

DYLAN THOMAS'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH IN THE POEM “AFTER THE FUNERAL”

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Resumo: O poeta gaulês Dylan Thomas escreveu vários poemas tratando da morte de outras pessoas. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar a atitude do poeta diante da morte, conforme se evidencia no poema “After the funeral,” um poema dedicado à sua tia Annie Jones, e compará-la com a visão sobre a morte e o morrer segundo a tradição cristã. Neste poema, memória e exuberância verbal se entrelaçam numa elegia cheia de emoção e crítica à hipocrisia da sociedade. Evidencia-se claramente a dificuldade que o ser humano tem de lidar com honestidade e franqueza com a realidade da morte.

Abstract: Dylan Thomas wrote several poems dealing with the death of another person. The objective of this article is to analyse Dylan Thomas's attitude towards death, as can be deduced from his poem “After the funeral,” dedicated to his aunt Annie Jones, and compare it with the view of death and dying, according to Christian tradition. In this specific poem, memory and verbal exuberance mingle in an elegy full of emotion and criticism of social hypocrisy. People's difficult in facing the reality of death with honesty and frankness is clearly evident.

Palavras-chave: morte; memória; luto e rito

Key words: death; memory; grief and ritual

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 the iambic

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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” (1959, p. 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.

(Thomas, 1993, p. 73)

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” (p. 101). The first part describes the ritual of the funeral and the funeral feast (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 (lines 21-26) describes the poet’s attempt to be “Ann’s bard.” The third part (lines 27-40) 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, p. 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, p. 33). The hypocrisy of 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 (1957, p. 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 the digging up of the bones of the dead, 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, 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” (l. 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 is 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. Annie Jones’s humility contrasts with the hypocrisy of that Puritan society, comments Aneurin Talfan Davies (p. 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 as she refuses 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, p. 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 (p. 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 connect 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" (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 (p. 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 (l. 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 are examples of the contrasting images referred to by Talfan Davies. 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" (p. 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", l. 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 Jones 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 human life after death through the biological process of the natural world (Ackerman, p. 104). Indeed, the idea of the permanence of life through the elements and movements seems to be present 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.

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.

In “After the Funeral” the persona is trying to preserve the memory of his

aunt, transforming in fact her individuality into a symbol of mythological importance. Luther and Calvin, representative of the Protestant thought, 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 is 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 it waits for the resurrection, and the spirit is conducted towards God's presence, where it 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. Thus, the poem 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's qualities, which are examples of consistent Christian traits, 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 Thomas's father. Yet, contrasting with the Christian tradition, in spite of using Christian figures, images, and language, the poet goes in 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, and according to Calvin's and Luther's doctrines. 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.

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. 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). Thus the relations between the individuals will not be destroyed by death. The understanding of love as something eternal, something that death cannot destroy, gives 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 to handle Christian symbols aesthetically.

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