

‘Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night’: Dylan Thomas and the Art of Dying

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In his recent essay *The Mythic Death of Dylan Thomas*,¹ Robert Minhinnick argues that one of the reasons why readers today have heard of Dylan Thomas is the nature of his death:

Today, however, it’s a fact – sad but true – that most people in the UK, and especially I believe in Wales, are interested in Dylan Thomas not because of his poetry, but because he had the good fortune and sound career sense to die a true Bohemian death in ... New York City ... If Dylan had died in a London hospital two days after, say, a heavy session at The Wheatsheaf or The Fitrovia, he would be known today, but not celebrated.

Minhinnick may well be onto something here: one only has to look at the death of Keats, or the deaths of various twentieth and twenty-first century rock stars, to see the impact that far-flung, outlandish or early death can have on the popularity and reputation of an artist’s work. As a devotee of Dylan Thomas’s language though, his craft, I want to argue something different. Dylan Thomas’s writing, it seems to me, endures and is celebrated not because of his death but rather, in part, due to his attitude *towards* death, the way the sonically perfect and beautifully formed villanelle ‘Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night’ gives us a position on death which is passionately expressed and, ultimately, stupidly heroic.

When I think of the reasons why I love Dylan Thomas’s work, many of them revolve around death. Among his short stories, ‘Who Do You Wish

Was With Us,' an incredibly poignant portrait of loss, is my favourite. If I had to pick favourite lines from his poems, my choice would be an obvious one – though of course these lines are an obvious choice for a reason: 'Time held me green and dying/Though I sang in my chains like the sea.'² One of the most moving poetry events I have been to was in the Dylan Thomas Boathouse last year, when a Laugharne actor gave an incredible rendition of 'And Death Shall Have No Dominion' in the intimate space of those rooms, the water lapping just a few feet away and the night coming in. And then, of course, just to show the range of what Dylan Thomas can do with death, there are these lines from *Under Milk Wood*: 'But I always think as we tumble into bed/Of little Willy Wee who is dead, dead, dead...'³

It's from another line in Thomas's play for voices that I think can be drawn one of the first things that makes 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night' a masterpiece. Although the technical restrictions of a villanelle make them difficult to write, the repetition of the refrain lines, and the frequency with which they come round mean that, if you have two great lines of poetry, it's difficult not to write a good villanelle. Because this is Dylan Thomas, of course, he gives us not two great lines of poetry, but two of the greatest lines of poetry which have ever been written. And the reason for the greatness of his first line, 'Do not go gentle into that good night' (p. 148), can be seen in a line from *Under Milk Wood* with a very different subject and tone: 'when she smiles is there dimples?' (p. 6)

'When she smiles are there dimples' would've been a good line. 'When she smiles is there dimples' is a great line. That wrongness, that idiosyncrasy, that capturing of childish language, is a great strength in Thomas, and is among the reasons why the line 'Do not go gentle into that good night' endures. The wrongness of that 'gentle,' the childishness of it, is one thing that separates writers like Dylan Thomas from the rest of us mere mortals. That one word ensures that this poem will last forever, but I want to make the case that the greatness of the word is due to its thematic importance as well as the way its sonic sore thumb lodges in the brain. The thing is that in the face of death we are, all of us, children. One need only visit a funeral and watch grown men howling like newborns to know this. Our attitude towards death never really matures: those first, childish, late-at-night *It can't be true, It can't be trues* aren't really something we move beyond. Religion, of course, offers some way out, and from this point of view it's worth considering Thomas's poem alongside another great human response to death:

Holy Sonnet X

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
 Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou art not soe,
 For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
 Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee.
 From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,
 Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
 And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
 Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.
 Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,
 And dost with poyson, warre and sicknesse dwell,
 And poppie, or charmes can makes us sleepe as well,
 And better then thy stroake; why swell'st thou then?
 One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
 And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.⁴

There is much in this poem which Thomas may have drawn on. There is the commanding direct address of the poem's first clause, for example, though tellingly, where Donne commands Death, Thomas commands us and, ultimately, in his last stanza, his father, to be bold in the face of death. Where Thomas's poem never turns from the power of death, the way it comes round as inevitably as his villanelle's brute repetitions, Donne's poem aims at diminishing the power of death: 'though some have called thee/Mighty and dreadfull...thou art not soe,/For, those whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,/Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee.' And of course, Donne has good reason and justification for undermining death – the whole accumulated weight of Christian faith: 'One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,/And death shall be no more; death thou shalt die.' By contrast, Thomas, in a room with his dying father, has no such religious consolation. He knows that he gets one father, and that his father gets one life, and that his was unsatisfactory – the poem is full of references to his father's thwarted literary ambitions: 'Because their words had forked no lightning they/Do not go gentle into that good night... Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright/Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay.' In the face of all this, the absolute tragedy of the end of his one father's thwarted life, Thomas offers the stupid and childish heroism of that wonderful misused adjective, the repetition of those refrains which he throws in the face of our powerlessness: 'Do not go gentle into that good night./Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'

