first part of the poem presents contrasts between the forces of life and the forces of death, between vital energy and natural decay. These two energies are presented as coexisting forces—"summer" and "ruin" (I.1.1), "harvest" and "freeze" (I.1.3), "heat" and "winter" (I.1.1.4). Existence is presented in seasonal terms, as a movement of time and weather, totally immersed in the natural process of life and death (Jackaman 22). In the first stanza the poet can see these "boys of summer"—a time of heat, harvest, fruit, beauty, and fertility—in "their ruin." The persona sees these two aspects of existence manifested at the same moment—summer and ruin. These boys of summer make the "gold tithings" sterile (I.1.1-2), when the harvest time is come they "freeze the soils" (I.1.3), in their "heat" the poet can see signals of the winter, where love is frozen and "cargued apples"—a metaphor of fertility—are drowned "in their tides" (I.1.6).

Everywhere the persona sees the reality of death in the middle of life, for "DEATH appears in capitals for him" (Jackaman 28). In the second stanza the "boys of summer" are called "boys of light," they live under the sun, they play in the full daylight, but they are "curdlers" and "sour" (I.2.1,2), they are infected by the destructive forces, they are boys, are young, but they also possess all the elements of death and decadence, the corrosive tendencies to sour, the sweetness of the honey contrasting with the taste of curds and sour. The "jacks of frost" (I.2.3) a symbol of winter, a metaphor for icicles (Maud *Entrances* 23), receive now a "sexual twist" contrasting with the feminine "hives," showing the sexual energy of the boys. The icicle image—the "jacks of frost"—, comments Ralph Maud, constitutes "a stiff, prodding weapon of destructive mischief, cold and male in its attack on female warmth (*Entrance* 24). However, this sexual

energy is contrasted with the "frigid threads / Of doubt and dark" with which they "feed their nerves" (I.4.2-3).

The last line of the second stanza—"The signal moon is zero in their voids"—shows how the moon, "traditionally a harvest and female fertility symbol, is made zero by the boys" (Maud *Entrances* 29). In the third stanza the poet moves his vision from the outer world of the harvest field to the inner world of the mother's womb, where he sees the "summer children" still unborn divide the "womb's weathers" (I.3.1-2). Even the wombs are subject to weather in the poem, even they are crossed by the injection. Commenting on this stanza Maud says that weathers are "the conditions through which time the seasons work their changes on the world" (*Entrances* 30). In the gestation the mother feels the transformations caused by time, the constant growing of the fetus and the visible changes on her body. In this sense the mother experiences at pregnancy the "sense of mortality," (Maud *Entrances* 31). The boys are emblems of Time inside the mother's womb. There, in the visceral cosmos of the mother's womb, between sun and moon, the boys "paint their dams" (I.3.5).

The last stanza of the first part presents the boys of summer as "men of nothing" (I.4.1), emphasizing again the negative destructive aspect of their existence. The "seedy shifting" denotes that the changes of time continue, no more in the wombs but inside the body of the boys. The influence of time is eminently negative for, as Ralph Maud has observed, after "negating the harvest and their mothers, the boys now negate themselves" (*Entrances* 32). The boys carry the polarities of the negation of life at the same moment that they affirm it. They have heat and the "dogdayed pulse / of love" (I.4.4), but their pulse is surrounded by the "ice" (I.4.6), their fertility by infertility, their light by darkness, their summer by winter, their life by death. They carry inside themselves the seeds of changes and polarities, their existence is a paradox, the affirmation and simultaneously the negation of life. Don Mckay perceives in the poem a struggle between figures of authority and subversive youth, the old man and the boys of summer (387). For Olson, Dylan Thomas's "I see the boys of summer" is a "complicated argument about how life ought to be lived" (36). This

poem makes it clear, for David Daiches, that it is impossible to control the continuous flux of time in terms of birth-death. "If we ignore," says Daiches, "the cosmic round to seize the moment when we have it, we are both deluded and doomed" (17). In this poem, he says, like in many others of Thomas's poems, it is possible to hear the note of "doom in the midst of present pleasure" (17).

In the second part of the poem the boys of summer try to give an answer to the poet, and their answer affirms the necessity of resistance to time and death. They try to overcome stagnation by negation. The tone has changed, the attitude now is more positive, there is resistance to the "seasons" as symbol of change in nature (II.1.1). Death must be faced. The monotonous rhythm of time is marked by the "totter / Into a chiming quarter" (II.1.1-2), the punctuality of death, the ringing of the stars, the sound of the "black-tongued bells" (II.1.3-4). Ralph Maud comments on the "clock-like monotony" of time (*Entrances* 33). Death is punctual and present all the time, but it must be "challenged." By this attitude, these boys contradict the narrator's passiveness, his pessimistic, repetitive view of life, "the circular face of the clock, divided into the four 'chiming quarters'" (Jackaman 30). The individual must resist the corrosive rhythm determined by nature. Stagnation does not have to be accepted passively. In the first stanza of the second part, the "sleepy man of winter" pulling the bell ropes of death stays in absolute contrast with the boys of summer (II.1.5-6). The sleepy man lives in a world surrounded by darkness and night, where there are "black-tongued bells," a world marked by "moon-and-midnight" time (II.1.6). In the next stanza the boys call themselves "dark deniers," individuals who contradict, counteract, and against the negative forces they invoke the positive ones, against the positive they invoke the negative forces. They live in a paradoxical world constantly visited by death and change, and the boys start denying any affirmation or negation of life, first invoking death from a young woman, "a woman in the summer of her life" (Maud *Entrances* 34), then invoking a "muscling life" (line 33), from lovers in their "cramp," in their muscular movement of love and life and death, then invoking the "bright-eyed worm on Davy's lamp" (II.2.5), a miner's lamp invented by Sir Humphrey Davy

(Maud *Entrances* 34), here a metaphor for worm, death, curiously linked with the image of light, like a glowworm, suggesting maybe a positive aspect of death, maybe death being seen as a natural process. Some critics see here a sexual metaphor conjoined to the same conceit, linking the idea of the "scavenger of death" and the "fathering worm of the penis" (Jackaman 22-3). Although this interpretation cannot be totally rejected, I think it is not the case of the present poem. The glowworm is summoned from the "dead who flush the sea" (II.2.4-5), and light is come from the dead, from the natural movement of nature. However the boys also invoke the "man of straw" from the "planted womb" (II.2.6), in contrast with the image of the seed, thus suggesting that infertility comes from a pregnant woman. Birth and death are thus part of the same movement.

In the next stanza the boys continue their paradoxical task of denying everything, in the "four-winded spinning" (II.3.1), a biblical expression referring to the forces of nature. They are involved by a "green" seaweed (II.3.2), a symbol of life, paradoxically made of iron, o lifeless metal. They attack violently the elements and forces of the sea, they throw down the sea birds, and throw the waves of the sea into the deserts, transforming a hostile environment into a place full of life, handling the "country garden" as if they were a "wreath" (II.3.6). These are all acts of contradiction and resistance to the dominion of nature, examples of affirmation of the individual against the forces of time. The image of the "wreath" is transformed in the last stanza of this second part into a "holly" (II.4.1), alluding to the biblical image of Christ being crowned with thorns in the cross, suggesting the idea of sacrifice, of life coming from death, the individual overcoming the power of death, overcoming his own destiny. The foreheads of the boys are crossed with this "holly," like Christ. The cross is blessing and curse, perdition and salvation, final condemnation and absolution. The boys of summer are not victims of the elements of nature, of the forces of life and death, they take the initiative and "cross" themselves, affirming their own individuality against the general forces of nature, shouting the Elizabethan exclamation "Heigh ho," celebrating the happiness of berry and the sacrifice of blood (II.4.2). They also "nail the squires" in the trees (II.4.3), a gratuitous act of

violence and cruelty, remembers Ralph Maud, seeming to allude to Easter, to the redemptive meaning of the crucifixion of Christ (*Entrances* 36). The main tone of this stanza seems to be one of negation of life, sacrifice, death. The second part ends with a reference to the dryness and mortality of "love's damp muscle" (II.4.4), and to the kiss which breaks in the emptiness of "no love's quarry" (II.4.5). This seems to point to a quite pessimistic view of existence. This is Spring time, and there is no place for love here. The explosive kiss finds no love's quarry. Ralph Maud, however, sees here the creation of love where there was none before (*Entrance* 37), what I think sounds like a very good interpretation. The last line of the second part seems to suggest a balance between forces of life and death, creation and destruction, between the attitudes of resistance and acceptance, between the forces of nature and the individual, since the "poles of promises" are manifested in the boys. The boys incarnate all the contradictory forces and realities of nature.

The last part of the poem contains only one very concentrated stanza which summarizes all that has already been said by the poet. This part contains a review of the previous ideas of "dynamic balance between polar tensions, growth and decay, in each instant of experience" (Maud *Entrances* 39). For Rob Jackaman, the final part synthesizes the dialogue between the old man and the boys, "the old man still insists that life is 'barren,' while the boys emphasize the fact that it is 'full'" (31). The first line of this stanza reiterates the first part of the poem. The man of the second line can be the "man of winter," man in the mortality of his fleshy body (Maud 38). The polarity of the boys is characterized by the adjectives "full" and "foreign" of the third line. The "I" of the fourth line represents, according to Ralph Maud, the "midway in the life-span," standing between the older and the younger generations (39). I think, however, that the fourth line states the passage of time from generation to generation, the limited importance of the individual, the transitoriness of everything, since the father is no more, I am (III.4). The boys then present themselves as the "sons of flint and pitch" (III.5), an image representing decadence and fertility under the earth, the coldness of the "flint" mixed with the

black energetic potentiality of the "pitch." Ralph Maud comments that "flint and pitch" are "two extremes sparked and united in the boys, when the poles kiss in the last line" (39). The kiss, for Maud, alludes to the Christian connotation related to the cross, and to the everlasting life coming at the moment of death, uniting and crossing the positive and the negative forces in the universe (39). However, in the narrative of the gospel, the kiss represents the negation of the Saviour, the act of betrayal perpetrated by Judas (Matthew 26:48). For Maud, the last line is the climax of the poem, presenting an appeasement in the universe, a "dynamic balance between polar tensions, growth and decay, in each instant of experience" (39). There is no homogeneous peace, but the balanced counteract of two opposing forces. The balance is precarious, constantly moving, being the time of youth constantly menaced and visited by death. And even at the moment of death, the hope of an eternal life unites the poles again, adding to the negative element of death the seed of the eternal life. Vincent B. Leitch attributes Thomas's images of the dialectical unity of forces of growth and decay to the influence of George Herbert's work "The Search," where he develops the theme of "the unity revealed in the divine will of Christ" (341). For W. S. Merwin, however, the poem "presents doom as the final reality in the very moments of man's euphory" instead of balance, since the poet "recommends that the passage of time, and death, be challenged and embraced, but he can give no reason why they should be—birth and death are an endless loveless dull round—and the poem ends in ironic despair" (237). Therefore, according to this, despair seems to be the strongest note of the poem, not the equilibrium of a pantheistic faith. However, I think that Maud's vision of a precarious balance seems to fit more appropriately to the structure of the poem which presents the individual in a continuous tension of contrictory forces. The poem is neither totally pessimistic, nor totally optimistic; it reflects the complexity of the human existence, the mystery of life.

## [1.2] "The force that through the green fuse"

The poem "The force that through the green fuse" was written in 1933 and published in Thomas's *18 Poems* in 1934, and presents the poet's meditation on the relation between his individuality and the explosive forces of nature, and on how he is affected by the same forces that bring life and death. Life and death are seen as part of the same process. The poem also shows the movement of time, its presence in the elements of nature and its influence on the life of the poet. It has four stanzas of five lines and the fifth stanza has only two lines, written basically in irregular iambic pentameter. The poem is centered on the self, on the body, and how it can be identified with the other elements of nature. The poet says:

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 first stanza testifies that a "force" which is operating in nature is also operating in the poet's self. The poem has no introduction, comments

Elder Olson, it just starts "immediately with the intuition that the forces which create and destroy both man and vegetable are identical, and pursues the consequences of that intuition" (45). The "force" links the individual and the world of nature in the same process, in the same movement. The images of the first lines create a vegetable world ready to explode, moved by the "force" that fires the "green fuse" but also blasts "the roots of trees" (1.1-2). The force is creative, it generates life in the flowers and drives the poet's "green age" of the poet. G. S. Fraser recognizes it and comments that the poet

is massively identifying the body of man with the body of the world. The forces, he is saying, that control the growth and decay, the beauty and terror of human life are not merely similar to, but are the very same forces as, we see at work in outer nature... Man, as an animal, is part of nature (*Dylan Thomas* 12).

But the forces that create the world also destroy it (1.3). The persona then declares that the same "wintry fever" which makes the rose "crooked" bends the poet's youth (1.4-5). According to Fraser, the image of the "wintry fever" suggests the unsatisfied sexual desires present in adolescence (*Dylan Thomas* 12). The sexual aspect is there, i. e., the force that creates life and motivates sex but also causes death. D. F. McKay comments that the poem reaffirms the rhythm of nature, alternating between destruction and creation, "systole and diastole, inhalation and exhalation" (56). The second stanza presents a world of liquid and solids elements. The same force can drive water through rocks and the blood of the poet, and it can dry the "mouthing streams" and the veins of the poet (2.1-3). And this energy affecting the individual and nature has both a creative and a destructive potentiality. This dynamic paradoxical power presented as a "force" and as a "mouth", becomes a "hand" that moves round and round the water in the pool and that "stirs the quicksand" (3.1). Life and death are caused by the same force. The force ropes "the blowing wind" (3.2), a symbol of life, creation, generation, and it also pulls the poet's "shroud sail" (3.3), a symbol of death as a voyage to the unknown waste sea, the shroud of ancient ships and the shroud of the burial. The third stanza ends with the poet recognizing that the "hangman's

lime" is made of the poet's body (3.4-5). \* Death is explicitly portrayed here in the image of the condemned man. The individual's death is linked with the same process that culminates in the hangman's death. Su Soon Peng suggests that the image of the hangman contains a religious allusion, that of Christ on the cross, and that even the image of the powerful hand can allude to the hand of God (117).

In the fourth stanza the "force" is presented through the metaphor of a leech, the "lips of time" suck the fountain of life, like leeches (4.1). The leech does not create life, it sucks life from other living beings, in a way it destroys vitality. The metaphor of blood falling and calming the sores comes from the world of medicine. Bleeding was an ancient therapy for the sick in which the idea was that the "fallen blood" would purify the patient. The poem seems to allude here to the "fallen blood" of Christ as a doctor who saved us from the "weather's wind" of mortality. Yet Ralph Maud explicitly denies that this poem can be classified as Christian, for "Thomas exploits the Christian concept of life coming out of death, just as he exploits medieval medicine, just as, indeed he exploits the personal lament" (*Entrances* 70-71).

"Love drips and gathers" (4.2) can be interpreted as a statement on the inevitable sacrifice of love, how it is destructive at the same time that it resists the forces of destruction and death. The process of time is imagined as a leech, exploring the living body. In contrast with the forces of time, there is the creative energy of love which bleeds but also resists and "gathers" again more energy. The persona then recognizes the presence and movement of time round the stars, in the cosmos, in the macro universe. Interestingly, Constantin Fitzgibbon considered this a cosmic poem (105). For Peter F. Parshall it is "love," the subject of the fourth stanza, which creates a heaven, "a heaven, which resists nature's destructive force" (65). Nevertheless, I think it is inaccurate to say that love creates heaven, because the poem seems to say that time, and not love,

\* The "hangman's lime" was the quicklime in which bodies from the scaffold were disposed of ("Notes" to the *Collected Poems* 183).

creates heaven, and the verb "has ticked" transmits the idea of a mechanism, the cold rhythm of a watch. However, Peter F. Parshall insists that the

essence of the early stanzas has been movement—a "force" which "drives," a cycle of endless creation/destruction, an unremitting *process*. The refrain to stanza 4 then deals with the only escape from this process, in the *oasis* of love (65).

For Parshall, Thomas is not simply speaking of sexual love, of love as a passion, as an ecstasy, as suggested in the previous stanzas, but of the calmness and fulfillment, of the sense of eternity after love passion (65). However this stanza also shows the ambiguity of love and "warn[s] us that love is a death also, and that time though slowed to a tick, flows inexorably on" (65).

The image of the "lover's tomb" in the last stanza suggests some pessimism in mood and attitude. Peter F. Parshall comments that the constant movement of nature in terms of creation, destruction, recreation would permit no escape from the Force; even death cannot bring any escape, "for the poet-lover's elements will soon be gathered into the green fuse again, to be driven through infinite new flowerings" (65). In the last stanza the persona acknowledges and wonders how the same "crooked worm" goes through the lover's tomb and through the poet's "sheet" (5.1-2). The same destructive force of death—which is mouth, and hand, and lip, and worm—kills lovers and is present in the funeral sheet of the poet.

The poem presents images of flowers and trees in the first stanza, rocks and streams in the second, sand and wind in the third, leech in the fourth, and the tomb in the fifth. The force is positive, it brings life, but it is also destructive, it brings death. Commenting on it, David Daiches says that the human being

is locked in a round of identities; the beginning of growth is also the first movement towards death, the beginning of love is the first move towards procreation, which in turn moves towards new growth, and the only way out of time's squirrel-cage is to embrace the unity of man with nature, of the negations with each other, of the divine with the human, of life with death (16-17).

Life and death are seen as part of the same natural process, in a "creative-destructive continuum" (Ackerman 78). The persona laments that he

cannot share this consciousness of the forces of life and death with the elements of nature, he "is dumb to tell" (1.4; 2.4; 3.4; 4.4; 5.1). The individual is isolated in his consciousness of death, he is alone. In spite of being part of nature, the individual is unique in his consciousness and in the verbalization of the process. W. S. Merwin comments that the poet's wish to communicate with nature comes from his "compassion," his solidarity with the other creatures, the other living beings, roses and lovers, for

compassion makes the poet at once wish to be able to  
communicate with all other things that are doomed, to tell  
them he understands their plight because his own is similar,  
and makes him feel the depth to which he is inarticulate and  
painfully unable to do so (238).

Don Mckay declares that "the force is tamed by language which seems to hold and dispense it in perfectly cadenced, uniform structures" (388), however the persona himself confesses his inability to speak. Time is everywhere, mortality destroys and recreates nature. In the poem, Thomas repeats again and again his basic idea that the individual is part of nature, that the forces that create nature also destroy it, death is being therefore a natural phenomenon. According to D. F. Mckay the poem transmits ultimately an idea of calmness, of acceptance, of a plunge into the unity of the process (56).

[1.3] "And death shall have no dominion"

The poem "And death shall have no dominion" does not deal with the death of a specific person, but with the poet's own experience of life and death. It was written in 1933 and published in the same year in *New English Weekly*, and in 1936 in Thomas's *Twenty-five Poems*. Some critics take the poem as only a piece of empty rhetorical exercise (Fraser *Vision and Rhetoric* 220). Aneurin Talfan Davies also thinks so and adds that the poem "lacks the basic sincerity which characterizes most of his work" (58). Indeed the poem is different from the others written by Thomas, but according to Anthony Thwaite it is different in

its superb arrogance, its repudiation of destruction and nullity,

which one can compare with Donne's sonnet "Death, be not proud."  
The rhetoric is unloosed, and the poem seems to exist in a harsh  
clear world, not the dark secret world of the other death poems (99-100).

I agree with Davies in the recognition that the poem has its value, and I would point out to the poem's musicality, to its rich imagery, to its cohesive structure. The poem was written at a suggestion of A. E. Trick to write a poem about "immortality," and Trick wrote his poem with the refrain "For death is not the end" while Dylan Thomas wrote "And death shall have no dominion" (Ferris 83). Ferris comments that the poem is an attempt by Thomas to be optimistic, to defy the forces of death and decadence, in order to keep his sanity (83). The poem "booms like an organ, it sounds more like an act of defiance than a declaration of faith" (83). However, Thomas didn't seem to like the poem and would have left it out from the *Twenty-five Poems* if Vernon Watkins had not interfered (134-5). Curiously this is one of Thomas's most known poems. It is divided into three stanzas and the rhyme structure is A,A,B,A,C,D,D,E,A. The poem starts with a Biblical reference to the book of Romans 6:9 in which Paul says that "[k]nowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him":

And death shall have no dominion.  
Dead men naked they shall be one  
With the man in the wind and the west moon;  
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,  
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;  
Though they go mad they shall be sane,  
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;  
Though lovers be lost love shall not;  
And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.  
Under the windings of the sea  
They lying long shall not die windily;  
Twisting on racks when sinews give way,  
Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;  
Faith in their hands shall snap in two,  
And the unicorn evils run them through;  
Split all ends up they shan't crack;  
And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.  
 No more may gulls cry at their ears  
 Or waves break loud on the seashores;  
 Where blew a flower may a flower no more  
 Lift its head to the blows of the rain;  
 Though they be mad and dead as nails,  
 Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;  
 Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,  
 And death shall have no dominion.

This poem is perhaps intended as an affirmation, if not of faith, at least of the individual in face of death, in contrast, says Maud, with the other poems marked by doubt (*Poet in the Making* 24-5). The poem expresses hope in the victory of life and love against the destructive power of death. The biblical assertion that death shall have no dominion is based on faith in the resurrection of the body and eternal life, characterizing a religious attitude towards death. Dylan Thomas's poem tries to maintain an optimistic attitude towards death and to resist the tyrannical dominion death perpetrates over nature. The first stanza seems to declare that after death the individual plunges and dissolves into nature, being integrated into the natural process of life in the cosmos. The poet says that "dead men" shall be united, "shall be one," with the forces of the universe, with the "wind and the west moon," with the "stars," even if their bones are completely dry and "gone" (1.1-4). The poet seems to be affirming that the individual will survive by some way after death through his integration into the forces of nature. The "clean bones" can refer to the Biblical passage of Ezekiel 37 where the prophet is sent to prophesy to the dry bones of the valley and to make them live again, and the bones revived and became persons again. But the poet is not talking about the Christian concept of resurrection, he is using this image to suggest that the individual survives through nature, in nature. The poem affirms life in spite of the apparent dominion of death, in direct opposition to it, which becomes emphatic with the recurrence of the conjunction "though," which indicates an attitude of resistance (1.6-8). In spite of madness, the dead "shall be sane" (1.6), in spite of being disintegrated by the sea they "shall rise again" (1.7) because their energy will be digested and transformed into other forms of life. The image of the sea returning its dead has also a biblical origin, the prophecy of

Revelation 20:13—"And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works." For Dylan Thomas, death shall have no dominion because the individual, through this immersion into nature, returns to life in a natural process. The first stanza also presents the idea that the essence of "love" shall not disappear; even if "lovers be lost" (1.8), the individual is redeemed by the general movement of love, and nothing is lost. Love is a symbol of the permanence of life, a very vital feeling that links and relates human beings, and death cannot kill it. Even if the individual is reached by death, the broader general process is saved, and the meaning of life is preserved, because the universe is not submerged into the domains of death. Each stanza starts and finishes with this affirmation of the victory of life over death—"And death shall have no dominion."

The second stanza continues focusing on those who stay "under the windings of the sea," saying that they "shall not die windily" (2.2-3). In a way, when the poet declares that death shall have no dominion, he is recognizing the real power death holds over the human life. Interestingly, the poet starts the poem with the coordinate clause "*And* death shall have no dominion," which seems to be the complement of another clause, thus implying that something has happened before and therefore death shall have no dominion. The biblical antecedent is the resurrection of Christ, Thomas's is the integration into the forces of nature. The poem starts with a sentence that seems to be the continuation of a longer discourse, maybe in the style of a funeral sermon. In the first part of the second stanza Thomas uses the image of a shipwreck, referring to those who remain dead at the bottom of the sea, their bodies being completely consumed by death, unidentified and lost forever under the waves. The poet, however, resists the dominion of this kind of death, declaring that those who repose under the sea "shall not die windily," shall not be completely dispersed by the blow of the winds of death.

Thomas also uses the image of those who died under violence and torture, perhaps under the revolting and harmful forces of Inquisition, perhaps the

death of the martyrs, "Twisting on racks" (2.4), "Strapped to a whell" (2.5), the "sinews giv[ing] way" (2.4), arguing that even in them the tendons shall not break, the individual's suffering shall not be permanent, absolute, but temporary.\* Sinews resist, i.e., the body resists to the absurd of death, the violence of death's dominion. The controversial sentence "Faith in their hands shall snap in two, / And the unicorn evils run them through" (2.6-7) of the second stanza has been interpreted as a hint on the poet's refusal to any consolation from faith, as an affirmation of the destruction of faith by this death in torture, and the negation of any deliverance from death through religious faith (Ackerman 86). However, it can also be inferred by the poem that faith is not completely destroyed, but only partially broken, divided in two parts as the hands at prayer taken apart, pierced by the unicorn evil, but in spite of being "Split" they shall not "crack," shall not break open, they will maintain the unity (2.8). The idea of resistance towards death is still present. The poet is in fact stating the permanence of faith in spite of the cruelty of death, in spite of the appearance of death as a penalty, as a condemnation. John Ackerman states that the poet is asserting the unity with nature as a substitute for faith (87). However, I think Thomas preserves the necessity of faith, in fact not the Christian orthodox faith, but some sort of faith as a human affirmation of life over death, an affirmation that transcends the experience of knowledge and touches the realm of the ineffable, a resource for the overcoming of death. Although sometimes this faith seems to represent something just a little bit more than the integration of the individual into the process of nature, or some sort of union with the natural world much more defined in terms of physical participation than of spiritual consciousness, the preservation of faith saves Thomas's world from despair, from cynicism, indifference. Indeed, Thomas attires his concept of integration of the individual into the elements of nature with the poetic and metaphysical aura of faith.

In the third stanza the images from the sea come back again, the sounds of the "gulls" and "waves" breaking loud on the shores (3.2-3). The world

\* The rack and the wheel were instruments of torture used at the time of the "holy" Inquisition, in the Middle Ages.

visited by death is a world of silence: the individual cannot identify the sounds of nature, there is a sense of loss, and the world has lost its beauty. The poet communicates a sense of nostalgia, of melancholy, adding the image of the absence of the flower, which cannot be seen any more under the rain (3.4-5). In the second half of the stanza the poet presents the counter-balance, the "Though" part (3.6). In spite of their death and madness, loss of meaning and consciousness, represented by the absence of flowers, rain, and gulls' cry, the individual will resist like the "heads of the characters hammer[ing] through daisies" (3.6-7). Even if the flowers can no more lift their heads to the rain, they will hammer their heads through daisies, through the elements of nature, through the vegetable still living world, invading the sun "till the sun breaks down" (3.8). Life is still possible even when it is reached by death, and death shall have no dominion, because life can reappear from under the ground and grow like a plant in the direction of the sun. The poem has an optimistic ending: in spite of the tyrannical presence of death, of the crisis that assaults faith, of the tragedy that falls over lovers, love will resist, life will resist, faith will resist.

#### [1.4] "Poem in October"

The next poem to be analyzed is entitled "Poem in October," written at the occasion of Thomas's thirtieth birthday and published in his *Deaths and Entrances*. This poem shows a change in Thomas's style to a more simple construction of phrases, images less compact, less difficult to understand, less obscure (Daiches 24). At this stage, Thomas achieved a "new lucidity and serenity" (Cox 4). The rhythm is easier to apprehend, the poem is less dark, less packed (Fraser *Vision and Rhetoric* 228-9). The rhythm does not follow the sound pattern but the number of syllables, each stanza repeating the structure of 9 syllables in the first line, 12 in the second, 9 in the third, 3 in the fourth, 5 in the fifth, 12 in the sixth, 12 in the seventh, 5 in the eighth, 3 in the ninth, and 9 in the tenth (Maud *Entrances* 5-6), something attributed to Thomas's Welsh background. Technically, this is a very complex poem, written in a very rigid

pattern of syllabic counting in the "traditional Welsh manner, with persistent vowel-rhymes within the lines" (Ferris 202-3). But in spite of this very complicated structure, Thomas's poem is simpler than others he produced before. The poem is divided in seven stanzas of 10 lines each, and starts with a "humble supplication," in the words of Henry Treece (102). The poet says:

It was my thirtieth year to heaven  
 Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood  
 And the mussel pooled and the heron  
 Priested shore  
 The morning beckon  
 With water praying and call of seagull and rook  
 And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall  
 Myself to set foot  
 That second  
 In the still sleeping town and set forth.

My birthday began with the water-  
 Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name  
 Above the farms and the white horses  
 And I rose  
 In rainy autumn  
 And walked abroad in a shower of all my days.  
 High tide and the heron dived when I took the road  
 Over the border  
 And the gates  
 Of the town closed as the town awoke.

A springful of larks in a rolling  
 Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling  
 Blackbirds and the sun of October  
 Summery  
 On the hill's shoulder,  
 Here were fond climates and sweet singers suddenly  
 Come in the morning where I wandered and listened  
 To the rain wringing  
 Wind blow cold  
 In the wood faraway under me.

Pale rain over the dwindling harbour  
 And over the sea wet church the size of a snail  
 With horns through mist and the castle  
     Brown as owls  
     But all the gardens  
 Of spring and summer were blooming in the tall tales  
 Beyond the border and under the lark full cloud.  
     There could I marvel  
     My birthday  
 Away but the weather turned around.

It turned away from the blithe country  
 And down the other air and the blue altered sky  
 Streamed again a wonder of summer  
     With apples  
     Pears and red currants  
 And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's  
 Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother  
     Through the parables  
     Of sun light  
 And the legends of the green chapels

And the twice told fields of infancy  
 That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine.  
 These were the woods the river and sea  
     Where a boy  
     In the listening  
 Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy  
 To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.  
     And the mystery  
     Sang alive  
 Still in the water and singingbirds.

And there could I marvel my birthday  
 Away but the weather turned around. And the true  
 Joy of the long dead child sang burning  
     In the sun.  
     It was my thirtieth  
 Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon  
 Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.  
     O may my heart's truth  
     Still be sung  
 On this high hill in a year's turning.

This poem was written in 1944, during the Second World War, after a visit Thomas made to his parents in Laugharne and was published in *Horizons* in 1945 and in his *Deaths and Entrances*. Thomas called this poem the

first place poem he ever wrote, a poem closely and specifically related to a place (Ackerman 115; Kertzer 307-8). At the age of thirty, the poet compares his existence to a walking towards "heaven," as Henry Treece observes, a sign of humility and an indication that the poet admits the necessity of a goal in life, a final direction (102). But of course the poet's remarks could be interpreted as an ironical declaration, a simple recognition of the end of his life as an unforgettable reality, a consciousness of death which affects his present life.

Birth and death are presented as two parts of the same journey. The persona is faced with the sounds, colors, and shapes of nature, he can hear the "beckon" of the morning (1.5) in a landscape characterized by sacredness for the shore is "heron priested" (1.3,4) and the water is praying (1.6). Daiches comments that in this poem it is possible to perceive Thomas's sacralization of nature, "and we have also a sense of glory in the natural world" (23). The holy, sanctified calling of nature allows the poet to become more and more conscious of his own self and to start his journey from city to nature, from the "sleeping" town to the state of consciousness of time and change, of birth and death, thus acquiring a new consciousness of his own individuality and of death.

In the second stanza the persona starts his walk from town to nature and develops a more intimate contact with the natural environment, becoming more conscious of his own self. The stanza starts with a reference to a world made basically of "water-birds" flying the poet's name (2.2), reassuring the persona's own identity, the persona's own self. The individual seems to be personally recognized by the elements of nature. This walk has for the poet a nostalgic tone as he revisits the farms and horses of his childhood. The setting of the poem is full of water, the waters of the sea, waters of the rain, the water-birds, the high tides. Water is one of the basic elements of nature, and it has in the poem a symbolic meaning. John L. Sweeney, in his "Introduction" to the *Selected Writings of Dylan Thomas* comments that water can be taken as "the traditional womb symbol" in Thomas's Poetry (xviii). Water means the fountain and origin of life, and in this case it is the source of the poet's own identity, for the name *Dylan* means in Welsh *tide*, and according to a Welsh legend Dylan

was the name of Arianrhod's child meaning "sea son of wave" (Ackerman 116). But it also symbolizes death, according to the biblical tradition, disintegration, forgetfulness. The prophet Jonah was saved by God from the deep waters of the sea, from which he claimed: "For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me... The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head" (Jon. 2:3,5). Jesus Christ's victory over death was compared to Jonah's rising from the sea (Matt 12:40).

