

DEATH IN DYLAN THOMAS'S POEM "A REFUSAL TO MOURN THE DEATH, BY FIRE, OF A CHILD IN LONDON" AND ITS RELATION TO THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

O TEMA DA MORTE NO POEMA "A REFUSAL TO MOURN THE DEATH, BY FIRE, OF A CHILD IN LONDON" E SUA RELAÇÃO COM A TRADIÇÃO CRISTÃ

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ABSTRACT

Dylan Thomas wrote several poems dealing with the problem of death. "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" is dedicated to a child, victim of bombardment in London during World War II. The objective of this article is to analyse Dylan Thomas's attitude towards death according to this poem, and to compare it to the view of death according to the Christian tradition. In "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," the persona laments the absurdity of a child's death and, contradictorily, refuses to lament this death as if his lament were a profanation of its sacredness.

Key words: war, death, grief, Christian tradition

RESUMO

Dylan Thomas escreveu vários poemas tratando da morte. "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" é dedicado a uma criança, vítima dos bombardeios a Londres na Segunda Guerra Mundial. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar a atitude do poeta diante da morte, conforme se evidencia no poema, e compará-la com a visão sobre a morte e o morrer segundo a tradição cristã. Em "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", o poeta lamenta o absurdo da morte de uma criança e, contraditoriamente, rejeita lamentar essa morte, como se o lamento fosse uma profanação do caráter sagrado desse morrer.

Palavras-chave: guerra, morte, luto, tradição cristã

In the poetry of Dylan Thomas, the reality of death has a fundamental importance, becoming its most recurrent theme and concern. In his 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 October 27, 1914, and lived always under the impression of a the proximity of death, with a clear consciousness of his own mortality. 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. Critics like Elder Olson, for example, considered Thomas's poetry very difficult to understand, sometimes almost irrational, and lacking the necessary discipline. Others, like David Daiches, in spite of acknowledging 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 on 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). In my opinion, 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. by Ferris). The Welsh religion, a kind of rural Protestant Puritanism with its preaching festivals, its revivals, its hymns, gave Thomas also 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 had also 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 do 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 9 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. 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. by Shapiro 176).

The poem "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" was 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. This child 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 (Olson 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 included in 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 clauses. 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),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). But more than that, from the first stanza on it is possible to identify the various dichotomies of the poem: light-darkness, motion-stillness, fire-water, creation-death, prayer-blasphemy. 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). According to this argument, with which I agree, 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). But I think that the image of the “ear of corn” is much more linked with the symbol of eucharist than with the church itself.

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^{3/4} 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

¹ The parenthetical references to the poem are presented according to the poem’s structure. Stanzas and lines will be indicated by Arabic numerals, separated by a full stop.

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). I can question Montgomery’s view, since the poem suggests that there is a final moment in history, a “last light braking,” a “still hour”, a death after which “there is no other”. 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. 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)

In my opinion, the idea of integration in nature does not fit into the orthodox Christian view. The poem freely plays with traditional images and proposes a new eschatology.

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, although in the Christian tradition death is personalized. 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). I would prefer to say that the salt seed stands for fertility and infertility, rather than to killing and seeding de soil.

Montgomery 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 also refer to the Jewish habit of wearing sackcloths and gray during the period of mourning, which I think is a preferable reading. 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), and I agree with her. 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, which is quite dubious. 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, something that Greenway has also observed (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). William 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). This is a reasonable idea, considering the strong evidences of the poem.

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), which in a way contrasts with the Christian faith in the resurrection of the body. But the beads can also be understood as those used for counting prayers (246), which suggests a more conventional connection with the Christian tradition.

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, which 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). This reading is possible but not fully satisfactory, because it implies a world view much more akin to Buddhism than to Dylan Thomas’s Christian

heritage.

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). According to this argument, to be a conscious individual is to break the harmony of the cosmos (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,

[t]he 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, "[a]fter 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, and 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). Death is a natural thing, therefore there is no reason for mourning. Ralph Maud, by 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 seems to also 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.”

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 taken 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 very different from the traditional Christian vision, 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 border of the universe. Nature is sacralized, taking God’s place in the manifestation and communication of 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, mixed with some other non-Christian elements, and used for aesthetic and philosophical intentions rather than, let us say, for theological or devotional reasons.

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 to 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. Kierkegaard would say that death is not the fundamental problem, but existence, not dying but living. Nevertheless, to the extent that death, for Dylan Thomas, constitutes a problem involving the whole humankind, he agrees with the Christian tradition which takes it as a tragedy common to all the human race. But the Christian tradition offers the doctrine of the resurrection of the body as the counterbalance to the reality of death, and Thomas seems to plunge into the experience of dying as a re-absorption into nature.

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, indicating a breaking up in the relationship with God, Thomas's poems in general present the forces of nature and the process of death as having a religious significance, a divine character. The poem "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" can exemplify very well Thomas's idea of the 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, the poet finds redemption, communion with God and life, a sense of accomplishment and the intensification of his existence. 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 signal of it. For the Christian tradition the individual has to transcend nature in order to find the true God, who is beyond nature.

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, like this child, he generally makes it in the context of a personal involvement, a personal relationship.

Thomas uses the Christian images and rituals in order to celebrate the dead, showing the importance a dead person can have to the living, and how the living can deal with the reality of the death of the other. Thomas communicates a sense of solidarity with the dead one, an impression that the living is directly affected by the death of the other. 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. Death 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. For the Christian tradition, death becomes a sacred act only through martyrdom, which is a sacrifice in the name of faith. For Thomas, the dead one, either his father, or his aunt, or the old man in the streets of London, or the child, they are all saints in their death, they are martyrs. They are elevated from the state of mortals to the state of saints, of idealized figures, of symbols of respect. 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 plunging 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.

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