

# DYLAN THOMAS'S POEM "AND DEATH SHALL HAVE NO DOMINION"

**Gladir da Silva Cabral\***

*Abstract:* This article analyzes Dylan Thomas's attitude towards death according to his poem "And death shall have no dominion" and compares it to death and dying according to the Christian tradition. In the poem there are clear references to dying, and a certain consolation coming from the idea of integration of the individual in the elements of the universe. The poem makes clear allusions to the Christian faith, starting from the biblical quotation of Romans 9, and it also presents several metaphors mixed with mystical ideas about the dissolution of the individuality in the natural universe.

*Keywords:* Death; nature; individuality; religion and myth.

**D**ylan Thomas wrote many poems dealing with the reality of death, some of them inspired by special dates as his birthday, some by the contemplation of the natural world around him. In this article I have selected the poem "And death shall have no dominion", published in Thomas's book *Twenty-five Poems* (1936), as a very good example of his attitude towards death.

Dylan Thomas was born in Swansea (Wales) in 27 of October of 1914, and lived always under the impression of a sudden near death, with a clear consciousness of his own mortality, even writing poems under the inspiration of death. Considered by some critics as the most important English poet of

.....  
\* Doutora em Letras pela UFSC e professora do curso de Letras da Universidade do Extremo Sul Catarinense. E-mail: gladir@unesccrct-sc.br

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.

The poem "And death shall have no dominion" does not deal with the death of a specific person, but with the poet's own experience of life and death. It was written in 1933 and published in the same year in *New English Weekly*, and in 1936 in Thomas's *Twenty-five Poems*. Some critics take the poem as only a piece of empty rhetorical exercise (Fraser, 1959, p.220). Aneurin Talfan Davies (1964, p.58) also thinks so and adds that the poem "lacks the basic sincerity which characterizes most of his work". Indeed the poem is different from the others written by Thomas, but according to Anthony Thwaite it is different in

*its superb arrogance, its repudiation of destruction and nullity,  
which one can compare with Donne's sonnet "Death, be not  
proud." The rhetoric is unloosed, and the poem seems to exist in  
a harsh clear world, not the dark secret world of the other death  
poems. (ibidem, p.99-100)*

I agree with Davies in the recognition that the poem has its value, and I would point out to the poem's musicality, to its rich imagery, to its cohesive structure. The poem was written at a suggestion of A. E. Trick to write a poem about "immortality", and Trick wrote his poem with the refrain "For death is not the end" while Dylan Thomas wrote "And death shall have no dominion" (Ferris, 1977, p.83). Ferris comments that the poem is an attempt by Thomas to be optimistic, to defy the forces of death and decadence, in order to keep his sanity (ibidem, p.83). The poem "booms like an organ, it sounds more like an act of defiance than a declaration of faith" (ibidem, p.83). However, Thomas didn't seem to like the poem and would have left it out from the *Twenty-five Poems* if Vernon Watkins (1957, p.134-5) had not interfered.

Curiously this is one of Thomas's most known poems. It is divided into three stanzas and the rhyme structure is A,A,B,A,C,D,D,E,A. The poem starts with a biblical reference to the book of Romans 6:9, in which Paul says that "[k]nowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him":

*And death shall have no dominion.  
Dead men naked they shall be one  
With the man in the wind and the west moon;  
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,  
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;  
Though they go mad they shall be sane,  
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;  
Though lovers be lost love shall not;  
And death shall have no dominion.*

*And death shall have no dominion.  
Under the windings of the sea  
They lying long shall not die windily;  
Twisting on racks when sinews give way,  
Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;  
Faith in their hands shall snap in two,  
And the unicorn evils run them through;*

*Split all ends up they shan't crack;  
And death shall have no dominion.*

*And death shall have no dominion.  
No more may gulls cry at their ears  
Or waves break loud on the seashores;  
Where blew a flower may a flower no more  
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;  
Though they be mad and dead as nails,  
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;  
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,  
And death shall have no dominion.*

This poem is perhaps intended as an affirmation, if not an affirmation of faith, at least an affirmation of the individual in face of death, in contrast, says Maud (1968, p.24-5) in the book *Poet in the Making*, with the other poems marked by doubt. The poem expresses hope in the victory of life and love against the destructive power of death. The biblical assertion that death shall have no dominion is based on faith in the resurrection of the body and eternal life, characterizing a religious attitude towards death. Dylan Thomas's poem tries to maintain an optimistic attitude towards death and to resist the tyrannical dominion death perpetrates over nature.