In the third stanza the persona moves to the woods, and hills, and the raining morning is visited by the October sun. He is now in a high place from where he can see the hills, hear the birds, and feel the winds. This is for him a moment of communion with nature and with himself. John Ackerman perceives here what he calls an optimistic pantheistic vision of nature according to which nature is sacred and the individual celebrates it (115). The persona describes nature as a harmonious unity of movements, colors, and sounds, and the birds are the great singers of the day. In the fourth stanza he can see rain at the harbour, a distant wet church, and castles as part of nature, as "dwindling" animals, as snails with "horns" and "owls" (4.1-4). The persona can travel in time and think of his childhood and its "tall tales" (4.) "Beyond the border" (4.7), and there he meditates on his birthday, in complete harmony with nature. Nature with its weathers and sounds and colors influences the individual, and it brings back to the persona the initial magical times of childhood (Ackerman 116-7). It is October, but the poet makes several references to Summer and Spring. The weather seems to be flexible according to the moods and impressions of the individual.

In the fifth stanza, the persona observes the weather change, the change in nature and the magical transformation of the environment. The world around him seems to transmit a sense of mutability. A "wonder of summer" has turned the weather, in a movement of magic, and the poet has a vision of the past, of his own childhood with his mother (5.1-7). This imaginary tour becomes for

the poet an experience of "legends" and "parables" (5.8-10). The sky is "altered" (5.2) and summer streams over the land which produces fantastic "apples, pears and red currants" (5.4-5). The sacramental character of nature is exemplified again through the "parables of sun light" and the "green chapels" (5.8-10). Nature is holy, the integration of the individual into nature has a religious pantheistic tone. If nature is sacred, if it shares some divine characteristics, then communion with nature can be taken as communion with God, with the origin of life. In that sense the poem is pantheistic. Therefore W. S. Merwin classified the poem as a poem of exultation (243).

In the sixth stanza the persona reveals the impact memories had upon him. The vision of the child affected him deeply and made him move between the past and the present, "tears" and "joy," the "dead" and the living (6.2-6). The persona remembers the boy in intimate communion with nature, within "the woods the river and sea" (6.3), in the "Summertime of the dead" (6.6), whispering his joy to "the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide" (6.7). A world of mystery, of singsongs of birds, of rumor of waters (6.8). The persona revives his childhood, the dead and living in communion, the child and the natural environment, making a true unity. Nature is enveloped by mystery, it was true in childhood, it is revived now in the poet's thirtieth birthday.

And the poem finishes with the seventh stanza, in which the persona shows bewilderment at his birthday and becomes conscious of the contrast between the two worlds, the world of wonder and Summer and the world of "town" and "October blood" (7.7), the real world. The persona is conscious that the weather is turning around, it is changing. He knows the world of nature is a world of changing, of coldness, rain, and falling leaves. The memory of the child sings inside the persona as a "burning / In the sun" (7.2-3). The persona experiences a true moment of revival in which the dead child can sing again. Then he reiterates his goal and defines his life as a walking "to heaven" (7.5-6), to death, to nature, to God. He is conscious of his mortality, of the process of time. The seventh line of this last stanza describes the town below as covered by the "October blood," referring to the fallen leaves of the trees. But it is more than

a reference to the changing of seasons, the coming of winter; it refers to the time of war, the blood poured in the streets, the bombs falling.

[1.5] "Fern Hill"

In the poem "Fern Hill" Dylan Thomas deals with his memories of childhood, with the movement of time, and with the mystery of life and death. It was written and published in 1945 in *Horizon* and later in 1946 in Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances*. The poem is a celebration of life, a rejoicing in the creatures of the natural world. The individual, the self seems to be the center of the experience, the subject who meditates on his own life and visits nature and past time. Fraser considers this a poem of celebration (*Vision and Rhetoric* 228-9), W. S. Merwin takes this as a poem of exultation (243), Anthony Thwaite as a poem of "nostalgia for childhood" (103), Ralph Maud reads this as a poem dealing with mortality and the passage of time (*Entrances* 80), and John Ackerman classifies this poem as one about happiness (119). The poem eternalizes the farm where the poet spent his childhood. The poet faces his own mortality with an attitude of communion with the world of nature around him, and celebrates it with joy mixed with some sense of nostalgia. He starts saying:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
 About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,  
     The night above the dingle starry,  
         Time let me hail and climb  
     Golden in the heydays of his eyes,  
 And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns  
 And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
     Trail with daisies and barley  
     Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns  
 About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,  
     In the sun that is young once only,  
         Time let me play and be  
     Golden in the mercy of his means,  
 And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves  
 Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,  
     And the sabbath rang slowly  
     In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay  
 Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air  
     And playing, lovely and watery  
         And fire green as grass.  
 And nightly under the simple stars  
 As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,  
 All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars  
     Flying with the ricks, and the horses  
         Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white  
 With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all  
     Shining, it was Adam and maiden,  
         The sky gathered again  
     And the sun grew round that very day.  
 So it must have been after the birth of the simple light  
 In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm  
     Out of the whinnying green stable  
         On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house  
 Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,  
     In the sun born over and over,  
         I ran my heedless ways,  
     My wishes raced through the house high hay  
 And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows  
 In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs  
     Before the children green and golden  
         Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me  
 Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,  
     In the moon that is always rising,  
         Nor that riding to sleep  
     I should hear him fly with the high fields  
 And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.  
 Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
     Time held me green and dying  
         Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

The poem presents Thomas's persona recalling the farm of his aunt in Laugharne and the happiness of childhood. He visits his past time and walks by the farm, the hills, the colors and sounds of nature, and the plays of children's imagination. In the first two stanzas the persona experiences the ecstasy of recalling the farm in a time when he was unconscious of the process of time, a

time of happiness, play, and intensity of life, a time of "running" (3.1). In the third stanza the persona experiences the mysteries and fantasies of night, and in the fifth stanza the morning breaks again, making the farm an earthly paradise, a new Eden, a new creation of the world. In the last two stanzas he chants the timeless experience of his childhood and the returning to the present, to adulthood and to the consciousness of time. The poem ends with the ambiguity of time: it "held me green and dying" (6.8).

The poem starts with a confusing reference to time, "Now as I was young and easy" (1.1). Time is blurred, the limits between past and present are mixed. Time is also personified in the poem, interfering and determining the poet's life, letting the poet "hail and climb" (1.4), "play and be / Golden" (2.4-5), always according to "the mercy of his means" (2.5). Time even has "eyes" (1.5). Time can hold the poet "green and dying" (6.8). Time is the Lord, the force that controls the individual and which determines the changes and eventually the death of the individual. D. F. Mckay comments that time is "the gentle warder, in whose chains the child is permitted to sing" (57). The presence of time implies also the presence of death, determining the coming of death, the limits of life, the brevity of the human experience. Nostalgia for the time of childhood seems to be a sort of reaction against the inflexible passage of time. Stephen J. Boyd comments that the poet proposes in the poem a paradoxical notion of time according to which the nostalgic remembrances create a state in which time was merciful, when the passage of time was not felt, the time of childhood (179). The first part of the poem presents childhood as a time of intense happiness, freshness, light and life, "as the grass was green," "Golden in the heydays" of the eyes of time (1.5), a time of great success, great happiness, and "green and carefree, famous" (2.1), a time of singing (2.2). Robert G. Havard observes that nostalgic mood of the poem can be related to the Celtic feeling called *hiareth* in Welsh, an emotive revisiting of the past, a recalling of those blissful days of childhood (812). Peculiarly, childhood occurs in the poem "once below a time" (1.7), and not "once upon a time." In an inversion of the childhood days the poet becomes the subject, the lord, the determiner, and not time. Childhood

establishes a different relationship with time, a relation in which the individual is free and unaware of the passage of time and of the menace of death. The poem presents this ambiguous attitude towards time, the child's unconsciousness of the destructive power of time, almost living out of the sphere of time, in an eternal present, on the one hand, and the time of old age, the time of adulthood, a time of mourning, of the melancholic singing of death, the time of consciousness of dying, on the other hand.

In spite of making the poet "green and dying," the universe created by the poem is harmonious, according to Linda Tarte Holley, and organized in terms of "centripetal and centrifugal forces," (61). For Holley, the image of the sun represents Time in the poem, which becomes the "controlling principle" of the first part of the poem, in spite of the child's impression of being prince and lord (66). But the persona learns that the sun, Time, is not an enemy, it is not an antagonistic force, but it shows mercy and grace, suggesting a kind of harmony with the universe, with the natural world. Holley disagrees with the idea of the poem as nostalgic in the sense of celebrating the "lost joyful innocence of childhood," instead she argues that the poem presents the paradox of a persona who understands existence as a "promise of being and becoming *temporarily*... at the center of a finite universe" (66). Stephen J. Boyd identifies two aspects of time in the poem, "the time of eternal now in the child's world," the Golden Age, the never-ending-Summer, the personified Time who directs life and shows mercy; and time in the ordinary sense, the time of adulthood, of consciousness, of mutability (186). For Boyd this apprehension of time expressed by the poem can be compared with the experience of the mystical writer, who writes in the ordinary time about an experience of timelessness, seeing life as "a plenitude with limits" and the world as a "limited whole" (186-7). And this notion of life, this comprehension of the world can provide the poet with something only experienced by the religious men: freedom from fear of death (187). When life is seen as a whole the individual cannot experience death, because he is living the present time in the dimension of timelessness (187). This interpretation sounds

interesting, since it seems to harmonize with Thomas's sense of the holiness of the natural world, his consciousness of being one with the universe.

Another important aspect of the poem is the notion of the individual in his relationship with time and nature, with life and the universe. The persona lives in the double dimension of being adult and child, being "green and golden" (1.2,5; 2.1), being servant of time (1.4; 2.4-5) and lord of nature (1.6,7). The individual's relationship with time and nature is portrayed as a temporal, provisional experience limited by mortality. In contrast with the adult the child experiences everything at the same time, he goes everywhere and enters into a relation of dominion with nature, he is "prince" (1.6) and possesses like a lord the "trees and leaves" (1.7). Boyd interprets this reference to childhood as a time when the individual is not conscious of his individuality and therefore lives in perfect harmony with nature as alluding to "a pre-linguistic stage of early infancy, a world in which language has as yet erected no barrier between self and other" (181). Light, heat, volume, movement, all inspire harmony and perfection (182). The expression "fire green as grass" (3.4) compares the intensity of the green grass, the intensity of the vegetable life with that of the fire. "This blurring of the distinction between literal and metaphorical is in keeping," says Stephen J. Boyd "with the deconstruction of other polarities in the poem, past/present, self/other, for example" (185). There is a synesthesia, the bark of a fox can be "cold" (2.7), the chimneys can play "tunes" (3.2), and horses can walk "warm" (4.7). The individual and the cosmic world get together into communion, the human, the natural, and the cosmic spheres are praised and celebrated in the poem recalling, as Linda Tarte Holley suggests, the theme and style of the seventeenth-century poets, mainly John Donne's *Devotions* (59). The child experiences the universe as home, he transforms the natural world into a world of tenderness and happiness. The persona is happy in his recalling and celebration of childhood, but he is also chained by mortality. Henry Treece talks about a "religious awareness" that the child has that, in some way, the world of nature is "God's handwork" (114).

But the relationship of the individual with nature is also characterized by the presence of death. John Brinin thinks this poem is nostalgic because of a sense of loss of a distant beginning, and because the poem has a doomed ending in which the poet wakes up to death, and the farm is there no more (Ferris 214). Paul Ferris agrees with that and comments that the "aunt and uncle were dead, and Fernhill was left to its owls and nettles. It is a poem without people, occupied only by child, house, countryside and animals" (34). Linda Tarte Holley also comments that the circle of joy is broken in the poem, and in that sense Thomas's poem is "eccentrique" (62).

In the fourth stanza, the breaking of the new morning is described in terms of biblical imagery. A reference is made to the myth of "Adam and maiden," suggesting that the morning receives a new shining and freshness typical of the original creation of the world. Joseph Satin takes the expressions "honoured among wagons," "famous among barns," "blessed among stables," "honoured among foxes and pheasants" as allusions to the phrase of the angel who saluted the Virgin Mary, saying "Blessed art thou among women," as a Christian reminiscence present in the poem, together with other references to the Christian tradition like the loss of "grace," the "lamb white days," and the colors green and gold as symbols of hope and divine glory (1146-7). Stephen J. Boyd defines Thomas' use of religious symbols and words as "secular mysticism," by which Boyd meant a "Christianity devoid of belief in a God who is really out there somewhere (or everywhere, indeed) and of hope in eternal life after death (177). Secular Mysticism involves for Boyd

an awareness that ones's own existence...is miraculous,  
inexplicable, that the nature of ones's self and its relationship  
to the world is deeply ambiguous and mysterious, that the mere  
fact that there are states of affairs and that one is aware of them  
is beyond reason, thought and intellect (182).

God becomes only a symbol of Thomas's most important values, a myth, "and yet a great and beloved presence" (177), and the natural world occupies then His space and becomes sacred in itself, a symbol of the presence of God. There is likeliness of faith without the orthodoxy, integrity of faith. In this sense, the poet's relationship with nature replaces his relationship with God, his religious

experience becomes only aesthetic. As a consequence, the individual enters in an almost religious relation with nature, in terms of mysticism, of communion, of integration. The poet's voyage to the past can be taken as a return to the lost paradise, to the Garden of Eden, to a harmonious world before the fall of man, a "prelapsarian\* paradise, perhaps suggesting that our quotidian view of the world is a fallen and defective one," as Boyd suggests (180). Fern Hill is full of religious life and music, of harmony, the child sings (2.2), "calves sang" to the child's horn (2.6-7), the "Sabbath rang" (2.8), the chimneys "tunes" (3.2). The sense of sacralization of nature can be seen, for example, in the end of the second stanza—"And the sabbath rang slowly/In the pebbles of the holy streams" (2.8-9). The act of looking at a stream of water receives a religious significance, the listening to a distant sound of Sunday bells suggests that the contemplation of nature becomes a genuine religious experience compared to the going to chapels on the Sabbath. Stephen Boyd takes this experience of the poet as "quasi-religious revelation" (184).

The poem ends with the poet recognizing death's presence in the middle of life, since he declares time holding him "green and dying" (6.8). The consciousness of time represents a great fall, in contrast with those old "white lamb days" of heedlessness and innocence. Maturity brings consciousness of time and death. Therefore unity with nature becomes impossible in terms of real experience, being only realized in terms of remembrance. The individual becomes conscious of his particularity and separation from the world of nature. As Ackerman comments, "Thomas personifies the farm as a returning wanderer, and the lines have a sensuous beauty that in the poet's empathy with the natural world recalls Keat's personification of autumn..." (121). But although the poet visits his time of innocence and eternity, he soon returns to the time of "mutability and mortality" (123).

\* Prelapsarian paradise: a theological expression referring to the paradise as it was before the sin of Adam and Eve.

## [1.6] "Poem on his Birthday"

"Poem on his Birthday" is another poem showing the passage of time in Thomas's life, the proximity of death. It was written in 1951 and published in *World Review* and later in 1952 it was included in Thomas's *In Country Sleep*. The poem simultaneously celebrates and laments life. It is a celebration but also a protest against the inevitable decadence of life and its tragic end. The poem celebrates Thomas's thirty-fifth birthday and conveys his meditation in the middle of the journey. Throughout this poem it is possible to see the exultation of a man in movement, involved in the process of life, and in the process of death. The poet says:

In the mustardseed sun,  
 By full tilt river and switchback sea  
 Where the cormorants scud,  
 In his house on stilts high among beaks  
 And palavers of birds  
 This sandgrain day in the bent bay's grave  
 He celebrates and spurns  
 His driftwood thirty-fifth wind turned age;  
 Herons spire and spear.

Under and round him go  
 Flounders, gulls, on their cold, dying trails,  
 Doing what they are told,  
 Curlews aloud in the congered waves  
 Work at their ways to death,  
 And the rhymer in the long tongued room,  
 Who tolls his birthday bell,  
 Toils towards the ambush of his wounds;  
 Herons, steeple stemmed, bless.

In the thistledown fall,  
 He sings towards anguish; finches fly  
 In the claw tracks of hawks  
 On a seizing sky; small fishes glide  
 Through wynds and shells of drowned  
 Ship towns to pastures of otters. He  
 In his slant, racking house  
 And the hewn coils of his trade perceives  
 Herons walk in their shroud,

The livelong river's robe  
 Of minnows wreathing around their prayer;  
 And far at sea he knows,  
 Who slaves to his crouched, eternal end  
 Under a serpent cloud,  
 Dolphins dive in their turnturtle dust,  
 The rippled seals streak down  
 To kill and their own tide daubind blood  
 Slides good in the sleek mouth.

In a cavernous, swung  
 Wave's silence, wept white angelus knells.  
 Thirty-five bells sing struck  
 On skull and scar where his loves lie wrecked,  
 Steered by the falling stars.  
 And tomorrow weeps in a blind cage  
 Terror will rage apart  
 Before chains break to a hammer flame  
 And love unbolts the dark

And freely he goes lost  
 In the unknown, famous light of great  
 And fabulous, dear God.  
 Dark is a way and light is a place,  
 Heaven that never was  
 Nor will be ever is always true,  
 And, in that brambled void,  
 Plenty as blackberries in the woods  
 The dead grow for His joy.

There he might wander bare  
 With the spirits of the horseshoe bay  
 Or the stars' seashore dead,  
 Marrow of eagles, the roots of whales  
 And wishbones of wild geese,  
 With blessed, unborn God and His Ghost,  
 And every soul His priest,  
 Gulled and chanter in young Heaven's fold  
 Be at cloud quaking peace,

But dark is a long way.  
 He, on the earth of the night, alone  
     With all the living, prays,  
 Who knows the rocketing wind will blow  
     The bones out of the hills,  
 And the scythed boulders bleed, and the last  
     Rage shattered waters kick  
 Masts and fishes to the still quick stars,  
     Faithlessly unto Him

Who is the light of old  
 And air shaped Heaven where souls grow wild  
     As horses in the foam:  
 Oh, let me midlife mourn by the shrined  
     And druid herons' vows  
 The voyage to ruin I must run,  
     Dawn ships clouted aground,  
 Yet, though I cry with tumbledown tongue,  
     Count my blessings aloud:

Four elements and five  
 Senses, and man a spirit in love  
     Tangling through this spun slime  
 To his nimbus bell cool kingdom come  
     And the lost, moonshine domes,  
 And the sea that hides his secret selves  
     Deep in its black, base bones,  
 Lulling of spheres in the seashell flesh,  
     And this last blessing most,

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

I hear the bouncing hills  
 Grow larked and greener at berry brown  
 Fall and the dew larks sing  
 Taller this thunderclap spring, and how  
 More spanned with angles ride  
 The mansouled fiery islands! Oh,  
 Holier than their eyes,  
 And my shining men no more alone  
 As I sail out to die.

His thirty-fifth birthday gives the poet the opportunity to celebrate and protest against the passage of time. The persona is surrounded by the forces and movements of nature, the "mustardseed sun" (1.1), the river, the sea, the birds, the bay. Until the eighth stanza the poet uses the third person narrative, from the ninth stanza on, the prayer part, he uses the personal "I." In the middle of the turmoil and vertiginous movement of nature the individual celebrates and rejects his birthday, in a contradictory movement. The rhythm of the poem is strong, with many internal rhymes and assonances as in line 6, for example—"This sand grain day in the bent bay's grave." Although the persona "celebrates" life, and although the environment suggests life and movement, he describes life as a "sand grain day" thrown in a "bent bay's grave." Life is seen as a movement towards death. The persona's attitude towards his birthday is ambiguous, he "celebrates and spurns" it, describing it as a "driftwood thirty-fifth wind turned age" (1.8), a rest of a dead tree, the rest of a shipwreck, in spite of the promising "mustardseed sun" (1.1) and the "sand grain day" (1.6). In the second stanza, "under and round" the persona sees fishes and birds make their way towards death, the world of nature is the world of death as part of life. They have "dying trails" (2.2), which are in fact "ways to death" (2.5). The "birthday bell," usually a symbol of joy, tolls now "towards the ambush of his wounds" (2.7-8). Life and death are really inter-connected, the birthday bell becomes the funeral bell. Thomas Dilworth relates this part of the poem with John Donne's "Meditation XVII" and his asking "for whom the bells toll" (5). Aneurin Talfan Davies comments that the poem shows the movements of nature as movements of death:

...[t]he whole of nature is engaged in its death trades. Finches  
 fall prey to the hawk, small fishes are devoured one by the other,

and the ship town, the 'sundered hylk' of a once spruce ship, is now a skeleton on the sea's bottom, and fishes glide through the wynds (lanes) of the dead town, to the pastures of death (66).

Besides the understanding of life as a movement towards death, another element that can be observed in the poem is the sacralization of death. The herons which attacked violently their victims in line 9, now communicate the sacralizing influence of nature, they are compared to the steeple of a church and even "bless" the poet (2.9). Nature is holy, which indicates a kind of pantheistic vision of nature, as if nature shared some kind of divine quality. The poet creates a world made of words, of language, as if the natural world were humanized. He is surrounded by the "palavers of birds" (1.5) and becomes the "rhymer in the long tongued room" (2.6). The whole nature participates in the persona's birthday, he seems to develop a profound communion with nature. The third stanza also presents nature as a place where death is a common thing, part of reality, normal. The persona sings his lament "towards anguish" (3.2), while death is envisaged in the flight of the finches (3.2), in the tracks of the hawks (3.3), in the gliding of small fishes victimized by otters (3.4-5), in the herons walking in their "shroud" (3.9), with "minnows wreathing around their prayer" (4.1-2).

The persona can distinguish the movement of death everywhere in the natural process. Besides, he perceives the living beings as conscious of their own lives and deaths. In the fourth stanza, conscious of his own "crouched, eternal end" under the shadow of the atomic "serpent cloud," the poet "knows" the "turnturtle dust" destiny of dolphins, he can see death working at the sea, in the attacks and agonies of the seals (4.7-9) and their "daubind blood" (4.7), while the sound of bells is heard from the "white angelus knells" (5.2). But consciousness of death does not bring him despair, for the poet is conscious that

death lurks for him, and for all, in the next lunatic war, and still singing, still praising the radiant earth, still loving, though remotely the animal creation also gladly pursuing their inevitable and grievous ends, he goes towards his (Ferris 288).

The birthday bells toll on "skull and scar where his loves lie wrecked" (5.4), i.e., the birthday reminds him of his own going to death, therefore they announce the

final moment as a shipwreck illuminated by "falling stars" (5.5). The loves of the persona, all his relationships, end in death.

This negative image of life as a shipwreck (5.4) is contrasted with a prophetic vision according to which tomorrow, in spite of being a weeping time imprisoned in a cage by a personified terror, will be free from the chains of darkness by the power of love which "unbolts the dark" (5.9), and he will experience death as a dissolution into the unconscious waters of the absolute, and as being free and lost in the immensity of his paradoxical "unknown, famous" and "fabulous, dear" God (6.2-3). Death is this plunging into God, a plunging which makes him lost. Death is this dark way to light (5.9-6.2), it is this return to "Heaven," traditionally seen in the Christian Tradition as a place of light, however being described in the poem as a "brambled void" (6.7) where the dead "grow" in plenties for the joy of this God (6.9). Death is seen as a manifestation of God's will and plan, the two being placed very near one another. This God rejoices in the work of death, in the growing of the dead souls, contrasting directly with the Christian God, Who does not have pleasure in anybody's death (Ezekiel 18:32). However, in the poem heaven is a place, a garden, or an anti-Eden garden, where dead men grow like "blackberries" (6.8), in spite of being a place of light. Light and darkness are constitutive elements of this Heaven described by the persona. According to the seventh stanza, there the individual can find freedom, described as wandering bare with the "spirits of the horseshoe bay" (7.1-2). There the persona can also find unity with the remains of the dead in the elements of nature, the dead of "the stars' seashore" (7.3), the "marrow of eagles" (7.4), the "roots of whales / And wishbones of wild geese" (7.4,5), with God and His Ghost, with every soul, in a peace paradoxically shaking. Death makes possible this integration with the fundamental, primal elements of nature.

Declaring to be contradictory alone "with all the living" (8.3) he prays "faithlessly unto Him" (8.9) who knows wind, boulders and waters will blow out the bones from the hills, bleed, and kick masts and fishes to the stars. Unto this God who is light of Heaven, the poet prays to let him mourn in harmony with the vows of herons "the voyage to ruin I must run" (9.4-6), the

voyage of a drifted ship. For Aneurin Talfan Davies the "rocketing winds" are winds of resurrection blowing the bones out of the hills," expressing an undeniable affirmation of life, in which "Darkness has succumbed to the light of love of the 'fabulous dear God'. And so the whole of death-dominated nature is transformed, and hears 'the bouncing hills...'" (8.3-5). Mary Dee Harris Fosberg interprets the 'dawn ships' as "years of the poet's life which have been 'wrecked' as he continues toward death" (297). However, in spite of crying and mourning, the persona can also count his blessings: the four elements, the five senses, his human nature as "a spirit in love" moving in the "spun slime" to his death, the "nimbus bell cool kingdom come" and the "moonshine domes," and the sea that hides the dead, and the most important blessing: the closer the persona gets to death the clearer becomes reality, the "louder the sun blooms" and the "sea exults" (10.1-11.4).

The proximity of death makes the persona experience life more intensely and exult in his union with the elements of nature. He confesses being a "sundered hulk[s]" (11.2), however tackling the waves of the way and the gales, and spinning together with the world in "its morning of praise" and "triumphant faith" (11.5-8). Aneurin Talfan Davies comments that in spite of being a poem about death, "it is one of the sunniest of all [Thomas's] poems" (65). Olson also agrees that it is an optimistic poem in which the reality of death is finally accepted with calmness, overcoming the fear and terror, depicting Heaven as a lost Eden in the likelihood of the natural world of Wales (20). Olson suggests that Thomas's attitude towards death can be traced as a development "from doubt and fear to faith and hope, and the moving cause is love; he comes to love of God by learning to love man and the world of nature" (20). Paul Ferris also agrees that the overall tone of the poem is optimistic, a "forced optimism" however (288). Indeed, in the last stanza the persona declares to hear the "bouncing hills" grow greener and full of larks in the fall (12.1-3), and "the dew larks sing" the spring with a great volume (12.3), and the "mansouled fiery islands" ride closely to the angels (12.4-6), as the poet "sail[s] out to die," holier than the eyes of the angels in the fellowship of his "shining men" (12.7-9). The persona celebrates his union

with the natural universe of sun and sea, hills and birds, quick and dead. This last stanza emphasizes the energy and power of creation overcoming the destructive forces of death and decadence. The individual is conscious of his death, and understands in his death an opportunity to become united with the universe, with nature, with the dead, with God, in Heaven. Although Thomas's God is quite vague and abstract, He can be felt in the natural movement of the universe, in the forces of nature. John Ackerman also thinks so since he says that

the last poems, with their pastoral settings and ethos, seem to explore and define the natural world in terms of a pantheism where God appears to be the immanent and vital 'Force of Power' rather than a transcendental being who controls the cosmos while being outside it (137).

According to the poem, the individual is not destroyed by death but united with the whole cosmos and the other individualities, the "mansouled fiery islands" (12.6). When he plunges into nature he meets the island of human kind.

## [2] Poems dealing with the death of the other

Dylan Thomas wrote several poems dealing with the death of another person. In this part we will analyze the poems "After the funeral," in which the poet celebrates the death of his aunt Annie Jones; "Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred," dedicated to an anonymous old man victimised by the war; "Ceremony After a Fire Raid," in memory of a child who met its death in the streets of London during the Second World War; "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," another poem dealing with death in war; the poem "Do not go gentle into that good night," written for his father David J. Thomas who was dying of an incurable disease; "Elegy," after his father's death.

### [2.1] "After the funeral"

The poem "After the funeral" presents Thomas's preoccupation with the death of another person, his aunt Annie Jones, who died of cancer in 1933.

The poem was finished only in 1938 and published in 1939 in the book *The Map of Love*. It is a poem of remembrance, it preserves the memory of a beloved one and it presents the feelings that arise after a funeral, after the decease and the ritual of burial. The poem has only one stanza, but presents a complex structure and elaborate sentences, internal rhymes and assonances, and a very diversified rhythm including iambic pentameter, the trochee, and the dactyl. G. S. Fraser identifies in most parts of the poem a complexity and elegance which he labeled "baroque eloquence" (*Vision and Rhetoric* 225). The poet says:

After the funeral, mule praises, brays,  
 Windshake of sailshaped ears, muffle-toed tap  
 Tap happily of one peg in the thick  
 Grave's foot, blinds down the lids, the teeth in black,  
 The spittled eyes, the salt ponds in the sleeves,  
 Morning smack of the spade that wakes up sleep,  
 Shakes a desolate boy who slits his throat  
 In the dark of the coffin and sheds dry leaves,  
 That breaks one bone to light with a judgment clout,  
 After the feast of tear-stuffed time and thistles,  
 In a room with a stuffed fox and a stale fern.  
 I stand, for this memorial's sake, alone  
 In the snivelling hours with dead, humped Ann  
 Whose hooded, fountain heart once fell in puddles  
 Round the parched worlds of Wales and drowned each sun  
 (Though this for her is a monstrous image blindly  
 Magnified out of praise; her death was a still drop;  
 She would not have me sinking in the holy  
 Flood of her heart's fame; she would lie dumb and deep  
 And need no druid of her broken body).  
 But I, Ann's bard on a raised hearth, call all  
 The seas to service that her wood-tongued virtue  
 Babble like a bellbuoy over the hymning heads,  
 Bow down the walls of the ferned and foxy woods  
 That her love sing and swing through a brown chapel,  
 Bless her bent spirit with four, crossing birds.  
 Her flesh was meek as milk, but this skyward statue  
 With the wild breast and blessed and giant skull  
 Is carved from her in a room with a wet window  
 In a fiercely mourning house in a crooked year.  
 I know her scrubbed and sour humble hands  
 Lie with religion in their cramp, her threadbare  
 Whisper in a damp word, her wits drilled hollow,  
 Her fist of a face died clenched on a round pain;  
 And sculptured Ann is seventy years of stone.

These cloud-sopped, marble hands, this monumental  
 Argument of the hewn voice, gesture and psalm  
 Storm me forever over her grave until  
 The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry Love  
 And the strutting fern lay seeds on the black sill.

According to Anthony Thwaite, the poem can be divided into three main parts: "the funeral and the funeral-feast, the bard's disclaimer, and the celebration or 'keen' over Ann's memory" (101). The first part describes the ritual of the funeral and the funeral feast, and includes lines 1-20. The solemn grave tone of the funeral ritual is conveyed through the diction and through the mood of the poem. The second part includes lines 21-26 and describes the poet's attempt to be "Ann's bard." The third part includes lines 27-40 and describes the image of Annie Jones preserved and exalted in Thomas's memory. The poem starts with a criticism of the superficiality of social conventions, a criticism of the hypocrisy of society manifested in the empty sentimentality of burial time, and in contrast with that the poet exalts the life of Annie Jones as an example of Christian virtue (Davies 32). The exaggerated sentimentality is described with expressions like "mule praises" in the first line and "Windshake of sailshaped ears" in the second line. The "teeth in black" of the fourth line indicates "a hypocritical mourning of 'salt ponds in the sleeves,' that is, they wear their grief, like their hearts, on their sleeves" (Davies 33). The hypocrisy of the society and its empty ritual are also represented in the poem by the artificiality of the "tear-stuffed time and thistles" in line 10, the "stuffed fox" and the "stale fern" in line 11. However, the stuffed fox can be simply seen as a symbol of the Welsh culture, a traditional element of their house decoration, a detail of the setting without any negative significance.

