

ON THE ORIGIN OF DYLAN THOMAS

I awoke in the midsummer not to call night, in the white and walk of the morning.

Dylan Thomas has such a distinctive voice that we assume he was born with it. No doubt there is some truth in that, but a poet's voice is always partly his own and partly borrowed or inherited, just like an ordinary voice. So where, assuming he wasn't just born with it, did his voice come from? I have four suggestions to make.

1

Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.

Nobody, for at least a hundred years after his death, could avoid the influence of Dickens. Not just the stylistic devices but the very rhythm of Dickens's prose wormed its way into every writer's subconscious. The influence is most obvious in Thomas's own prose, in *Under Milk Wood* and the short stories, the narration and the description as well as the characters and the incidents, but it is there in the poetry too. A few lines from *Poem in October*, set out as prose for comparison with the sentence from *Bleak House*, make the point.

Pale rain over the dwindling harbour and over the sea wet church the size of a snail with its horn 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.

Dickens was a master of the sentence and sentences are the backbone of Thomas's poems. Each verse of *In my Craft or Sullen Art* is a sentence. The same is true of many others. The sentences of which *Fern Hill* is composed provide, in their syntax, the building blocks of the whole poem, rhythm, sound and sense. Thomas thought in sentences. Not all poets do.

2

We are all conceived in close prison; in our mothers' wombs, we are close prisoners all; when we are born, we are born but to the liberty of the house; prisoners still, though within larger walls; and then all our life is but a going out to that place of execution, to death.

In his introduction to the *Collected Poems* (Dent, 1952) Thomas writes: 'I read somewhere of a shepherd who, when asked why he made, from within fairy rings, ritual observances to the moon to protect his flocks, replied, "I'd be a damn' fool if I didn't!" These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't.'

The themes of his poems are life and death, which he wrote about in ways that, in their use of words and their choice of imagery, could be taken for lines from the sermons of John Donne.

When, like a running grave, time tracks you down

And death shall have no dominion

It is the sinners' dust-tongued bell claps me to churches

The conversation of prayers about to be said

After the first death, there is no other

And all your deeds and words, each truth, each lie, die in unjudging love

At other times, as in *Do not go gentle into that good night*, the voice has the dramatic urgency, the immediacy, of George Herbert's in *The Collar*. The conduit for these influences, as much as his own reading of seventeenth century poetry, must have been Wales itself, its

chapels, its puritanical preachers and its hymns, some of which were written by George Herbert.

3

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a Den, and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and, as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold, I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked, and saw him open the book, and read therein; and, as he read, he wept, and trembled; and, not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, "What shall I do?"

Could we read the *Collected Poems* as a modern *Pilgrim's Progress*? The poems are brimful of biblical imagery and the people in them would not be out of place in Bunyan's allegory – or, come to that, in a medieval tapestry. The boys of summer in their ruin, the two sad knaves of thieves, the green unraveller, the dark brides, the star-gestured children in the park, a ghostly other, a cripple, the brassy orator, the sexton sentinel, a fiddling warden, the keeper of the key, the wanton starrer, the windy masons, the man in the wind and the west moon, the long world's gentleman, two-gunned Gabriel, the bagpipe-breasted ladies, the child going to bed and the man on the stairs, London's daughter, the long dead child, a girl mad as birds, the hunchback in the park, wise men, good men, wild men, grave men, the rough riding boys, the wayside brides, an old tormented man three-quarters blind.

4

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Perhaps you thought the quote at the head of this essay was something by Dylan Thomas himself, or perhaps you recognised it for what it is, something by Gerard Manley Hopkins. There are plenty of others to choose from, with all the word-play that we associate with the later poet. (Hopkins was writing in the 1870s and 80s, but his poems were not published until 1918 and seemed modern when Dylan Thomas was growing up.)

... the dappled-with-damson west... the down-dugged ground-hugged grey... with, all down darkness wide, his wading light... and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume... lovely the woods, waters, meadows, combes, vales... on meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank... time's vast, womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night...

Dylan Thomas made it his trade-mark and gave a bravura performance in the prologue to the *Collected Poems*:

*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*

and so on.

Was he sending himself up? Perhaps. When your style is so easy to parody, it's best to get in first. Or perhaps not. His *Author's Prologue* goes on to describe the poems as his 'bellowing ark' built 'out of the fountainhead of fear'.

There's more to Dylan Thomas than fishing boat bobbing seas.