The first stanza seems to declare that after death the individual plunges and dissolves into nature, being integrated into the natural process of life in the cosmos. The poet says that "dead men" shall be united, "shall be one", with the forces of the universe, with the "wind and the west moon", with the "stars", even if their bones are completely dry and "gone" (1.1-4).<sup>1</sup> The poet seems to be affirming that the individual will survive by some way after death through his integration into the forces of nature.

The "clean bones" can refer to the biblical passage of Ezekiel 37 where the prophet is sent to prophesy to the dry bones of the valley and to make them live again, and the bones revived and became persons again. But the poet is not talking about the Christian concept of resurrection, he is using this image to suggest that the individual survive through nature, in nature.

The poem affirms life in spite of the apparent dominion of death, in direct opposition to it, what becomes emphatic with the recurrence of the conjunction "though", which indicates an attitude of resistance (1.6-8). In spite of madness, the dead "shall be sane" (1.6), in spite of being disintegrated by the sea they "shall rise again" (1.7) because their energy will be digested and transformed into other forms of life.

The image of the sea returning its dead has also a biblical origin, the prophecy of Revelation 20:13 – "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works." For Dylan Thomas, death shall have no dominion because the individual, through this immersion into nature, returns to life in a natural process.

.....  
1 The parenthetical references to the poems are presented according to the poem's structure. Stanzas and lines will be indicated by Arabic numerals, separated by a full stop (4.7).

The first stanza also presents the idea that the essence of "love" shall not disappear; even if "lovers be lost" (1.8), the individual is redeemed by the general movement of love, and nothing is lost. Love is a symbol of the permanence of life, a very vital feeling that links and relates human beings, and death cannot kill it. Even if the individual is reached by death, the larger general process is saved, and the meaning of life is preserved, because the universe is not submerged into the domains of death. Each stanza starts and finishes with this affirmation of the victory of life over death – "And death shall have no dominion".

The second stanza continues focusing on those who stay "under the windings of the sea", saying that they "shall not die windily" (2.2-3). In a way, when the poet declares that death shall have no dominion, he is recognizing the real power death holds over the human life. Interestingly, the poet starts the poem with the coordinate clause "And death shall have no dominion", which seems to be the complement of another clause, thus implying that something has happened before and therefore death shall have no dominion. The biblical antecedent is the resurrection of Christ, Thomas's is the integration into the forces of nature. The poem starts with a sentence that seems to be the continuation of a longer discourse, maybe in the style of a funeral sermon.

In the first part of the second stanza Thomas uses the image of a shipwreck, referring to those who remain dead at the bottom of the sea, their bodies being completely consumed by death, unidentified and lost forever under the waves. The poet, however, resists the dominion of this kind of death, declaring that those who repose under the sea "shall not die windily", shall not be completely dispersed by the blow of the winds of death.

Thomas also uses the image of those who died under violence and torture, perhaps under the revolting and harmful forces of Inquisition, perhaps the death of the martyrs, "[t]wisting on racks" (2.4), "[s]trapped to a whell" (2.5), the "sinews giv[ing] way" (2.4), arguing that even in them the tendons shall not break, the individual's suffering shall not be permanent, absolute, but temporary.<sup>2</sup> Sinews resist, i.e., the body resists to the absurd of death, the violence of death's dominion.

The controversial sentence "Faith in their hands shall snap in two, / And the unicorn evils run them through" (2.6-7) of the second stanza has been interpreted as a hint on the poet's refusal to any consolation from faith, as an affirmation of the destruction of faith by this death in torture, and the negation of any deliverance from death through religious faith (Ackerman, 1994, p.86). However, it can also be inferred by the poem that faith is not completely destroyed, but only partially broken, divided in two parts as the hands at prayer taken apart, pierced by the unicorn evil, but in spite of being "[s]plit" they shall not "crack", shall not break open, they will maintain the unity (2.8). The idea of resistance towards death is still present. The poet is in fact stating the permanence of faith in spite of the cruelty of death, in spite of the appearance of death as a penalty, as a condemnation. John Ackerman (1994, p.87) defends that the poet is asserting the unity with nature as a substitute for faith. However, I think Thomas preserves the necessity of faith, in fact not the Christian orthodox faith, but some sort of faith as a human affirmation of life over death, an affirmation that transcends the experience of knowledge

