Dylan Thomas: Poet of his People?

I'm most grateful for the honour of being asked to give this lecture to so eminent a Society. When I expressed a preference for this evening's subject, one or two people showed a barely disguised surprise. Or was it regret? After all, a *pregethwr* might have been supposed to go for a theological or, at least, a spiritual theme and, if he wanted to insist on a figure from the world of Anglo-Welsh poetry, then why didn't he offer us something on R.S.Thomas rather than the ambiguous and surely over-rated Dylan Thomas?

I want to deal with the assumptions lying behind this assessment of Dylan Thomas in due course but let me explain why I felt drawn to him rather than his more rarefied namesake. First of all, I was invited to give this lecture just a couple of months before the fiftieth anniversary of Dylan Thomas's death. It seemed, therefore, timely. And then there was the question of my own provenance. I was born in Burry Port, a point on Carmarthen Bay (within the seeing, hearing and smelling of the fishing-boat-bobbing sea) that's roughly half way between the Swansea of Thomas's birth and sleepy old Laugharne where he was finally laid to rest. There were no books in my home as a child. I was a late teenager before I bought my first volumes among which was Thomas's *Collected Poems*, a book that's remained a firm favourite ever since for reasons (I admit it!) as much sentimental as literary. I remember still the day the Llanelli Boys' Grammar School's Head of English came into our classroom to announce the poet's death. He left us in no doubt that it was a great man who'd gone from us and urged us to remember this day for the rest of our lives. Little did I know then just how huge a rift there was between the raunchy and licentious lifestyle embraced by this dying ember and that adumbrated in the surrounding chapel culture, a worldview suffused with all those virtues (and attitudes) fixated on abstinence and probity. It never occurred to me to question how contradictory it might be to laud a man like Dylan Thomas whilst all the time being told how we must aspire to live in a way so radically different from him.

And so to my final reason for being drawn to my subject. I was a student and teacher of literature long before my calling to Christian ministry and the study of theology. It's still to poetry and the novel that I turn for consolation, recreation and delight. The imagination figures importantly among my tools of interpretation as I try to make sense of life. Empiricism, logic,

propositional statements and creeds may all have their place in our search for an explanation of ultimate questions but literature takes us into altogether different areas of experience and understanding. There are doors of perception which these other keys can't unlock and alongside theology's description of the leap of faith can be found, in my mind and my heart, literature's invitation to suspend disbelief and take the intuitive leap of the imagination.

Enough said by way of introduction. It's clear that I've chosen to discuss Dylan Thomas on grounds of nostalgia, timing, and out of a conviction that he left us a literary legacy we can be proud of and that stands up to close scrutiny.

Not that everyone would agree with that, of course. There has been some very barbed and jaundiced criticism of Thomas in recent months. And none more pointed than that offered by my eminent predecessor as the Jane Gruffydd lecturer, Hywel Williams. He entitled last year's offering "Francophone, Anglophone, Galloisphone: the politics of cultural identity: 1763-2001." I shall myself want to take up the subject of cultural identity a little later, but, in the absence of a copy of last year's lecture, I've been obliged to pick up some remarks made by Hywel Williams in a piece written for *The Guardian* in October 2003 to mark the anniversary of the poet's death.

"The sadness of Thomas the deracinated poet," he writes, "was that he couldn't express himself in English any more than he could in Welsh. So what he ended up writing was really not poetry at all, but rather a kind of demented word play – something surely best done with crayons… And along that road to a literary hell paved with squiffy intent, there's abuse of Wales…. From Richard Burton and Sian Phillips onwards, two generations of Welsh actors have colluded in this sorry little tale (*Under Milk Wood*) by a man who was the literary agent of the colonial condition. Rarely has the national talent for genial submissiveness wound its way quite so stupidly and self-destructively up its own backside."

This is a very dismissive stance indeed and I'd like to examine what seem to me the two main thrusts of Williams's argument. There's first of all the literary question. Was Dylan Thomas worth his salt as a writer? And then,

lurking behind that more obvious level of consideration, lies the question of his role in mediating "Welshness" (whatever that may mean). The question of Thomas's dissolute character will never quite leave us, of course. It will hover over the whole discussion, a Banquo's ghost, haunting our feast.

Literary assessment.

