

## More than a lullaby: Dylan Thomas's attitude towards death in the poem "In Country Sleep"

**Abstract:** Dylan Thomas wrote several poems dealing with the problem of death. Some of them deal not only with the death of an individual but with the end of the whole humankind. "In Country Sleep" is a poem that brings this wider perspective about death, the death of the human race. This poem was dedicated to Thomas's daughter Aeronwy, and deals with the human life in its wider, cosmic perspective. The objective of this article is to analyse Dylan Thomas's attitude towards death according to this poem, and to compare it to the Christian tradition view of death.

**Keywords:** life, death, cosmos, faith, fear.

**Resumo:** Dylan Thomas escreveu vários poemas tratando da morte. Alguns deles lidam não apenas com a morte de um indivíduo, mas de toda a humanidade. "In Country Sleep" é um poema que traz essa perspectiva mais ampla a respeito da morte, falando do fim do gênero humano. Este poema foi dedicado a sua filha Aeronwy e trata da vida humana em seu aspecto mais amplo, cósmico. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar a atitude de Dylan Thomas diante da morte de acordo com o poema e compará-la com a tradição cristã.

**Palavras-chave:** vida, morte, cosmos, fé, medo.

Dylan Thomas wrote many 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 soli-

clarity 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 Sleep", and his "Prologue" to the *Collected Poems*.

The poem "In Country Sleep" makes part of that great cluster of poems dealing with the destruction of the earth in the atomic era. As many other late poems by Thomas, this one has a larger, looser rhythm, with a slower and docile movement, and a less concentrated, less packed, less dark style "effects" (Fraser, 1959, pp. 228-9). In spite of being the result of a more mature vision of the world and a more developed concept of poetry, the poem is not a simple one, since it gives room to several different interpretations. For H. H. Kleinman (1963) this poem is a moving "statement of fatherhood in its hope and fear and anguish and love" in the style of Yeats's "Prayer For My Daughter" and Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" (p. 7). In fact, in the poem the poet addresses his daughter, and warns her about the coming of the Thief and shows her the importance of maintaining faith in a world full of risks and uncertainties. The poem suggests this address of a father to his daughter in the middle of the night, in a time of menace and fear. But more than a poem dealing with fatherhood, "In Country Sleep" presents a vision of the world surrounded by terrors and menaces of death, a vision of the individual lost between imaginary and real dangers.

The poem is seen by Donald Williams Bruce as an “elaborate lullaby for his daughter Aeronwy, born in 1943”, and as “a criss-cross of stories and nursery rhymes from various compilations issued under the name of Mother Goose” (p. 4). The poem was finished and published only in 1947 in the *Horizon*, and published in 1952 in Thomas’s *In Country Sleep*. The poem is divided into two parts in which the poet addresses his daughter, saying:

# I

Never and never, my girl riding far and near  
In the land of the hearthstone tales, and spelled asleep,  
Fear or believe that the wolf in a sheepwhite hood  
Loping and bleating roughly and blithely shall leap,  
My dear, my dear,  
Out of a lair in the flocked leaves in the dew dipped year  
To eat your heart in the house in the rosy wood.

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 ravened 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

And sly as snow and meek as dew blown to the thorn,  
This night and each vast night until the stern bell talks  
In the tower and tolls to sleep over the stalts  
Of the hearthstone tales my own, last love; and the soul walks  
The waters shorn.

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 on the wind-  
Milled dust of the apple tree and the pounded islands  
Of the morning leaves, as the star falls, as the winged  
Apple seed glides,

And falls, and flowers in the yawning wound at our sides,  
As the world falls, silent as the cyclone of silence.

## II

Night and the reindeer on the clouds above the haycocks  
And the wings of the great roc ribboned for the fair!  
The leaping saga of prayer! And high, there, on the hare-  
Heeled winds the rooks  
Cawing from their black bethels soaring, the holy books  
Of birds! Among the cocks like fire the red fox

Burning! Night and the vein of birds in the winged, sloe wrist  
Of the wood! Pastoral beat of blood through the laced leaves!  
The stream from the priest black wristed spinney and sleeves  
Of thistling frost  
Of the nightingale's din and tale! The upgiven ghost  
Of the dingle torn to singing and the surpliced

Hill of cypresses! The din and tale in the skimmed  
Yard of the buttermilk rain on the pail! The sermon  
Of blood! The bird loud vein! The saga from mermen  
To seraphim  
Leaping! The gospel rooks! All tell, this night, of him  
Who comes as red as the fox and sly as the heeled wind.

