

JA– John Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, Macmillan, 1991.

BH– Barbara Hardy, *Dylan Thomas: An Original Language*, U. of Georgia Press, 2000.

ART– A.-R. Tellier, *La Poésie de Dylan Thomas (Thèmes et formes)*, PUF, 1963.

WYT– W. Y. Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas*, Thames & Hudson, 1962.

Personal, social and political aspects of DT's poetry

- “My poetry is, or should be, useful to me for one reason: it is the record of my individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light. (...) What is hidden should be made naked. To be stripped of darkness is to be clean, to strip of darkness is to make clean.” **DT**, reply to “An Enquire”, *New Verse*, 1934. “Poetry, heavy in tare though nimble, should be as orgastic and organic as copulation, dividing and unifying, personal but private, propagating the individual in the mass and the mass in the individual.” **DT**, 1935 letter to Charles Fisher.
- “The close proximity of industry, countryside and the sea — a familiar feature of South Wales.” “It [DT's beginnings] was in 1931, the bitterest year of the Depression in Wales, and the years of severe poverty and unemployment.” “It has been insufficiently realised that the mind and imagination that produced the early introspective, astonishingly original but generally solipsistic verse was as informed and socially aware as the more political poets of the period.” “... a lost Nonconformist, wrestling with an inherited religion and Puritan ethos.” “[DT] had become the first civilian war-poet.” **JA**
- “He wrote poetry which is not only unpolitical (...) but which fascinatingly and freshly reimagines region, abstracting and metonymizing the subjects of nest and habitat while warmly sustaining the common sense of loved times and places.” “He is a poet of region, not nation. He uses and praises a beloved seascape and landscape which are at once very personal and also marvelously abstracted and mythologized.” **BH**

Themes, motifs and sources

- “This sea-town [Swansea] was my world.” **DT**, “Reminiscences of childhood”, in *Quite Early One Morning*
- “... his sea-haunted pastoral verse.” “While biblical language and rhythms influenced T's style, the Puritanism of his Welsh background colours the introspective, obsessive, sexual and religious currents of feeling.” “The lyric poet was learning to grow old. It produced that luminous exploration of the joy and tragedy of the human condition whose mainspring was a pantheistic apprehension of the universe and whose expression was in pastoral fable.” “Essentially, T's poetry is informed by the recognition of a radical relationship between human and natural life.” “T's poetic style is based on the primacy of ‘physical feeling’, seeking its roots in the senses (...)

and drawing its images from the physical body and the natural world.” “In T’s later verse (...) the natural world is conveyed not with the static realism of a still-life presentation but rather with the fluid, active and heightened evocation more peculiar to visionary experience; while the ‘disciplined’ aspect of this presentation lies in the elaborate, painstakingly achieved structure of sound.” **JA**

- “... the *hwyl*, the rapturous release of strong feeling expected in Welsh sermons.” “... an incessant concern with assonantal and alliterative patterns: T’s metaphors of hacking, sawing, toiling and hewing are strictly appropriate.” “There are several ways in which a localized image or meaning makes itself structurally conspicuous, undermining or replacing teleological progression and unity. T’s images — similes, metaphors, synecdoches and personifications usually presenting a visual or tactile appeal, usually making some sense impact — are complex. They tend to join particularized sensuousness with idea or abstraction, making the familiar strange or the strange familiar, or both.” “There are very few of T’s poems which do not offer a meditation on nature. Many can be called poems about nature.” **BH**

- « Le pourrissement *après* la mort, s’il n’est pas entièrement absent de l’œuvre, ne constitue pourtant pas lui-même l’aspect principal. (...) C’est visiblement le phénomène de décomposition au sein de la vie qui obsède surtout T et qui apparaît comme l’aspect essentiel du thème de la mort dans sa poésie. (...) L’imagination lui fait découvrir le ver qui ronge l’homme vivant, qui le mine depuis sa naissance, et qui, oserait-on dire, fait partie de la chair elle-même. » « À quelque niveau que l’on porte la discussion des poèmes de DT : individu, hommes contemporains du poète, ou générations successives, on est constamment obligé de revenir au thème du temps. » « [Le] symbolisme climatique et astrologique n’[est] autre que l’affleurement de la double obsession de l’unité regrettée et de la multiplicité changeante et douloureuse. » « T est obsédé par toute une gamme, non seulement de liquides, mais encore, et de manière plus générale, de substances qui, selon leur température, et éventuellement selon l’époque de l’année, sont fluides, molles, ou au contraire sèches et durcies. » **ART**

- “Whether praised or dismissed, God and Christ are always around in T’ poetry — not in their proper capacities, however, but as metaphors for nature, poet, and their creative powers. (...) When he talks about God or Christ, he has nature in mind or himself, as creator and sufferer.” **WYT**

Forms and the process of writing

- “I am a painstaking, conscientious, involved and devious craftsman in words. (...) Every device there is in language is there to be used.” **DT**, “Poetic Manifesto”, in *Early Prose Writings*

- “A poem by myself needs a host of images, because its centre is a host of images. I make one image (...) let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time.” **DT**, 1938 letter to Henry Treece. “I like things that are difficult to write and difficult to understand; I like ‘redeeming the contraries’ with secretive images; I like contradicting my images, saying two things at once in one word, four in two and one in six. (...) I think [poetry] should work from words, from the substance of words and the rhythm of substantial word set together, not towards words.” **DT**, 1935 letter to Charles Fisher.