When Hywel Williams attempts to demolish Thomas's work on literary grounds, he makes a comparison with Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins rediscovered his muse in Clwyd after many years of imposed silence. It's clear that, alongside his detailed study of the classical languages and the tough demands of Anglo Saxon poesy, Hopkins had studied and greatly admired the intricacies of Welsh verse forms. This is a point made by Williams who illustrates the felicitous outcome of all this in the opening couplet of Hopkins' poem *Spring and Fall*. They read thus:

> Margaret are you grieving
> Over Goldengrove unleaving?

The whole poem is indeed a delicately drafted piece with an assonance and rhythm that are limpid and musical. Through a pathetic fallacy, the poet links his observation of the season of autumn with a deep sigh for the ephemerality of our human lives. Williams holds up Hopkins's piece in fierce contrast with the work of Thomas who, he alleges, though haunted by the ghost of the strict metrical forms of Welsh language verse, never got a hold on it. "It only existed within his poetry," he points out, "as a kind of obscure intimation of how the real poetic thing might be done." Meanwhile, he accuses, "Thomas just carried on being a decadent baby in love with his own childishness as he sang in his pram by the sea."

The methodology being used here is more typical of journalism than literary criticism. A mellifluous couplet is pulled out of a Hopkins poem to suggest heights Thomas could never rise to. Now I'm a great admirer of Hopkins, my first published work was a study of his writing, but I could put a few ugly lines alongside the admittedly well chosen couplet Williams seizes on to underpin his polemic. What about the opening of *Harry Ploughman,* for example?

> Hard as hurdle arms, with a broth of goldish flue
> Breathed round;…..

And, let me assure you, there's plenty more of a similar ilk.

Meanwhile, of course, it's a cheap and nasty little trick to parody the last line of *Fern Hill* like that ("as he sang in his pram by the sea"). That's an easy game to play. What about giving the same treatment to Robert Burns: "My love is like a red, red nose"? Or we might wonder whether William Wordsworth might just have written: "Oft when on my bed I lie, in anal and retentive mood." You get the (rather silly) point, I'm sure.

Dylan Thomas, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote little. And the precious items to be found among a great deal of dross are, indeed, few. But it's at least arguable that they have real and lasting value. Take one or two examples. In *After the funeral*, Thomas gives us a picture of the dead Ann Jones which captures the whole tenor of her life with an economy of words that, for all their simplicity, leave us with an unforgettably evocative impression of a simple woman's life and character.

> 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.

This is reminiscent of the cameo in *Under Milk Wood* which describes poor Bessie Bighead. "Alone she dies, Bessie Bighead, hired help, born in the workhouse, smelling of the cowshed …. Picks a posy of daisies in Sunday Meadow to put on the grave of Gomer Own who kissed her once by the pig-sty when she wasn't looking and never kissed her again although she was looking all the time."

But Thomas is not a mere observer. He operates at a philosophical level too. Again and again, he shows how death is to be found in the midst of life and describes those intimations of our mortality which we're given even in our prime. As in these lines:

> The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
> Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
> Is my destroyer.
> And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
> My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

I could trot out a string of examples from Thomas's output for which a good case could be made, if not for greatness then at least as examples of fine pieces worthy of inclusion in any anthology of early twentieth century verse. I'd certainly want to make such a bid for *I in my intricate image*, *The hand that signed the paper*, *And death shall have no dominion*, *The conversation of prayer*, *Poem in October*, *The hunchback in the park*, and others too. I recognize that so many of Thomas's pieces, whilst bristling with spasmodic brilliance, don't quite come off as a whole. His genius is undoubtedly flawed. But genius it is.

Isaac Watts, hailed by many as the greatest hymn writer of all time, author of *When I survey the wondrous cross* (which one scholar called "the protestant rosary"), was one day introduced to a new hymn by Charles Wesley. It was, *Come O thou traveller unknown*" which traces in verse Jacob's struggle with God and his ultimate cry of when he recognises his assailant: "Thy nature and thy name is love". Watts was filled with instant admiration and declared that he'd have given up all the verse he'd ever written if he could have composed this one work of genius.

And there's one poem in Dylan Thomas's work too that stands head and shoulders above the rest. *Fern Hill*, almost alone, would guarantee greatness for any author. It is to his output what *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* is to the work of Thomas Gray, or *Howl* to his near contemporary Allen Ginsberg. It portrays and reflects on the subject of childhood and must surely rank alongside pieces by Henry Vaughan and William Wordsworth as one of the finest ever written on this theme.