The poem shows how the individual can be affected by the death of another person, how a boy responds to a relative's death, the strong emotions involved at a funeral, the depressive, grave, dark atmosphere. This poem, says G. S. Fraser, becomes an example of a sincere and profound attitude of solidarity with the other in spite of or just for the sake of death, a real "human interest" in the life and death of the other (*Dylan Thomas* 21). This individual is shaken by the terrible smacking of the spade which can even wake up the sleep and suggest ideas of suicide, for the boy "slits his throat" and "sheds dry leaves" in lines 7, 8.

The "smack of the spade" seems to make a terrible sound which wakes up the sleep, but this waking up can also be interpreted as digging up bones of dead to light, making dramatically evident to the boy the reality of death. Death is everywhere, in the sounds of laments, in the brays of the mule, in the blowing of the winds, in the taps, in the spades, and inside the mind of the boy, in his thoughts of suicide and dry sleeves. The "smack of the spade" which "wakes up the sleep" seems to make an allusion to the biblical image of the resurrection of the dead as described by the prophet Daniel as a waking up from the sleep (Daniel 12:2). In contrast with the tumultuous and noisy desolation of the lament of "mule praises, brays," of "Windshake" of ears, of "muffle-toed tap" and "smack of spade" in the "grave's foot," the poet describes his solitary contact with the dead Annie in the interior of her house, alone in a silent room with a "stuffed fox and a stale fern" (11). These images, these sounds, this eloquent presence of death affect the boy violently. The individual is affected by the death of the other and his authentic reaction seems to contrast with the artificiality of the social conventions.

After the ritual moment of the burial and the funeral feast, the boy stays alone with the memory of his dead aunt. He wants to be her bard, and to overcome the power of death by the use of the word, by the articulation of the poetic elegiac discourse. He wants to be a serious mourner in contrast with the ironical observers of the first part of the poem. But line 16 seems to suggest that the poet's serious attempt is useless for she needs "no druid of her broken body." His bardic attempt is frustrated by the dead person herself, whose death is "a still drop" and whose heart so humble and pure that her death is "dumb and deep," according to lines 17-20. The poet intends to preserve the memory of the dead person by praising her life, but it becomes difficult because she seems to avoid any kind of glory or distortion. She would not accept this honour of the bardic Dylan Thomas. The humility of Annie Jones contrasts with the hypocrisy of that Puritan society, comments Aneirin Talfan Davies (34-5), and does not fit the elegiac purpose of the poet. She incarnates the most touching and real example of Christian mind and meekness in Thomas's poetry.

After criticizing the hypocrisy of the funeral ritual dramatized by the community and recognizing the humility of Annie Jones's personality in refusing the poet's druidic elegy, the persona of the poem invokes the power of nature in order to celebrate Annie's memory, "her love and her 'bent spirit'" (Thwaite 101). In the mind of the poet, according to Thwaite's interpretation, the celebration of her death is done with the help of the elements of the natural world, and her beatitudes, her own natural virtues are the "bellbuoy" which calls the people to church, and the wild world of nature becomes now the temple, the sanctuary, the church where the cross is formed by four birds flying in the sky above (101). For Thwaite, the sound produced by the bells of the bellbuoy represents the religious call of Annie's character. Indeed, in line 22 the poet calls the seas to a "service," line 23 talks of "hymning heads," line 25 states that her love "sing[s]" through a "brown chapel." These elements seem to link the natural world with some sort of religious meaning.

Another important aspect evident in the poem is the idealization of the dead person, the glorious transformation of the dead person. In contrast with Annie's humble personality who wants no requiem, no homage, the poet depicts an idealized Annie. Trying to overcome the reality of her death through the eloquence of his bardic discourse, intending to offer what the funeral ceremony cannot, the persona seems to confirm that the passage of death transforms human beings. In line 27, Annie Jones's character is transformed from a living humble person whose "flesh was meek as milk" to the condition of a glorious dead one compared to a "skyward statue." Indeed, while exalting dead Annie Jones, the persona is preserving her personality against the destructive influence of death. The power of the word is so concrete and strong for the preserving of memory that the poet compares her image to a sculpture, to a statue made of stone, a "monumental / Argument of the hewn voice", according to line 36-7.

Aneirin Talfan Davies observes that the poem offers a constant contrast of images of dryness and wetness, sometimes emphasizing the dryness of the reality of death, sometimes the gloomy environment near the graveyard (33). In fact, in line 8 there is a reference to "dry leaves" shed by the boy near the

coffin, contrasting with the "salt ponds" of line 5. In line 14 the heart of Annie "once fell in puddles" even drowning a sun (15). Her death is compared to a "still drop" in line 17. The persona of the poem can almost sink in the flood of Annie's fame, in lines 18-9. The sea and the wall, the stuffed fox and the fern, the statue and the skull, the "wet window" of line 29, the "cloud-sopped, marble hands" of line 36 seem to indicate these contrasting images. The result is the creation of complex images expressing complex impressions about the reality of death. Talfan Davies says in addition that Thomas "takes his image of dryness from the parlours of the small-windowed cottages of the Welsh country-side, where one will as likely as not find the stuffed fox in its glass case, and the pots of fern on the window-sill" (33). This poem seems to be very linked with Thomas's cultural background.

The poem ends with the poet emphasizing the permanence of Annie's life and death in Thomas's life. The effect of Annie's personality on the persona's existence is violent and permanent – "Storm me forever" (38). Death cannot destroy the influence of an individual on another, the influence of a subject on another. The hands, the voice, the gestures and the psalm of Annie Jonnes would strike the persona forever. The last two lines contain an enigmatic expression that can suggest some sort of hope in the last manifestation of life, a hope that the "stuffed fox" would cry "Love" and that the "strutting fern" would "lay seeds" again. But the expression can also be interpreted as a pessimistic statement, if the emphasis is placed on the adverb "forever" in line 38. However the word "Love," with capital letters, calls the attention and seems to suggest something special, maybe the representation of love as the supreme and absolute force capable of overcoming the destructive process of death. John Ackerman also considers this final statement an optimistic declaration of the final victory of life over death, but he suggests that Thomas is rejecting the traditional Christian concept of love in favor of a concept linked with the natural world, represented by the wild fox and the fern, maybe suggesting the survival of the human life after death through the biological process of the natural world (Ackerman 104). Indeed, the idea of the permanence of life through the elements and movements

seems to be present here in this poem. The stuffed fox and the fern, considered symbols of the cultural background of Wales, would guarantee the renewal of life, the miracle of the victory of life against the forces of death.

[2.2] "Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred"

The sonnet "Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred" is a poem written at the time of war, about the tragedies of war. The title seems to be picked out from the headline of a newspaper. John Ackerman relates this poem with the experience Dylan Thomas had as a fire-watcher in Soho, where Thomas worked for Strand films (106). The poem was written and published in 1941 in *Life and Letters Today* and later in Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* in 1946. It is considered one of the most detached poems Dylan Thomas wrote about the death of another person. Elder Olson, for example, who considered the poem a piece of inferior quality (*Poetry* 28), says that Thomas's verbal skill in the poem "goes for naught" (29). According to Paul Ferris's account, even Thomas recognized the poem as transmitting a very detached and even "light-hearted" view of the incident (187). The poem starts by presenting the death of the man as something common in that circumstance of war, just another news in the newspaper. This detachment has sometimes been interpreted as indifference, but it expresses indeed Thomas's indignation about the war, his protest against the injustice and violence caused by war. The poet says:

When the morning was waking over the war  
 He put on his clothes and stepped out and he died,  
 The locks yawned loose and a blast blew them wide,  
 He dropped where he loved on the burst pavement stone  
 And the funeral grains of the slaughtered floor.  
 Tell his street on its back he stopped a sun  
 And the craters of his eyes grew springshoots and fire  
 When all the keys shot from the locks, and rang.  
 Dig no more for the chains of his grey-haired heart.  
 The heavenly ambulance drawn by a wound  
 Assembling waits for the spade's ring on the cage.

O keep his bones away from that common cart,  
 The morning is flying on the wings of his age  
 And a hundred storks perch on the sun's right hand.

The old man seems to be absorbed in his daily routine, dressing and coming out of his house, the same way as the morning was usually "waking over the war," according to the first line. His life was interrupted by a bomb; death comes from the sky, something created by the modern war. Then the poet describes the violence of the explosion: the "locks yawned loose" and were blown wide (1), the old man was "dropped" on the pavement stone and the grains of the floor now described as "slaughtered" (4). In spite of being a hundred years old, the man was attached to life and loved his street, his city. In line 6, the enigmatic expression "Tell his street on its back he stopped a sun" also describes the violence of this death. How can the individual stop the sun? The old man, the limited, weak individual, faced the hot, powerful sun. We also have biblical echoes here since the Old Testament contains the narrative of the life of Joshua who, in a war of the Philistians against the Israelites, prayed and made the sun stop (Joshua 10:12-4). The individual is pressed against the violent movement of war, he is pressed against the force of his own destiny, and the power of death seems to be indestructible. In lines 7-8 the violence is reflected in the man's burning eyes, in the "springshoots and fire," in the "keys shot from the locks."

The poet is indeed deeply affected by this death, he interferes, he responds to the scene, the imperative verb form denoting the urgency of his speech. He asks an undetermined addressee, maybe a Londoner, to tell the inanimate streets about the significance of this death. In line 10, the poet tells the rescuers to stop digging, since it was useless, for the "heavenly ambulance" waits for the old man. Peculiarly, in this poem Thomas does not talk about the integration of the individual in elements of nature, nothing about pantheism or any hope of overcoming the drama of death, only the cruel reality of death. But the idea of sacralization of death is clearly present in the poem when the poet tells the rescuers not to dirty the old man's bones by mixing them in the "common cart" (12) The dead old man seems to reach a state of sanctity, of beatitude, and his death must be respected as something out of common experience, it must be

protected against banalization. This poem could be seen as a protest against the banalization of death produced by the war, the morbidity of those corpses thrown in the streets, anonymously scattered on the ground.

The last two lines return to the image of the morning, now altered, since the morning is no more "waking over the war," as it was in the first line, but "flying on the wings of his age" (13). In a certain way the old man reached a state of freedom, his spirit can fly and carry the light of the morning, after he had stopped the sun. Then the poet declares that "a hundred storks perch on the sun's right hand" (14), and the number is significant since the old man is aged a hundred. The storks are symbols of birth, according to the childhood legends, a symbol of the renewal of life. The sun, so powerful and dangerous, the same sun the old man stopped, shelters a band of storks in its right hand. So the poet seems to convey an optimistic perspective of this death, pointing to its somewhat sacred character, envisaging in it an experience of liberation, and a kind of beauty.

### [2.3] "Ceremony After a Fire Raid"

The poem "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" also deals with the death of another person, in this case the death of a new-born baby in an air bombing. The poem was written in 1945 and published in Thomas *Deaths and Entrances* in 1946. The subject of the poem is the innocent infant dead in war, burned completely in the arms of its mother. What is brought into question is the significance, the meaning of this death. Although death is essentially a complex phenomenon without explanation, without sense and meaning, the poet tries to bring light upon this reality, attempting to draw meaning from the absurdity of death. The essence of this poem lies in the hope of overcoming death and all the destructive elements of life (Daiches 17). The other person of this poem is not a relative, but an unknown child victimized by the violence of war, not a soldier but a civilian, not an adult but a child. The poem, as the title suggests and the sermon style language confirms, is in itself a funeral ceremony harmonized by an increasing music (Watkins 114). The poem is divided into three parts, each part

having a different structure: the first part contains a cry of grief and a confessional prayer, the second part explains the significance of this death, and the third part culminates in a great symphonic chant of glory and exultation. The poem starts with a lament a cry of grievance:

## I

Myselfes  
 The grievers  
 Grieve  
 Among the street burned to tireless death  
 A child of a few hours  
 With its kneading mouth  
 Charred on the black breast of the grave  
 The mother dug, and its arms full of fires.

Begin  
 With singing  
 Sing  
 Darkness kindled back into beginning  
 When the caught tongue nodded blind.  
 A star was broken  
 Into the centuries of the child  
 Myselfes grieve now, and miracles cannot atone.

Forgive  
 Us forgive  
 Give  
 Us your death that myselfes the believers  
 May hold it in a great flood  
 Till the blood shall spurt,  
 And the dust shall sing like a bird  
 As the grains blow, as your death grows, through our heart.

Crying  
 Your dying  
 Cry,  
 Child beyond cockcrow, by the fire-dwarfed  
 Street we chant the flying sea  
 In the body bereft.  
 Love is the last light spoken. Oh  
 Seed of sons in the loin of the black husk left.

## II

I know not whether  
Adam or Eve, the adorned holy bullock  
Or the white ewe lamb  
Or the chosen virgin  
Laid in her snow  
On the altar of London,  
Was the first to die  
In the cinder of the little skull,  
O bride and bride groom  
O Adam and Eve together  
Lying in the lull  
Under the sad breast of the head stone  
White as the skeleton  
Of the garden of Eden.

I know the legend  
Of Adam and Eve is never for a second  
Silent in my service  
Over the dead infants  
Over the one  
Child who was priest and servants,  
Word, singers, and tongue  
In the cinder of the little skull,  
Who was the serpent's  
Night fall and the fruit like a sun,  
Man and woman undone,  
Beginning crumbled back to darkness  
Bare as the nurseries  
Of the garden of wilderness.

## III

Into the organpipes and steeples  
 Of the luminous cathedrals,  
 Into the weathercocks' molten mouths  
 Rippling in twelve-winded circles,  
 Into the dead clock burning the hour  
 Over the urn of sabbaths  
 Over the whirling ditch of daybreak  
 Over the sun's hovel and the slum of fire  
 And the golden pavements laid in requiems,  
 Into the cauldrons of the statuary,  
 Into the bread in a wheatfield of flames,  
 Into the wine burning like brandy,  
 The masses of the sea  
 The masses of the sea under  
 The masses of the infant-bearing sea  
 Erupt, fountain, and enter to utter for ever  
 Glory glory glory  
 The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder.

The first person of the plural is surprising and indicates that this death is lamented by all human race. In the first line "Myselfes" represents what is usually called human kind. This expression indicates, according to Siew-yue Killingsley, that the poet becomes part of this choir of grievers, a reminiscence of a line from Hopkins' *Henry Purcell* (296). However these "grievors" are, at least temporarily, despoiled of their individuality and hidden behind this generalized "grievors," this collectivity.

The first stanza presents a declaration of grievance and links birth and death in the same tragic movement. This death is anonymous, "among the street" (I.1.4), the child is given no name in the poem. Just a few hours after the birth, the child encounters death. In line 7 the mother is there, but instead of a milk and womb, the child finds the "black breast of the grave." In the second stanza, the requiem begins with a sad song singing that darkness put out—"kindled back" (I.2.4)—the light of that birth. The violence of that death disturbs ones senses and makes the "kneading mouth" (I.1.6) which wanted milk and mother find the grave and the "tongue nodded blind" (I.2.5). With an allusion to the star that shone in the sky in the night of Jesus Christ's nativity, according to the narratives of the Gospel, the poet sadly states in the second stanza that a "star

was broken" and there is no chance of a miracle to save the disgrace of this child's death. The star is broken, hope is broken, the child is broken. The star, much more than the flash of the exploding bomb, represents the broken hope of salvation, the dis-nativity of this anti-gospel where birth finds death so near and the individual is dead among burned, unnamed streets.

As the poem develops, the religious experience and symbolism become more and more evident. The grievers are now called "the believers" (I.3.4), grievance becomes a confession of guilt. In the third stanza the poet calls for forgiveness, forgiveness for "us" (I.3.2-4), for all humanity. The poet assumes more and more the function of a priest, interceding for the rest of the community, presiding a Mass in which the confession of guilt is a fundamental part. This death is endowed with a sacrificial significance when the "believers" ask for it, take and "hold it" (I.3.5), and let child's blood spill over "through [our] heart" (I.3.8). It is a symbol of the renewal of life since the dust sings like a bird and the "grains blow" (I.3.7-8). This death also gives the poet the opportunity for developing the theme of guilt for the murder of so a young child, a so fragile life, guilt also for all the deaths in war, guilt which the Christian tradition links with the sin of Adam and Eve, so profoundly enclosed in the human nature.

This death as a sacrificial act has a positive energy in itself. This death can occur for the sake of the believers, it can make blood spurt, dust sing, and grains blow "in nature's mystical unity" (Ackerman 108). The poet continues in the fourth stanza directing the chant of the "congregation" of all human kind in the crying of the child's "dying cry" (I.4.2,3), in the chant of the "flying sea" (I.4.5), the sea of the dead, the flight of the soul. The image of the sea seems to allude to the book of Genesis, to the narrative of the creation of the world, where the sea surrounds everything, and to the book of Revelation where the sea also surrounds everything. The redemptive character of this death can be seen in the background of the Christian tradition, which absorbed the Old Testament idea of the holocaust, and in the New Testament proclamation of a redeemer who gives his life for the salvation of the others. But the poem cannot be simply identified with some sort of Christian orthodoxy, because the poet uses the Christian

tradition recreating the meanings and applying them to the tragic death of the child and to the forces and elements of nature. Notwithstanding that, Aneurin Talfan Davies regards this poem as "the one, perhaps, which comes nearest to a direct statement of [Dylan Thomas's] Christian affinities" (63).

The first part of the poem ends in an enigmatic declaration: "Love is the last light spoken" (I.4.7), which indicates that love seems to be the ultimate, the most important experience in life. On the one hand, this can sound paradoxical and contradictory, but completely urgent, in a world destroyed and violated by the violence of war. On the other hand, this sounds very familiar, with the Christian message of love as the reason why God saved the world and as the ethical principle that guides the Christian life. By the way, a reference to love as an absolute value was already present in the end of the poem "After the Funeral." Now, at this moment marked by the negativity of death, love is presented as a positive communicative luminous energy, as fertile as the "seed of sons in the loin of the black husk left" (I.4.8). Love is bright and energized with light, but the poet says that love is "the last light spoken" (I.4.7). How can love be related to words? This part may be related to the biblical passage from John when the apostle says that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), in connexion with his declaration that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (3:16). So love can be spoken, can be redemptive, can be illuminated with divinity.

The second part of the poem develops the significance of the child's death through biblical and pagan mythology, characterizing the poem more and more as a religious ceremony in which the sacrifice of life is of central importance, as a Christian Mass. This second part invites us to visit the biblical myths of Adam and Eve and all the sacrificial symbolism of the Old Testament applied and accomplished in Jesus Christ on the cross. The biblical imagery is abundant. According to the narrative of the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve were the originators of the human race and responsible for the entering of death in the

history of humanity. Death is caused by their sin, it is taken as a consequence of their disobedience, and therefore mixed with a deep sense of guilt and wonder. The poet recognizes his uncertainty about who was "the first to die," if Adam or Eve, if the "holy bullock" or the "white ewe lamb," or if the "chosen virgin" (II.1.1-7). The bullock was used as the victim of the sacrifices in the Old Testament, as an atonement for the sin of the people. The lamb was also used in the Old Testament, in the sacrifice for the sins of the people of Israel, and it is used in the New Testament to identify and represent the mission and the character of the Messiah, according to the prophecy of Isaiah 53 which describes the Messiah as a silent lamb going to the slaughterhouse. The chosen virgin can be related to the pagan mythology, alien to the biblical tradition but very common in the cultural background of Europe in general, and Wales in particular. However, the Bible also presents Mary, Jesus's mother, as the chosen virgin of Israel. In the second stanza of the second part, the poet acknowledges that the legend of Adam and Eve will not be silent in his service over the dead infant. In a way, the poet distinguishes this special child from the generality of the dead infants, and ascribes to it the characteristics of a legend, the capacity of being "priest and servant" at the same time (II.2.6). and "Word, singers, and tongue," and the night fall of the serpent (II.2.7-10), and the fruit—of the knowledge of good and evil— and "man and woman undone" (II.2.11). The poet gives significance to the absurd of the child's death in the streets of London by elevating it to the stature of a myth. Using Christian and pagan symbols, the poem makes the child be more than an ordinary child and makes its death be more than an ordinary death in a world marked by the daily tragedy of war. The child seems to encompass the poles of a myth: it is the priest and the servant at the same time, for example; it is the serpent and the fruit at the same time, man and woman, in a kind of returning to the darkness of the beginning, in an anti-garden of Eden, "the garden of wilderness" (II.2.14). The child seems to symbolize the drama of human existence. For Aneirin Talfan Davies, this child is the legend, the myth "which foreshadows the conquest of that death which came through Adam, by the child" (61). For Davies, Thomas is talking about Jesus

Christ. Of course, the allusion to a new-born child and saviour is there, but it does not make the poem a piece of Christian devotion or an orthodox interpretation of the gospel. The poem uses the biblical imagery and the symbols of the Christian ritual and theology only to give significance and importance to the death of this child, which happened in a secular, terribly devastating war. Symbolically, the child's death receives some characteristics of Christ's death and brings some illumination to the problem of death in the human existence, but Dylan Thomas is not preaching a sermon, he is just playing with words, images, and symbols, just enriching the poem with the emotional charge these symbols contain. Paul Ferris, however, admits that this question is "open to argument" (201).

A holistic significance surrounds the child, who represents Adam and Eve at the same time, the entire human tragedy, the pulse of life under the "head stone" (II.1.12), the sacrifice and the priest, the mystic "totalization" of the human experience and history. The child is all, a holistic expression of what life is. The child is life and death being dramatized in the streets of London, it is the myth invading the secular age, it is the sacred invading the profane, it is the invitation to a Mass in an age of disbelief, it is the sacrificial blood of the lamb in an age full of guilt and sin. It is light and darkness in an age full of darkness and lightning of bombs. For Vernon Watkins it is the "pressure of the anarchy of war itself and the vision of distorted London" which inspired Dylan Thomas to write such beautiful poems like this one (quoted by Ferris 203). In the first stanza of the second part, the persona says: "I know not..." (II.101), he recognizes the reality of a mystery, the impotence of rational understanding, the open space to the mythological elements, the urge for some revelation. Therefore the poet gives the child the significance of a revelational, mythological phenomenon.

The third part of the poem represents the climax of this requiem, in which the music and the symbol reach their highest point. Commenting this third part, D. F. McKay says:

Like most visionary experiences in which the protagonist is invaded by divine power, the flight into the sun constitutes the consumation of being as well as a destruction. Thomas' line "The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis's thunder"

at the conclusion of "Ceremony After the Fire Raid" delineates the contradictory constituents of "such moments of pure energy" (55).

This third part presents the paradox of life and death dramatized through the symbols of the Christian Mass, accomplishing this "magnificent ritualistic poem... where the paradox is, if not resolved, held in eternal equilibrium" (Davies 58). Talfan Davies even concludes that this poem constitutes a Catholic poem, in contrast with "After the Funeral" which he considers a Protestant one (58-9). Differently from "After the Funeral" which was basically a funeral oration and preaching, "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" constitutes a real ceremony, with the presence of a priest, the body of Christ, the chants, the candles, the fires (58-9). It is really interesting that Thomas's preferred to use a Catholic word—"Mass"—instead of a Protestant one—service. The word mass emphasizes the centrality of the sacrifice, contrasting with the general idea of praise conveyed by the "service," centred in the preached word. The tone of the poem has changed from a sad lament and cry, from grief and mourning, to a rejoicing, full, and triumphant music (Ackerman 109), a Mass of glory and ecstasy. In the third part the "organpipes and steeples" of the cathedrals (III.1), the molten "weathercocks" and "dead clock" (III.3-5) are part of the scenery of the bombarded London, and its turbulent streets. The poet portrays an ecclesiastical but also a warlike London setting. The "urn of sabbaths" (III.6) suggests the traditional Sunday morning linked with the funereal image of the urn full of ashes of cremated bodies. The image of the church furniture is contaminated and secularized by the images of deterioration and crisis, the scenery of war. Everything is imbued with religion and war, faith and destruction, glory and flame, gold and fire, the sanctity of wine and the secularism of brandy (III.12), religious ecstasy and the fire of hell. The poet sees London as a burning cathedral in a time of funeral ceremonies and sacrifices. Bread and wine are "transubstantiated" into war, bombing, cinders. The presence of death in the middle of life represents a surreal, musical, ecclesiastical, and secular Mass which proclaims the meaning of life in the verge of death, and the plenitude of the child who embraces the sun, and becomes united with nature. In the opinion

of Paul Ferris, this poem is an affirmation of life resounding in the last eloquent lines "Glory glory glory / The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder" (201). The poem becomes a celebration of life, not a celebration of death, a solemn declaration of the positiveness and fulfillment of this mythical child united with the sea, symbol of the origin of life. In fact, the sea plays an important role in the sequence of the creation of the world and life.

John Ackerman understands this last mixing part of urban destruction and religious images of natural energy as a celebration of the triumph of life against death (109). Indeed, the child, London, and the sea become one; the individual, the city, and nature become one. When the individual is re-absorbed by nature, life receives meaning and death is overcome. The Christian symbolism offered Dylan Thomas the tools to express his secular hope, his hope in the overcoming of death through the reabsorption in the elements and movements of nature. The poem displays a crescendo until this last part, like a symphony in which the apocalyptic "Glory glory glory" represents the climax, according to the vision of the throne and the voices of many waters of the book of Revelation (4:2-11). The sacrificial death of the child produces salvation, regeneration, and the whole world can be redeemed. Revelation and Genesis, end and beginning seem to be linked in the child who dies and is one with the sea. The cathedral, the city, and nature celebrate the holy meaning of life and the overcoming of death through the mystical union with the elements. There is sin to be confessed, bread and wine to be swallowed, hymns to be sung, and everything is symbolically directed to the child dead in the altar – the streets of London.

#### [2.4] "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London"

The poem "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" was also written in 1945 and published in the same year in *New Republic* and later in 1946 in Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances*, in memory of a child victimized by the Second World War, an anonymous child murdered in the streets of London. Again, this other person is not a known person, a relative, but

a strange little girl. However, the poet expresses a serious concern for the child and confesses to be deeply affected by its death. Elder Olson, nevertheless, comments that Dylan Thomas's poetry is always centred on his own self, showing always his own attitude towards the suffering of the other, and not the sufferings specifically (23). Olson argues that Thomas never "suffers imaginatively the experience of the child, does not share in it in the least; he sees the pain and the horror from without..." (23). However, in reading the poem it is possible to see how much the poet is touched by this death, and how the poem is carried with emotion and pain. The long title of the poem seems to contradict the content: the poet says he will not mourn, but throughout the poem he mourns. The poem asks for the impossible (6). Death by itself is absurd, but death in war makes the situation worse, because it includes a sense of injustice and raises the question of morality. The poem starts with a long sentence including three stanzas. The poet says:

Never until the mankind making  
 Bird beast and flower  
 Fathering and all humbling darkness  
 Tells with silence the last light breaking  
 And the still hour  
 Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round  
 Zion of the water bead  
 And the Synagogue of the ear of corn  
 Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound  
 Or sow my salt seed  
 In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death.  
 I shall not murder  
 The mankind of her going with a grave truth  
 Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath  
 With any further  
 Elegy of innocence and youth.

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,  
 Robed in the long friends,  
 The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother;  
 Secret by the unmourning water  
 Of the riding Thames.  
 After the first death, there is no other.

The rhyme scheme of the poem follows roughly the order A,B,C,A,B,C. The first thirteen lines complete a sentence in which the first nine lines constitute the three dependent clause. And the noun "darkness" receives several compound adjectives modifying its meaning, "mankind making / Bird beast and flower / Fathering and all humbling darkness." According to Paula Sunderman, the poem can be divided into four major units, the first one involving the whole first sentence (23).

In the first part of the poem death is seen as an entering into the kingdom of nature, a process of returning to the primeval state of unconsciousness and energy, of integration in the natural elements. The darkness brought by death, at the moment of death, is presented in terms of positive and negative aspects, it is destructive and constructive (Sunderman 23). So death is ambiguous in its mixed darkness, being present even in the "mankind making" (1.1), i.e., in the process of human reproduction and generation. This ambiguous "darkness" of death is also present in the contradictory appearance of life and beauty of "Bird beast and flower / Fathering" (1.2-3). Paula Sunderman then concludes that darkness "becomes both creator and destroyer, an image which initiates the cyclical process of the poem" (23). From the first stanza on, it is possible to identify the basic dichotomies of the poem: light-darkness, motion-stillness, creation-death. Death is described in the first stanza as a return to nature, a meeting with basic elements which implies the end of self-identity, the loss of individuality and complete integration with the elements,

The second part of the poem describes death, the individual death or even the generic death at the end of the world, as a returning to the "Zion of the water bead" to the "Synagogue of the ear of corn," a direct allusion to the biblical city considered the holy city of Israel, the place where God lives with his people, the place of adoration and prayer. For Daiches, the "water bead" and the

"synagogue of the ear of corn" are "primal elements, to which all return at the end" (18-9). These are considered "sacramental images," intending to give sacramental character to the reality of death as the unity of all things, the unity of all creation (Daiches 20). The poem seems to take death as a sacred reality, endowing it with an aura of untouchable "sacralization." Death as a return to nature is expressed in the poem by images of holiness, sanctity, images of religious significance. The synagogue was created at the time of the exile of Israel in Babylon (550 b.C) as a substitute to the Temple of Jerusalem (in the mount of Zion). Paula Sunderman argues that Dylan Thomas was conscious of the pagan mythology as well as the Christian, therefore she suggests that the images of "water" and "corn" be understood first in their pagan level, as symbols of pagan regeneration, linked with the adoration of Ceres and the myth of death by water and that the "water-bead" image be taken as a religious symbol of the renewal of life, alluding to the ritual of baptism as to the cleansing of the body and soul (26-7). Indeed, I recognize that the pagan mythology is present in the poem, but I think that the images of "water" and "corn" should be understood first as part of the Christian background (the water of baptism, the water of the Holy Spirit, the wheat of the parables and the bread of life). Sunderman also thinks that the "ear of corn" could be interpreted in terms of the Christian iconography, as the church and eternal life, i.e., the shaft of wheat (27).

In my view, the "valley of sackcloth" (2.6) stands for the "valley of the shadow of death" of Psalm 23, which contributes to the sacralization of death, giving "majesty" to the reality of the child's death in contrast with the sense of the banalization of life and death provoked by the war. The child's death could be taken in the context of the war just as another common and repetitive fact—"it is just another death." But for the poet it is a sacred happening, it receives "majesty" and brightness and "burning," towards which the poet expresses his bashful refusal to "blaspheme down the stations of the breath" (3.1-4), a clear reference to the stations of the Cross, the several sufferings of Jesus Christ. The "sacralization of death" contributes to make this refusal in fact a great elegy, but it does not imply a Christian interpretation of death and eternity. Ralph Maud is

of the same opinion since he has observed that the natural world which receives the death of the child as a sacred phenomenon, a returning to Zion, to the Synagogue, as the passage of the stations of the cross, does not stand for the Christian heaven (*Entrances* 53). The round Zion of the water bead is only the river in the eternity of its fluidity.

