The Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive

The greatest regret of my life is that I was born too late to be a bohemian. But by the time I was old enough to be one, respectability had almost died out, and bohemianism is parasitic on respectability for its attraction. When everyone is a bohemian, no one is. Besides, property prices had risen so much that it was no longer possible to live in what one might call higher squalor in the center of a great city, renting a single uncomfortable room for next to nothing. Where residential property costs $15,000 a square yard, no one wants a feckless poet or painter as a tenant, not even of a cupboard-size room. And nowadays, when it is sometimes difficult to distinguish by his mode of dress the chief executive of a giant corporation from a student, it is easier to express social rebellion by wearing a collar and tie than by turning up at a cocktail party in a turtleneck sweater, once regarded as the height of eccentricity.

Dylan Thomas, the great Welsh poet, the centenary of whose birth was in October, was one of the last thoroughgoing bohemians. It never occurred to him to get a regular job or conform to the restrictive conventions of the society into which he was born. He considered employment only as a temporary and regrettable expedient to get him out of a financial fix. Drinking, sponging off others, indifference to social norms, womanizing, physical squalor, petty theft (of shirts, for example), and even not-so-petty theft, were his mode of life. His friend Norman Cameron, a minor poet and advertising executive, wrote:

> *Who invited him in? What was he doing here,*
> *That insolent little ruffian, that crapulous lout?*
> *When he quitted a sofa, he left behind him a smear.*
> *My wife says he even tried to paw her about.*

> *If that is what his friends thought of him, what of his enemies?*

It is easy to construct a case against Dylan Thomas. The notion of returning borrowed money was so alien to him that it never even crossed his mind to do so. He had no concept of *meum et tuum*. He bilked tradesmen if he could, treated other people's homes without respect, leaving them in a mess and unapologetically breaking their valuable furniture in quarrels with his fiery wife, Caitlin, and in general behaved as if he were above the degrading necessity of ordinary mortals to earn a living: the world was lucky to have him. He was a careless, neglectful, and irresponsible father of three children, he betrayed his wife on innumerable occasions, and his attachment to truth was less than obsessional. The Oxford historian A. J. P. Taylor—no stickler for convention himself—detested Thomas for his laziness, dishonesty, drunkenness, and parasitism; it was Taylor's wife, Margaret, in love with Thomas, who gave him the money to live in his last and beautiful home, the Boat House, in Laugharne, on the Carmarthenshire coast. Yet Thomas was far from grateful for his patron's largesse (she paid all his bills, too); in private, he was disparaging about, and even contemptuous of, her. He regarded her cold-bloodedly as a cash cow, and, come what might, he always had money for the pub.

Thomas's conduct, however, always exhibited an element of play-acting: his bohemianism, at least at first, was not unself-conscious. He grew up in a respectable area of Swansea known as Uplands, in an Edwardian-style house on a street called Cwmdonkin Drive. The Thomas family had a maid. His father was head of English teaching at Swansea Grammar School at a time of high academic standards. Thomas Sr. was a dissatisfied man, bitter that his talents had gone unrecognized—he once applied for the chair of English at Aberystwyth University College but was turned down in favor of someone he thought his inferior. Like V. S. Naipaul's father,

Thomas Sr. had unfulfilled literary aspirations, and vicarious social and academic ambitions for his son. (He was a native Welsh speaker, for example, but did not want his son to learn the language, thinking this a worthless and even deleterious accomplishment that would mark Dylan as belonging to a culturally backward race. Indeed, he paid for the young Dylan to have elocution lessons, to expunge Welshness from his pronunciation.)

The young Dylan set about frustrating his father's ambitions for him. He attended the grammar school in which his father taught; but he was an undisciplined scholar, focusing only on English composition and ignoring all other subjects, and his formal education ceased when he was 16. Thomas was a quart that could not be fit into a pint pot.

He early conceived the vocation of poet, as others conceive a religious vocation. At 13, he published a poem in a South Wales newspaper, though (as was later discovered) it was pure plagiarism. Yet Thomas soon thought of himself, and referred to himself, as the Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive, a part he played for the rest of his life: and when you play a part long enough, it becomes what you actually are—in this case, the *poète maudit*. His wife once said that he worked hard at his image; and in the end, the image was the man and it killed him. The alcohol consumption and the death were all too real, even if he drank partly to create the impression of himself that he wanted to convey, both to himself and, more important, to others.