The evocation of youth is a recurring theme in Thomas's work, of course. Every year, I still read his *A Child's Christmas in Wales* to whatever audience I can muster. And his *Holiday Memory*, the story of the old August Bank Holiday, also taps into shared experience and, out of his acute observation, brings a great deal that's suppressed within our collective sub-

conscious to the surface where we can reflect and ruminate on its place and meaning. “All over the beautiful beach,” he writes, “I remember most the children playing, boys and girls tumbling, moving jewels, who might never be happy again. And ‘happy as a sandboy’ is true as the heat of the sun.” Alongside these stories, I’d place others in his collection *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* – lovely but uneven pieces where Thomas digs into his memory bank and brings out associative pieces that charm and delight the ear as well as the heart.

Fern Hill consists of six nine-lined stanzas that show all the signs of a very careful workmanship. The poem is unrhymed, depending for its rhythm on a stress-related structure in the manner of Anglo Saxon verse. Each stanza is consistent with the others. The vocabulary is uncomplicated. Yet there is a pent-up energy that is immediately released when the words are read out loud. A very romantic view of a blissful childhood experience is shot through with persistent reminders of the transience of human life. So the remembrance of being “young and easy” is set against the experience of time, like an ever-rolling stream, bearing all its sons and daughters away. And “green and golden,” green and carefree”, “golden in the heydays of his eyes”, are matched by “green and dying,” with the haunting reminder that, for all the exhilaration of happiness, “time allows in all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs before the children green and golden follow him out of grace.”

The poem is studded with biblical allusion. The perfect morning “was Adam and maiden” and “the Sabbath rang slowly in the pebbles of holy streams.” A mood of ecstatic recall pervades the whole poem but, like Proust before him, the poet discovers that the search for lost time, far from recapturing the joys of the past, reveals only death. But even that underlying theme cannot diminish the dramatic intensity of one tumbling image after another. “Once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves trail with daisies and barley down the rivers of the windfall light.” Here a clever pattern of assonance has words flowing as silkily as ideas, one little current rippling over another in the poem’s onward and seemingly unstoppable flow. Gerard Manley Hopkins would have enjoyed the easy mastery of vocabulary, rhythm and sound with which Thomas invests his work.

It's no wonder that Rowan Williams, in this very week's *Royal Society of Literature* magazine, refers to the "Dylan Thomas phase," a necessary rite of passage for him and other intellectual adolescents in the Swansea of his youth. The Archbishop of Canterbury talks about his own teenage "sub-Dylan" or "para-Dylan" jottings before it sank in just how clever and intricate Thomas's literary style really was. "Beneath the fireworkish tricks of the musical surface," he writes, "the poet conceals tough connections and carefully worked movements without which the surface would be embarrassingly vacuous." Dr Williams goes on to refer to the poet's passionate concern with the symbolism of faith, a sense of how "metaphor and transubstantiation connect and a belief that words, like the Word itself, can have a redemptive power.

The abuse of Wales?

How do we Welsh most fulfil the stereotypes formed for us by others? By portraying our own people as unreliable, whingers, wet and woeful snivellers etc. (as Williams alleges happens in *Under Milk Wood*)? Possibly. But the *dramatis personae* of Thomas's radio play, far from merely playing to the prejudices of "colonial" stereotypers or to a Gallo-phobic gallery, presents a cast I could have replicated from places I've lived and worked in. Just think of some of the characters I grew up with in Burry Port: Willie-One-Leg, Dai-Central-Eating, Fanny-Frills and John-y-Band for example. And when, one day, I was visiting my mother's grave and bumped into Eric James the local undertaker, I had an amazing time. He and I had been in school together and he proceeded to take me on a whistle-stop tour of the graveyard. I just wish I'd had a tape recorder to capture the running commentary he gave of the people we'd both known and whom he'd laid to rest in these blessed plots. Into his narrative came a rich array of characters who could, *mutatis mutandis,* have given us another *Under Milk Wood* with no trouble at all. The point is that all of us who've lived in Wales are likely to have met Mrs Dai Bread (One and Two), NoGood Boyo, Captain Cat, Mr Waldo and, yes, Polly Garter too. When, during university vacations, I worked the country round for the GPO, I *was* Willy Nilly postman, I've been helped through life by the Reverend Eli Jenkins, and heard my mother tell her tales about the likes of Lord Cut Glass or Mrs Cherry Owen. Far from being a range of pathetic creatures, divorced from reality and serving the despicable ends of foreigners who wish Wales ill, the success of this cast of

characters, it seems to me, is that it rings oh-so-true to the village or community life all of us who've lived in Wales remember. They're caricatures, of course, but none the less true for that.