The concept of time transparent in the poem is that of cyclic time, a repetitive movement of birth and decay, fathering and death, suggesting the biblical sequence of the book of Genesis, but in the inverted order, from light to darkness, from movement to stillness, as Benilde Montgomery has observed, in a constant movement of creation and destruction (126). However, the notion of time present throughout the Bible is the linear and not the cyclic time, according to the Jewish culture. From the biblical perspective, there is a starting point for the history of the universe, and there is a final point. The cyclic concept of time that Montgomery observes in the book of Genesis is limited to the organic world, to the world of bird, beast and flower. For William Empson, darkness represents the "unknown, undeveloped Nature from which all life came and to which it returns" (244). In line 6, the image of the sea, expressed in the poem as "tumbling in harness" also relates to the description of the creation of the world and the deluge in the book of Genesis, and to Doomsday according to the biblical narrative of Revelation. The creation and the destruction of the world are illustrated by the image of the sea.

The cyclical notion of time affects also the structure of the poem, which presents a progress from the organic world—the world of man, bird, beast and flower—to the "inorganic state of death" (Sunderman 25). According to this view, the child's death is seen as a movement from the organic to the inorganic state, from individuality to generality, from consciousness to unconsciousness, from the human sphere to the cosmic. But the cyclical character of nature guarantees the reverse movement, the return of the child to the living state through the elements of nature. As Paula Sanderman comments,

although the child dies, as will all mankind itself some day,  
and returns to the natural elements, once her body disintegrates,  
she will experience a paganistic regeneration because her decayed

body will furnish rich soil and minerals to nourish the plants which spring from the earth... This paradoxical linking of death and creation does not only form the central analogy upon which the poem is based; also, to anticipate a little, we will see that in the linking sub-analogies in the next stanzas of the poem, the religious images suggest, by extrapolation, correspondences to the metaliterary world or the cultural matrix of the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions that Thomas is employing (25).

Using synesthesia, the poet makes "darkness" (a visual element) "tell[s]" (a sonorous element) the "still hour," but darkness is also an inanimate subject, and it is not expected to say anything. The expression "the last light breaking" may be an allusion to the book of Revelation 6:12-13, where one can find the images of the falling stars as a signal representing the end of the world, ambiguously linking the death of the individual with the death of the human race. These images reinforce the idea of destruction. As Paula Sunderman comments, "Darkness," the "still hour," and "silence" are linked by the paradigm of the process of destruction (25). In contrast with those images of destruction the poet opposes the images of "bird, beast, and flower" and "ear of corn," pointing to a process of regeneration, of regaining life (34).

The child's death is mysterious, it is holy, therefore the narrator makes a solemn vow of not mourning the "majesty and burning of the child's death" (3.1). Besides, the poet uses the biblical expression "I shall not murder" (3.2), a clear allusion to the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), and indication that there is a sacred reason not to disturb the death of the child, and the persona dares not "blaspheme down the stations of the breath" with funeral discourses (3.4), corroborating the creation of an aura of sanctity around the child's death, elevated from the category of banality to the standard of holiness. The expression "salt seed" of the second stanza implies a positive and a negative sense: the seed is a symbol of life, but salt thrown in a fertile ground brings infertility to it. So the image is a paradox: crying her death is killing, but it is also a way of seeding the soil (Montgomery 127). Montgomery also relates the "valley of the sackcloth" with chapter thirty-seven of Ezekiel which describes the resurrection of the dry bones, which indicates that Dylan Thomas "is re-affirming a belief in the resurrection and consequently in the indestructibility of matter" (127). But the

"valley of sackcloth" can refer also to the Jewish habit of wearing sackcloths and gray during the period of mourning. For Paula Sunderman the "mankind of her going" (3.3) points out to her sharing in the sin of humankind, her identification with the rest of the human race through the reality of sin (29). The expression "with a grave truth" (3.3) has a double meaning to the extent that it indicates the poet's wish to preserve the child's death from the banalization of a formal speech, a funeral discourse, and also the child's destiny of going to the grave. William Empson even comments that Dylan Thomas had been tempted "to write war propaganda [in favour of Britain's participation] , both by indignation and by the opportunities of his profession, and then felt that this would be disgusting; it would be making use of the child" (247) and that the passage alludes to this temptation. Nevertheless the idea of death as a return to elemental life is really present in the poem.

Another idea present in the poem is the proximity of death and birth in the human existence. The poem abounds in biblical references and imagery – "beast," "Zion," "grave," "humble," "pray," "salt,"—, which echo the Biblical mythology contained in the book of Genesis, such as the creation and mystery of nature and the garden of Eden (Greenway 3). The diction used in the poem seems to suggest some biblical patterns of construction, like "let pray" (2.4), "enter again" (2.1), "shall not" (3.2), "is come" (1.6), and "blaspheme down" (3.4). Willian Greenway, however, seems to believe that Thomas's religion is different from the traditional version, completely transformed, altered according to his poetic intentions, thus creating a more "humanistic gospel" centred on the experience of the individual rather than on God's action, affirming human qualities rather than conveying the metaphysical view of the Bible (4).

Another important idea in the poem is the concept of death connected with the loss of consciousness, a plunge into the unconscious world of nature. The individual loses his consciousness while being integrated, re-unified with the forces of nature, an idea which G. S. Fraser calls "a pantheistic pessimism," originally developed by William Empson (*Vision and Rhetoric* 235). The child must be absorbed by nature from which it will be reborn, however into

another form of life. The idea of dissolution, of unity in the mass of nature is implied in the image of the water-bead. It hints at the idea of being dissolved as a drop of water in the large amount of the ocean, "making a round unity which does not spread into the outside world" (Empson 246) But the beads can also be understood as those used for counting prayers (246). According to Montgomery's interpretation of the myth of the Fall, the immediate consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve was the impediment to reach the tree of everlasting life and the fall into a state of shame, a state of "self-consciousness" (125). If this interpretation is correct, the state of non-self-consciousness before the Fall is characterized as a state of harmony between God and humankind. After the Fall of Adam man experiences pain, alienation, the consciousness of the self, what represents a kind of death. This perspective, says Montgomery, is precisely reflected in the poem of Dylan Thomas which takes the present life as a painful experience and death as a return to Eden, to a state of non-self-consciousness, a return to true life (125). The loss of the consciousness of being an individual becomes something desirable, and therefore the poet's refusal to mourn the death of the child can be understood (125). Death liberates the individual from his own consciousness and places him in the realm of unconsciousness, therefore the poet takes the death of the child as a sacred, majestic phenomenon (127). Arguing that death is holy just because of the fact of being mysterious, Montgomery suggests that the poet does not try to clarify or to reason about the reality of death, and therefore the poet does not fall in Adam's temptation of attaining knowledge, of rationalizing everything, the poet preserves the notion according to which self-consciousness is death, and death is liberation (128). Therefore, according to Montgomery, the poet uses a lot of ambiguity and paradox, avoiding clear, restrict definitions, certitudes, dogmas, doctrines (128). This way, Thomas guarantees and preserves his readers against the temptation of trying to understand death. Death remains a mystery that no one can understand. "Death for Thomas," says Montgomery "is not the loss of self but rather a consciousness of self as distinct from the cycle of creation. This self-consciousness is the immediate result of man's having succumbed to the need to distinguish good from

evil, to understand with clarity what ought to be left mysterious" (126). The idea of death as a plunge into nature, as the loss of consciousness contrasts radically with the Christian concept of resurrection, according to which God will restore the identity of each individual with a permanent state of consciousness called eternal life.

The fourth stanza presents the climax of the poem and reaffirms the idea of integration of the individual into the elements of nature. This last part echoes the first part of the poem, but the tone has changed to a more "liturgical proclamation" (Daiches 19). London's daughter lies "deep" with the first dead, "robed" in the long friends, and "secret" by the unmourning water. For David Daiches, the "long friends" mean basically worms, elements of corruption which have a positive function in the reunification of the individual with nature, contributing to accelerate the process of rebirth in nature (19). "One dies but once," says Daiches paraphrasing the poem, "and through that death becomes reunited with the timeless unity of things" (19). The "first dead" are interpreted by Paula Sunderman as referring either to the Londoners who died in the war before the child or to Adam and Eve (30-1). Sunderman thinks that the idea of identifying the "long friends" with worms is grotesque, and argues that this expression transmits the idea of "human solidarity," every one shares a part in the human condition, we are part of the same human race, and we share it even in the moment of death (30-1). I agree with Sunderman and also think that the "long friends" represent the human race, the ancestors, those who have died before. The dead have now become the child's envelope, they "robed" the child (4.2) as a "sacred investiture"; the dust of the dead has become the grains in the layers of earth, in the "veins" of the mother earth (Sunderman 31). The grains are ageless, according to Sunderman, because they partake in the timeless cycle of nature, and because they bring life by dying, according to the Biblical text of John 12:24-25, therefore a Christian and not a pagan reference (31). The silent, unmourning movement of the river Thames, personified in the expression "riding Thames" (4.5), contrasts with the unmoved body of the child. The river seems to be indifferent to the death of the child, and this indifference is expressed by its

stillness and by its unmourning attitude. Paula Sunderman identifies in the poem two levels of operation for the images of death: the death of a girl in a bombing raid in London, and the death of all humankind at the end of the world (24). She still identifies a third level: "the death of death" (33). Therefore there is no motive for mourning, since the child has already received the eternal life,

The body is equated in pagan terms with the images of death—the earth, plants, birds, and darkness—and is regenerated only through the cycle of nature. The soul is associated with the images of water, light, Zion, Synagogue, and fecundity, images which, in the Judeo-Christian context, symbolize eternal life (33).

Taking into consideration the biblical tradition, Paula Sunderman identifies the first death with that of Adam and Eve, which was caused by sin, and the child inherited this first death when she was born. The second death, after Christ's atonement, becomes no death, because death "in Christian terms is not a cause for sorrow or an occasion for an elegy because it is the door to eternal life" (32). Since the first death is the spiritual one caused by sin and the physical death represents for the Christian only a passage to another kind of life, "After the first death there is no other" (4.6). Indeed, the poet seems to use a Christian notion about the first death and the second death, but altering the original meanings of these concepts. He seems to neutralize the power, the terror of death by reaffirming the cyclical movement of nature. Through the entering into this cyclical movement of decay and rebirth the individual overcomes death, this seems to be the basic idea of the poem. William Empson even states that the last line of the poem means that the child "lives for ever as part of Nature" (248). Therefore the poem rejects any mourning comment of rhetorical discourse. For Ad de Vries, as the first dead have already become corn and water, grains and veins, part of the mother earth, the child has become one with the veins and grains (552). Siew-yue Killingsley interprets this last verse as an indication of a reaction to death as a natural phenomenon, toward which any elegy would be a blasphemy, since death is the lot of humankind (290). Ralph Maud, on his turn, explains the last verse commenting that to mourn the child would be to murder it twice "because all words available are necessarily inadequate, oversolemn truths

or thumbed elegies" (*Entrances to Thomas Maud* 53). She is integrated into nature. There is no other death because there is no other life (53). I agree with the idea that Thomas is emphasizing the re-absorption into the elements of nature as an alternative to the reality of death, and this last line has to be interpreted in this direction. However, I can perceive here some echoes of the biblical passage of Hebrews 9:27 which declares that "it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." The poet also seems to say that after the physical death the individual has to face the truth of his own existence, the judgment. In a way, there is a positive aspect in the statement, after all there is only one death to die. However, the statement can also suggest a terrible pessimism, there is no other death because there is no other chance to live. The idea of overcoming death through the integration into the elements of nature seems to give some sort of consolation, according to the poem, but the problem of the loss of self-identity remains. There is a kind of survival into nature, but the individuality is lost forever, since "[a]fter the first death, there is no other."

#### [2.5] "Do not go gentle into that good night"

The poem "Do not go gentle into that good night" is another poem showing Thomas's concern with the death of the other. This is one of his most famous poems, addressed to his father David J. Thomas, "now in chronic ill health, chiefly through heart trouble" (Ferris 283). Dylan Thomas's father was sick and dying. The poem was written in 1951 following a very strict form, considerably rare in the English Literature: the "villanelle." This structure implies the recurrence of two rhymes, in a framework of five tercets and one quatrain. The first line is repeated in the sixth, twelfth, and eighteenth line; and the third line is repeated in the ninth, fifteenth and in the last line. The poem was published in 1951 in *Botteghe Oscure*, after David Thomas's death, and later included in the *Collected Poems* in 1952. Throughout the poem the poet tries to convince his father to resist the destructive powers of death. The poet says:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
 Because their words had forked no lightning they  
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
 Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
 And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
 Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
 Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray,  
 Do not go gentle into that good night.  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The recognition of individuality as a supreme value of the human life seems to be the fundamental presupposition of the poem. Individuality seems to possess a tremendous importance in the poem. And this is the precise drama created by death, the menace of extermination of the individual. The problem is that death threatens the self of the other, and in this case the other is a beloved person, the poet's father, the originator of life. The menace of annihilation of the individual makes death a tragic reality, beyond the limits of a natural process.

As a natural process, death could not be taken as good or bad, but the ironical expression "good night" indicates how negatively the poet regards the process of dying. He advises his father to resist the coming of death, using this expression to indicate how negatively he takes death. However, the expression "good night" also indicates a certain ambiguity, at least there is the temptation of taking death as a good, attractive thing. Positive and negative aspects seem to be present in this understanding of death, which can be very elusive and presented as a "good night," at the same time that it has to be resisted. In the first two lines

there is also an opposition between the attitudes towards death: the "gentle" acceptance of death, which is condemned by the poet, is contrasted to "burn and rave" and "rage against the dying of the light" (1.2-3). The poet chooses to resist and advises his father to present an active, intense opposition to the coming of death. In this first stanza the duality light-darkness is also evident. There is a struggle between life and death, light and darkness. The poet employs the imperative according to which this old man, his father, should "burn" and "rage" against the "dying of the light" (1.2-3).

The poem develops the idea of death as part of the "human lot," something from which there is no escape, something which involves all humanity. Each stanza presents a portion of mankind, namely: the "wise men" (2.1), the "good men" (3.1), the "wild men" (4.1), and the "grave men" (5.1). All of them have something in common: they do not accept easily the idea of death, they do not give up living, they resist as much as they can. Commenting on this poem, Gingerich says that these men resist the power of death "not because they fear death or hate death or think death evil, but because this final moment of all life's moments illuminates all their past life" (178-9). Gingerich adds that this is a paradox, the fact that this darkest moment of life can bring so much light to existence, how it can bring meaning and sense to an entire life (178-9). According to this interpretation, they resist death in order to enjoy this final moment of life, giving an example of how death can be faced with dignity.

There has been quite a long discussion about the interpretation of these four categories of men presented by the poem. Clarck Emery in his book *The World of Dylan Thomas* identifies the "wise men" as the philosophers who in spite of their hard and serious work have brought no answer to the question of life in face of death, the "good men" as saints, religious persons, the "wild men" as poets, and the "grave men" as sober and serious men who regret the way they have lived (54). In his book *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas*, William York Tindall understands that the "wise men" are philosophers, the "good men" are moralists who do not accept death after such a restricted and limited way of life,

the "grave men" are poets, and the "wild men" are "men of action and lovers of living" (205).

Michael W. Murphy, however, has a different opinion on the subject according to which "wise men," as preachers of wisdom, are contrasted with "good men," as the practitioners of these preachings (55). Both resist death because they do not feel accomplished through their work. Words and works are inefficient, ineffective to bring light and meaning to life. The words of the "wise men" brought no "lightning," no illumination in that final moment of life and therefore they "[d]o not go gentle into that good night" (2.1-3). "Good men" only cry how unstable their fragile actions have danced in the "green bay," and therefore they "rage against the dying of the light" (3.1-3). Still according to For Michael W. Murphy, the "wild men" represent the hedonistic way of life, summarized by the expression *carpe diem* as a correspondence to "caught the sun," and their frustration when they discover that instead of catching the sun, they were caught by it (55). The enthusiastic lyric songs of the "wild men" are converted at the end into laments and elegies. "Grave men" who have led a more calm and "Apollonian" way of life (55), old and blind, who perceive at the moment of death that the eyes could "blaze like meteors and be gay," they rage and resist death. The moment of death seems to bring some blinding revelation to life, a light which illuminates even the darkest hour, making possible the act of dying with "meteor-like splendour" (55), with dignity, with consciousness. In my opinion, the four categories of men indicate the human race as a whole, and not only some part of it. The "wise men" of the second stanza are men of "words" (2.2), men who developed knowledge and wisdom; the "good men" of the third stanza are men who lived according to strong ethical values, men of "deeds" (3.2); the "wild men" (4.1) seem to be men of art, bards who "sang the sun," aesthetic men I would say, alluding to Kierkegaard; and the "grave men" (5.1) can be identified with old and blind men, like Thomas's father himself. All of them have in common the heroic attitude of resisting the tyranny of their destiny, the merciless coming of death, in spite of the failure of their acts and words, defending their individuality and dignity.

The four categories of men seem to convey the idea that life is always incomplete and therefore death has to be always resisted. If life is incomplete, if there is no possibility of fully enjoying existence, then death must be expected with rage, resistance, and fight. That is the human plight. Death is unavoidable, but the individual has to fight against it personally in his own life. Death has to be faced not as a gentle person, without fight. The poem finishes with a direct statement addressed to the father of the poet clearly urging him to resist death. According to Gingerich the poet seems to perceive in his father an unacceptable meekness, in contrast with the attitude of the other four men, something that can menace the meaning of life (179). Indeed, some reaction is much better than no reaction, than submission, than the humble acceptance of the cutting of life. Therefore the poet "prays" and makes that paradoxical wish "curse, bless" in the last stanza. According to Gingerich, for the poet, who is the real protagonist of the poem, "life is something to affirm to death" (178-9). Therefore he asks his father to resist and react against death, affirming life even in that extreme moment. Anyway, for the poet, his father's cursing would be like a blessing because it would reveal his resistance, his fight. Interestingly, the poet invokes "Curse-bless," the curse coming first, maybe suggesting the superiority of the attitude of cursing as a positive signal of resistance. Gingerich's affirmation that the four men resist death seems to be fragile, since the syntax of the poem is very ambiguous, making it difficult to know precisely when the poet is using the imperative verb form or the indicative verb form. The first and the last stanzas urging "Do not go gentle" are clearly imperative, the second stanza is clearly indicative, but the third, fourth and fifth stanzas are ambiguous. The contrast between the poet's father and the other men may not be so clear and definite. The ambiguity of the syntax seems to suggest and reflect the complexity of the situation and the ambiguity of the individual as a mixture of rage and gentleness, blessing and curse, brightness and darkness, life and death.

Another aspect present in the poem is a sense of solidarity conveyed through the emotional involvement of the poet with this dying man. One can notice the high level of sympathy, of intimacy implied in the expression

"my father," the intensity of the verb "pray," the emotional tension involved in the request "Curse, bless, *me*" and the urgency of "now" (6.1-4). The poet is linked with and concerned about the destiny of another person, another individuality. He is not limited within the interests of his own life and death, but he transcends it and reaches the experience, the suffering of the other. The closed circle of egotism is broken and the self can feel the tragedy of the death of another self.

Differently from the preceding poems, there is a rather negative attitude towards death in this one. Dylan Thomas does not seem to accept death naturally or even with resignation, on the contrary, we have fight, regret, cry and tears. But, in a way, there is the optimistic impression that a man can, at least, struggle against death and die with dignity and glory, and pride. Paul J. Ferlazzo establishes a parallel between Thomas's attitude towards death and Withman's and concludes that there is no peace for Thomas, no rest, no acceptance, no compromise with death and time, only struggle and unrest (137). Always in favor of Withman, Ferlazzo concludes that "Dylan Thomas saw time as a negative, destructive force. So, he lived against time, living twice as hard, taking life and pleasure to an excess against that time when it would all be taken away" (139). According to Ferlazzo's interpretation, Thomas saw life from the perspective of death. Linking this pessimism manifest in Thomas's poetry with the poet's life, Ferlazzo comments that this attitude became self-destructive in the sense that because of his fear of death and his intense desire of life, Dylan Thomas committed all the possible excesses, living beyond the limits of common sense, and this attitude became very dangerous against life itself (139). In the case of this poem, Ferlazzo's conclusion seems acceptable, but it is important to separate the poem from the personal existence of the author. What is important here is the message, the attitude, the emotion, the idea present in the poem as an autonomous reality. What Ferlazzo seems to emphasize is that, for Thomas, time was not a natural, organic phenomenon, but a mechanical, cruel, inflexible force against the individual (139-40). Therefore life was led always under pressure and menace, peace was never reached. According to Ferlazzo's point of view, Dylan

Thomas did not express an affirmative attitude towards life in terms of faith and peace about the problem of time and death (140-1). Summarizing, this poem shows the importance of the individual and his resistance to death, the urgency of resisting the destructive power of death, and paradoxically how this destructive power motivates the reaction of the individual in terms of dying consciously and with pride. Death affects all humankind, but the individuals are asked to react against death and possibly die with pride and dignity. In that sense, the moment of death brings revelation ("light") to one's entire life, in spite of death being a cruel and constant menace against life.

## [2.6] "Elegy"

The last poem of this section "Elegy" was written by Dylan Thomas just a few months after his father's death and published only in 1956 when it was included by Vernon Watkins as an appendix to the *Collected Poems*. The poem seems to have some points of contact with "Do not go gentle into that good night" and presents some changes in terms of attitude towards death. The poem "Elegy" is also directly linked with a real person's existence, a beloved one, an "other" with whom Thomas is related in terms of affection and love. The context is the death of Thomas's father, after a long process of sickness involving cancer in the mouth and blindness. The poem describes Thomas's father approaching death without any consolation or encouragement of faith in God or in the eternal life, without any religious hope (Tremlett 150), but solitary and bitter in his "pride." This is in fact an unfinished poem and it starts with a lament on the kind of death this man had suffered:

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

On that darkest day. Oh, forever may  
 He live lightly, at last, on the last, crossed  
 Hill, and there grow young, under the grass, in love,

Among the long flocks, and never lie lost  
 Or still all the days of his death, though above  
 All he longed all dark for his mother's breast

Which was rest and dust, and in the kind ground  
 The darkest justice of death, blind and unblessed,  
 Let him find no rest but be fathered and found,

I prayed in the crouching room, by his blind bed,  
 In the muted house, one minute before  
 Noon, and night, and light. The rivers of the dead

Moved in his poor hand I held, and I saw  
 Through his faded eyes to the roots of the sea.  
 Go calm to your crucified hill, I told

The air that drew away from him.

Darkness surrounds and pierces this tragic death. The old man dies "proud" (1.1), "cold" (1.3), and paradoxically "kind" (1.3). He is a "brave" man, dying without any sign of cowardice or submission. However, death with its violent darkness suppresses any resistance. In spite of his resistance, death destroys the individual's life. It seems that the darkness of death conjoins with the darkness of the eyes to operate the breaking of this old body. And the first stanza of the poem seems to fit very well with the poem "Do not go gentle into that good night"; for the old father did resist and died unbroken in spirit, maintaining his dignity, preserving the pride of being an individual in total consciousness.

The second stanza of the poem contains a prayer the poet makes. This prayer expresses a desire that the poet's father may live after death, but this does not imply an orthodox Christian faith in some eternal life or heaven. The persona expresses in his prayer a hope in the overcoming of death but in terms of integration of the individual in the continuous movement of nature. As John Ackerman points out, life and love will be renewed and continue in nature (161). If there is a God, this God is confounded with nature as a pantheistic God; if there is an after-life, it will be through integration with the forces and processes of nature. For Dylan Thomas death is a return to nature. The persona prays for the eternal life of his father "on the last, crossed / Hill" (2.2-3) where he can "grow young, under the grass" (2.3), "[a]mong the flocks" (3.1). Stanza 3 states

that death is not a state of negation of life, of "rest and dust" (4.1), of cessation of movement, but on the contrary the poet prays for an unrestful after-life for his father. He wishes that his father may never lie "still all the days of his death" (3.2), an inversion of the common expression "all the days of his life." So life and death seem to be interchangeable, death seems to maintain some characteristics belonging almost exclusively to life. The poet prays: "Let him find no rest" (4.3), which seems to be the contrary of what is expected from death. This implies a certain hope, or at least a strong wish, in the survival of the individual after death. And this prayer is made just before the final moment of death, at the crucial instant of transition, of agony and loneliness, when the passage of time is described through the sequence "one minute before / Noon, and night, and light" (5.2-3).

Death is also presented in the third stanza as an encounter with the mother earth. A connection is made between the "mother's breast" (3.3) and the process of dying as lying in the "dust, and in the kind ground" (4.1). Birth and death are linked by the same image of the mother. This element emphasizes also the belief in the integration of the individual and nature as a way of overcoming the destructive power of death. The individual survives in nature, through nature. Although the poet's father had wished and understood death as a cold, cruel, blind judge, and as a kind of "darkest justice" (4.2), the poet prays not for rest, but wishes that his father could be "fathered and found" (4.3) in the "kind ground" (4.1).

The last stanza of the poem contains a farewell of the orphaned son, at the very moment of the father's death. This part of the poem seems to be in contrast to the poem "Do not go gentle into that good night." It expresses a kind of acceptance of the inevitable, unalterable reality of death, where there is no more urge for resistance but a calm departure. In the "Notes" to the *Collected Poems*, Walford Davies and Ralph Maud make a commentary that this "final 'Elegy' is proposing that a calmness is possible in the face of death" (264). There is nothing more to be done in order to stop the process. The poet addresses now the leaving spirit of the father, in a touch of tenderness and melancholy. The

image of the "rivers of the dead" (5.3) stands for the veins of the father's hands (6.1). The eyes which were once blind, now are transparent and show the "roots of the sea" (6.2). The liberating and comprehensive declaration "Go calm" (6.3) contrasts to and echoes the imperative "Do not go gentle." The "crucified hill" (6.3), an allusion to Christ's suffering on the cross, stands for the vision of the father "there on the sad height" of the previously analysed poem. The description of the spirit of life as blow of air represents another biblical allusion to the belief that the soul is in the breath and vice-versa. So at the end of this poem there is a sense of calmness, of repose, and precisely in this poem which is the last one by Dylan Thomas. Unfortunately the poem was not finished, but we have a pretty good idea of what the poet was to say through these remanent parts.

### [3] Poems dealing with the death of the human race

Besides writing about the death of the other and about the death of the self, Dylan Thomas also wrote poems about the death of the human race, the inevitability of the death of all humanity. Some of these poems show a more open and mature concern with the future of the planet, with the drama of war, with the menace of a worldwide annihilation in the atomic age. They indicate a change in Thomas's poetry towards a more intense awareness of "a more general mortality," something different from the concept found in the personal elegy (Davies 62). In these poems, Thomas is not worried about the death of a relative, or with his personal doom, but with the death of the collectivity, the death of the human kind. These poems were written and published in the last part of Dylan Thomas's life, showing a certain evolution in his poetry toward a wider view of life and to a more mature sense of solidarity with the human race. In this classification are included poems such as "Deaths and Entrances," "Vision and Prayer," "In Country Sleep," "Over Sir John's hill," "In Country Heaven," and his "Prologue" to the *Collected Poems*.

## [3.1] "Deaths and Entrances"

One of these poems is entitled "Deaths and Entrances" and became the title of his fourth book of poems, published in 1946. The poem relates to the bombing of London in the Second World War, which Thomas witnessed and suffered personally. The poem is structured in three stanzas of twelve lines. According to Fraser, confirming what was said before, the poem shows a development in Thomas's poetry in terms of his preoccupation with the situation of the human race, humankind (*Vision and Rhetoric* 233-4). Aneurin Talfan Davies perceives a development in the book *Deaths and Entrances* as a whole towards a more simplified style and a clearer and lucid text (55-6). The poem shows the action of death in the context of a war, the experience of death as a collective tragedy, involving the whole society, the city. Death is presented in the context of a military invasion, an air attack. The title of the poem seems to allude, according to Walford Davies and Ralph Maud, to John Donne's last sermon *Death's Duell*, which contains the sentence "Deliverance from death, the death of the womb, is an entrance, a delivery over to another death" (238), a sentence expressing pity for mankind "because of humanity's inevitable passing and corruption" (Treece 91). The poet says:

On almost the incendiary eve  
 Of several near deaths.  
 When one at the great least of your best loved  
 And always known must leave  
 Lions and fires of his flying breath,  
 Of your immortal friends  
 Who'd raise the organs of the counted dust  
 To shoot and sing your praise,  
 One who called deepest down shall hold his peace  
 That cannot sink or cease  
 Endlessly to his wound  
 In many married London's estranging grief.

On almost the incendiary eve  
     When at your lips and keys,  
 Locking, unlocking, the murdered strangers weave,  
     One who is most unknown,  
 Your polestar neighbour, sun of another street,  
     Will dive up to his tears.  
 He'll bathe his raining blood in the male sea  
     Who strode for your own dead  
 And wind his globe out of your water thread  
     And load the throats of shells  
     With every cry since light  
 Flashed first across his thunderclapping eyes.

On almost the incendiary eve  
     Of deaths and entrances,  
 When near and strange wounded on London's waves  
     Have sought your single grave,  
 One enemy, of many, who knows well  
     Your heart is luminous  
 In the watched dark, quivering through locks and caves,  
     Will pull the thunderbolts  
 To shut the sun, plunge, mount your darkened keys  
     And sear just riders back,  
     Until that one loved least  
 Looms the last Samson of your zodiac.

When the war started, Dylan Thomas wrote to Vernon Watkins sharing his fear of invasion, saying that what "frightened him, he said, was the thought of German troops marching silently up the street. Invasion seemed imminent that September, and Thomas had nightmares about it" (Ferris 182). In that same letter Thomas commented on a very peculiar, impressive case: "I went to see a smashed aerodrome. Only one person had been killed. He was playing the piano in an entirely empty, entirely dark canteen" (*Letters* 463, qtd. by Davies and Maud 238-9). The poem refers to those victimized in the streets of London, some of them were Thomas's friends and admirers. They were killed in an air bombardment. Thomas is sympathetic with them, even with the strangers, with those he does not know personally but who were united in the tragedy of a sudden communal death. To a certain extent, the poem anticipates Thomas's preoccupation with the menace war represented not only for London but for the rest of the world, for those living near and far.

Each stanza starts with the enigmatic adverbial phrase "On almost the incendiary eve" (1.1; 2.1; 3.1), which indicates a tension caused by a sense that something will happen. The expectancy of a terrible catastrophe, the menace of bombardment, of invasion on the "incendiary eve" marks the poem. The incendiary bombs menace the city with "several near deaths," with collective deaths, with massive communal deaths. It affects the life of the "best loved" and determines the death of those individuals with whom the poet relates in terms of love (1.3-5). These loved ones, these friends, these admirers who "sing your praise" will leave "lions and fires" of their "flying breath," that is, they will die. These friends are called "immortal" in line 6, but they raise the "counted dust" of line 7, a reference to mortality, according to the Christian Tradition which establishes that man is dust and will return to dust (Genesis 3:19). The first stanza is centered on this dramatic situation of friends being victimized and menaced by the bombardment over London. These friends shall be quiet in their suffering, before this "wound" in the streets of London, streets marked by the union of marriages and separation of "estrangling" conflicts. Death is something which happens to individuals in the context of a world in war, in a city menaced by bombardment. The poem emphasizes this time of "eve" before the day of destruction.

The second stanza describes the attack of the enemy, his coming, the destruction and death he causes at the door of the addressee of the poem, who is an inhabitant of London, the blow up at the door and at the mouth, "locking, unlocking" (2.3), and the victims being weaved on the ground. The enemy is characteristically "most unknown" (2.4), in contrast with the "best loved / And always known" friends (1.3,4). He is also called the "polestar neighbour" (2.5), the star of another constellation, of "another street" (2.5), and at the same time he is described as someone coming from above. In spite of being a neighbor, the enemy is one who comes to bring violence, to "dive up to his tears" (2.6), to "bathe" his blood in the sea (2.7), and make the personified sea stride to cause the addressee's own death (2.8), moving round and round his "globe" (2.9), his totality, his integrity, out of the course of the water. The enemy possesses a great

destructive power capable of displacing the sea and re-designing the rivers, and the rivers of the individual's lives. The sea is also able to put all the cries of pain and grief and suffering inside the "throats of shells" (2.10) at the precise moment of the "thunderclapping" flashing of the light across the eyes (2.11-2).