For a long time, Dylan Thomas was as famous for his life as for his works; his roistering, drunken, undisciplined existence exerted an attraction for people chained by circumstance or cowardice to the humdrum world of getting and spending. That Thomas for much of his short life received an income from his writing that would have been adequate for comfort, if only he spent it wisely; that he never took buses but only taxis, even when broke and even for long distances

and at immense expense; that he sent his son to be privately educated—none of this was widely known, for poverty as a consequence of his principled determination to live as a poet was more appropriate to the legend he created and lived.

Thomas may have played the part of the doomed poet, excused by his genius from following the conventions of decent behavior. But he *was* a genius: few are the twentieth-century English poets who wrote lines that not only were memorable but that also make the soul vibrate. Thomas was one of them.

Thomas was aware from an early age of his own genius. In his book of marvelously evocative stories about his childhood and adolescence, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, published in 1940, when he was 26, Thomas recalls reciting a poem he had written 12 years earlier, in which the lines appear:

> *The frost has known,*
> *From scattered conclave by the few winds blown,*
> *That the lone genius in my roots,*
> *Bare down there in a jungle of fruits,*
> *Has planted a green year, for praise, in the heart of my upgrowing days.*

No doubt many a young boy has felt the lone genius in his roots, but few have seen them grow, like Thomas's, aboveground.

The story in which these lines appear, "The Fight," conveys the great charm of Thomas's personality, which struck as many people as did his disgraceful egotism. The fight was with Dan Jones, a Swansea boy two years his senior. Strangely enough, it cemented their lifelong friendship. Jones went on to become a distinguished composer and a brilliant linguist: during the war, he decoded messages from the Russians, Romanians, and Japanese.

Jones came from a richer family than Thomas, and in "The

Fight," Thomas describes the first dinner at Jones's house to which he was invited. Also present at the dinner are the Reverend Mr. Bevan and his wife. Mrs. Bevan is quite mad: as Jones relates, "She tried to throw herself out of the window but [Mr. Bevan] didn't take any notice, so she came up to our house and told mother all about it." Thomas has an almost Dickensian eye for the social absurdities of middle-class respectability:

> *Mr Bevan said grace. When he stood up, it was just as though he were still sitting down, he was so short. "Bless our repast this evening," he said, as though he didn't like the food at all. But once "Amen" was over, he went at the cold meat like a dog.*
>
> *Mrs Bevan didn't look all there. She stared at the table-cloth and made hesitant movements with her knife and fork. She appeared to be wondering which to cut up first, the meat or the cloth.*

In the story, Thomas reveals his own character. Jones's father, called Mr. Jenkyn in the story, asks Thomas his age: "I told him, but added one year. Why did I lie then? I wondered. If I lost my cap and found it in my bedroom, and my mother asked me where I had found it, I would say, 'In the attic,' or, 'Under the hall-stand.' It was exciting to have to keep wary all the time in case I contradicted myself, to make up the story of a film I pretended to have seen." Having heard from Thomas that he was 15 and three-quarters years old, Mr. Jenkyn says, "That's a very exact age. I see we have a mathematician with us. Now see if he can do this little sum." He asks the young Dylan whether he would like to do a puzzle: " 'Oh, I'd like to see it very much,' I said in my best voice. I wanted to come to the house again. This was better than home, and there was a woman off her head, too." When Mr. Jenkyn shows the solution to the puzzle, Dylan pretends to understand: "I thanked him and asked him for another one. It

was almost as good being a hypocrite as being a liar; it made you warm and shameful."

It is as if Thomas had to embroider truth poetically for it to become real for him, the embroidery leading to or exposing a deeper kind of truth. There is charm in his child's clear-sighted view of things, which Thomas never lost and which is still evident in the one undoubted dramatic masterpiece ever written for radio, *Under Milk Wood*, which he completed shortly before his death. But his clear-sightedness is that of no ordinary child: the juxtaposition of warmth and shamefulness is completely unexpected, a revelatory leap of the imagination. These are the kinds of juxtapositions that made much of Thomas's poetry so evocative and capable of changing the way you look at the world, increasing the intensity of your attention. In "Poem in October," for example, Thomas describes his birthday as he overlooks the estuary of the River Tawe:

> *It was my thirtieth year to heaven*
> *Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood*
> *And the mussel pooled and the heron*
> *Priested shore*
> *The morning beckon*
> *With water praying and call of seagull and rook*
> *And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall*
> *Myself to set foot*
> *That second*
> *In the still sleeping town and set forth.*

There is no verbal music better than this in twentieth-century poetry in English; and who, having read "The heron priested shore," will ever look at a heron in quite the same way again?