Perhaps it's our touchiness that's more likely to be the problem, the way we allow criticism of us to touch a raw spot. Is not our over-reaction to real or supposed criticism a much more evident way of revealing our supposed inferiority complex and reinforcing the very stereotypes we complain of? Remember the Anne Robinson spat of three years ago? I broadcast a piece for BBC Radio Wales in the very week of her infelicitous remark. It went as follows:

"Anne Robinson's confession that she finds us Welsh people irritating is, well, irritating. Her reason for shoving us into *Room 101*, a kind of sin bin for all the people and fears who've ever got you down our got up your nose, is interesting too. 'They are always so pleased with themselves,' says Ms Robinson. Well, I ask you! I've heard people say that we've got chips on our shoulders, or that we suffer from an inferiority complex, or that we burn their summer cottages down, or that we sing flat. But 'pleased with ourselves' is a new one on me. And coming from someone who is so clearly and smirkily pleased with herself and her much relished power to dismiss the latest weakest link, it's rich indeed.

But I think I'm more dismayed at the fuss caused by her outburst than by the offending remarks themselves. Allegations of racism have been hurled at her, comparisons are made with the treatment of black people and Pakistanis, the BBC Director General's head has been demanded on a silver plate or a pikestaff it doesn't matter which, letters have been written to the police, lawyers have been consulted and 'London' (a generic word that seems to mean 'all those nasty people living over there') roundly blamed for insulting, disparaging, denigrating the Welsh. According to one critic, Ms Robinson has shown a clear intent to incite racial hatred towards us. Well! What sensitive people we seem to be. How thin skinned. And how readily we've offered a hostage to fortune by our over-reaction and defensiveness, allowing people to see just how touchy and grumpy we are, how lacking in grace and calm. People who are secure within themselves can always take a punch from the Anne Robinsons of this world. We should have smiled nicely at her, we should have thanked her ever so much for singling us out

for such special treatment and, following the advice of someone else who was thought by many to be another weakest link, we should have turned the other cheek. Turning the other cheek doesn't turn people into doormats. Indeed, far from displaying weakness, it reveals an immense inner strength. That would certainly have been my preferred way of responding to Ms Robinson's little outburst."

Another literary anniversary fell at the same time as that of Dylan Thomas. The 25th anniversary of Edward Said's extraordinary book *Orientalism* was widely marked in the newspapers in the late summer. This was given extra poignancy by Said's death in October. No one has spoken more powerfully about cultural identity in post-colonial societies, than Said. I've paid tribute to him elsewhere but some of his insights seem very pertinent to our examination of Dylan Thomas.

Said gives a magisterial account of the emergence of a science he calls "orientalism," something that's become an important part of our Western intellectual apparatus. This is the branch of human knowledge that has systematised, catalogued, inventorised and tabulated every feature of the Orient known to man - its history, geography, linguistics, ethnology, botany etc., etc.. This has been going on (and become a massive industry) since Napoleon's conquest of Egypt in 1798 and the subsequent publication between 1809 and 1829 of the *Histoire de l'Egypte* in twenty three huge volumes, a truly compendious and encyclopaedic compilation.

It is Said's contention that this has had the result of allowing Western intellectuals to feel they have mastered all there is to know about the Orient without necessarily having encountered any of its peoples directly or personally. The knowledge so laboriously and meticulously accumulated allows judgements to be made that define and establish relationships between the powerful West and a disempowered Orient. And the question begged in Said's mind is this: "[How can we now] undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to orientalism, or ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a non-repressive and non-manipulative, perspective?" But he begins to answer his own question by continuing with the observation that "then one would have to rethink the whole complex problem of knowledge and power."