The last stanza presents the menace caused by the coming of the enemy, his constant vigilance against the individual's life. The generality of the war, the eclectic force of the bomb can unite in the same grave "near and strange" wounded inhabitants of London (3.1-4), united in the addressee's grave. The poet links the victims of the war with the addressee's destiny. The known and the unknown are linked with the addressee's life. The enemy can find out the individual, can perceive the luminosity of his heart in the "watched dark" (3.6-7). The enemy receives almost a divine quality of omniscience, since, always crouched in the ground, "quivering through locks and caves" (3.7), he knows "well" the luminosity of the individual's heart in the middle of darkness. The enemy is also divinized when he is described pulling the "thunderbolts" to stop the sun, to plunge, and dominate like a horseman the keys of the addressee, searing them back, causing pain and bringing violence (3.8-12). The enemy represents a nightmarish menace against life, against the individuality, against peace in London. He can cause more than one death, several deaths, he can kill the known and the unknown neighbor, he can menace the human kind. And the last verses say that this menace will remain until that "one loved least / Looms the last Samson" of the zodiac of the addressee (3.12). According to the poem, the enemy is coming to dominate the sky, to dominate the city, and to terrify the individual, bringing destruction to the cosmos represented by the city of London.

### [3.2] "Vision and Prayer"

The next poem to be analyzed is Thomas's "Vision and Prayer," a very complex poem in which the Author deals with the problem of the salvation and redemption of the earth, through the birth-death of a child. The poem was dedicated to Thomas's son Llewelyn who was born on 30 of January of 1939, but

it was finished only in 1944 and published in 1946 in *Deaths and Entrances*. The poem is divided into two major parts: the vision and the prayer, and has a very peculiar modern design, the first part in diamond shapes and the second part in the shape of an hour-glass, representing perhaps the bricks on a wall, or the presence of time. As Daniel Jones has first observed, the poem follows the syllabic counting according to which the "Vision stanza goes from 1 to 9 syllables and back to 1 (the reverse of this in the Prayer stanza), each line rhythmically unique" (Maud *Entrances* 160). In the first part the poet has a "vision" of the child's birth and in the second part the poet makes his "prayer." Death and life, destruction and salvation are portrayed in this long poem. The birth of a child, a chosen child, a supernatural, mythical child, at least in the way the poet takes this birth, affects the individual's existence. In spite of being centred on the relation of the individual with the child, the poem deals with the whole humankind because of its mythological significance. The poem shows Thomas's solidarity with the whole humanity, the living and the dead, and suggests that the birth of the child is given to "All men" (II.2.10). The poet begins:

## I

Who  
 Are you  
 Who is born  
 In the next room  
 So loud to my own  
 That I can hear the womb  
 Opening and the dark run  
 Over the ghost and the dropped son  
 Behind the wall thin as a wren's bone?  
 In the birth bloody room unknown  
 To the burn and turn of time  
 And the heart print of man  
 Bows no baptism  
 But dark alone  
 Blessing on  
 The wild  
 Child.

I  
Must lie  
Still as stone  
By the wren bone  
Wall hearing the moan  
Of the mother hidden  
And the shadowed head of pain  
Casting tomorrow like a thorn  
And the midwives of miracle sing  
Until the turbulent new born  
Burns me his name and his flame  
And the winged wall is torn  
By his torrid crown  
And the dark thrown  
From his loin  
To bright  
Light.

When  
The wren  
Bone writhes down  
And the first dawn  
Furied by his stream  
Swarms on the kingdom come  
Of the dazzler of heaven  
And the splashed mothering maiden  
Who bore him with a bonfire in  
His mouth and rocked him like a storm  
I shall run lost in sudden  
Terror and shining from  
The once hooded room  
Crying in vain  
In the caldron  
Of his  
Kiss

In  
the spin  
Of the sun  
In the spuming  
Cyclone of his wing  
For I was lost who am  
Crying at the man drenched throne  
In the first fury of his stream  
And the lightnings of adoration  
Back to black silence melt and mourn  
For I was lost who have come  
To dumbfounding haven  
And the finding one  
And the high noon  
Of his wound  
Blinds my  
Cry.

There  
Crouched bare  
In the shrine  
Of his blazing  
Breast I shall waken  
To the judge blown bedlam  
Of the uncaged sea bottom  
The cloud climb of the exhaling tomb  
And the bidden dust upsailing  
With his flame in every grain.  
O spiral of ascension  
From the vultured urn  
Of the morning  
Of man when  
The land  
And

The  
 Born sea  
 Praised the sun  
 The finding one  
 And upright Adam  
 Sang upon origin!  
 O the wings of the children!  
 The woundward flight of the ancient  
 Young from the canyons of oblivion!  
 The sky stride of the always slain  
 In battle! the happening  
 Of saints to their vision!  
 The world winding home!  
 And the whole pain  
 Flows open  
 And I  
 Die.

## II

In the name of the lost who glory in  
 The swinish plains of carrion  
 Under the burial song  
 Of the birds of burden  
 Heavy with the drowned  
 And the green dust  
 And bearing  
 The ghost  
 From  
 The ground  
 Like pollen  
 On the black plume  
 And the beak of slime  
 I pray though I belong  
 Not wholly to that lamenting  
 Brethren for joy has moved within  
 The inmost marrow of my heart bone

That he who learns now the sun and moon  
 Of his mother's milk may return  
 Before the lips blaze and bloom  
 To the birth bloody room  
 Behind the wall's wren  
 Bone and be dumb  
 And the womb  
 That bore  
 For  
 All men  
 The adored  
 Infant light or  
 The dazzling prison  
 Yawn to his upcoming.  
 In the name of the wanton  
 Lost on the unchristened mountain  
 In the centre of dark I pray him

That he let the dead lie though they moan  
 For his briared hands to hoist them  
 To the shrine of his world's wound  
 And the blood drop's garden  
 Endure the stone  
 Blind host to sleep  
 In the dark  
 And deep  
 Rock  
 Awake  
 No heart bone  
 But let it break  
 On the mountain crown  
 Unbidden by the sun  
 And the beating dust be blown  
 Down to the river rooting plain  
 Under the night forever falling.

Forever falling night is a known  
 Star and country to the legion  
 Of sleepers whose tongue I toll  
 To mourn his deluging  
 Light through sea and soil  
 And we have come  
 To know all  
 Places  
 Ways  
 Mazes  
 Passages  
 Quarters and graves  
 Of the endless fall.  
 Now the common lazarus  
 Of the charting sleepers prays  
 Never to awake and arise  
 For the country of death is the heart's size

And the star of the lost the shape of the eyes.  
 In the name of the fatherless  
 In the name of the unborn  
 And the undesirers  
 Of midwiving morning's  
 Hands or instruments  
 O in the name  
 Of no one  
 Now or  
 No  
 One to  
 Be I pray  
 May the crimson  
 Sun spin a grave grey  
 And the colour of clay  
 Stream upon his martyrdom  
 In the interpreted evening  
 And the known dark of the earth amen.

I turn the corner of prayer and burn  
 In a blessing of the sudden  
 Sun. In the name of the damned  
 I would turn back and run  
 To the hidden land  
 But the loud sun  
 Christens down  
 The sky.  
 I  
 Am found.  
 O let him  
 Scald me and drown  
 Me in his world's wound.  
 His lightning answers my  
 Cry. My voice burns in his hand.  
 Now I am lost in the blinding  
 One. The sun roars at the prayer's end.

In the first part of the poem, the Vision, the persona of the poet addresses the new-born child in the "next room" (I.1.4), in a mixture of strangeness and emotional interest, asking: "Who are you" (I.1.1-9). The wall which separates poet and child is "thin as a wren's bonne" (I.1.9), a short winged bird. The birth is loud and the poet can "hear the womb / Opening" (I.1.6-7), the spirit and the child being run over by darkness. In the same first stanza the poet states that this birth goes beyond the limits of time and goes beyond the "heart print of man," beyond the influence of what is human, cultural, transcending it, therefore there is no "baptism" and only the dark blesses the child (I.1.10-17). The child is "wild" (I.1.16) and "turbulent" (I.2.10). This birth is mysteriously involved in darkness and silence. In the second stanza, the persona lies silent by the wall, hearing the moan of the mother and the child, and songs of the "midwives of miracle" (I.2.9), waiting for the child's manifestation, but then the child "burns" the poet with his name and flame (I.2.11) and demolishes the wall, comes and brings "bright light" (I.2.16-7). The mystic vision of the persona is centred on the birth and manifestation of this mysterious child, who is described as a king (I.2.13), as someone who can rule and control the future, and one who can have so strong an influence on the poet. But at the same time the child has a "thorn" (I.2.8), alluding to Jesus Christ and his crown of thorns, a symbol of his suffering as the Messiah. Since the first stanzas it is possible to distinguish an

opposition between the poet as an individual and this child as the Other, and it is also possible to perceive an opposition between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. But the wall will be destroyed and the encounter of the poet with the child seems to be inevitable. Stanzas 3 and 4 are linked by the same long complex sentence in which the poet describes his paradoxical reactions when the wall is overthrown and the sun appears, "the kingdom come / Of the dazzler of heaven" (I.3.6-7).

The poet is strongly affected by the child's birth and even foretells that he "shall run lost in sudden / Terror" after the brilliant, tremendous, fantastic manifestation of the child (I.3.11-2). There is a tension between the poet and the child, a threatening atmosphere; the child seems to have supernatural powers and to be more than a simple child. The poet runs away from the child's kiss, "Crying in vain" (I.4.13) in the turbulent spinning movement of the sun, in the cyclone of the child's "wing" (I.4.5). The poet runs "lost" (I.3.11; I.4.6, 11), because of the violent manifestation of the child, his brightness, his burning kiss, his windy wings, "In the first fury of his stream" (I.4.8), the "lightnings of adoration" melt and mourn (I.4.9-10). The persona becomes lost when he comes to the "dumbfounding" and to the "finding" heaven (I.4.12-3). He is blinded by the brightness of the child's wound (I.4.14-7), a clear reference to Christ's wounds linked with his Transfiguration in a high mount. In the poet's vision, the child has wings and brightness like the visions of the prophets. The coming of the child is violent, it affects the individual with brightness, glory, and turbulence, it brings terror. In the fifth and sixth stanzas the poet wakes up "Crouched bare / In the shrine" of the child's "blazing / Breast" (I.5.1-5). The persona becomes conscious of the uproar from the bottom of the sea, a reference to the resurrection of those who were buried and imprisoned in the bottom of the sea (Revelation 20:13). The persona also becomes conscious of the "cloud" which arises from the tombs full of gases, and of the "dust upsailing" in every grain (I.5.5-10), the "spiral of ascension / From the vultured urn" (I.5.11-2), all images of the resurrection of the dead. He also remembers the beginning of human history, when in Paradise land

and sea where in harmony and praised the "sun" (I.5.16-6.3), and "Adam," representing the human race, in a state of rightness, "Sang upon origin" (I.6.5-6).

So the child's birth gives the poet consciousness of the forces of life operating with and maybe overcoming the forces of death, and then the poet becomes conscious of how he is linked with the destiny of the natural world, sea and land and sun, with the destiny of the human race. The birth of the child is presented as a flight from the "canyons of oblivion" (I.6.9), the child has wings (I.6.7). Birth is seen as a flight from oblivion to the wounds of death, the "sky stride" of those who will be slain in battle (I.6.10-1). The persona has this vision of birth as the first step in the direction of death, a vision of "saints to their visions" (I.6.12), maybe the vision of martyrdom, life being understood as a martyrdom, a sacrificial sainted way of dying. The scope of this poem transcends the life of an individual and touches all the human race, since his home is seen as "world winding" (I.6.13)", as having a universal movement and a cosmic significance. The poet experiences life, since the birth of the child, as an intense pain flowing open, as a process of dying (I.6.14-7). Life and death are then seen as very close moments of the same process. There is a flight towards death in the poem, as the child is born the poet dies.

In the second part the persona starts his prayer, in fact an anti-prayer, for the poet prays not in the name of the saints, or in the name of the Saviour, or "in the name of the Lord" as the Protestant habit, he makes his anti-prayer in the name of the "lost" (II.1.1). The "lost" ones are those imprisoned, controlled, victimized by the reality of death, who "glory" in the "plains of carrion" under the "burial song" of birds of burden, carrying the "drowned" and "dust" and "ghost" like a "pollen" in the black plume and beak (II.1.1-13). So the persona prays in the name of the dead, of those who have lost their lives. But his prayer is not precisely a lament, because the persona recognizes joy as the basic element of his own constitution, "marrow" and "heart bone" (II.1.14-7). And he prays for the returning of the child to the room of birth, to the womb of the mother, where the child would be dumb, and the "lips" would not "blaze" and language would not "bloom" (II.2.1-15). The persona prays for the unbirth of the

child, for his going back in time, back to the origin, to the silences of non-life. This prayer asks for the negation of life before its complete manifestation, maybe because the persona is conscious of how death menaces life, how birth is destined to death. The persona continues and prays in the name of the "wanton / Lost on the unchristened mountain" (1.2.16), in darkness. He addresses the child, "I pray him" (1.3.1), as if the child possessed some divinity. He prays him to "let the dead lie though they moan" (1.3.2-4) for resurrection, for salvation, for redemption from the power of death; to let the "blood drop's garden" endure the dead "host" to sleep (II.3.5-10) in the rock dark and deep; to "Awake / No heart bone" but let it break on the top of the "mountain" (II.3.11-4.1); and to let the "beating dust be blown / Down to river rooting plain / Under the night forever falling" (II.3.17-4.1). This is a prayer for the maintenance of death, for the permanence of the dead in the state of death. This anti-prayer seems to imply that death is a sacred state, a positive value. Ralph Maud suggests that the persona is praying for the opposite of what he wants: in spite of praying for the permanence of death, the poet wishes the overcoming of death and the victorious affirmation of life (Maud *Entrances* 86). However, this is not so evident in the poem. Stanza ten explains the character of the "Forever falling night" (II.4.2) as a star and country known by the dead, by those who sleep, a place in the cosmos. The persona laments the "deluging" coming of the child's light over "sea and soil" (II.4.2-6). He declares to know personally the manifold experience of "fall" (II.4.4), "all / Places / Ways / Mazes / Passages / Quarters and graves" (II.4.8-14). The persona calls the dead "common lazarus" (II.4.15), an image drawn out from the Bible—the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and from the resurrection of Lazarus of Bethany—and describes them as praying to never "awake and arise" from the state and country of death. In the last line of the fourth stanza and in the first line of the fifth stanza of the second part is written the enigmatic sentence: "For the country of death is the heart's size / And the star of the lost the shape of the eyes" (II.5.1-2). Death is compared to the extension of the heart and the shape of the eyes, death is dislocated then to the inside of the body. Death is no more out there, it inhabits the inner parts of the self, the essence of the human being.

Death seems to mark the individual and seems to be deeply present there where the individual is conscious of himself. Death is still presented as the positive value of the poem, as a sacred state that deserves to be preserved untouched, unchanged by resurrection, or by the birth of the child.

The persona continues his prayer in the name of the "fatherless" (II.5.1), of the "unborn" (II.5.2), of the "undesirers / Of midwiving morning's / Hands or instruments" (II.5.3-5), of no one "Now" (II.5.7-8), of no one "to be" (II.5.9-11). In the name of those who are not alive, the persona prays for the child's death, for the spinning of a "grave gray" (II.5.14) which also echoes a gray grave, and for the streaming of "the colour of clay" (II.5.15) upon the child's "martyrdom" (II.5.16), in the evening and dark of the earth. The persona prays for grave and clay for the child. In the last stanza the persona is suddenly touched by the sun and burned by the child, now identified with the sun, he is affected by the power of this infant being born. "In the corner of prayer" (II.6.2), during the process of praying, the persona is suddenly blessed by the sun. In the name of the "damned" (II.6.4) the persona wants to "turn back and run" (II.6.5) to a hidden land, but it does not work, it is too late, the "sun / Christens down / The sky" (II.6.7-9). There is no way out, light illuminates every part of the world, and the persona surrenders to the influence and power of the child. He confesses: "I am found" (II.6.10-1) and prays for being scalded by the child and to drown in "his world's wound" (II.6.12-4). He also confesses that the child's "lightning" answer the poet's "Cry" (II.6.15-6). In this last stanza Thomas concentrates the meaning more and more. The persona's voice is then burned in the child's "hand" (II.6.15), he confesses to be "lost" in the child, "the blinding One" (II.6.16-7), and he finally declares that "The sun roars at the prayer's end" (II.6.17).

This child has salvific powers, his birth and death redeem life from the power of death, darkness, and night. This may not be a Christian poem, but Thomas uses many Christian symbols and the general structure of the poem reflects the Christian vision of the humanity. The persona is destroyed, saved, touched by the child. Treece suggests that this is a Christmas poem about the birth of a child—Christ, one may suppose—"and talks as though the poet was an

actual witness at the birth" (101). Aneirin Talfan Davies acknowledges that the poem was originally written for the occasion of Thomas's son Llewlyn birth (42), an idea corroborated by the "Notes" of Walford Davies and Ralph Maud to the *Collected Poems* (246). However, Aneirin Talfan Davies adds that although "the poem was, it seems natural to believe, occasioned by the birth of one of his own children, yet, even in the first verse, he moves swiftly to levels of implication and significance which transcend human birth" (43). The divine purpose of the birth becomes explicit, according to Talfan Davies, in the second part of the poem, when the poet uses the expression "midwives of miracle," suggesting a miraculous birth, a "birth with a pre-ordained, divine purpose" (43). Treece also informs that the verses in the shape of diamonds are "the fashion among the Metaphysical poets" while the hour-glasses shape suggests a "drinking-glass, perhaps the Communion-cup, or the Grail" (101). Talfan Davies suggests also as possible meanings of the shapes as tear drops, the chalice, the opening of the womb. He thinks it is difficult to believe that Thomas was conscious of the implications of the shapes but only of the syllabic pattern (41). However Talfan Davies still favours the view that the diamond shape represents birth and the womb, and sees in the shape of the second part a representation of the Cross, "which plays an important part in the poem" (41).

G. S. Fraser synthesizes the poem by saying that "'Vision and Prayer' offers us a naked confrontation of the desire for utter extinction with the hope of personal salvation" (*Vision and Rhetoric* 325). Fraser argues that the poem conflicts with the Protestant doctrine of the "reversibility of grace; the idea that all prayers and all good acts co-operate for the benefit of all men, and that God, in His inscrutable mercy, can give the innocent the privilege of suffering some of the tribulations which have been incurred by redeemable sinners" (*Dylan Thomas* 28). For D. F. McKay, however, this is a poem of reconciliation, not of human defiance or conquest over the divine powers according to the mythological tradition, but a poem of communion instead (58). According to Daiches's reading, the poem develops the theme of

identity of himself, every man, and Christ. He imagines  
himself addressing the unborn Christ, who, in his mother's

womb, seems separated from himself by a "wall thin as a wren's bone." The infant in the next room replies, explaining that it is his destiny to storm out across the partition that separates man from God, and the poet identifies himself with the glory and suffering of Christ's redemptive career. The first part of the poem blazes to a conclusion with a vision of the triumph and pain of Christ's death. The second movement begins in a slow, hushed, almost muttering cadence: the poet prays that Christ remain in the womb, for men are indifferent and wanton and not worth redemption. Let the splendour of Christ's martyrdom remain unrevealed; "May the crimson / Sun spin a grave gray / And the colour of clay / Stream upon his martyrdom." But as he ends this sad prayer the sun of God blazes forth and takes up the poet in its lightning. "The sun roars at the prayer's end" (22-3).

Daiches gives an interpretation very linked and committed with the Christian tradition. A. T. Davies believes that Thomas occasionally denies this tradition. In the second part of the poem, the poet tries to avoid the "terrifying implications of being 'found.' He prays... that his Infant may return to the womb that bore him... He prays this because of his sense of solidarity with the mass of humankind" (Davies 45-6), or as if it were a reaction just after the conversion, as the experience of the apostle Paul (Acts 9). The poet is afraid of the implications and complications of a "second birth," like Nicodemus in his meeting with Jesus (John 3), and wishes that "the womb swallow up the Infant" (Davies 46-7). He wants to avoid the consequences of Christ's death, and Resurrection, avoid Gethsemane—"the blood drop's garden"—and prefers to endure the sleep over the grave in the deep rock, to endure the dry and empty reality of death (46-7). As a man, the poet wants death to remain as "the end of all things. Men do not want Christ's martyrdom," says Davies (46-7). Yet the poem ends with a proclamation of the final triumph over death, after being faced by the individual (48-9). The poet's solidarity with the human race finishes when he has to face his own death as an individual, because "the challenge of death is a personal one.... This deep sense of solidarity with the fallen man makes him wish he could return with them to the dark... But this is not to be" for the poet is found and baptized by the Crucified One who answered his cry (48-9).



Sleep, good, for ever, slow and deep, spelled rare and wise,  
 My girl ranging in the night in the rose and shire  
 Of the hobnail tales: no gooseherd or swine will turn  
 Into a homestall king or hamlet of fire

And prince of ice

To court the honeyed heart from your side before sunrise  
 In a spinney of ringed boys and ganders, spike and burn,

Nor the innocent lie in the rooting dingle wooed  
 And staved, and riven among plumes my rider weep.  
 From the broomed witch's spume you are shielded by fern  
 And flower of country sleep and the greenwood keep.

Lie fast and soothed,

Safe be and smooth from the bellows of the rushy brood.  
 Never, my girl, until tolled to sleep by the stern

Bell believe or fear that the rustic shade or spell  
 Shall harrow and snow the blood while you ride wide and near,  
 For who unmanningly haunts the mountain ravined eaves  
 Or skulks in the dell moon but moonshine echoing clear

From the starred well?

A hill touches an angel. Out of a saint's cell  
 The nightbird lauds through nunneries and domes of leaves

Her robin breasted tree, three Marys in the rays.  
 Sanctum sanctorum the animal eye of the wood  
 In the rain telling its beads, and the gravest ghost  
 The owl at its knelling. Fox and holt kneel before blood.

Now the tales praise

The star rise at pasture and nightlong the fables graze  
 On the lord's table of the bowing grass. Fear most

For ever of all not the wolf in his baaing hood  
 Nor the tusked prince, in the ruttish farm, at the rind  
 And mire of love, but the Thief as meek as the dew.  
 The country is holy: O bide in that country kind,

Know the green good,

Under the prayer wheeling moon in the rosy wood  
 Be shielded by chant and flower and gay may you

Lie in grace. Sleep spelled at rest in the lowly house  
 In the squirrel nimble grove, under linen and thatch  
 And star: held and blessed, though you scour the high four  
 Winds, from the dousing shade and the roarer ant the latch,

Cool in your vows.

Yet out of the beaked, web dark and the pouncing boughs  
 Be you sure the Thief will seek a way sly and sure





alludes to the stories of witches, asseverating that the girl is protected by the elements and forces of nature. The "rushy brood" (I.3.6) can also be taken as a sexual image of threatening, of danger, but the girl can sleep "fast and soothed" (I.3.5). The girl has no reason to fear the folktale stories or the spring of sexuality, the coming of the prince, because she is protected by nature, by "fern / And flower of country sleep and the greenwood keep" (I.3.3-4). In the sixth stanza the persona advises his daughter not to fear tales of wolves or the seduction of the prince in the spring time of love and sexuality, but to "fear most" the future coming of the Thief and his presence. The "Thief" written in capital letter seems to be taken as a very important and powerful figure, perhaps a supernatural entity. The fourth and fifth stanzas continue the advice not to fear the spell and threatening of night, the haunts of the "mountain ravened eaves" (I.4.3), since the only thing active at night is the moonshine.

The sacralization of the natural world can also be perceived in this poem. Nature is transformed into a sanctuary, inhabited by angels (I.4.6), a "saint's cell" (I.4.6) with "nunneries and domes of leaves" (I.4.7), and the image of the "three Marys in the rays" (I.5.1) conveys a religious vision of nature. The natural world has its own "Sanctum sanctorum" (I.5.2)—as the Temple of Jerusalem had its "holy of holies," the most sacred place of the sanctuary, according to the Old Testament—where the owl recreates the sounds of bells, the fox and the forest "kneel before the blood" (I.5.4), before the sacrifice at the altar, the grass bows, the tales and the fables praise and "graze / On the lord's table" (I.5.5-7). Night after night the Thief makes short visits to the girl—"This night and each night since the falling star you were born, / Ever and ever he finds a way, as the snow falls, / As the rain falls, hail on the fleece, as the vale mist rides / Through the haygold stalls, as the dew falls" (I.8.6-9.2). Then the persona reaffirms the idea of the sacramental value of nature and declares that "the country is holy" (I.6.4), "good" (I.6.5), moves saintly like a wheel of prayer and a "rosy wood" (I.6.6) and grace (I.7.1). The persona invites his child to sleep under the protection of nature, "held and blessed" by the "lowly house" (I.7.1), and "grove" (I.7.2), and "linen and thatch" (I.7.2), and "star" (I.7.3) in spite of all the

ominous and fearful sounds of winds, the movements of shades and the beating of the "latch" (I.7.1-3).

But the sacred realm of nature cannot hinder the nocturnal visit of the Thief, who "will seek a way sly and sure" (I.7.7), he will be present although sly and "meek as dew" (I.8.1). And he will be there night after night until the eternal night of death comes and "the stern bell talks" and "tolls to sleep" the poet's last love and the "soul walks" across the limits of the "waters shorn," the Thief will find a way and be present (I.8.2-7). The image of the soul walking across the waters seems to allude to the biblical narrative of Jesus walking on across the trouble waters (Matthew 14:26). The Thief will be calm and silent as the night, meek as the dew, interacting with the forces of nature, the hail, the rain, the mist in the vale, the dew, the wind, the apple tree, the leaves, the falling stars, the seeds of the apple, the flowers, the falling of the world, the falling rain, "the hail on the fleece" (I.9.1)—a biblical reference to the life of the prophet Elisha and his trial by God, his asking of a divine signal. The natural world has a sacred character, has become a temple, but its movement is depicted as a continuous falling, the rain, the fruits, the leaves, the stars, the dew. Nature moves in a constant "Fall"—but this notion of Fall is different from the traditional Christian doctrine, it's a natural process, as if nature were eternally holy and falling at the same time, a falling course towards silence. The "Fall" in nature can mean the process of decadence, the movement towards death in contrast with the upward movement of life. Existence is a continuous, sacrificial, messianic falling, suffering. In nature everything is falling. However there is this absolute mark on time, the coming of the Thief.

T. H. Jones interprets the Thief as "obviously God, the bringer of death," according to I Thessalonians 5:2 and Revelation 3:3 that say the "day of the Lord" will arrive like a thief in the night (99). But to John Ackerman the Thief is death (148). "It is death," says Ackerman, "not folk-tales of wolves, sexuality or the agents of nature, who is the ever-present and meekly subtle thief to be feared" (148), but the Thief can only be identified with the "imperceived but unavoidable advent of death, the 'sly and sure' thief" (149). The coming of the

"Thief" is the most terrible fear to be presented and acknowledged in life, according to the poem. However it is described as being tender and delicate.

The second part of the poem reaffirms the holy character of nature, where everything reacts against fall and flies, the reindeers on the clouds, alluding to the legend of Santa Claus, the wings of the rocs, the flight of the rooks, the "holy books / Of the birds" (II.1.1). The exclamation marks indicate the very strong emotions involved in the recognition of the sacramental presence and sanctity of nature. The temple is ready for the sacrifice, and the "red fox" runs burning among the cocks (II.1.5-2.1). There is life, there is blood running in the veins of the birds, in the leaves of the trees, in the running of water in the image of the "stream" that flows of the sacerdotal black sounds and stories of the nightingale (II.2.3-5). The hill is adorned with the surplice of its priestly function, and the ghost of the dingle sings (II.26-3.1), the blood makes a sermon (II.3.2-3), and sings in the vein of the birds, and the mermen narrate the saga to seraphins, the rooks proclaim the "gospel" (II.3.6), and all nature, the whole natural world tells about the Thief and proclaims that He comes "red" and "sly" (II.3.7). The idea of nature proclaiming God's word and work can be found in the Psalm 19:1-4:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun.

So, according to the poem, nature seems to proclaim the coming of the Thief, and this entity is not totally bad in spite of being frightening and sometimes terribly threatening. The fourth stanza of the second part mixes the senses, sound and light, eyes and ears, and makes music bring illumination (II.4.1), the sound and color of the gull and the wave, and the silence of the foal's movement, and the whisper of the wind (II.4.1-4). Music is mysteriously produced by the elements, which makes of the natural world some indefinite divine manifestation—"Earth, air, water, fire, singing into the white act" (II.4.6). The fifth stanza of the second part returns to the image of the girl in her mystic sleep, surrounded by the holy

world of nature, in a "haloed house" (II.5.2), protected by the high hill, "held and blessed and true" (II.5.1-3), and nothing seems to disturb the girl's calm and sweet sleep and the calm rotating movement of her "holy heart" (II.6.1-2), nether the sky, nor the bells, nor the night, nor the Thief falling on the dead (II.5.4-6).

Then the Thief comes in the seventh stanza of the second part to the loved girl, he comes silently and slowly and slyly like the snow, like the dew, like the clouds. And the Thief comes to steal not her sex, not her body, not her beautiful walk, not her pretty eyes, but "her faith" and the "saga of prayer," the narrative of the sacred things (II.6.6-7.3). Faith is the force the girl possesses while she is sleeping "in country sleep," but God will come in the force of death. Fitzgibbon also interprets the "Thief" as the personification of death "as meek as dew," always waiting to attack (326). But the Thief not only steals her faith, but also comes to leave her alone, abandoned under a "lawless sun awaking" (II.7.6), "naked and forsaken" to grieve the absence of the Thief (II. 8.1). The Thief comes to make the girl conscious of her nakedness, like the Fall of Adam and Eve narrated in Genesis 3. She is brilliantly conscious of her individuality in an "unsacred" (II.7.5) world.

William York Tindall believes that the Thief represents death or time, or even Jesus Christ (Younis 123). Thomas himself once said that the Thief could be "Alcohol" today, or "fame or success" tomorrow since the Thief could be "anything that robs you of your faith, of your reason for being" (qtd. by Ferris 226-7). Eric J. Sundquist has suggested also that the Thief represents the "recognition that the sexual fall is common to all creation, the preliminary act of the test of faith. The 'Thief,' a kind of sexual incubus and reaper and raper of faith, will find a way with her just as he does with the whole of the earth" (72-3). The Thief is then interpreted as an agent of the fall (73), a mixture of sex, rape, and death (73-4). Raymond Aaron Younis comments on the description of the Thief in the poem as cunning and subtle, persistent, an entity "subject to some greater power of teleological principle," to some divine plan, and argues that the Thief didn't represent a sexual incubus, or a sexual principle or force, or death, or time, since "death and time cannot be accurately described as 'meek' in the poem,

as the Thief is 'meek'" (123). For Younis, Time and death are only natural forces, universal aspects of the natural world (123). The Thief cannot be identified with Jesus either, because Jesus cannot be described as "sly," the Thief represents the force that "seeks to rob the girl of her faith" (124). The losing of faith is compared with nakedness, since it represents the loss of every benediction and grace, which means the Thief is whatever brings despair (124), whatever can be linked with the Kierkegaardian notion of despair as the real problem of existence. "The idea that faith is being threatened runs through the poem," comments Paul Ferris (211-2). Thomas's manuscripts contain a text after the poem which seems to reinforce Ferris's and Younis's interpretations:

If you believe (and fear) that every night, night without end,  
the Thief comes to try to steal your faith that every night he  
comes to steal your faith that your faith is there—then you  
will wake with your faith steadfast and deathless.