So, 'gentle' is not a bad choice. But by the time he's writing this poem, Thomas knows something about the economy of words, how not just to be a genius but also to put front and centre that he is one. Aside from his creative work, one of the most wonderful Dylan Thomas books you can read is Paul Ferris's edition of his collected letters. A thousand pages of absolute farce, absolute mess, they're a wonderful antidote to the fools who don't like Thomas because they think he's bardic, overblown, self-important. They might well bring you to the conclusion that Thomas was killed as much by a life as a freelancer, the editors and event organisers who he pursued and pursued for what they owed him, as he was by the straight whiskies or that winking needle. Thomas had to think about money constantly, and it's no surprise from that point of view that he hits us over the head with his brilliance. 'Time held me green and dying/
Though I sang in my chains like the sea' isn't buried in the middle of a poem. 'And death shall have no dominion,' as well as being a title, is repeated six times in three stanzas.

If 'gentle' is great then, let's have a big pink neon sign round it, saying *Look at me, look at me, look at me*. It's not just its wrongness that makes it stick out, but also the sonic patterning of the line. For one thing, it's one of few words in the line which aren't monosyllables. For another, that one soft 'g' surrounded by those hard 'g's – 'go,' 'good' – draws attention. And for another, the way that 't' echoes the 't' sounds around it – 'not,' 'into,' 'that,' 'night' – gives the line a lovely ringing harmony. 'Gentle' is the star here, but it's the words Thomas surrounds it with, the supporting cast, which allow it to soar, which mean it's quoted by people who've never read the poem, by people who've never heard of Dylan Thomas.

With a line this good, Thomas is halfway to a great villanelle. And his other refrain line 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light' is none too bad either. Again, it's that sense, given to us by the repetition within and of this line that, in the face of the absolute power of death, all you can offer is a powerless, insistent, impassioned *No*, which makes this line and poem for me so stupidly heroic. It's that which makes this line endure, but again the sonic beauty of the line doesn't hurt at all. On this occasion, it's the assonance, the way we move from the 'a' sound in the line's first three words to the 'i' sound in 'dying' and 'light' which makes the line so wonderfully musical.

More than that, though, what makes this line great is the way Thomas plays with rhythm. The poem is written in iambic pentameter, and it's quite rare that there is any quarrel between the rhythmic stresses of this

metre and the natural spoken stresses when we read the poem: 'Do **not** go **gentle into that** good **night**./Old **age** should **burn** and **rave** at **close** of **day**.' When we get to 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light,' though, the relationship between spoken and metric stress is less a quarrel than an outright punch-up. The metric pattern established by the poem would have us saying this: 'Rage, **rage** against the **dying of the light**.' But when reading, how on earth does the human voice give more weight to the second 'rage' than the first? Much more likely that we say something like this: '**Rage, rage** against the **dying of the light**.' As soon as we do, we're disrupting the overwhelming metrical template of the poem. Again, it's that wrongness in the refrain line which draws attention, in this case that double stress at the line's opening which enacts the passion of the line. The disruption ensures that we have to pause and think each time we get to that refrain as to how we read it. Ultimately, it's impossible to read that line fluently, thoughtlessly, without rediscovering again and again its emotive power.

When you see Dylan Thomas do all this with just two refrain lines, it's enough to make any poet decide to pack up and go home. But he doesn't stop there. Years of broadcasting experience have by this stage made Thomas intensely aware of the value of repetition as a structural device. One of my favourite lessons to teach in school, for example, uses his radio broadcast 'Holiday Memory' to inspire pupils to write descriptions of beaches. It's a wonderful piece of work, full of all the descriptive devices you would want Year Eight to know, plus many Thomas has made up himself. 'A silent hullabaloo of balloons'⁵ is about the most perfect example of synaesthesia you'll ever come across. 'The monkey-nuts flew through the air like salty hail' is a simile I'm hoping to trouble the monumental mason's right arm with when I go. But the important point is that all of this is wrapped up in a repetitive structure, as Thomas's descriptive flights of fancy return again and again to the simple phrase 'I remember.'