Said's famous neologism to describe the way knowledge coupled with power engenders manipulative perspective on the cultures being studied is the verb "to other". We "other" others in order to keep them at a sanitized distance from us. By "othering" them, we can control them. We talk, therefore, in broad generalisations, lumping peoples from whole regions together as "Arabs" or "Africans" or "Orientals" or, increasingly these days, as "Moslems". Such a way of categorising others and then using the stereotypes we've created to fuel our thinking can lead to some frightening conclusions. Said gives one obvious example: "the simple-minded dichotomy of freedom-loving, democratic Israel and evil, totalitarian and terroristic Arabs, [makes] the chance of anything like a clear view of the picture one wants to paint in talking about the Near East depressingly small."

Now, you may ask, what on earth can all this have to do with Wales and Dylan Thomas? Well, in considering whether Thomas has knowingly or unwittingly fed the stereotypical thinking of those who write about Wales, everything. Thomas stands accused of colluding with the English colonial mind in perpetuating stereotypes of Welshness that have allowed the English to "other" the Welsh all down the years and thereby keep them in their place.

Against that, I'd suggest that the real collusion that's taking place is perfectly displayed not in the portrayal of character in *Under Milk Wood* or other stories so much as in the very dismissive and disdainful remarks about Thomas made by a number Welsh intellectuals at this time. These are the people who too often "other" the English, lumping *them* together under one generic title, and attributing to *them* these imperialistic attitudes so bitterly complained of. It becomes a question of "othering" the "otherers". But if there is still an English imperial mind set, and if it does seek material to use in order to maintain its iron grip of power over the Welsh and people of other cultures, I'd suggest that it's the touchiness and over-reaction so evident in the dismissive remarks of the imperious critics of Dylan Thomas that's most likely to serve that nefarious end.

A little while ago (3.ix.'01), I submitted a script to my producer for BBC Radio Wales. It was turned down because, she said, it was too angry. So this is its first hearing. I think it's self-explanatory. It was written just after a

vitriolic attack had been launched on Dylan Thomas, an attack that was widely reported in the national press at that time. To which I responded thus:

"Who are these sad and preying vultures, these ivory-towered academics, who've got their clammy and predatory grip on Dylan Thomas? "A sad old caricature," they call him, "a man who played up to English notions of what a Welshman, and particularly a Welsh poet, might be like – a person addicted to singing, swinging and shagging, the three Welsh Ss, that he seemed to want to embody."

As if all that twaddle weren't enough, these three wise men from the West go on to take pot shots at Thomas's poetical style, picking on phrases and images which they're pleased to call "fake" and "loose", "excessive" and "meaningless." One of them compares Thomas's verse to that written on Christmas cards.

Now one member of this triumvirate actually taught me in my salad days as an undergraduate at Cardiff, so I'd better be careful. Even so, I have to protest at this act of butchery done on someone who's given pleasure and inspiration to so many. Sure, Thomas was a wreck of a man. Of course he acted a part again and again as he drank his way from one disastrous social scene to another. It all became rather squalid. But to my mind, the misery of it all simply underlines the miracle of it all, that so much brilliance could have been poured from such a broken vessel. As Thomas put it himself: 'Man himself is a work. Today he is a dirty piece of work. But tomorrow he may sprout wings under his serge shoulders, be faced and sided like Aquarius, who is the first sign of the vital year.'

I thank God that he can use such broken reeds, such clods of earth, to speak with so much subtlety in pointing out truths about ourselves and our universe that are not easily communicated by other disciplines or styles. 'Praise the Lord for we are a poetical nation.' As for our three academicals; I do just wonder if they aren't the ones who offer the truly sad and image-obsessed caricature as they play their own Welsh card in an attempt to get themselves noticed."

The fact is, of course, that Dylan Thomas became something of a cult figure. Kenneth Rexroth, the father figure of a San Francisco group of writers in the

1950s, uttered a lament "Thou shalt not kill" for Thomas on hearing of his death:

> You killed him,
> Benign Lady on the postage stamp.
> He was found dead at a *New Republic* luncheon.
> He was found dead on the cutting room floor.
> He was found dead at a *Time* policy conference.
> Henry Luce killed him with a telegram to the Pope.
> *Mademoiselle* strangled him with a padded brassiere.
> Old Possum sprinkled him with a tea ball.