If you are innocent of the Thief, you are in danger. If you are  
innocent of the loss of faith, you cannot be faithful. If you do not  
know the Thief as well as you know God, then you do not know  
God well. Christian looked through a hole in the floor of heaven  
and saw hell. You must look through faith, and see disbelief  
("Notes" *Collected Poems* 251-2).

In spite of the darkened figure of the Thief, the general sense of the poem seems to convey a "recognizable affirmation of faith in life," says Karl Shapiro (174). According to John Ackerman the poem transmits a sense of happiness, for it is a "prayer" for the happiness of the poet's young daughter, a prayer for finding in nature the "ultimate good and security" (Ackerman 147). For Ackerman, the poet finds in nature the solution to the menace of death, the poet confesses his "faith in nature" when he describes nature as being "holy", as the "green good" (1.6.4). Nature is seen as a sacred reality, totally filled with God's presence, accomplishing a religious and even salvific function, since in nature a hill can touch "an angel. Out of a saint's cell / The nightbird lauds through nunneries and domes of leaves" (1.4.6-7). This transformation of the world of nature into a sacred country makes the persona get into a religious relation with the natural world. Nature is no more, as in the Protestant tradition, a sign or a manifestation of the glory of the Creator, but a divinity itself, an immanent God

that occupies the place of a transcendent God, a concept called pantheism. "Thus," says Ackerman "it is the hill which is holy, and fables (legends) are inspired by the living, nourishing grass" (149). Buddhist religious prayer wheels are alluded to in the poem, as well as Christian metaphors like the "rosy wood" and "grace," referring to the protective and salvific character of nature (149). For Ackerman, contrasting to Ferris's and Younis's idea, the positive idea of the poem is that "in nature's cycle death brings re-immersion into its forms and forces and what is lost, what death in fact steals or removes, is only the belief/superstition that heaven or hell follows" (150). I cannot agree with Ackerman, because his interpretation seems to invert the message of the poem, he says that the poem ends optimistically just because there is no faith, or there is no more the illusion of faith, and death is seen as a natural process of plunging into nature. This idea does not seem to consider the emotional tension of the poem, how the loss of faith represents a tragedy for the persona. Indeed the idea of death as a natural unalterable process ruled by the laws of nature is there in the poem, but that does not mean that the Christian tradition and myth are discarded as "superstition." According to Ackerman's understanding, "this re-immersion into the physical universe that death occasions, following nature's pattern and order, becomes an affirmation and celebration of that universe and man's unity with it" (151). Ralph Maud also agrees that this poem is a celebration, a happy poem, since the Thief is not considered an enemy, which is "sly and sure," therefore granting that assurance is the main mood of the poem (*Entrances* 114). He says that "life is given security by being bounded by death" (Maud *Entrances* 114). The last stanza of the poem reiterates the poet's advice that the girl should be sure that the Thief will come in the "night without end" (II.8.3) to awake her from the sleep in the holy country of natural world to a completely different world, without mystery, without tales, without end. Death will come, and the consciousness of death transforms the magic world of the child, and the cosmic scope of the poem seems to suggest that it deals not only with the death of an individual but with death as an mysterious presence in the natural world, menacing the whole humanity. Death seems to be the Thief who comes to steal the new-born faith.

The waking is a continuous movement of the girl from the country sleep, "each first dawn" (II.8.5).

[3.4] "Over Sir John's hill"

The poem "Over Sir John's hill" is also part of the group of poems dealing with the problem of the annihilation of the world in the nuclear age. The poem alludes to the view Dylan Thomas saw from his "Boat House" in Laugharne, the vision of Sir John's hill in the limits of the bay framing the seascape, the estuary of the river Towy and Taf, the same scenery of the poems "In Country Sleep," "Prologue," "In the White Giant's Thigh," and "Poem on His Birthday." The poem presents a vision of the natural world in all its crudity and a clear vision of death in every movement of nature. The natural world on the seashore seems to resemble the human world in the atomic threatening age in which death is very near the individual and the human race. The poem was written in 1949 and published in 1950 in *Botteghe Oscure*, in 1951 in *Times Literary Supplement* and in 1952 in Thomas's *In Country Sleep*. The poem is developed in five stanzas and describes nature at war, and death as the price of life. The poet says:

Over Sir John's hill,  
 The hawk on fire hangs still;  
 In a hoisted cloud, at drop of dusk, he pulls to his claws  
 And gallows, up the rays of his eyes the small birds of the bay  
 And the shrill child's play  
 Wars  
 Of the sparrows and such who swansing, dusk, in wrangling hedges.  
 And blithely they squawk  
 To fiery tyburn over the wrestle of elms until  
 The flash the noosed hawk  
 Crashes, and slowly the fishing holy stalking heron  
 In the river Towy below bows his tilted headstone.

Flash, and the plumes crack,  
 And a black cap of jack—  
 Daws Sir John's just hill dons, and again the gulled birds hare  
 To the hawk on fire, the halter height, over Towy's fins,  
 In a whack of wind.  
 There  
 Where the elegiac fisherbird stabs and paddles  
 In the pebbly dab filled  
 Shallow and sedge, and 'dilly dilly,' calls the loft hawk,  
 'Come and be killed,'  
 I open the leaves of the water at a passage  
 Of psalms and shadows among the pincer sandcrabs prancing

And read, in a shell,  
 Death clear as a buoy's bell:  
 All praise of the hawk on fire in hawk-eyed dusk be sung,  
 When his viperish fuse hangs looped with flames under the brand  
 Wing, and blest shall  
 Young  
 Green chickens of the bay and bushes cluck, 'dilly dilly,  
 Come let us die.'  
 We grieve as the blithe birds, never again, leave shingle and elm,  
 The heron and I,  
 I young Aesop fabling to the near night by the dingle  
 Of eels, saint heron hymning in the shell-hung distant

Christal harbour vale  
 Where the sea cobbles sail,  
 And wharves of water where the walls dance and the white cranes stilt.  
 It is the heron and I, under judging Sir John's elmed  
 Hill, tell-tale the knelled  
 Guilt  
 Of the led-astray birds whom God, for their breast of whistles,  
 Have mercy on,  
 God in his whirlwind silence save, who marks the sparrows hail,  
 For their souls' song.  
 Now the heron grieves in the weeded verge. Through windows  
 Of dusk and water I see the tilting whispering

Heron, mirrored, go,  
 As the snapt feathers snow,  
 Fishing in the tear of the Towy. Only a hoot owl  
 Hollows, a grassblade blown in cupped hands, in the looted elms,  
 And no green cocks or hens  
 Shout  
 Now on Sir John's hill. The heron, ankling the scaly  
 Lowlands of the waves,  
 Makes all the music; and I who hear the tune of the slow,  
 Wear-willow river, grave,  
 Before the lunge of the night, the notes on this time-shaken  
 Stone for the sake of the souls of the slain birds sailing.

The first stanza presents the world of the poem, the landscape, the estuary of Laugharne, the sea, the river, and the lordly figure of the hill called Sir John, a low headland along the shore from Boat House where Dylan Thomas lived with his family. The hawk represents the figure of the predator, and is prepared to attack its victims, pulling its "claws" and "gallows" (1.3-4). The poet, however, uses only neutral adjectives for the "killer-hawk" as if he wanted death to appear natural and neutral (Maud *Entrances* 109). The small birds, the sparrows, and the hens are the victims of this violent attack. The persona and the heron are the witnesses of this violent, indifferent world, in which life and death are so near and inter-dependent. Nature is at war (1.6), a war for survival, the hedges are "wrangling" (1.7), the elms "wrestle" (1.9). Carrol F. Terrel comments the state of war in the natural world, saying that the

victim sparrows in their child's-play wars are oblivious to the real natural war threatening them from on high until in a "flash the noosed hawk crashes" and the "plumes" of a sparrow "crack." The other sparrows flee like a frightened hare from the "hawk on fire." Then while the elegiac heron stabs his victims, the small fish in the shallow and sedge, "dilli dilly, calls the loft hawk, come and be killed!" The words are in quotes because they are taken from an old folk song entitled "Mrs. Bond" (25).

The image of the "hawk on fire" (1.2) seems very similar to a warplane ready to attack. The hawk is presented also as an executioner of death penalty, he pulls his "gallows" (1.4) over the sparrows which give their last performance, "swansinging" (1.7) and squawking to the "fiery tyburn" (1.9), the hawk is "noosed" (1.10).

One may notice that the victims are unconscious of the possibility and of the reality of death, there is an illusion of happiness, and lightheartedness (1.8). The heron in spite of its "holiness" just watches the show indifferently and reflects the image of death inclining its "tilted headstone" (1.12). In the second stanza the scene develops and presents the reaction of the birds to the hawk's attack, in which the "plumes crack" (2.1), the "jack-daws" flying cover Sir John's hill with a black cap. The "gulled birds hare," but their flight leads them to the claws of the "hawk on fire" (2.4), like a "whack of wind" (2.5). Everything moves fast in nature, in the direction of death, to the general final destiny of every creature. Anne Williams comments on the movement of the birds towards death and says that "as the sparrows 'leave, never again' their trees to fly up to the 'halter height,' their behavior seems predestined, ritualistic" (12). On his turn the "fisherbird" attacks "shallow and sedge" (2.9), while the hawk continues its predatory course calling the victims with an incantatory, ironic rhyme "dilly dilly...come and be killed" (2.9-10). The hawk seems to be a creature of "explosive power, luring the sparrows with seemingly supernatural ease. He is God's executioner, himself unequivocally mortal" (Williams 12), an idea that can be related to Calvin's concept of God's sovereignty and control over nature.

The poem also develops the idea of "sacralization" of the natural world, the world of nature transformed into a manifestation of the divine essence. The persona "opens the leaves of the water at a passage / Of psalms and shadows among the pincer'd sandcrabs prancing / And read, in a shell, Death clear as a buoy's bell" (2.11-3.2). The persona reads the book of nature as if it were the revelation of God, the word of God, as if nature were a psalm singing the glory of the Lord. The persona reads the sacramental book of nature and finds its most impressive word: death. This part links the second with the third stanza, in which the "hawk on fire," already described as "lofty" (2.9) is again exalted and praised and sung in the manifestation of its "viperish" deathly mission (3.3-4), like a hangman with his rope hanging looped. And the "young green chickens" are also blessed in their naïve unconsciousness of the movements of death in the claws of the predator, symbolized by their rhymed response to the song of the hawk: "dilly

dilly, / Come let us die" (3.5-8). According to Ruth Rosenberg, the refrain "dilly, dilly, come and be killed" does not indicate that Dylan Thomas was playing with his own name, or that he was making a reference to his own death, a self-reference, but it is simply an allusion to the chorus of a nursery rhyme present in the book *The Annotated Mother Goose* page 306 (50).

Then the persona joins the heron and starts to grieve the sad destiny of the "blithe birds" (3.10). The poet presents himself as the "young Aesop fabling to the near night" (3.12), recreating the world, retelling the moral value of a world without moral concepts, without the notion of justice. Therefore the poet can see signs of "justice" in the majestic splendor of the hill (2.3), for Anne Williams a clear allusion to the "British judge pronouncing the fatal sentence," and a reminder that "the hawk also has a legal authority for the sparrows' death—that of natural law" (12). The hill is called just because it is presented as a judge, it puts on a black cap. Ralph Maud comments on the aspect of moral value and death, saying that in the poem

Death is not just (or unjust), Sir John's hill is not judging, the birds are not guilty, the heron is not holy, and God is not, in any meaningful sense, merciful... Perhaps we should bear in mind, to begin with, that the common expression "condemned to die" does not, when one thinks about it, really mean condemned, *punished* by death. But there is a rightness about "condemned"; it corresponds to the feeling of grievance against death... The poem may be expressing only the *fact* of death, and such words as "guilt" may be empty of intellectual content; but a form of meaning is communicated to the emotions, the reader's compassion is guided (*Entrances* 109-10).

However, in spite of not linking the reality of death with the moral imperfection of the human race, Thomas uses the Christian notion of guilt and death in order to emphasize the inevitability of death and the sense of condemnation the individual feels in relation to his own death. The young Aesop infuses the natural world with values, lessons of morality, sense of justice, of bad and good. It can be linked with Maud's observation that Thomas's main interest is not to overcome death through the use of rationality, because reason cannot handle the reality of death, but he intends to deal with the problem emotionally, through the expression and externalization of "sternness, rebellion, hatred, self-pity,

compassion" (*Entrances* 110), strong emotions that help to deal with the tragedy of death. "From among these emotions," continues Maud, "it is Thomas's inclination to choose compassion and to use the words, new or old, which will succeed in expressing it for him" ("Last" 78-9). Mortality is amoral, according to Thomas's vision of death as part of nature, however the poem refers to John's hill as "just" (2.3) and "judging" (4.4). Commenting on the reference to the fables of Aesop, Anne Williams classifies the poem as a pastoral elegy without any sign of supernatural elements offering consolation for loss, or transcending the destructive forces operating in nature. But it is important to observe that the mythical elements are present in the poem and related with the elements of nature, as if the poet intended to show the mystical character of nature, the supernaturality of the natural elements and movements. The subject of the elegy is "a post-Darwinian nature...containing both good and evil, beauty and fear," says Anne Williams (11-2). This elegiac poem seems to reach a point of relief, according to Anne Williams, and this point can be identified with the moment when the persona waits for "the lunge of night" alone with "weeded verge" and "wear-willow river" and finds comfort, or at least a stopping place, only in the "equivocal eternity of the poem itself" (13). However, this work of art does not seem to change the violent indifference of the natural world where there is no murderer or victim, where life and death are inter-dependent, where life comes from death. The reader is conscious, says Anne Williams, of the "incongruity of human moral categories applied to nature. By artfully and self-consciously imposing them, Thomas emphasizes the disparity between mind, creator of such categories, and nature, which defies them" (12). Commenting on this poem Ralph Maud says that

Although Sir John's hill puts on the black cap for our death sentences, there is no real judgment as there is no real crime, where a little sermonizing of the scene might be expected in the poem, one looks in vain. The hawk-executioner, especially, might have been given moral import; but the poet's intention seems to have been quite the opposite (Maud "Last" 76).

The heron is now transformed into a "saint" singing hymns in the distant "vale" (3.12-4.1). Nature becomes again a sacrament, and performs a

religious ritual in the seashaped temple. In the fourth stanza the persona and the heron, under the stern moral judgment of Sir John's hill, confess the guilt of the "led-astray" birds and invoke on them the mercy of God and pray for the salvation of their souls (4.8-10), a priestlike religious attitude towards nature and towards death in nature. According to Aneurin Talfan Davies's interpretation, the poet uses the confession of the guilt of the birds as an instrument for his religious confession (55). T. H. Jones also says that the poem gives the poet an opportunity to make an "intercessionary prayer in his dual role as visionary witness and trumped-tongued celebrator for this doomed and guilty order of the fallen world" (100). Ralph Maud reads these manifestations of moral implications and religious intercessions as ironical references to the amorality of death and to the secularization of Thomas's approach, since "there is no real judgment as there is no real crime", and the sparrows have no soul, as the human beings don't have an eternal soul either (*Entrances* 106-7).

In the poem God is represented by the image of a "whirlwind silence" (4.9), which sounds as an allusion to the prophet Elijah when he had contact with God in front of the cave of mount Horeb and saw the manifestation of God in the "still small voice" (I Kings 19:12). The God presented by the poem observes the sparrows, like Jesus said God the Father did with "the fowls of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them" (Matthew 6:26). The heron then starts to grieve the death of the other birds (4.11). In the last stanza the persona describes the "tilting whispering / heron" (4.12-5.1) returning to its fishing in the river Towy, and he can hear an owl cry melancholic "hollows" (5.4) as the night is coming, the elms are "looted", there is no signal of "green cocks or hens" (5.5). The heron goes back to its fishing and the poet returns to his poem; the poet is alone in his consciousness, and cannot assimilate the world of nature, cannot connect the vision of his mind with the reality of nature and matter (Williams 12-3). The heron is the only one to make music in all the landscape, but the poet can hear the tune of the slow river and "grave," suggesting the word engrave, the notes on

the stone carved by the time, interceding for the "souls of the slain birds sailing" (5.9-12).

"Over Sir John's hill" is a poem centered basically on the landscape, it is a portrait of a seashore environment with all the movements of life and death. The poem transmits the sense of paradox, of contradictory movements in life, being at the same time an affirmation and a negation of life, presenting a world in crisis. In fact, in the poem universal mortality is conveyed "in the actual scene from the poet's window overlooking the estuary of the Taf and Towy at Laugharne, South Wales" (Maud *Entrances* 103). The poem faces the problem of mortality straightforwardly and directly, which helps the poet to overcome the fear of death—"the victory comes in seeing it straight" (Davies 60). For Aneurin Talfan Davies also, this is not simply a poem about nature, but it is mainly a poem about death, about judgment day

with the sun over Sir John's Hill donning his "black cap" of jackdaws to sit in judgement on the "led-astray" birds. The whole nature is involved, and the poet, casting himself once again in the role of nature's priest, with Saint heron, reads the water's psalms, and chants his litany of penitence (54).

The attitude of the poet moves between terror and pity towards the "ineluctable scheme of Nature in a riverscape of hawks and herons" (Kleinman 7).

### [3.5] "In Country Heaven"

In the poem "In Country Heaven" Dylan Thomas deals with the problem of the destruction of the earth in the atomic age, the death of the planet. The poem also develops the idea of sacralization of the natural world and presents Thomas's concept of God. However, the great theme of the poem is the destructive power the human race has developed in the atomic bomb age. The poem, unfortunately unfinished, was written in 1951 and published posthumously based on manuscripts in progress just before Thomas's death and included in the later printings of the *Collected Poems 1934-1952*. The number of syllables was

originally planned in terms of 9,4,11,7,8 in the first stanza and 11,7,9,8,4 in the second stanza, and then repeated in the next stanzas. The poet says:

Always when He, in country heaven,  
 (Whom my heart hears),  
 Crosses the breast of the praising east and kneels,  
 Humble in all his planets,  
 And weeps on the abasing crest,

Then in the last ward and joy of beasts and birds  
 And the canonized valley  
 Where all sings, that was made and is dead,  
 And the angels whirr like pheasants  
 Through naves of leaves,

Light and His tears dewfall together  
 (O hand in hand)  
 Out of the pierced eyes and the cataract sky,  
 He cries his blood, and the suns  
 Dissolve and run down the ragged

Gutters of his face: Heaven is blind and black.

The poem presents the vision of a world menaced by destruction, which makes God go across the sky, kneel, and weep, because all that "was made is dead" (2.3), and from God's face glide down "light" and "tears" (3.1), and "blood" and "suns" (3.4-5). And darkness surrounds everything in the last line, which seems to be the last day of the anti-creation of the universe, thus opposing the biblical narrative of the creation where the first thing created was light. This is a world in crisis. In the poem God and the inhabitants of Country Heaven become aware of the atomic extinction of the earth. The poet transcends the preoccupation with his own death and concentrates on the terrible permanent menace of the death of the world through a nuclear war, of course including in this large menace the possibility of his own individual death. Dylan Thomas witnessed and was very conscious of the destructive power of the atomic bomb and made several references to it in his letters. In this poem, Thomas deals with the "basic problem facing mankind in the atomic age, the problem of total annihilation" (Maud *Entrances* 112). Thomas considered civilization a "murderer," in a letter written on Armistice Day, 1933:

We, with the cross of a castrated Saviour cut on our brows,

sink deeper and deeper with the days into the pit of the West...  
Your bones and mine shall manure an empty island set in a vaste  
sea. The stars shall shine over... the sarcophagus of a spoonfed  
nation; and the pitch in the slain souls of our children, will never  
be lit (*Selected Letters* 63).

In a note published in the Italian magazine *Botteghe Oscure* in November 1950, Dylan comments on his project of writing a collection of poems to be entitled "In Country Heaven," including other poems like "In the White Giant's Thigh" and "Over Sir John's Hill" ("Notes" to the *Collected Poems 1934-1953* 262). In the note, Dylan presents his original idea and provides some information on the poem "In Country Heaven":

The godhead, the author, the first cause, architect, lamp-lighter, the beginning word, the anthropomorphic bawler-out and black-baller, the quintessence, scapegoat, martyr, maker—He, on top of a hill in Heaven, weeps whenever, outside that state of being called His country, one of His worlds drops dead, vanishes screaming, shrivels, explodes, murders itself. And, when He weeps, Light and His tears glide down together, hand in hand. So, at the beginning of the poem-to-be, He weeps, and Country Heaven is suddenly dark. Bushes and owls blow out like candles. And the countrymen of heaven crouch all together under the hedges, and, among themselves, in the tear-salt darkness, surmise which world, which star, which of their late, turning homes in the skies has gone for ever. And this time, spreads the heavenly hedge-row rumour, it is the Earth. The Earth has killed itself. It is black, petrified, wizened, poisoned, burst; insanity has blown it rotten; and no creatures at all, joyful, despairing, cruel, kind, dumb, afire, loving, dull, shortly and brutishly hunt their days down like enemies on that corrupted face. And, one by one, these heavenly hedgerow men who once were of the Earth, tell one another, through the long night, Light and His tears falling, what they remember, what they sense in the submerged wilderness and on the exposed hairs-breadth of the mind, of that self-killed place. They remember places, fears, loves, exultation, misery, animal joy, ignorance and mysteries, all you and I know and do not know. The poem-to-be is made of these tellings.

And the poem becomes, at last, an affirmation of the beautiful and terrible worth of the Earth. It grows into a praise of what is and what could be on this lump in the skies. It is a poem about happiness (*Quite Early One Morning* 179-80 & "Notes" *Collected Poems 1934-1953* 262-3).

The original plan was changed. In Thomas's notebook of October 1951 the poem appears with only sixteen lines (Maud "Notes" *Collected Poems* 263). As Eric J.

Sundquist has observed, Thomas's poem is closer to the world of nuclear holocaust created by Beckett, than to the original idea of the country-heaven poems (72-3).

God is crying the death of a planet, the death of the planet earth, in the atomic age, by an atomic war. God is presented as the absolute "He" (1.1), with a capital H, who is heard by the individual, the persona of the poem (1.2). This God is the absolute, the supreme Other, who can make his voice be heard by the individual, the human being. This God embraces the horizon, embraces the earth (1.3). He visits his planets and shows humbleness (1.4), like Jesus Christ, according to Paul in Philippians 2, who "being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" (2:6-7), and according to John 1.14—"the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." According to the poem, God not only visits his planets, but he "weeps on the abasing crest" (1.5) like Christ in Getsemany. And God's crying contrasts with the last joy of the natural world, the world of "beasts and birds" (2.1), transformed into a holy world, a "canonized valley" (2.2), an allusion to the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23).

Thomas's constant references to the Bible suggest that his poetry is religious, at least with a religious tone. In spite of that death is not seen as a passage to the eternal life, or as the consequence of sin, but as a natural phenomenon that happens continually. In this poem, death seems to be seen as a tragic event that puts an end to the human race, a problem without solution, since God seems unable to save the world and only cries (3.4). Contrasting with the biblical concept of the Fall as a unique event for which God has provided salvation, the poem compares the movement of nature to a continuous Fall, a continuous process of changing and destruction of what has been created, a perpetual falling, a constant descent and annihilation, to a next recreation as a natural process, not as a supernatural intervention. J. Hillis Miller compares the Fall in nature, suggested by the poem, to the flow of a hemorrhage from a great wound (qtd. by Eric J. Sundquist 67-8). For Dylan Thomas life and death,

destruction and construction are part of the same movement, therefore death is always present in the living, in the order of nature, in the sky, in the flower (*Selected Letters* 122), and the only attitude that is left for the living is to accept the going into nature as a way of surviving. The lines 1-3 of the second stanza are interpreted by Eric J. Sundquist as an indication of Thomas's vision of the world as an interaction of the living and the dead, a system of forces as if it were a great organism growing and decaying, being born and dying (66). Dylan Thomas originally wanted this poem to be positive, expressing in tone and scope his most profound hope in the affirmation of life, an overcoming of the reality of death (Fitzgibbon 327). But the original plan didn't survive and the poem was never finished and the concept (like happiness) remained "wishful thinking" (Ferris 280). In fact, existence for Thomas represented this continuous rearrangement and decay, this dynamic, paradoxical process of living and dying, remembrance and desire, rise and fall (*Selected Letters* 83).

Another aspect of the poem is the sacralization of the natural world. The elements and forces of nature seem to move in joy, in holiness, and in praise of God, always singing, in life and in death, with the angels resembling "pheasants" (2.4), in a world that resembles a temple (2.5). This idea is not strange in the Bible. Nature becomes a sanctuary, a temple, and existence becomes a religious service, a state of permanent adoration—something very near the Protestant vision of nature and of the meaning of the human existence as "adoring God and enjoying Him forever" (Westminster Confession). But in contrast with all the happy movement of nature, God is crying light and tears, two forces that come out of His eyes in the sky (3.1-3). The poet then presents the image of God's crying as the melting of the sun, something that can be related with the passage of Matthew 24 where Jesus Christ talks about the end of the world and prophecies that the sun will be darkened, the moon shall not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven (Matthew 24:29). The poem ends with the very dark commentary that "Heaven is blind and black" (4.1), in direct contrast with the brilliant original color of nature, portrayed as a magic and

wonderful paradise, and in contrast also with the brilliant vision of heaven portrayed in the book of Revelation, according to which the prophet says:

And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there (Revelation 21:22-5).

Another aspect in which the poem contrasts with the Christian notion of the end of the world is that the Bible presents the end as the result of God's interference in the human history, while the poem presents the end as the result of human madness.

In parallel with the sacralization of nature, Thomas's poem shows the secularization of God. According to Fitzgibbon, it is very peculiar that Thomas took this cluster of poems as a set of writings "in praise of God's world by a man who doesn't believe in God" (Fitzgibbon 326). As the Christian thinker C. S. Lewis has described so well, the present age can be called "post-Christian" (in Maud "Last" 80). Maud continues:

... For Thomas's God, both in the prose account and in the poems, is not a religious entity at all in the normal sense of a presiding Being whose presence controls or at least justifies existence. Thomas's God does nothing to alleviate the absurdity of the position of rational man in an irrational universe; Thomas's God does nothing to explain death in terms of higher values. As the eternal sympathetic spectator, He simply weeps, offering none of the usual consolations. It is the Last Day of Non-Judgment

And all our deeds and words,  
Each truth, each lie,  
Die in unjudging love ("This side of the Truth" qtd. by Maud "Last" 80).

However, in the poem, God seems to be at least solidary with the human tragedy, and He shows some signs of affection, coming to earth, kneeling, weeping. At least, it can be said that God cares about the terrible situation of this end. But this is not the Almighty brilliant God of Revelation, who controls and makes history finish in light and glory. Notwithstanding, Thomas uses several linking knots with the Christian tradition. Thomas's God is much closer to nature than to

heaven, and allows the tragedy of earth to bring darkness to "Heaven" (4.1). God in Heaven does not save the earth, on the contrary, He and his "Country Heaven" are affected by the news of the fall and total destruction of the earth, which contradicts the very essence of Heaven, a combination of light and perfect happiness. This Thomasian God resembles much more a human being completely lost in the atomic age, who cannot avoid the cosmic death of this planet. Maud comments that for Dylan Thomas God has "perhaps only one function: to make death less fearful. Or, looked at the other way round, that miraculous force which—not for any arguable reason but nevertheless effectively—makes death less fearful, he calls God" (*Entrances* 113). In my opinion, the poem acknowledges the presence of a transcendental entity called God, and He is not a vague figure. The poem does not intend to portray a complete and "theological consistent" definition of the Christian God. It presents perhaps just one side of God's face, the crying face of God (Isaiah 53), and this image of God crying for the destiny of humankind, crying for the sins of the people, is not alien to the Christian tradition at all. Heaven is blind, there is no sun, no heat, no life. The menace of an atomic apocalypse becomes very real in the poem.

The collection of poems to be entitled "In Country Heaven" intended to be positive and optimistic, this particular poem however emphasizes the destructive aspects in nature and in the description of the "Godhead". God is a "weeping presence who laments rather than intercedes, regarding creation with pity and tears" with sympathy (Ackerman 157). But tears and laments are not unknown experiences to the Christian God. The poem with its darkened image anticipates the nuclear holocaust. Eric J. Sundquist comments that the poem is pessimistic for it sees the world from the perspective of the grave and the dead, and the poet is presumably living among "ravaged roots" (66). John Ackerman however thinks that the religious image of "angels" suggests a paradise regained (*Companion* 157), even if not in the Christian terms of the resurrection of the individual, at least in terms of the supremacy of life over the forces of death in the natural world. T. H. Jones comments that the poetry of Dylan Thomas is essentially religious in the sense of presenting a world which combines "a tragic

vision with a sense of joy" (96-9). In fact the poem uses religious images and language, showing how the holy joy of nature crushes tragically with the imminent destruction of the earth.

### [3.6] "Prologue"

The last poem to be analyzed is the "Prologue" to the *Collected Poems* of Dylan Thomas, another pastoral poem which was written in 1952 in the context of the poet's consciousness of the peculiar age in which he was living, the atomic age when the human race can be totally annihilated, like in the times of the biblical character Noah and the great deluge. The poem also represents an introduction to Thomas's poetry, his own presentation and the attitude he took towards his own work. The world of the "Prologue" is still the seashore of Laugharne, the setting of his last poems, with the sea, the hills, the birds, the sand, the wind. The poem was written in a very intricate and original rhyme scheme in which the first line of the poem rhymes with the last line, and the second line with the penultimate, and so on until they meet in the middle of the poem. The rhythmic pattern relies on the syllabic counting, a style very akin to his Welsh background. The poem starts:

This day winding down now  
 At God speeded summer's end  
 In the torrent salmon sun,  
 In my seashaken house  
 On a breakneck of rocks  
 Tangled with chirrup and fruit,  
 Froth, flute, fin and quill  
 At a wood's dancing hoof,  
 By scummed starfish sands  
 With their fishwife cross  
 Gulls, pipers, cockles, and sails,  
 Out there, crow black, men  
 Tackled with clouds, who kneel  
 To the sunset nets,  
 Geese nearly in heaven, boys  
 Stabbing, and herons, and shells  
 That speak seven seas,  
 Eternal waters away  
 From the cities of nine

Days' night whose towers will catch  
 In the religious wind  
 Like stalks of tall, dry straw,  
 At poor peace I sing  
 To you, strangers, (though song  
 Is a burning and crested act,  
 The fire of birds in  
 The world's turning wood,  
 For my sawn, splay sounds),  
 Out of these seathumbed leaves  
 That will fly and fall  
 Like leaves of trees and as soon  
 Crumble and undie  
 Into the dogdayed night.  
 Seaward the salmon, sucked sun slips,  
 And the dumb swans drub blue  
 My dabbed bay's dusk, as I hack  
 This rumpus of shapes  
 For you to know  
 How I, a spinning man,  
 Glory also this star, bird  
 Roared, sea born, man torn, blood blest.  
 Hark: I trumpet the place,  
 From fish to jumping hill! Look:  
 I build my bellowing ark  
 To the best of my love  
 As the flood begins,  
 Out of the fountainhead  
 Of fear, rage red, manalive,  
 Molten and mountainous to stream  
 Over the wound asleep  
 Sheep white hollow farms

To Wales in my arms.  
 Hoo, there, in castle keep,  
 You king singsong owls, who moonbeam  
 The flickering runs and dive  
 The dingle furred deer dead!  
 Huloo, on plumbed bryns,  
 O my ruffled ring dove  
 In the hooting, nearly dark  
 With Welsh and reverent rook,  
 Coo rooing the woods' praise,  
 Who moons her blue notes from her nest  
 Down to the curlew herd!  
 Ho, hullaballoing clan  
 Agape, with woe

In your beaks, on the gabbing capes!  
 Heigh, on horseback hill, jack  
 Whisking hare! who  
 Hears, there, this fox light, my flood ship's  
 Clangour as I hew and smite  
 (A clash of anvils for my  
 Hubbub and fiddle, this tune  
 On a tongued puffball)  
 But animals thick as thieves  
 On God's rough tumbling grounds  
 (Hails to His beasthood!)  
 Beasts who sleep good and thin,  
 Hist, in hogsback woods! The haystacked  
 Hollow farms in a throng  
 Of waters cluck and cling,  
 And barnroofs cockcrow war!  
 O kingdom of neighbours, finned  
 Felled and quilled, flash to my patch  
 Work ark and the moonshine  
 Drinking Noah of the bay,  
 With pelt, and scale, and fleece:  
 Only the drowned deep bells.  
 Of sheep and churches noise  
 Poor peace as the sun sets  
 And dark shoals every holy field.  
 We shall ride out alone, and then,  
 Under the stars of Wales,  
 Cry, Multitudes of arks! Across  
 The water lidded lands,  
 Manned with their loves they'll move,  
 Like wooden islands, hill to hill.  
 Huloo, my prowed dove with a flute!  
 Ahoy, old, sea-legged fox,  
 Tom tit and Dai mouse!  
 My ark sings in the sun  
 At God speeded summer's end  
 And the flood flowers now.