'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night' does not limit its repetitive structure to the villanelle's refrains. On top of that, each stanza after the first begins with some variation on 'men': 'Wise men...Good men...Wild men' and so on. This repetition is broken at the start of the final stanza, by the four words which for me are the best in the poem: 'And you, my father.' In the middle of all the sonic pyrotechnics in the poem, it is the simplicity of these four words which is incredibly powerful. They usher us into a very intimate space, and give the lie to all the Thomas nay-sayers who want to tell us that the melodrama and elevation of his writing make

it impossible to take his writing seriously or to form that genuine emotional relationship with his writing which successful poetry demands. What's interesting is that Thomas's structure is almost exactly replicated in probably the second most famous villanelle ever written, Elizabeth Bishop's 'One Art':

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

– Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master

though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.⁶

In this villanelle,⁷ we can see, as with Thomas's repetitions, an interesting structure. The things which are being lost become increasingly big: the 'lost door keys, the hour badly spent' quickly moves up to 'I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,/some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.' Just when we might be thinking *Where can she go next? What's bigger?* the poem gives us this, just as Thomas gives us 'And you, my father': 'Even losing you.' That both poems turn to a direct address to a loved one, that everything else in the poem becomes a way to load emotion onto that one word 'you' is, I think, not accidental. It leads us to a conclusion which is not exactly startling but is worth not losing sight of, not just as writers or readers, but as people: writing is at its most important when it is one person saying to another, *You know, I kind of care about you.*

As I take a run-up towards the end of this article, I can't leave without a nod to one of the most famous lines of Thomas's poem, 'Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.' Once more, as so often, it is the sonic patterning of this line which makes it extraordinary, the way the 's' sound of 'fierce tears' picks up that same sound from 'Curse, bless,' the way those sounds and the rhyme of 'fierce tears' give an impassioned sonic harmony to words which, in terms of meaning, are so contradictory. This is what the poem's up to throughout, of course: its refrains choose to rhyme 'night' with 'light', drawing attention to their open-ended and contradictory symbolism. Such contradictions are absolutely in tune with the relationship between Thomas's father and the poet, which was both the relationship of an upright schoolmaster with a dissolute son and the relationship of a thwarted writer with one of the most talented, successful, famous and uncompromising writers we have ever been lucky enough to have on this planet. But they are also, of course, in tune with the relationship all of us have with our parents, those authority figures, those barriers to independence, the ones we would howl and kill for, the ones who in, say, dark teenage moments, many of us might kill. At the point of his father's death, Thomas does not turn for a second from the reality of their flawed relationship, just as he does not turn from the absolute tragedy and end of death towards some sentimentalising consolation in which he does not believe.

For me, it's this, this son in a room with his father, saying *We didn't get on, and you didn't have the life you wanted, and now it's ending, and there's nothing that anyone, anyone can do* which makes this poem matter. Despite, or because of, the wonderful, wonderful crafting, Thomas gives us honestly what his father's death means. In giving us that intimate and personal moment, in speaking just for himself, he of course speaks for all of us, he makes his father public and mythical, just like Heaney's father in 'Follower', just like Don Paterson's father in that masterpiece, 'An Elliptical Stylus.' As Hamlet says about his father, he will not look upon his like again.

Faced with this sort of thing, everything that needs to be said about Minhinnick's notion that Thomas's writing is 'celebrated' because of his exotic death has been said. And I haven't even started yet, haven't even scratched the surface, haven't even talked about how Thomas's rage in this poem seems to draw on the accumulated weight of centuries of South Wales Valleys working-class rage, of rage against the factory owner and the man, which Thomas applies, extraordinarily, to the absolute power of death. Thomas's death at 39 was not a path to fame. It was a

criminal act which robbed us of further masterpieces, further words for us, and leads me now to three words in terms of what we should do with poets, as well as reading them and lauding them and saying their words over and over to ourselves when we need them, in times like those Thomas describes in 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.' Just three words now for the poets. Look after them.

Notes

1. Minhinnick, R (2014) *The Mythic Death of Dylan Thomas* (Glenrothes: HappenStance).
2. Thomas, D (1993) *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Everyman), p.135. All references to Dylan Thomas's poems are to this edition.
3. Thomas, D (2000) *Under Milk Wood: The Definitive Edition*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix), p.50. All references to *Under Milk Wood* are to this edition.
4. Donne, J (2006) *Selected Poems* with an introduction and notes by Ilona Bell (London: Penguin Classics), p. 181.
5. Thomas, D (1986) *The Collected Stories* (New York: New Directions), p. 304. Audio recordings of Dylan Thomas reading this broadcast are an invaluable classroom resource.
6. Bishop, E (1991) *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus), p. 178.
7. For further reading on villanelles, I'd strongly recommend *Villanelles* (2012), ed. by Annie Finch and Mary-Elizabeth Mali (London: Everyman) and *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (2001), ed. by Mark Strand and Eavan Boland (New York: W.W. Norton and Company).