.....  
2 The rack and the wheel were instruments of torture used at the time of the "holy" Inquisition, in the Middle Ages.

and touches the realm of the ineffable, a resource for the overcoming of death. Although sometimes this faith seems to represent something just a little bit more than the integration of the individual into the process of nature, or some sort of union with the natural world much more defined in terms of physical participation than of spiritual consciousness, the preservation of faith saves Thomas's world from despair, from cynicism, indifference. Indeed, Thomas attires his concept of integration of the individual into the elements of nature with the poetic and metaphysical aura of faith

In the third stanza the images from the sea come back again, the sounds of the "gulls" and "waves" breaking loud on the shores (3.2-3). The world visited by death is a world of silence: the individual cannot identify the sounds of nature, there is a sense of loss, and the world has lost its beauty. The poet communicates a sense of nostalgia, of melancholy, adding the image of the absence of the flower, which cannot be seen no more under the rain (3.4-5).

In the second half of the stanza the poet presents the counter-balance, the "Though" part (3.6). In spite of their death and madness, loss of meaning and consciousness, represented by the absence of flowers, rain, and gulls' cry, the individual will resist like the "heads of the characters hammer[ing] through daisies" (3.6-7). Even if the flowers can no more lift their heads to the rain, they will hammer their heads through daisies, through the elements of nature, through the vegetable still living world, invading the sun "till the sun breaks down" (3.8). Life is still possible even when it is reached by death, and death shall have no dominion, because life can reappear from under the ground and grow like a plant in the direction of the sun. The poem has an optimistic ending: in spite of the tyrannical presence of death, of the crisis that assaults faith, of the tragedy that falls over lovers, love will resist, life will resist, faith will resist.

According to the Christian Tradition, death is linked with the reality of sin, being considered the consequence of a human wrong choice rather than part of the natural process of creation. Sin brings death to all things created. But, according to gospel, Christ transforms the human tragedy into a divine comedy. Death, once seen as a tragic end of life, as a separation from God, is now understood under the vision of redemption and salvation originated in God's mercy and love.

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.

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.

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 in 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.

In the Christian Tradition, death is considered a punishment for sins and therefore it has some moral implications related to right and wrong, good and evil, obedience and disobedience. But if death is part of the cyclical movement of nature, as it seems to be the case of Thomas's poetry, then it is neutral, it does not have a moral impact, it does not generate guilt. Calvin and Luther, as spokesmen of the Protestant tradition, also agree with the understanding of death as being the consequence, the result of sin. For them, death was not originally part of nature, but it was generated by the Fall of man as a result of a free use of choice, something that could be avoided. In fact both theologians think that the sin of Adam has deformed and transformed the natural world, generating a degenerate human nature, a fallen cosmos.

Luther and Calvin see life as being constantly menaced by death, and each day of life as being a victory over the forces of destruction. In Thomas's poems this portrait of life as being constantly threatened by the risks and powers of death can also be identified. Death is always present, menacing the individuals, denouncing the limits of time and existence. Thomas's "And death shall have no dominion" seems to show in fact a unity of the phenomenon of life and death. Life and death are very near each other, the day of birth is the beginning of death, which contrasts with the biblical vision of life as the supreme value, as the most important gift from God, and death as the negation of life but not an autonomous reality, not as something in itself. Indeed, Thomas sees life and death as part of the same process, as a unity. But based on their reading of the New Testament, Calvin and Luther developed the idea of life as being surrounded by the constant and intense menace of death, recognizing

that death is very near life. Thus in this aspect Thomas's views are quite akin Luther's and Calvin's.

The individual represents a fundamental value in Thomas's poetry, it is the center of his poetry, which is lyrical, subjective. The presence of death seems to affect the individual and throw him into a deep existential crisis. In this aspect Thomas's poetry can be linked with the thought of Kierkegaard: the poet shows to be conscious of his own death and despair. Thomas presents the individual in a crisis precisely because of the menacing presence of time and mortality, and because of his self-consciousness. To a certain extent, these poems show an individual in anguish, conscious of his individuality and of his mortality, trying to overcome the anxiety of this situation. These birthday poems can be considered true meditations on mortality, and in this sense they seem to fit into Luther's position according to which the individual shall meditate everyday of his life on his condition as a mortal human being. Of course Luther does not recommend thinking about death at the moment of dying. He argues that at the moment of death the Christian should concentrate on the vision of life and Christ. But he suggests that the Christian should think of his own state of mortality throughout life. Kierkegaard also considers individuality a fundamental value of the Christian teaching and relates this sense of individuality to the human relationship with God. The human being is an individual when he stands in relation with the tri-personal God.