The poem presents a world doomed, marked by the end. The day is "winding down" (1.1), the Summer is also finishing (1.2), the sun receives the color of salmon and is declining (1.3), men "kneel to the sunset nets" (1.14), the "salmon" sun slips "seaward" and is "sucked" (1.34). This is the time of flying and falling leaves, soon crumbled into the "dogdayed night" (1.29-33). Light is becoming rarefied at "dusk" (1.36). In the line 46 of the first stanza, the poet

declares that the "flood" is beginning, using the biblical image of the deluge, the destruction of the world and the salvation of the animals by Noah, a man chosen by God. In line 18 of the second stanza, the poet makes another reference to the flood. And in line 34 of the second stanza the poet compares himself to Noah, calling himself the "Drinking Noah of the bay," while the "dark shoals" (2.39) and moon and stars are shining (2.33, 41). The poem ends with another reference to the end of season, "speeded summer's end" and the beginning of the flood (2.50-1). The presence of time is clear in the poem, this is the time of the end, symbolized by the rotating movement and the color of the sun, the flickering of the moon and starlight. This time is the apocalyptic time of the end of the world, since the flood is coming, a time of judgment, of doom, a time of tragic events, of the end of history. The poet is making a reference to the cyclical natural world in a way, but is also referring to the world in which he lived, the world of an apocalyptic atomic age, a world threatened by war and doom. The world of the poem is a world at war, a world of "poor peace" (1.23; 2.38), a world in which nature seems to reveal a world of war, "cockcrow war" (2.30), a world of "fear, rage red, manalive" (1.48). The poet uses the cyclic movement of nature to emphasize and illustrate the real menace of the end, the possibility of the total destruction of the world at the time the poem was written.

The world of the poem also emanates God's presence and glory. The end of Summer seems to be determined by God (1.2), what suggests that nature is a divine creation. The natural world is sacralized, is transformed into a religious sacred environment, moving in a continuous process of spiritual celebration and glorification. In line 15 of the first stanza, geese fly "nearly in heaven" instead of in the sky, the totality of the "seven seas" flow and spill "eternal waters" (1.17-8) and the wind is also "religious" (1.21), the rook is "reverent" and sings the "wood's praise" (2.9-10), the grounds are rough and tumbling and they belong to God (2.24). The poet perceives the presence of the "kingdom of neighbours" (2.31), and the neighbours are the animals, the birds, the fish, the natural beings. The poet can hear the bells of sheep and churches (2.36-7). The field is "holy" (2.39).

The world of the poem is a world full of life and movement and quick sounds of birds and animals. Birds fly, prey, and sing in a constant life-death movement. The world of the poem is represented by the persona as a world of "Froth, flute, fm and quill," (1.7), a world of rhythm and musical sounds like the sounds of the "wood's dancing hoof" (1.8), a world of "Gulls, pipers, cockles, and sails" (1.11), of men that resemble "crow black" (1.12), of boys "stabbing" geese, and herons and shells speaking (1.15-7), of birds singing while the world is turning (1.26-7), a world of rocks, hills, leaves, woods, and sea, a world of singsongs of "owls" (2.3), the animals with strength and force, wildness, sing and praise God's "besthood" (2.24-6). To this sea sounds, the persona adds the sounds of the farms, the bells of the sheep and churches (2.28-37).

The poet presents himself as the new Noah of the natural world, the Noah of Wales, the one who proclaims the end of the world, the mystery of life and death, the one who saves the world in his ark. He defines his poetic mission as the act of singing to the "strangers" (1.24) the "burning and crested" songs, the "sawn, splay" sounds of his poetry, of his voice (1.28). The poet sings "At poor peace" (1.23), his song is a tormented act, a visceral movement, reflecting the agonies of the time and of the natural world, the burning songs of birds and swans, reflecting the hard times marked by the menace of a nuclear war. The poet defines his poetic task as the hacking of a "rumpus of shapes" (1.36-7), glorifying the elements of nature, "this star, bird / Roared, sea born, man torn, blood blest" (1.40-1). He presents himself as the poet of the natural world, the poet of the sounds, movements, colors, and cyclical tragedies of nature. He presents himself also as the poet "of the place" (1.42), of Wales (2.1), in harmony with the "Welsh and reverent rook" (2.9), "from fish to jumping hill" (1.43). He compares himself to the mythical figure of Noah and announces that the flood is beginning, "Out of the fountainhead / Of fear, rage red, manalive" and streaming over the farms of Wales (1.46-2.1). He is the poet in a world marked by hatred and war, he is the poet in a world in which the survival of the human race is doubtful, the poet of the flood in a time marked by the menace of the end.

The second part of the poem is marked by a strong emotional intensity, the sentences being interposed with interjections, exclamations like "Hoo" (2.2), "Huloo" (2.6,46), "O" (2.7, 31), "Ho" (2.13), "Heigh" (2.16), "Hist" (2.27), and "Ahoy" (2.47). Being the intense poet of nature in a time of war, the poet distinguishes himself from the "king singsong owls" (2.3), poets who sing the moonshine in the "flickering runs" (2.4) and dive the "dingle furred deer dead" (2.5), poets of indecision, poets of artificiality, of "furred" poetry (2.5). Similarly to Noah the poet has his own singing adorned "dove" (2.7) which flies through the hills, in the nearly dark hour, singing "her blue notes" (2.11) as moon rays over the "curlew herd" (2.8-12). The poem is presented as a "Clangour" (2.19), accompanied with sounds of hewing and smiting, and clashing of "anvils" (2.19-20), sounds of very rustic work, very near to the fisherman of Laugharne, full of intense emotions, contrasting with the sound of "Hubbud and fiddle" (2.21). But in spite of its force and violence, his poetry doesn't hurt the "animals" and beasts "who sleep good and thin" (2.23-6). The "kingdom of neighbours" includes the forces and elements of nature and the inhabitants of Wales, "flashing" to the poet, who sees himself as the "Drinking Noah of the bay" (2.34). At the end of the poem, the persona can see "Multitudes of arks" crying and riding out "alone" (2.40-2), like "wooden islands," moving from "hill to hill" (2.43-5). And the new Noah calls for his dove adorned with a flute, and for the "sea-legged fox" (2.46). The last three lines portray the ark singing in the sun, while the flood is beginning and the summer is ending. So the poet seems to understand his work of art as a testimony to the near doom of the world and a song of praise to holy nature, and hope in a certain kind of redemption. His poem is a declaration of hope in the salvation of the earth. In times of sunset, of Summer's end, the poet believes in his poetry and clings to it as the only possibility of salvation for the doomed world.

Love seems to be the force that can redeem humankind, and the persona has built his ark, his poetry, "To the best of my love" (1.45), and in the line 44 of the second stanza he says that the multitude of arks would move "Manned with their loves." W. S. Merwin comments that the poem represents

and portrays "the exuberance of a man drunk with the holiness and wonder of creation, with the reality and terror and ubiquity of death, but with love as God, as more powerful than death" (243). Merwin also comments that Thomas's last poems represent his most important achievement as a poet, since they display "love, compassion, dramaticity, celebration, tragic vision of creation and joy" (243). T. H. Jones also considers the "Author's Prologue" as a reaffirmation of Thomas's "vision and faith" (105), in which he mixes the "world of nature, Wales, the concept of poetry itself, the sense of glory" (105). For Aneirin Talfan Davies, this poem represents Thomas's "final declaration of the relevance of his art to the human condition" in which the poet identifies himself with the created universe (70). The poet becomes the "spinning man" uttering praises and glorifying the "sea-born" star. Poetry is the ark, and the "drunken Noah" stands for Christ, the Saviour of the world who shed his own blood and offered it in the cross, in the holy supper—"This is my body, this is my blood" (Matthew 26:26-30). Talfan Davies shares my vision and recognizes that the poet perceives the world "in danger of a second flood, a flood of hate, and he therefore builds his ark with its seams caulked by love" (73-4). Talfan Davies remembers that although Thomas's poem is so full of references to nature, to beasts, flowers, birds, the real target of the preoccupation of the poet is humankind, and says, in addition, that line 48 of the second stanza gives an example of that preoccupation, when the poet alludes to "Tom tit and Dai mouse," taken as Thomas' "fellow countrymen—representatives of the common denominator of humanity" since there is only one answer and solution to fear and hate, and that is "love" (73-4). According to W. S. Merwin,

If the act of love is conceived as the central holy act of creation, where love, in joy and then in pain and then in joy, overcomes death, it is clear why he should have felt that his poems were so directed (246).

Love is the creative act that overcomes death under the perspective of the flood. And the flood is seen flowering at the end of the poem, being renewed, being transformed into a positive happening. The poem is a celebration of it, is an

expression of faith and joy, the "statement of vocation of a great religious poet" (Merwin 246).

David Middleton interprets the enigmatic phrase "cities of nine / Days' night" (1.19-20) as a reference to Blake's poem *Vala, or The Four Zoas*, where the central drama is the struggle among the elements of the Cosmos, being the poem divided into nine nights of judgment day, nights of striving, struggle, destruction, culminating in a "harmonious integration in Albion or the Eternal Man" (12). Middleton observes that Thomas's ark receives some characteristics of a seed, causing the flood to flower, for example, singing in the sun, taking "the final spiritual harvest as the culmination of apocalypse" (12).

At the end, death is seen not as a negative element, but as a glorious ending, always renewable in the human history. The dove of the poem stands for the dove that announced the end of the flood to Noah, the messenger of hope, and it is also the symbol of peace, of which the world is so poor and in need. Love is the great force of transformation, optimism and faith in the poem. The word "Agape" (2.14) can be read in the double meaning of open mouth and "love," according to the Greek word renewed by the Christian theology of the New Testament. Ackerman interprets the ark of the poem as a symbol of love that transforms "the coming flood (of evening tides and death) into a flowering destiny," and comments that the poet indeed glorifies the natural world, "despite the shed blood of man and beast" (*Companion* 142). In my opinion, poetry is the ark of salvation, the poet is Noah, the atomic age represents the deluge, men and beasts are Thomas's neighbours and listeners to his message of love.

The natural world is vividly portrayed in the poem in contrast with the presence of God, always vague and secondary in comparison to the natural world. The natural world has color, smell, sound, volume, and a kind of immanent divinity that John Ackerman calls "animistic vision" (143). Ackerman identifies in Thomas's image of the flood, not only a reference to the myth of Noah, but also a reference to *The Mabinogion* collection of mediaeval Welsh tales, where appears the legend of Seithenyn, "whose drunken negligence led to the flooding of the lowlands" (144). Thomas seems to mingle in the poem biblical

imagery with pagan pantheism. He seems to transcend his concerns with the limited world of his own individuality, or a couple of lovers, or beloved persons, in order to express his consciousness of and preoccupation with the entire humankind, with the planet earth. For John Ackerman, the poem is optimistic, and emphasizes "sunlight rather than dark" (146), the individual's rejoice in the kingdom of nature. And instead of a "pessimistic pantheism," as William Empson described Thomas's religiosity, Ackerman identifies "an optimistic pantheism as the driving force of the last poems, some related aspects of which it remains finally to explore" (146). Thomas's natural world is colorful, glorious, holy, according to Vernon Watkins an indication of Thomas's optimistic pantheism (qtd. by Ackerman 146).

## Conclusion

I have intended in this dissertation to analyze Dylan Thomas's poetry considering his attitudes towards death, as conveyed by some of his poems, and I have tried to compare them with the Christian tradition, looking for points of concordance and points of discordance.

In the first chapter I have pointed out that the Christian tradition is the result of a historical evolution from a more materialistic view of life and death to a more spiritualized notion, as well as from the notion of a nation to the consciousness of individuality. It was also the result of a concept of God as the creator and preserver of life, a personal God sympathetic with the human reality. Death was linked with the reality of sin, being considered the consequence of a human wrong choice, rather than part of the natural process of creation. The Christian tradition shows the transformation of the human tragedy into a divine comedy, the tragic end of life, caused by sin and death, as a separation from God to a vision of redemption and salvation originated in God's mercy and love.

In the second chapter I analyzed some of Thomas's poems, trying to analyze his attitudes towards death, observing that he gives a great importance to the relation between the individual and the world of nature. I also observed that, in relation to the reality of life and death, Thomas makes innumerable references to his Christian tradition, sometimes suggesting a Christian interpretation of existence, sometimes seeming to deny his Christian heritage and to create a concept of his own, sometimes mixing his personal view with his Christian background, offering a kind of dialogue between his poetry and his culture. And I have observed that his attitude towards death has some points of contact with the Christian tradition, not in terms of absolute confirmation or absolute denial, but in terms of explicit allusions and use of images and diction, and in terms of a personal and aesthetic re-interpretation of the Christian values. In doing so, he

can, for example, make an allusion to the doctrine of survival of the individual through the resurrection of the body, but meaning the permanence of life through the reabsorption of the individual into the elements of nature.

There are many elements of concordance and discordance between Thomas's attitude towards death and the Christian (Protestant) tradition. In fact, Thomas's poetry was produced in the context of a Christianized society, Wales and England, although Thomas himself was not an actively religious man. In his childhood, he received several religious influences through his mother, from his relatives, from the reading of the Bible, the hymns, the preachers, the Sunday School. His poems contain an abundance of images, rhythms and concepts brought from the Bible. However, Thomas's poetry cannot be classified as devotional or religious or even Christian orthodox. His religiousness is characterized by a more generalized scope, a vague sense of God's presence in the world, an indefinite impression of the sacredness of life, and an ineffable recognition of the importance of the reality of death. The religious character of Thomas's poetry can be perceived in the formal and structural elements and even in the content of his poems. Sometimes they can be taken as a recast of the Christian tradition, a re-interpretation of the Christian concepts and images. But since his attitude is religious but in a vague sense, his poetry cannot fit the Christian orthodoxy. As a matter of fact, Thomas's poetry presents a secular version of Christianity, a secular attitude towards life and death behind a Christian language and rhetoric, imagery and symbology. God, in Thomas's poems, becomes a figure that is very different from the traditional Christian vision. In fact, Thomas's God is more identified with the natural world, sometimes less involved in the human tragedy, sometimes sympathetic with mankind, sometimes less personal, sometimes becoming an undistinguished presence in the frontier of the universe. Nature is sacralized, taking God's place in the manifestation and communication of the world's holiness and mystery. Death is seen from a different perspective, in spite of the use of Christian images and symbols. These religious elements present in Thomas's poetry are part of his

cultural background, his linguistic and mythical universe, they are re-interpreted according to his subjectivity.

The recurrence of the theme of death in Thomas's poetry testifies that this was a very important subject for him, almost an obsession. In his poems, death represents a process which affects himself, his body and mind, his individuality, but it is something that also affects every human being. His emphasis on death as a fundamental experience of life seems to contrast with the biblical vision of life as the supreme value and of death as important only in the extent that it indicates the end of life. According to the Christian tradition, death is not an autonomous value in itself. For Luther, the manifestation of God's grace and salvation constitutes the supreme value of life, which, for Calvin, lies in the relationship of a free individual with the sovereign God. For Kierkegaard existence, and not death, is fundamental problem, living, not dying. The Christian tradition offers the doctrine of the resurrection of the body as the counterbalance to the reality of death, and Thomas seems to see in the experience of dying a re-absorption into nature.

In some of Thomas's poems death is seen as a natural process, as something that inevitably happens in nature and affects every creature, something closely related to the natural movement of life. In poems like "The force that through the green fuse," for example, it becomes very clear that for Thomas death is part of nature, it is part of life, with no supernatural, or "sin-punishment" connections. It contrasts with the biblical understanding of death as the result of the Fall of Adam and Eve, the result of their disobedience towards God's commandments. In the Christian Tradition, death is considered a punishment for sins and therefore it has implications related to right and wrong, good and evil, obedience and disobedience. But if death is part of the cyclical movement of nature, as it seems to be the case with Thomas's poetry, then it is neutral, it does not have a moral impact, it does not generate fear. Calvin and Luther, as spokesmen of the Protestant tradition, also agree with the understanding of death as being the consequence, the result of sin. For them, death was not originally part of nature, but it was generated by the Fall of man as a result of a free use of

choice, something that could be avoided. In fact both theologians think that the sin of Adam has deformed and transformed the natural world, generating a degenerate human nature, a fallen cosmos. In his "Poem on his Birthday," for example, Thomas presents death as being part of the natural world, as something neutral, separated from the human behavior, and flounders, gulls, curlews and herons can do "what they are told," i.e., kill to survive, and they can go on their "cold, dying trails" (stanzas 2-3). In the Christian tradition, the understanding of death as something unnatural creates the necessity of an atonement, a redemptive regaining of life. Even Kierkegaard, who wrote in a less orthodox way, develops the idea of guilt as part of the human experience of life and death. In Thomas's poetry, however, death is taken as a natural process, which brings no judgment, no sense of guilt, no need of atonement, although some of his poems use images and metaphors of Christ's sacrifice and redemption without implying a theological significance. Death is presented as part of the natural cycle of life.

The sense of mortality as part of the human condition is something present in Thomas's poetry and also in the Christian tradition. Human life is seen as surrounded, darkened by the shadows of death. In the horizon of the human existence there is always this figure of death as the limit, the direction. To be human is to be condemned to die. Calvin and Luther confirm the teaching of the Bible according to which, since the sin of Adam and Eve, death is something to which man is condemned. In contrast, Kierkegaard develops the idea of the individual being condemned to live, not to die, and so life would be the real problem of the human race. For Kierkegaard, the individual cannot die, he cannot understand the death of his own individuality, the death of his own self, then the individual denies it and lives as if he were eternal. Besides, the individual can never get rid of his own individuality, of his own subjectivity. For Kierkegaard, immortality is the real problem, not mortality. Dylan Thomas, however, seems to understand that the death of the individual constitutes the great problem of existence, thus making it the great theme of his poetry.

The sacralization of death constitutes another important element of Thomas's poetry. Contrasting with the Christian tradition, according to which

death represents exactly the contrary of what is sacred, since it is a punishment, Thomas's poems in general present the destructive forces of nature and the process of death as having a religious significance, a divine character, since it unites the individual with the whole, with the cosmos. The poem "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" can exemplify Thomas's idea of sacredness of death, the notion of death as a mystery that is beyond human understanding, an idea that can be related to Kierkegaard's notion that death cannot be objectively apprehended by the individual, but only subjectively. In fact, it can be said that very often nature takes the place of God as the absolute value in Thomas's poetry. Plunging into nature, surviving in the plant, in the movements of the river, the poet finds redemption, communion with God and life, a sense of accomplishment and the intensification of his existence. "Poem on his Birthday" can illustrate it very well, when the poet says in the last two stanzas that

...the closer I move  
 To death, one man through his sundered hulks,  
 The louder the sun blooms  
 And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults.

Nature is described with an aura of sanctity, with religious adjectives and qualifications. In contrast with nature, God is represented in very vague and indefinite terms. He is only a name, an indefinite other behind the world of nature. Indeed, according to the Christian tradition, there is a clear and important distinction between God as the creator of the universe and the natural world as the creation. There are also specific commandments against the adoration of the natural world, against the divinization of the sun, the stars, trees or animals. Only God shall be adored. Nature can even reflect the glory of God and stay as the silent manifestation of God's divinity, but it cannot be confounded with God himself. Calvin and Luther reject openly the idea of nature as being divine, the idea of pantheism, of believing that everything (*pan*) is God (*theos*). By making the natural world sacred, Thomas may have intended to portray a more direct, vivid, immanent relationship with God. By using this strategy, his poetry receives more intense images and creates a much more impressive, organic, visceral

religious consciousness, in imitation maybe of the mystics of the Middle Ages or of the Metaphysical poets of the 17th-century. This passionate vision, of course, contrasts with the abstract, transcendent God of the Protestant theology. Thomas's immanent God (nature) can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, experienced by the senses, without the interference of reason. The union with nature, provided by death, becomes a religious experience. This vision clearly contradicts the biblical understanding of nature as being created by God, as being something very distinct from Him who transcends the universe of nature. But according to the pantheistic vision, nature represents God's immanent presence, and is not only a sign of it. For the Christian tradition the individual has to transcend nature in order to find the true God, who is beyond nature.

Luther and Calvin see life as being constantly menaced by death, and each day of life as being a victory over the forces of destruction. In Thomas's poems this portrait of life as being constantly threatened by the risks and powers of death can also be identified. Poems like "I see the boys of summer" and "The force that through the green fuse" illustrate this vision of life. Death is always present, menacing the individuals, denouncing the limits of time and existence. Thomas's poems seem to show in fact a unity of the phenomenon of life and death. Life and death are very near each other; the day of birth is the beginning of death, which seems to contrast with the biblical vision of life as the supreme value, as the most important gift from God, and death as the negation of life but not an autonomous reality, not as something in itself. Indeed, Thomas sees life and death as part of the same process, as a unity. But based on their reading of the New Testament, Calvin and Luther developed the idea of life as being surrounded by the constant and intense menace of death, recognizing that death is very near life. Thus in this aspect Thomas's views are quite akin to Luther's and Calvin's.

The individual represents a fundamental value in Thomas's poetry, it is the center of his poetry, which is lyrical, subjective. Even when the poet describes and refers to the death of some other person, he generally makes it in the context of a personal involvement, a personal relationship. When he describes

his father's death, for example, he is subjectively involved, he is emotionally affected by this death. Some poems like "I see the boys of summer" and "The force that through the green fuse," among others, show the tension of an individual being conscious of himself, of his individuality, and being conscious at the same time of the inexorable coming and dominion of time and mortality. The presence of death seems to affect the individual and throw him into a deep existential crisis, reminding on of Kierkegaard's idea of consciousness of death and despair. Thomas presents the individual in a crisis precisely because of the menacing presence of time and mortality, and because of his self-consciousness. This can be clearly observed in Thomas's birthday poems: "Poem in October" and "Poem on his Birthday." To a certain extent, these poems show an individual in anguish, conscious of his individuality and of his mortality, trying to overcome the anxiety of this situation. These birthday poems can be considered true meditations on mortality, and in this sense they seem to fit into Luther's position according to which the individual shall meditate everyday of his life on his condition as a mortal human being. Of course Luther does not recommend thinking about death at the moment of dying. He argues that at the moment of death the Christian should concentrate on the vision of life and Christ. But he suggests that the Christian should think of his own state of mortality throughout life. Kierkegaard also considers individuality a fundamental value of the Christian teaching and relates this sense of individuality to the human relationship with God. The human being is an individual when he stands in relation with the tri-personal God.

In poems dealing with the death of the humankind, Thomas proves he is conscious of the end of history, of the annihilation of the human race, of the death of the planet. Some links can be traced between this consciousness of an end and the Christian eschatology, the Christian doctrine of the end of the world, the apocalyptic perspective of life and existence. The poems "In Country Heaven," "Prologue," "Over Sir John's hill," among others, show the anxiety of the individual becoming conscious of the end of the world. In these poems, there is some kind of consciousness of the end of the race, a consciousness that the

history of the world is coming to a dramatic point from which there will be no return, a point related with the atomic age in which humankind can cause the complete destruction of life on earth. In the poem "Prologue" Thomas compares himself with Noah, living in the end of time. In the poem "In Country Heaven" he presents the news about the destruction of the planet earth arriving at God's hearing. This apocalyptic vision of the world takes from the Christian tradition figures and images to fully express the poet's consciousness of the end of the world but not through God's interference but through human insanity. Calvin and Luther also make several references to the end of the world, and to the Final Judgement, but in terms of the biblical perspective, i. e., depending on God's will. For them, the end of the world is a real possibility of everyday life, and they lived under the pressure of this realization. The New Testament is characterized by an apocalyptic consciousness, by the understanding of present time as an apocalyptic age, as the setting of God's manifestation.

An important distinction can be made between Thomas's poems and the Christian tradition in relation to the concept of time. For Thomas, time is presented as a cyclical movement. For the Christian tradition, time is understood as a continuous linear movement, not repetitive, not cyclical, tending to a climax towards the end of history. As Thomas sees time as a cyclical phenomenon, death is presented as part of this cyclical process. For the Christian tradition, however, time is a linear historical movement and death constitutes an interruption in the process. According to the biblical teaching, time is part of God's creation, and, therefore, under God's power and control. In contrast, in Thomas's poems, such as "Fern Hill" and "I see the boys of summer" for example, time seems to have absolute control of the individual, almost constituting the absolute force that controls the elements of nature and the human beings. Time is ungovernable and controls everything, it's inflexible and pervades every instant of life, every movement of nature. In the poem "Fern Hill," for example, time is presented ambiguously as cruel and merciful, depending on the different experiences the individual has gone through in his childhood and in adulthood, reinforcing at the end the absolute influence of time. The Christian tradition, however, based on the

biblical teaching, sees time as under God's control, since from His perspective one day and a thousand years are the same (Psalm 90:4; II Peter 3:8), because He is the Eternal God who created time and who is not controlled by it, and the Christian is linked with this God.

Some of Thomas's poems present death as a negative force and invite the reader to reject and resist the idea of death. Poems like "Do not go gentle into that good night," contradicting the concept of death as a natural phenomenon, take it not as something good just for the fact of being natural, but suggest that the individual shall resist it, taking death as a negative reality that should be resisted and if possible overcome. Poems like "I see the boys of summer" and "And death shall have no dominion" also invite the reader to challenge death, to resist its destructive presence. For the Christian tradition, however, death is always the enemy, the negative destructive force that is caused by the Fall of the human race. Although sometimes the apostle Paul refers to death as a passage to the eternal life, he takes it as the "last enemy" (I Corinthians 15:26), as the salary of sin (Romans 6:23), something evil in itself, something that has to be overcome by faith in Christ and in resurrection. However, Luther and Calvin, in spite of also considering death a negative force linked with the sin of Adam and Eve, see death as standing under God's control, and therefore they argue that the Christian shall accept the arrival of death as a divine appointment. If Thomas urges his father to not accept death, Luther and Calvin on their turn consider it a great sin. They think that since the Christian believes in eternal life, and since he is redeemed from condemnation and from the malediction of death, through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, he is now free to accept the coming of death as a manifestation of God's will, something that has to be faced with courage and faith. The Bible presents the death of patriarchs as examples of how death can be handled and accepted with calmness and courage. Those leaders of Israel died in a "good old age," without resistance, accepting their final moment. They were not afraid of dying. Even when Luther invites the Christians to mock death, to get rid of all fears caused by death, he does not authorize or suggest that the Christian can resist the hour of death. In some other poems, like in "Elegy,"

Thomas seems to accept the idea of death with more calmness, with some kind of resignation, but meaning that the individual will survive in the elements of nature instead of sharing the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body.

Some of Thomas's poems deal with the death of the others, trying to preserve their memory, transforming in fact their individuality into a symbol of mythological importance. This is the case of Annie Jones in "After the Funeral," and of the child killed in the streets of London in "Ceremony After a Fire Raid." Luther and Calvin recommend that the Christian community respect the dead body and give it a worthy funeral, in accordance with the dignity of the Gospel, but they advised against the exaggeration in the manifestation of emotions, the excess of luxury, and the adoration of the dead. It's interesting that the poem "After the Funeral" starts with this puritanical condemnation of exaggerated emotions. Luther and Calvin accepted the expressions of grief, mourning, the ritual ceremony of the funeral, but condemned manifestations of despair. The Christian should show a brave and optimistic attitude towards death, in agreement with the Christian hope in the resurrection of the body. The body of the dead is given to the earth and dissolved in the ground, where he waits for the resurrection, and the spirit is conducted towards God's presence, where he waits for the final judgment. Luther even suggests some epitaphs for the Christians' tomb ("Christian Songs" 290-2). In the Old Testament, the body of the dead was considered unclean but grief was allowed with manifestations of strong emotions, although there were clear limits in order to differentiate the tribes of Israel from the pagans, signals of grief like self-mutilation, for example, were totally forbidden. The person who touched a dead body or even the clothes of a dead person was considered unclean for seven days, therefore the contact between the living and the dead was emphatically forbidden.

Thomas uses the Christian images and rituals in order to celebrate the dead. As I said before, the poem dedicated to Thomas's aunt Annie Jones starts with a reference to the ritual of burial in which the poet condemns the exaggeration of empty sentimentality. As the poem continues, the poet intends to be Annie's bard, entering in a peculiar relation with her, showing the importance

a dead person can have to the living, and how the living can deal with the reality of the other's death. Celebrating Annie as an example of a true consistent Christian, Thomas communicates a sense of solidarity with the dead one, an impression that the living is directly affected by the other's death. This is also particularly clear in the poems "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "Elegy," dedicated to his father. Yet, contrasting with the Christian tradition, in spite of using Christian figures, images, and language, the poet goes to the opposite direction of the orthodoxy and even sacralizes the reality of death. The dead body becomes for the poet not something unclean, but holy in its very essence. The dead one becomes a saint, his/her image is idealized, his/her individuality is transformed and sanctified by the process of dying. This is something absurd according to the Old Testament perspective, and according to the thought of Calvin and Luther. Thomas makes death purify the individual, instead of making him/her impure.

One of Thomas's clearest concepts is the overcoming of death through the integration of the individual into the forces of nature. For Thomas, the individual can overcome the fear of death by understanding it as a plunge into the world of nature. He suggests that the individual can survive and live in the elements of nature, in the tree, in the stream, in the flower. The biblical perspective is different. It teaches that the individual can overcome the reality of death through faith in the resurrection of the body, which is the revival of the individual's body, recreated and perfected by God's direct interference in the natural process. Of course this concept transcends the limits of reason and can be expressed and accepted only in terms of faith. For Luther and Calvin, what gives peace to the heart of a dying individual is the belief in the resurrection of the body, in the reaffirmation of life after the experience of death. The idea of surviving in nature is not present in the Christian tradition. It seems to partake of some oriental religious ideas, such as the notion of the reabsorption of the individual into the whole. Thomas's plunge into the elements of nature seems to guarantee the continuity of life, but the individuality is lost in the process, and it

seems to suggest that individuality is taken only as an interruption in the cyclical organic unconscious movement of nature..