- “Meaning in a poem by T is compounded as much in the emotional and sensory impact as in the intellectual or conceptual import.” “It is the individual word or phrase, rather than the development of idea, that gives propulsion to a poem by T.” “T cannot resist the pun, the joke, the wittily surprising.” “The fact that T’s poetry is more easily understood after hearing it read aloud, particularly by the poet, proves the importance of the aural pattern in its structures. Sound and rhythm frequently indicate which words and which ideas are linked; for the structure of the poem was often musical rather than syntactical.” **JA**

- “There is dislocation and radical new construction in T, but many — probably most — of his poems are unified in a common and classical way, and proceed to some kind of telos or conclusion. (...) But what marks many of the poems which do have an apparently or superficially conventional temporal form — at least a beginning and end — is a repetitiveness or suspension, a dislocation or refusal to proceed during the poem.” “T often jammed together images unrelated in origin, theme, and register. But the image may constitute the whole poem, not just forming or occupying a part or producing a local effect.” **BH**

- « La poésie de T (...), plus que toute autre, se caractérise par le nombre restreint des thèmes et la riche multitude des symboles et des combinaisons verbales. (...) Les thèmes et, éventuellement, les messages, sont amplement conditionnés par les mots, et non ceux-ci par ceux-là. » « Poussée à ce point, l’imagination symbolique, qui tend déjà normalement à brouiller les niveaux de signification, va plus loin encore : elle *crée* des contradictions là où le sens commun ne voit qu’homogénéité; elle efface en revanche, et abolit en vertu d’une analogie profonde les contradictions que l’opinion ordinaire serait tentée de considérer comme essentielles. » « C’est à la finale du vers que se développent de manière très souple mais ample *le jeu de remplissage vocalique d’éléments consonantiques* et, corrélativement, celui des *variations de consonnes autour d’un centre vocalique*. Cela revient à dire que l’unité supérieure au niveau de laquelle se développent les échos, c’est la strophe et le poème tout entier. » « T fait preuve bien souvent d’un très réel sens phonétique dans la façon dont il conçoit les rimes et surtout dans la manière dont *il les enchaîne en une suite fondue, dont les éléments passent insensiblement d’une sonorité à une autre*. (...) Ce qui se passe à la rime n’est, en somme, (...) qu’un cas particulier, dans une situation privilégiée, des phénomènes que nous avons signalés à propos de l’intérieur des vers. » **ART**

Reception and assessment of D.T.

- “It was D.T.’s gift as a reader, both of his poetry and his prose, that created in his lifetime the conditions most essential to his poetry’s success: delight in the sound and dramatic power of verse. For him reading aloud was a highly disciplined art.” **JA**

- “T’s critics (...) have been keen on explication of meanings, and have sometimes tried to explain his obscurity and strangeness rather than accept and place them in the modernist tradition. (...) They have (...) often filled in gaps which he leaves, or completed what he leaves incomplete.” **BH**

Chronology and evolution

- “In the early poetry, T explores the unity between man and nature, mainly in terms of his own body, with a concentration on such processes as conception, birth, sexuality and death.” “The

impact of war deepened his poetic vision and gave it a tragic as well as public resonance. (...) The horrors of war also drove T to re-create remembered happiness in his luminous evocations of childhood in such poems as ‘The Hunchback in the park’, ‘Fern Hill’ and ‘Poem in October.’” “While *25 Poems* continues the self-questioning and rebellious mood of *18 Poems* and there is the same obsessive concern with death, sex, sin and the isolation of the individual, there are poems of greater immediate clarity and intelligibility.” “[DT] moved in *Death and Entrances* from the largely solipsistic universe of the early poetry to the luminous chronicles of the natural world around him.” **JA**

A few specific comments

- “‘After the funeral’ is his ‘Lycidas’, just as ‘Fern Hill’ is his ‘Paradise Lost’, though perhaps also his ‘Paradise Regained’¹.” **BH**
- “Though an actual remembered place is re-created [in ‘The Hunchback’], it could really be anywhere, and the poem is certainly not appropriately or adequately described as a Welsh poem about a Welsh place. (...) It is about any park.” **BH**
- “In ‘The force...’ and ‘Fern Hill’, T is meditating on art and nature at one and the same time. (...) The poems are Janus-faced, looking evenly in two directions. (...) They are poems which almost succeed in crossing the threshold from human nature to nonhuman nature, which attempt to assert — and demonstrate — that such a threshold does not exist. (...) These two big poems are both occupied with greenness, in its many meanings.” **BH**

¹These are three poems by Milton, the first a pastoral elegy, the other two epics.