To return to Thomas's charm: it is to be found in his letters to Vernon Watkins, another Swansea poet and a lifelong friend (Swansea was surprisingly fecund in men of talent in the first

third of the twentieth century), but in character very different, almost opposite. Not a drinker, and better—or longer—educated than Thomas, Watkins worked all his life in a bank and always behaved like a responsible bourgeois. Poetry and fecklessness are not identical twins.

Thomas wrote to Watkins from the age of 21; he enclosed poems in his letters for Watkins's comments and amendments, often accepting his suggestions. That Thomas lived through periods of genuine penury, even if sometimes self-inflicted, is proved by the fact that he had often to ask Watkins to type out his poems, since he lacked a typewriter or even paper of his own. Among other things, these letters testify to the vast increase in abundance that has taken place among us within living memory.

Many of the letters ask Watkins for money. They do so with irresistible charm, such that, if I had received one, I think I would have been glad and perhaps even honored to comply. Here Thomas describes the cold caused by his penury: "It's almost too cold to hold a pen this morning. I've lost a toe since breakfast, my nose is on its last nostril."

The very first letter that Thomas wrote to Watkins, in April 1936, asked him whether he was "temporarily rich" and, if so, whether he would like to lend him a pound or two. "If you ever have 5 shillings that you hate," he wrote to Watkins in August 1940, "I shan't." That year, he also wrote to say that he had not received two pounds (equivalent these days to more than $100) that Watkins had sent him by mail: "Sorry, very sorry, sorrier than I can tell you, about the death of the pounds." Thomas was not to be trusted to tell the truth, however, for he once told A. J. P. Taylor that he had lost his return train ticket when he hadn't, trying to extract money from him. In May 1941, Thomas wrote three times to Watkins. The first of the letters noted: "A little money has arrived for me since your last pound for the road; now that has gone. . . . [No cigarettes] now for days. I have taken to biting my nails, but

they go down so quickly, and one has only 10." In the next, Thomas complained, "The joke has gone too far. It isn't fair to be penniless *every* morning. Every morning but one, okay; but no, *every* morning." In the third letter, he says, "See if you can squeeze another drop from your borrowed-to-death body . . . . [H]ow vile I feel when I ask you again. Really vile. Weasels take off their hats as I stink by." And so on.

As a memoir written by Watkins's widow, Gwen, makes clear, the relationship between Thomas and Watkins was unequal. Thomas was more important to Watkins, emotionally, than Watkins ever was to Thomas, who used him but, in the familiar pattern, belittled him in private. But Watkins, who was six years older than Thomas and survived him by 14 years, fiercely defended his friend against his many detractors; and it is hard not to see in this a noble recognition of a man of genius by a man of talent, because one-sided admiration is as painful in its way as unrequited love. The difference between the two men is laid out, perhaps unintentionally, when Gwen Watkins drew parallels between their early development, as described in their own words:

> *Watkins: By the time I was ten I had collected most of the English poets. . . . The hold which poetry had on my sensibility increased, and hardly ever relaxed its grip.*
>
> *Thomas: When I was very young, and just at school . . . in my eleventh year I read indiscriminately, and with my eyes hanging out.*
>
> *Watkins: I wrote poems, and they usually reflected the style of the poet I was reading at the time. In language, I was not at all precocious, only responsive.*
>
> *Thomas: I wrote endless imitations, though I never thought them to be imitations, but rather, wonderfully original things, like eggs laid by tigers.*

Who was going to be the greater poet?

Genius does not justify betrayal and the many other sins to which Thomas was heir, but one feels that there was more to Thomas's egotism than to that of, say, the ordinary psychopath. For one thing, his vision of human life was intensely tragic, having two periods: childhood and adolescence, on the one hand; and death, on the other. Childhood is irrecoverably past ("the years before I knew I was happy," Thomas calls it); only death awaits:

> *Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs*
> *About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green. . . .*

> *Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me. . . .*
> *Time held me green and dying*
> *Though I sang in my chains like the sea.*

Or again:

> *When I was a windy boy and a bit . . .*
> *I tiptoed shy in the gooseberry wood,*
> *The rude owl cried like a telltale tit, . . .*

> *Now I am a man no more no more*
> *And a black reward for a roaring life, . . .*
> *Modesty hides my thighs in her wings,*
> *And all the deadly virtues plague my death!*

His childhood over, Thomas, by his manner of burning his candle at both ends, went more than halfway to meet death, as if he had nothing more to expect of life.