In some of his poems, Thomas seems to suggest the idea of love as being a positive energy capable of facing and surviving the destructive power of death. Even if lovers are lost, as declared in the poem "And death shall have no dominion," love shall resist and become unalterable in essence. Love will remain as a cry in "After the Funeral," as the reaffirming force of life, in spite of the permanence of death. According to the New Testament teaching, love is an eternal creative force in the universe, since God is love (I John 4:16) and, as the apostle Paul suggests, prophecies, miracles, and tongues will come to an end, but love will remain, because love is eternal (I Corinthians 13:8). Since love is an affection implying the relation of at least two persons and since love is described in the Christian tradition as eternal, then the relations between the individuals are eternal and will not be destroyed by death. The understanding of love as something eternal, something that death cannot destroy, brings life a great optimism that helps to overcome despair and the sense of emptiness caused by death. Yet it opposes the Old Testament concept of death as the end of all relationships and as the end of the relationship with God. If love is eternal, the power of death is limited and has no more dominion over life. So, in this aspect Thomas follows the Christian tradition, which considers love the energy which survives the destructive influence of death. With this emphasis on the permanence of love as the unbreakable linking with life, death becomes now, and it is Thomas who develops this idea, a way of union of the individual with the whole, with the absolute, which for him is nature, or God in nature. Death is understood no more as a breaking down of all relations but as an opportunity of communion with nature, with the elements and forces of the universe, with the mystery of life. This characteristic of taking love as the supreme value of life, gives Thomas the instrument he needed to affirm life in spite of and beyond the forces of death, and shows his ability of handling aesthetically Christian symbols.

Commenting on how the Christian can see death from a different perspective through faith in Christ, Luther develops the idea of the recasting of

death, of how its negative powers and elements can be transformed into gain, into victory, how its venom can be transformed into medicine. Luther says that those who overcome death through faith in Christ can look at it no more as a malediction but as a blessing. Sometimes Dylan Thomas seems to go in the same direction. In his "Poem in October" he can even say that the proximity of death clarifies his vision of life, his perception of nature making him exult and celebrate. According to the Christian tradition, this is possible only by the acceptance of and faith in the sacrificial, redemptive death of Christ. Thomas uses the image of redemption in his poems "Vision and Prayer" and "Ceremony After a Fire Raid," for example, without affirming the Christian tradition. In the poem "Vision and Prayer," Thomas implies that the birth of a certain child redeems life and affects his existence, and the existence of humankind. Anyway the idea of a sacrificial birth and death is present in the poem, as well as the affirmation of life, the wish to overcome the destructive elements brought by death. This notion of Christ as the Redeemer of life, as the incarnation of God, as the synthesis of man and God can be identified in the writings of Kierkegaard: Christ is the miracle. Curiously, and contrasting with the Christian tradition, Thomas's overcoming of the fear of death does not imply the exercise of faith in eternal life, which is replaced by the idea of integration of the individual into the forces of nature. Faith in resurrection is replaced by a certain faith in the holy character of the natural world. This notion of faith as very emotional and volitional can be related with Kierkegaard's notion of faith as a human experience facing life and death. Yet, the concept of redemption seems to be present in Thomas's poem, salvation seems to be possible through the birth-death of this mythological child, this Messiah, this ambiguous Saviour who saves by burning, who gives life by threatening.

Finally comparing Thomas's attitudes towards death as conveyed by the poems analyzed to the Christian Protestant tradition as represented by the teaching and stories of the Bible, the writings of Luther, Calvin and Kierkegaard, it is possible to conclude that Thomas uses many elements of his Christian heritage, but he rejects the integral acceptance of the Christian orthodoxy. His

poems are full of intense and genuine religious experience, even Christian metaphors, allusions, concepts and words, but they are re-interpreted according to Thomas's personal view of the individual as part of nature, of death as an experience of union with the elements of the natural world, and according to his hope of surviving death through the physical participation in the elements and movements of nature. Thomas uses some of the Christian concepts and symbols as an overall structure for his aesthetic experience and as part of his cultural background, rather than out of some personal convictions.

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## Appendix

### I see the boys of summer

#### I

I see the boys of summer in their ruin  
Lay the gold tithings barren,  
Setting no store by harvest, freeze the soils;  
There in their heat the winter floods  
Of frozen loves they fetch their girls,  
And drown the cargoed apples in their tides.

These boys of light are curdlers in their folly,  
Sour the boiling honey;  
The jacks of frost they finger in the hives;  
There in the sun the frigid threads  
Of doubt and dark they feed their nerves;  
The signal moon is zero in their voids.

I see the summer children in their mothers  
Split up the brawned womb's weathers,  
Divide the night and day with fairy thumbs;  
There in the deep with quartered shades  
Of sun and moon they paint their dams  
As sunlight paints the shelling of their heads.

I see that from these boys shall men of nothing  
Stature by seedy shifting,  
Or lame the air with leaping from its heats;  
There from their hearts the dogdayed pulse  
Of love and light bursts in their throats.  
O see the pulse of summer in the ice.

## II

But seasons must be challenged or they totter  
 Into a chiming quarter  
 Where, punctual as death, we ring the stars;  
 There, in his night, the black-tongued bells  
 The sleepy man of winter pulls,  
 Nor blows back moon-and-midnight as she blows.

We are the dark deniers, let us summon  
 Death from a summer woman,  
 A muscling life from lovers in their cramp,  
 From the fair dead who flush the sea  
 The bright-eyed worm on Davy's lamp,  
 And from the planted womb the man of straw.

We summer boys in this four-winded spinning,  
 Green of the seaweeds' iron,  
 Hold up the noisy sea and drop her birds,  
 Pick the world's ball of wave and froth  
 To choke the deserts with her tides,  
 And comb the country gardens for a wreath.

In spring we cross our foreheads with the holly,  
 Heigh ho the blood and berry,  
 And nail the merry squires to the trees;  
 Here love's damp muscle dries and dies,  
 Here break a kiss in no love's quarry.  
 O see the poles of promise in the boys.

## III

I see you boys of summer in your ruin.  
 Man in his maggot's barren.  
 And boys are full and foreign in the pouch.  
 I am the man your father was.  
 We are the sons of flint and pitch.  
 O see the poles are kissing as they cross.

The force that through the green fuse

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.

And death shall have no dominion

And death shall have no dominion.  
 Dead men naked they shall be one  
 With the man in the wind and the west moon;  
 When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,  
 They shall have stars at elbow and foot;  
 Though they go mad they shall be sane,  
 Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;  
 Though lovers be lost love shall not;  
 And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.  
 Under the windings of the sea  
 They lying long shall not die windily;  
 Twisting on racks when sinews give way,  
 Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;  
 Faith in their hands shall snap in two,  
 And the unicorn evils run them through;  
 Split all ends up they shan't crack;  
 And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.  
 No more may gulls cry at their ears  
 Or waves break loud on the seashores;  
 Where blew a flower may a flower no more  
 Lift its head to the blows of the rain;  
 Though they be mad and dead as nails,  
 Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;  
 Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,  
 And death shall have no dominion.

Poem in October

It was my thirtieth year to heaven  
 Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood  
 And the mussel pooled and the heron  
     Priested shore  
     The morning beckon  
 With water praying and call of seagull and rook  
 And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall  
     Myself to set foot  
     That second  
 In the still sleeping town and set forth.

My birthday began with the water-  
 Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name  
 Above the farms and the white horses  
     And I rose  
     In rainy autumn  
 And walked abroad in a shower of all my days.  
 High tide and the heron dived when I took the road  
     Over the border  
     And the gates  
 Of the town closed as the town awoke.

A springful of larks in a rolling  
 Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling  
 Blackbirds and the sun of October  
     Summery  
     On the hill's shoulder,  
 Here were fond climates and sweet singers suddenly  
 Come in the morning where I wandered and listened  
     To the rain wringing  
     Wind blow cold  
 In the wood faraway under me.

Pale rain over the dwindling harbour  
 And over the sea wet church the size of a snail  
 With horns through mist and the castle  
     Brown as owls  
     But all the gardens  
 Of spring and summer were blooming in the tall tales  
 Beyond the border and under the lark full cloud.  
     There could I marvel  
     My birthday  
 Away but the weather turned around.

It turned away from the blithe country  
 And down the other air and the blue altered sky  
 Streamed again a wonder of summer  
     With apples  
     Pears and red currants  
 And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's  
 Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother  
     Through the parables  
     Of sun light  
 And the legends of the green chapels

And the twice told fields of infancy  
 That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine.  
     These were the woods the river and sea  
     Where a boy  
     In the listening  
 Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy  
 To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.  
     And the mystery  
     Sang alive  
 Still in the water and singingbirds.

And there could I marvel my birthday  
 Away but the weather turned around. And the true  
 Joy of the long dead child sang burning  
     In the sun.  
     It was my thirtieth  
 Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon  
 Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.  
     O may my heart's truth  
     Still be sung  
 On this high hill in a year's turning.

## Fern Hill

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
 About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,  
     The night above the dingle starry,  
     Time let me hail and climb  
     Golden in the heydays of his eyes,  
 And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns  
 And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
     Trail with daises and barley  
     Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns  
 About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,  
     In the sun that is young once only,  
     Time let me play and be  
     Golden in the mercy of his means,  
 And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves  
 Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,  
     And the sabbath rang slowly  
     In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay  
 Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air  
     And playing, lovely and watery  
     And fire green as grass.  
     And nightly under the simple stars  
 As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,  
 All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars  
     Flying with the ricks, and the horses  
     Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white  
 With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all  
     Shining, it was Adam and maiden,  
     The sky gathered again  
     And the sun grew round that very day.  
 So it must have been after the birth of the simple light  
 In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm  
     Out of the whinnying green stable  
     On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house  
 Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,  
     In the sun born over and over,  
         I ran my heedless ways,  
     My wishes raced through the house high hay  
 And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows  
 In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs  
     Before the children green and golden  
         Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me  
 Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,  
     In the moon that is always rising,  
         Nor that riding to sleep  
     I should hear him fly with the high fields  
 And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.  
 Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
     Time held me green and dying  
         Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

#### Poem on his Birthday

In the mustardseed sun,  
 By full tilt river and switchback sea  
     Where the cormorants scud,  
 In his house on stilts high among beaks  
     And palavers of birds  
 This sandgrain day in the bent bay's grave  
     He celebrates and spurns  
 His driftwood thirty-fifth wind turned age;  
     Herons spire and spear.

Under and round him go  
 Flounders, gulls, on their cold, dying trails,  
     Doing what they are told,  
 Curlews aloud in the congered waves  
     Work at their ways to death,  
 And the rhymer in the long tongued room,  
     Who tolls his birthday bell,  
 Toils towards the ambush of his wounds;  
     Herons, steeple stemmed, bless.

In the thistledown fall,  
 He sings towards anguish; finches fly  
     In the claw tracks of hawks  
 On a seizing sky; small fishes glide  
     Through wynds and shells of drowned  
 Ship towns to pastures of otters. He  
     In his slant, racking house  
 And the hewn coils of his trade perceives  
     Hérons walk in their shroud,

The livelong river's robe  
 Of minnows wreathing around their prayer;  
     And far at sea he knows,  
 Who slaves to his crouched, eternal end  
     Under a serpent cloud,  
 Dolphins dive in their turmturtle dust,  
     The rippled seals streak down  
 To kill and their own tide daubind blood  
     Slides good in the sleek mouth.

In a cavernous, swung  
 Wave's silence, wept white angelus knells.  
     Thirty-five bells sing struck  
 On skull and scar where his loves lie wrecked,  
     Steered by the falling stars.  
 And tomorrow weeps in a blind cage  
     Terror will rage apart  
 Before chains break to a hammer flame  
     And love unbolts the dark

And freely he goes lost  
 In the unknown, famous light of great  
     And fabulous, dear God.  
 Dark is a way and light is a place,  
     Heaven that never was  
 Nor will be ever is always true,  
     And, in that brambled void,  
 Plenty as blackberries in the woods  
     The dead grow for His joy.

There he might wander bare  
 With the spirits of the horseshoe bay  
 Or the stars' seashore dead,  
 Marrow of eagles, the roots of whales  
 And wishbones of wild geese,  
 With blessed, unborn God and His Ghost,  
 And every soul His priest,  
 Gulled and chanter in young Heaven's fold  
 Be at cloud quaking peace,

But dark is a long way.  
 He, on the earth of the night, alone  
 With all the living, prays,  
 Who knows the rocketing wind will blow  
 The bones out of the hills,  
 And the scythed boulders bleed, and the last  
 Rage shattered waters kick  
 Masts and fishes to the still quick stars,  
 Faithlessly unto Him

Who is the light of old  
 And air shaped Heaven where souls grow wild  
 As horses in the foam:  
 Oh, let me midlife mourn by the shrined  
 And druid herons' vows  
 The voyage to ruin I must run,  
 Dawn ships clouted aground,  
 Yet, though I cry with tumbledown tongue,  
 Count my blessings aloud:

Four elements and five  
 Senses, and man a spirit in love  
 Tangling through this spun slime  
 To his nimbus bell cool kingdom come  
 And the lost, moonshine domes,  
 And the sea that hides his secret selves  
 Deep in its black, base bones,  
 Lulling of spheres in the seashell flesh,  
 And this last blessing most,

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

I hear the bouncing hills  
 Grow larked and greener at berry brown  
     Fall and the dew larks sing  
 Taller this thunderclap spring, and how  
     More spanned with angles ride  
 The mansouled fiery islands! Oh,  
     Holier then their eyes,  
 And my shining men no more alone  
     As I sail out to die.

#### After the funeral

After the funeral, mule praises, brays,  
 Windshake of sailshaped ears, muffle-toed tap  
 Tap happily of one peg in the thick  
 Grave's foot, blinds down the lids, the teeth in black,  
 The spittled eyes, the salt ponds in the sleeves,  
 Morning smack of the spade that wakes up sleep,  
 Shakes a desolate boy who slits his throat  
 In the dark of the coffin and sheds dry leaves,  
 That breaks one bone to light with a judgment clout,  
 After the feast of tear-stuffed time and thistles,  
 In a room with a stuffed fox and a stale fern.  
 I stand, for this memorial's sake, alone  
 In the snivelling hours with dead, humped Ann  
 Whose hooded, fountain heart once fell in puddles  
 Round the parched worlds of Wales and drowned each sun  
 (Though this for her is a monstrous image blindly  
 Magnified out of praise; her death was a still drop;  
 She would not have me sinking in the holy  
 Flood of her heart's fame; she would lie dumb and deep  
 And need no druid of her broken body).  
 But I, Ann's bard on a raised hearth, call all  
 The seas to service that her wood-tongued virtue  
 Babble like a bellbuoy over the hymning heads,  
 Bow down the walls of the ferned and foxy woods

That her love sing and swing through a brown chapel,  
 Bless her bent spirit with four, crossing birds.  
 Her flesh was meek as milk, but this skyward statue  
 With the wild breast and blessed and giant skull  
 Is carved from her in a room with a wet window  
 In a fiercely mourning house in a crooked year.  
 I know her scrubbed and sour humble hands  
 Lie with religion in their cramp, her threadbare  
 Whisper in a damp word, her wits drilled hollow,  
 Her fist of a face died clenched on a round pain;  
 And sculptured Ann is seventy years of stone.  
 These cloud-sopped, marble hands, this monumental  
 Argument of the hewn voice, gesture and psalm  
 Storm me forever over her grave until  
 The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry Love  
 And the strutting fern lay seeds on the black sill.

Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred

When the morning was waking over the war  
 He put on his clothes and stepped out and he died,  
 The locks yawned loose and a blast blew them wide,  
 He dropped where he loved on the burst pavement stone  
 And the funeral grains of the slaughtered floor.  
 Tell his street on its back he stopped a sun  
 And the craters of his eyes grew springshoots and fire  
 When all the keys shot from the locks, and rang.  
 Dig no more for the chains of his grey-haired heart.  
 The heavenly ambulance drawn by a wound  
 Assembling waits for the spade's ring on the cage.  
 O keep his bones away from that common cart,  
 The morning is flying on the wings of his age  
 And a hundred storks perch on the sun's right hand.

Ceremony After a Fire Raid

I

Myselfes  
 The grieviers  
 Grieve  
 Among the street burned to tireless death  
 A child of a few hours  
 With its kneading mouth  
 Charred on the black breast of the grave  
 The mother dug, and its arms full of fires.

Begin  
 With singing  
 Sing  
 Darkness kindled back into beginning  
 When the caught tongue nodded blind.  
 A star was broken  
 Into the centuries of the child  
 Myselfs grieve now, and miracles cannot atone.

Forgive  
 Us forgive  
 Give  
 Us your death that myselfs the believers  
 May hold it in a great flood  
 Till the blood shall spurt,  
 And the dust shall sing like a bird  
 As the grains blow, as your death grows, through our heart.

Crying  
 Your dying  
 Cry,  
 Child beyond cockcrow, by the fire-dwarfed  
 Street we chant the flying sea  
 In the body bereft.  
 Love is the last light spoken. Oh  
 Seed of sons in the loin of the black husk left.

## II

I know not whether  
 Adam or Eve, the adorned holy bullock  
 Or the white ewe lamb  
 Or the chosen virgin  
 Laid in her snow  
 On the altar of London,  
 Was the first to die  
 In the cinder of the little skull,  
 O bride and bride groom  
 O Adam and Eve together  
 Lying in the lull  
 Under the sad breast of the head stone  
 White as the skeleton  
 Of the garden of Eden.

I know the legend  
 Of Adam and Eve is never for a second  
 Silent in my service  
 Over the dead infants  
 Over the one  
 Child who was priest and servants,  
 Word, singers, and tongue  
 In the cinder of the little skull,  
 Who was the serpent's  
 Night fall and the fruit like a sun,  
 Man and woman undone,  
 Beginning crumbled back to darkness  
 Bare as the nurseries  
 Of the garden of wilderness.

### III

Into the organpipes and steeples  
 Of the luminous cathedrals,  
 Into the weathercocks' molten mouths  
 Rippling in twelve-winded circles,  
 Into the dead clock burning the hour  
 Over the urn of sabbaths  
 Over the whirling ditch of daybreak  
 Over the sun's hovel and the slum of fire  
 And the golden pavements laid in requiems,  
 Into the cauldrons of the statuary,  
 Into the bread in a wheatfield of flames,  
 Into the wine burning like brandy,  
 The masses of the sea  
 The masses of the sea under  
 The masses of the infant-bearing sea  
 Erupt, fountain, and enter to utter for ever  
 Glory glory glory  
 The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder.

### A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London

Never until the mankind making  
 Bird beast and flower  
 Fathering and all humbling darkness  
 Tells with silence the last light breaking  
 And the still hour  
 Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round  
 Zion of the water bead  
 And the Synagogue of the ear of corn  
 Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound  
 Or sow my salt seed  
 In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death.  
 I shall not murder  
 The mankind of her going with a grave truth  
 Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath  
 With any further  
 Elegy of innocence and youth.

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,  
 Robed in the long friends,  
 The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother;  
 Secret by the unmourning water  
 Of the riding Thames.  
 After the first death, there is no other.

Do not go gentle into that good night

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
 Because their words had forked no lightning they  
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
 Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
 And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
 Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

### Elegy

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

On that darkest day. Oh, forever may  
He live lightly, at last, on the last, crossed  
Hill, and there grow young, under the grass, in love,

Among the long flocks, and never lie lost  
Or still all the days of his death, though above  
All he longed all dark for his mother's breast

Which was rest and dust, and in the kind ground  
The darkest justice of death, blind and unblessed,  
Let him find no rest but be fathered and found,

I prayed in the crouching room, by his blind bed,  
In the muted house, one minute before  
Noon, and night, and light. The rivers of the dead

Moved in his poor hand I held, and I saw  
Through his faded eyes to the roots of the sea.  
Go calm to your crucified hill, I told

The air that drew away from him.

## Deaths and Entrances

On almost the incendiary eve  
     Of several near deaths.  
 When one at the great least of your best loved  
     And always known must leave  
 Lions and fires of his flying breath,  
     Of your immortal friends  
 Who'd raise the organs of the counted dust  
     To shoot and sing your praise,  
 One who called deepest down shall hold his peace  
     That cannot sink or cease  
     Endlessly to his wound  
 In many married London's estranging grief.

On almost the incendiary eve  
     When at your lips and keys,  
 Locking, unlocking, the murdered strangers weave,  
     One who is most unknown,  
 Your polestar neighbour, sun of another street,  
     Will dive up to his tears.  
 He'll bathe his raining blood in the male sea  
     Who strode for your own dead  
 And wind his globe out of your water thread  
     And load the throats of shells  
     With every cry since light  
 Flashed first across his thunderclapping eyes.

On almost the incendiary eve  
     Of deaths and entrances,  
 When near and strange wounded on London's waves  
     Have sought your single grave,  
 One enemy, of many, who knows well  
     Your heart is luminous  
 In the watched dark, quivering through locks and caves,  
     Will pull the thunderbolts  
 To shut the sun, plunge, mount your darkened keys  
     And sear just riders back,  
     Until that one loved least  
 Looms the last Samson of your zodiac.

## Vision and Prayer

I

Who  
Are you  
Who is born  
In the next room  
So loud to my own  
That I can hear the womb  
Opening and the dark run  
Over the ghost and the dropped son  
Behind the wall thin as a wren's bone?  
In the birth bloody room unknown  
To the burn and turn of time  
And the heart print of man  
Bows no baptism  
But dark alone  
Blessing on  
The wild  
Child.

I

Must lie  
Still as stone  
By the wren bone  
Wall hearing the moan  
Of the mother hidden  
And the shadowed head of pain  
Casting tomorrow like a thorn  
And the midwives of miracle sing  
Until the turbulent new born  
Burns me his name and his flame  
And the winged wall is torn  
By his torrid crown  
And the dark thrown  
From his loin  
To bright  
Light.

When  
 The wren  
 Bone writhes down  
 And the first dawn  
 Furiated by his stream  
 Swarms on the kingdom come  
 Of the dazzler of heaven  
 And the splashed mothering maiden  
 Who bore him with a bonfire in  
 His mouth and rocked him like a storm  
 I shall run lost in sudden  
 Terror and shining from  
 The once hooded room  
 Crying in vain  
 In the caldron  
 Of his  
 Kiss

In  
 the spin  
 Of the sun  
 In the spuming  
 Cyclone of his wing  
 For I was lost who am  
 Crying at the man drenched throne  
 In the first fury of his stream  
 And the lightnings of adoration  
 Back to black silence melt and mourn  
 For I was lost who have come  
 To dumbfounding haven  
 And the finding one  
 And the high noon  
 Of his wound  
 Blinds my  
 Cry.

There  
Crouched bare  
In the shrine  
Of his blazing  
Breast I shall waken  
To the judge blown bedlam  
Of the uncaged sea bottom  
The cloud climb of the exhaling tomb  
And the bidden dust upsailing  
With his flame in every grain.  
O spiral of ascension  
From the vultured urn  
Of the morning  
Of man when  
The land  
And

The  
Born sea  
Praised the sun  
The finding one  
And upright Adam  
Sang upon origin!  
O the wings of the children!  
The woundward flight of the ancient  
Young from the canyons of oblivion!  
The sky stride of the always slain  
In battle! the happening  
Of saints to their vision!  
The world winding home!  
And the whole pain  
Flows open  
And I  
Die.

## II

In the name of the lost who glory in  
 The swinish plains of carrion  
 Under the burial song  
 Of the birds of burden  
 Heavy with the drowned  
 And the green dust  
 And bearing  
 The ghost  
 From  
 The ground  
 Like pollen  
 On the black plume  
 And the beak of slime  
 I pray though I belong  
 Not wholly to that lamenting  
 Brethren for joy has moved within  
 The inmost marrow of my heart bone

That he who learns now the sun and moon  
 Of his mother's milk may return  
 Before the lips blaze and bloom  
 To the birth bloody room  
 Behind the wall's wren  
 Bone and be dumb  
 And the womb  
 That bore  
 For  
 All men  
 The adored  
 Infant light or  
 The dazzling prison  
 Yawn to his upcoming.  
 In the name of the wanton  
 Lost on the unchristened mountain  
 In the centre of dark I pray him

That he let the dead lie though they moan  
 For his briared hands to hoist them  
 To the shrine of his world's wound  
 And the blood drop's garden  
     Endure the stone  
     Blind host to sleep  
         In the dark  
         And deep  
             Rock  
             Awake  
             No heart bone  
             But let it break  
         On the mountain crown  
         Unbidden by the sun  
     And the beating dust be blown  
     Down to the river rooting plain  
     Under the night forever falling.

Forever falling night is a known  
 Star and country to the legion  
 Of sleepers whose tongue I toll  
     To mourn his deluging  
     Light through sea and soil  
     And we have come  
         To know all  
             Places  
             Ways  
             Mazes  
             Passages  
         Quarters and graves  
         Of the endless fall.  
     Now the common lazarus  
     Of the charting sleepers prays  
     Never to awake and arise  
 For the country of death is the heart's size

And the star of the lost the shape of the eyes.  
 In the name of the fatherless  
 In the name of the unborn  
 And the undesirers  
 Of midwiving morning's  
 Hands or instruments  
 O in the name  
 Of no one  
 Now or  
 No  
 One to  
 Be I pray  
 May the crimson  
 Sun spin a grave grey  
 And the colour of clay  
 Stream upon his martyrdom  
 In the interpreted evening  
 And the known dark of the earth amen.

I turn the corner of prayer and burn  
 In a blessing of the sudden  
 Sun. In the name of the damned  
 I would turn back and run  
 To the hidden land  
 But the loud sun  
 Christens down  
 The sky.  
 I  
 Am found.  
 O let him  
 Scald me and drown  
 Me in his world's wound.  
 His lightning answers my  
 Cry. My voice burns in his hand.  
 Now I am lost in the blinding  
 One. The sun roars at the prayer's end.







## Over Sir John's hill

Over Sir John's hill,  
 The hawk on fire hangs still;  
 In a hoisted cloud, at drop of dusk, he pulls to his claws  
 And gallows, up the rays of his eyes the small birds of the bay  
 And the shrill child's play  
 Wars  
 Of the sparrows and such who swansing, dusk, in wrangling hedges.  
 And blithely they squawk  
 To fiery tyburn over the wrestle of elms until  
 The flash the noosed hawk  
 Crashes, and slowly the fishing holy stalking heron  
 In the river Towy below bows his tilted headstone.

Flash, and the plumes crack,  
 And a black cap of jack—  
 Daws Sir John's just hill dons, and again the gulled birds hare  
 To the hawk on fire, the halter height, over Towy's fins,  
 In a whack of wind.  
 There  
 Where the elegiac fisherbird stabs and paddles  
 In the pebbly dab filled  
 Shallow and sedge, and 'dilly dilly,' calls the loft hawk,  
 'Come and be killed,'  
 I open the leaves of the water at a passage  
 Of psalms and shadows among the pincerred sandcrabs prancing

And read, in a shell,  
 Death clear as a buoy's bell:  
 All praise of the hawk on fire in hawk-eyed dusk be sung,  
 When his viperish fuse hangs looped with flames under the brand  
 Wing, and blest shall  
 Young  
 Green chickens of the bay and bushes cluck, 'dilly dilly,  
 Come let us die.'  
 We grieve as the blithe birds, never again, leave shingle and elm,  
 The heron and I,  
 I young Aesop fabling to the near night by the dingle  
 Of eels, saint heron hymning in the shell-hung distant

Christal harbour vale  
 Where the sea cobbles sail,  
 And wharves of water where the walls dance and the white cranes stilt.  
 It is the heron and I, under judging Sir John's elmed  
 Hill, tell-tale the knelled  
 Guilt  
 Of the led-astray birds whom God, for their breast of whistles,  
 Have mercy on,  
 God in his whirlwind silence save, who marks the sparrows hail,  
 For their souls' song.  
 Now the heron grieves in the weeded verge. Through windows  
 Of dusk and water I see the tilting whispering

Heron, mirrored, go,  
 As the snapt feathers snow,  
 Fishing in the tear of the Towy. Only a hoot owl  
 Hollows, a grassblade blown in cupped hands, in the looted elms,  
 And no green cocks or hens  
 Shout  
 Now on Sir John's hill. The heron, ankling the scaly  
 Lowlands of the waves,  
 Makes all the music; and I who hear the tune of the slow,  
 Wear-willow river, grave,  
 Before the lunge of the night, the notes on this time-shaken  
 Stone for the sake of the souls of the slain birds sailing.

### I Country Heaven

Always when He, in country heaven,  
 (Whom my heart hears),  
 Crosses the breast of the praising east and kneels,  
 Humble in all his planets,  
 And weeps on the abasing crest,

Then in the last ward and joy of beasts and birds  
 And the canonized valley  
 Where all sings, that was made and is dead,  
 And the angels whirr like pheasants  
 Through naves of leaves,

Light and His tears dewfall together  
 (O hand in hand)  
 Out of the pierced eyes and the cataract sky,  
 He cries his blood, and the suns  
 Dissolve and run down the raggèd

Gutters of his face: Heaven is blind and black.

## Prologue

This day winding down now  
 At God speeded summer's end  
 In the torrent salmon sun,  
 In my seashaken house  
 On a breakneck of rocks  
 Tangled with chirrup and fruit,  
 Froth, flute, fin and quill  
 At a wood's dancing hoof,  
 By scummed starfish sands  
 With their fishwife cross  
 Gulls, pipers, cockles, and sails,  
 Out there, crow black, men  
 Tackled with clouds, who kneel  
 To the sunset nets,  
 Geese nearly in heaven, boys  
 Stabbing, and herons, and shells  
 That speak seven seas,  
 Eternal waters away  
 From the cities of nine  
 Days' night whose towers will catch  
 In the religious wind  
 Like stalks of tall, dry straw,  
 At poor peace I sing  
 To you, strangers, (though song  
 Is a burning and crested act,  
 The fire of birds in  
 The world's turning wood,  
 For my sawn, splay sounds),  
 Out of these seathumbed leaves  
 That will fly and fall  
 Like leaves of trees and as soon  
 Crumble and undie  
 Into the dogdayed night.  
 Seaward the salmon, sucked sun slips,  
 And the dumb swans drub blue  
 My dabbed bay's dusk, as I hack  
 This rumpus of shapes  
 For you to know  
 How I, a spinning man,  
 Glory also this star, bird  
 Roared, sea born, man torn, blood blest.  
 Hark: I trumpet the place,  
 From fish to jumping hill! Look:  
 I build my bellowing ark  
 To the best of my love

As the flood begins,  
 Out of the fountainhead  
 Of fear, rage red, manalive,  
 Molten and mountainous to stream  
 Over the wound asleep  
 Sheep white hollow farms

To Wales in my arms.  
 Hoo, there, in castle keep,  
 You king singsong owls, who moonbeam  
 The flickering runs and dive  
 The dingle furred deer dead!  
 Huloo, on plumbed bryns,  
 O my ruffled ring dove  
 In the hooting, nearly dark  
 With Welsh and reverent rook,  
 Coo rooing the woods' praise,  
 Who moons her blue notes from her nest  
 Down to the curlew herd!  
 Ho, hullaballoing clan  
 Agape, with woe  
 In your beaks, on the gabbing capes!  
 Heigh, on horseback hill, jack  
 Whisking hare! who  
 Hears, there, this fox light, my flood ship's  
 Clangour as I hew and smite  
 (A clash of anvils for my  
 Hubbub and fiddle, this tune  
 On a tongued puffball)  
 But animals thick as thieves  
 On God's rough tumbling grounds  
 (Hails to His beasthood!)  
 Beasts who sleep good and thin,  
 Hist, in hogsback woods! The haystacked  
 Hollow farms in a throng  
 Of waters cluck and cling,  
 And barnroofs cockcrow war!  
 O kingdom of neighbours, finned  
 Felled and quilled, flash to my patch  
 Work ark and the moonshine  
 Drinking Noah of the bay,  
 With pelt, and scale, and fleece:  
 Only the drowned deep bells  
 Of sheep and churches noise  
 Poor peace as the sun sets  
 And dark shoals every holy field.  
 We shall ride out alone, and then,

Under the stars of Wales,  
Cry, Multitudes of arks! Across  
The water lidded lands,  
Manned with their loves they'll move,  
Like wooden islands, hill to hill.  
Huloo, my prowed dove with a flute!  
Ahoy, old, sea-legged fox,  
Tom tit and Dai mouse!  
My ark sings in the sun  
At God speeded summer's end  
And the flood flowers now.