Some of Thomas's poems present death as a negative force and invite the reader to reject and resist the idea of death. Poems like "Do not go gentle into that good night", for example, in which the poet deals with the death of his own father, he contradicts the concept of death as a natural phenomenon and takes it not as something good just for the fact of being natural, but suggests that the individual shall resist it, taking death as a negative reality that should be resisted and if possible overcome. The poem "And death shall have no dominion" also invites the reader to challenge death, to resist its destructive presence.

For the Christian tradition death is always the enemy, the negative destructive force that is caused by the Fall of the human race. Although sometimes the apostle Paul refers to death as a passage to the eternal life, he takes it as the "last enemy" (I Corinthians 15:26), as the salary of sin (Romans 6:23), something evil in itself, something that has to be overcome by faith in Christ and in resurrection. However, Luther and Calvin, in spite of also considering death a negative force linked with the sin of Adam and Eve, see death as standing under God's control, and therefore they argue that the Christian shall accept the arrival of death as a divine appointment. The Bible presents the death of patriarchs as example of how death can be handled and accepted with calmness and courage. Those leaders of Israel died in a "good old age", without resistance, accepting their final moment. They were not afraid of dying.

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. 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.

#### REFERENCES

- ACKERMAN, J. *A Dylan Thomas Companion*. 2.ed. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994.
- BIBLE, King James Version. London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1992.
- CALVIN, J. *Instituição de la Religião Cristiana*. Trad. Cipriano de Valera (1597). Rijswijk: Fundação Editorial de Literatura Reformada, 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Comentary on the Book of Psalms*. Trans. James Anderson. Grand Rapids: W. D. Eerdmans P. Co., 1949.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Comentary to the Book of Romans*. Trans. John Owen. Grand Rapids: W. D. Eerdmans P. Co., 1955.
- DAVIES, A. T. *Dylan: Druid of the Broken Body*. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1964.
- FERRIS, P. *Dylan Thomas*. New York: Dial, 1977. 399p.
- FRASER, G. S. *Dylan Thomas*. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Vision and Rhetoric*. London: Faber and Faber, 1959.
- KIERKEGAARD, S. *Either/Or* Trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin. Swenson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *O conceito de angústia*. Trad. João Lopes Alves. Porto: Editora Presença, 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *O desespero humano*. Trad. Carlos Grifo, Maria José Marinho, Adolfo Casais Monteiro. 2.ed. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Migalhas filosóficas*. Migalhas filosóficas ou um bocadinho de filosofia de João Climacus. Trad. Ernani Reichmann e Alvaro Valls. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Temor e tremor*. Trad. Carlos Grifo, Maria José Marinho, Adolfo Casais Monteiro. 2.ed. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1984.
- MAUD, R. *Entrances to Dylan Thomas Poetry*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1963.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Introduction. In: *Poet in the Making*. The Notebooks of Dylan Thomas. Ed. Ralph Maud. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1968.
- THOMAS, D. *Collected Poems 1934-1953*. Ed. Walford Davies and Ralph Maud. London: J. M. Dent, 1993.



WATKINS, V. (Ed.) *Dylan Thomas Letters to Vernon*. London: J.M.Dent & Sons, 1957.

CABRAL, G. da S. O poema "And death shall have no dominion" de Dylan Thomas. *Todas as Letras G* (São Paulo), ano 7, n.7, p.83-91, edição especial, 2005.

*Resumo:* Este artigo é analisa a atitude do poeta Dylan Thomas diante da morte, assim como ela se evidencia no poema "And death shall have no dominion" e compara-a com a visão sobre a morte e o morrer da tradição cristã. Neste poema, percebe-se uma clara resistência ao morrer e uma certa consolação advinda da idéia de integração do individuo com os elementos do universo. O poema faz claras alusões à fé cristã, a começar pela citação do texto bíblico de Romanos 9 e também pelas inúmeras metáforas presentes, mescladas com místicas a respeito da dissolução da individualidade no universo natural.

*Palavras-chave:* Morte; natureza; individualidade; religião e mito.