From all that I have said of Thomas's behavior, he might have seemed so self-absorbed that he had no time or energy or

concern for the rest of humanity. But in fact, his last work, *Under Milk Wood*, was a social comedy so finely observed and tolerant (and, of course, poetic) that it reconciles you to the inevitable hypocrisies, evasions, frustrations, absurdities, pains, and fantasies of human existence. This is the *comédie humaine* in its small-town, Welsh version; and if Thomas himself behaved as if he wanted desperately to escape it, no man who did not, at some level, love humanity could have written the following scene, in which Mr. Pugh dreams of disembarrassing himself of his scurrilous and censorious wife:

> *FIRST VOICE*
> *In the blind-drawn dark dining-room of School House, dusty and echoing as a dining-room in a vault, Mr and Mrs Pugh are silent over cold grey cottage pie. Mr Pugh reads, as he forks the shroud meat in, from Lives of the Great Poisoners. He has bound a plain brown-paper cover round the book. Slyly, between slow mouthfuls, he sidespies up at Mrs Pugh, poisons her with his eye, then goes on reading. He underlines certain passages and smiles in secret.*
>
> *MRS PUGH*
> *Persons with manners do not read at table,*
>
> *FIRST VOICE*
> *says Mrs Pugh. She swallows a digestive tablet as big as a horse-pill, washing it down with clouded peasoup water.*
> *[Pause]*
>
> *MRS PUGH*
> *Some persons were brought up in pigsties.*
>
> *MR PUGH*
> *Pigs don’t read at table, dear.*

FIRST VOICE
Bitterly she flicks dust from the broken cruet. It settles on the pie in a thin gnat-rain.

MR PUGH
Pigs can’t read, my dear.

MRS PUGH
I know one who can.

FIRST VOICE
Alone in the hissing laboratory of his wishes, Mr Pugh minces among bad vats and jeroboams, tiptoes through spinneys of murdering herbs, agony dancing in his crucibles, and mixes especially for Mrs Pugh a venomous porridge unknown to toxicologists which will scald and viper through her until her ears fall off like figs, her toes grow big and black as balloons, and steam comes screaming out of her navel.

MR PUGH
You know best, dear,

FIRST VOICE
says Mr Pugh, and quick as a flash he ducks her in rat soup.

MRS PUGH
What’s that book by your trough, Mr Pugh?

MR PUGH
It’s a theological work, my dear. Lives of the Great Saints.

FIRST VOICE
Mrs Pugh smiles. An icicle forms in the cold air of the dining-vault.

This is writing of genius, by which Thomas makes us aware of the glories of the everyday, the everyday that he could not himself tolerate.

Most (but not all) of those offended by Thomas's outrageous behavior forgave him; for them, the profit of his company was greater than the loss occasioned by his various vices. I think I should have been among those who forgave him. But whether he would have enriched the world as much as he did, or perhaps even more, had he not so early assumed the role of the Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive, is impossible to say.

His grave in St. Martin's churchyard, Laugharne, is deeply moving. It consists of a simple white cross with his name and dates painted in black. His temperamental but much put-upon widow, Caitlin, chose to be buried next to him when she died 41 years later, though she had spent the intervening years in Italy, where she sobered up (eventually) and had another son at the age of 49 with a man with whom she lived for the rest of her life. Clearly, then, Dylan Thomas was no ordinary man, and his reunion with Caitlin in the grave—which is that of Everyman, simpler by far than that of the local butcher or baker—gives point to the final stanzas of Norman Cameron's poem about him:

> *What was worse, if, as often happened, we caught him out*
> *Stealing or pinching the maid's backside, he would leer,*
> *With a cigarette on his lip and a shiny snout,*
> *With a hint: "You and I are all in the same galère."*
>
> *Yesterday we ejected him, nearly by force,*
> *To go on the parish, perhaps, or die of starvation;*
> *As to that, we agreed, we felt no kind of remorse.*
>
> *Yet there's this check on our righteous jubilation:*
> *Now that the little accuser is gone, of course,*
> *We shall never be able to answer his accusation.*

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