Illumination of music! the lulled black backed  
Gull, on the wave with sand in its eyes! And the foal moves  
Through the shaken greensward lake, silent, on moonshod hooves,  
In the winds' wakes.  
Music of elements, that a miracle makes!  
Earth, air, water, fire, singing into the white act,

The haygold haired, my love asleep, and the rift blue  
Eyed, in the haloed house, in her rareness and hilly  
High riding, held and blessed and true, and so stillly  
Lying the sky  
Might cross its planets, the bell weep, night gather her eyes,  
The Thief fall on the dead like the willynilly dew,  
Only for the turning of the earth in her holy  
Heart! Slyly, slowly, hearing the wound in her side go  
Round the sun, he comes to my love like the designed snow,  
And truly he  
Flows to the strand of flowers like the dew's ruly sea,  
And surely he sails like the ship shape clouds. Oh he

Comes designed to my love to steal not her tide raking  
Wound, nor her riding high, nor her eyes, nor kindled hair,  
But her faith that each vast night and the saga of prayer  
He comes to take  
Her faith that this last night for his unsacred sake  
He comes to leave her in the lawless sun awaking

Naked and forsaken to grieve he will not come.  
Ever and ever by all your vows believe and fear  
My dear this night he comes and night without end my dear  
Since you were born:  
And you shall wake, from country sleep, this dawn each first dawn,  
Your faith as deathless as the outcry of the ruled sun.

The poem is divided into two great parts, the first contains nine stanzas and the second contains eight. Each stanza of the first part has seven verses of twelve syllables, except the fifth verse, which comprises only four. Each verse of the second part contains six verses of twelve syllables, except for the fourth verse. The rhyme scheme of the first part stanzas is: ABCBAAC; and the second part stanzas are organized as: ABBCCA. The poem is rich in terms of rhythmic variation and musicality, with many occurrences of alliteration, consonance and assonance like: "... as the winged / Apple seed glides / And falls, and flowers in the yawning wound at our sides, / As the world falls, silent as the cyclone of silence" (I.9.4-7).

The persona addresses his daughter, for whom he expresses his love and care, and warns her about the coming of the "Thief", telling her not to fear the terrible creatures of the imaginary world, "the wolf in a sheep-white hood" (I.1.3), the "gooseherd or swine" (I.2.3), the "tusked prince" (I.6.2), but to learn that the "Thief" will certainly come. Those fearful imaginary creatures of the world of fairy-tales told at night before sleep, presented at the beginning of the poem cannot be compared with the real fear of the Thief. The first stanza alludes to the story of the girl "spelled asleep" (I.1.2), the Sleeping Beauty, and the threatening "wolf in a sheepwhite hood" (I.1.3). The second stanza alludes to the story of the mother goose and seems to suggest a sexual initiation with the images of the "prince" (I.2.5) courting the honeyed girl's heart (I.2.6) and the "boys and ganders" (I.2.7), and states that the girl can sleep calm and safe because nothing bad will happen. The third stanza reaffirms the same idea and 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 Eliah 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 eter-

nally 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. In my opinion, the Thief cannot be totally identified with God or Death only, but with something else in human experience: the loss of faith. The poem clearly alludes to the biblical image of the second coming of Christ as a Thief, but uses this image as a metaphor for the loss of faith and the experience of maturity.

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, what 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. The Thief comes to replace innocence with experience.

William York Tindall believes that the Thief represents death or time, or even Jesus Christ (Younis, 1991, p. 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" (quoted by Ferris, 1977, pp. 226-7). Eric J. Sundquist (1979) suggests 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” (pp. 72-3). The Thief is then interpreted as an agent of the fall (p. 73), a mixture of sex, rape, and death (pp. 73-4). In fact, the Thief can be identified with the experience of time and death as loss of innocence, abandon of illusion and dissolution of faith.

Raymond Aaron Younis (1991) 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”, 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’” (p. 123). For Younis, Time and death are only natural forces, universal aspects of the natural world (p. 123). The Thief cannot also be identified with Jesus, because Jesus cannot be described as “sly”, the Thief represents the force that “seeks to rob the girl of her faith” (p. 124). The losing of faith is compared with nakedness, since it represents the loss of every benediction and grace, that means the Thief is that which brings despair (p. 124), what 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 (1977, pp. 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*, pp. 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 (1987, p. 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, 1994, p. 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” (I.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” (I.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” (p. 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 (p. 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” (p. 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 plunge 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 take the Christian tradition and myth as discarded “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” (p. 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 (1963, p. 114). Maud continues, saying that

Thomas’ message to his sleeping child is that the Thief will not leave her forsaken. To paraphrase a very complicated sentence: she has a faith that each night Death comes to dispel her fear that he will leave her to grieve he will not come. Sleep is a small death, and confirms each night death’s presence in the world (Maud, 1963, p. 114).

And Maud finishes stating that “life is given security by being bounded by death” (p. 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).

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 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 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 (1967) and Luther (1932; 1983; 1987) 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 (1944; 1949; 1962; 1984; 1995) 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. Death happens not as something the individual does consciously, but as something beyond the scope of his decision and existence, therefore he cannot die. 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, 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, 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. In his poem, Thomas's idea of sacredness of death, the notion of death as a mystery that is beyond human understanding, is evident. This idea 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.

In his poems dealing with the death of humankind, Thomas proves to be conscious of the end of history, to be conscious of the annihilation of the human race, to be conscious 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. 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. 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.

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