It was to Rexroth's group that the young Allen Ginsberg attached himself and the riotous and anarchic poetry-reading sessions which were innovative and radical too. Robert Duncan, one of the core members of the group, counted Pound, Stein and Thomas among his early mentors. The Beat generation counted Thomas among the voices they most revered. Just a little later, of course, Robert Allen Zimmerman changed his name to Bob Dylan out of deference to Thomas's influence. The *New Apocalypse* group (J.F.Hendry, Henry Treece, George Sutherland Fraser et al.), a short-lived movement during the 1940s, invoked the names of D.H.Lawrence, G.Barker, Vernon Watkins and Dylan Thomas in their romantic reaction against what they saw as the "classicism" of W.H.Auden. Indeed, Thomas was one of the very few English-language writers of talent to have been interested in surrealism in the thirties. Auden and his friends had turned away from the 'European qualities of modernism in Joyce and Eliot; it is a mark of how far Thomas was different from them that he thought he might hitch himself on to the largely French movement. Clearly he was far from insular either in outlook or impact.

And his assimilation of the rhythms and assonances of Welsh traditional poetry is far more real than his present-day critics allow. Like his hero Caradoc Evans, he turned his back on the chapel culture with its primness and (sometimes) hypocrisy. But Gwyn Jones went much further in his assessment of Thomas's craft. He claims that the poet was "Welsh in the cunning complexity of his metres, not only in the loose *cynghanedd*, the chime of consonants and pealing vowels, but in the relentless discipline of his verse, the hierarchic devotion to the poet's craft, the intellectual

exactitude and emotional compression of word and phrase and stave and poem." And, as an example of this, Jones quotes a few lines from the "Prologue" to the *Collected Poems.*

> We will ride out alone, and then,
> Under the stars of Wales,
> Cry, Multitudes of arks! Across
> The water lidded lands,
> Manned with their loves they'll move,
> Like wooden islands, hill to hill.
> Huloo, my proud dove with a flute!
> Ahoy, old, sea-legged fox,
> Tom tit and Dai mouse!
> My ark sings in the sun
> At God speeded summer's end
> And the flood flowers now.

This is surely every bit as good as the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins with which we began.

I can do little better as I reach the end of this lecture than to offer a paragraph from Andrew Sinclair's wonderful 1975 biography of Dylan Thomas. He writes:

"Dylan Thomas was born to a divided bardic tradition, a divided language, and a split-minded people. This has led to the contradictions of the man who was the finest lyric poet of his age: one foot in Eden, the other in Babylon; one hand on the Bible, the other under the bedclothes; his heavy head lifted to the sky, his feet on the bar-rail; a frail angel become gross, a self-declared Lucifer, who took in his aged parents; the sensuous prophet of the adolescent, the generous wastrel of middle age, the fierce mourner of the dead; a first name from the Mabinogion that he passed on to a folk singer, a last name so common in Wales that it meant any farmer, railwayman, teacher , or housewife; the bard of the mysteries of heaven and hell, the poet of the country and the bode, the writer of the excessive and the vernacular. He had to cope with his Welshman's sense of inferiority, with his own obsession with death, with the deep divisions within him."

But let's leave the last word (or, rather, the last two words) with Dylan Thomas himself. His birthdays always seemed to make him contemplate death, his own death. But here, in these lines from his *Poem on his birthday*, we sense a deep spirituality that somehow co-existed within his troubled persona with all the uncertainties that made him lose himself in drink.

… And every wave of the way
And gale I tackle, the whole world then,
With more triumphant faith
Than ever was since the world was said,
Spins its morning of praise,

I hear the bouncing hills
Grow larked and greener at berry brown
Fall and the dew larks sing
Taller this thunderclap spring, and how
More spanned with angels ride
The mansouled fiery islands! Oh,
Holier then their eyes,
And my shining men no more alone
As I sail out to die.

And so to the last word. It's the evening song of the Reverend Eli Jenkins. How I'd prefer to offer it to you as sung by my dear friend Osian Elis. But, failing that, and in celebration of a humane and courteous way of saluting the deep-down goodness in things, let me read this familiar ode from *Under Milk Wood*.

Every morning when I wake,
Dear Lord, a little prayer I make,
O please to keep Thy lovely eye
On all poor creatures born to die.

And every evening at sun-down
I ask a blessing on the town,
For whether we last the night or no
I'm sure is always touch-and-go.

15.

We are not wholly bad or good
Who live our lives under Milk Wood,
And Thou, I know, wilt be the first
To see our best side, not our worst.

O let us see another day!
Bless us this night, I pray,
And to the sun we all will bow
And say, good-bye – but just for now!

And so I salute the memory of Dylan Thomas, truly (as I contend) the poet of his (and my) people.