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'From the Oracular Archives': The Dylan Thomas Poetry Archive

GOODBY, John

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Citation:

GOODBY, John (2024). 'From the Oracular Archives': The Dylan Thomas Poetry Archive. In: CALLISON, Jamie, FELDMAN, Matthew, SVENDSEN, Anna and TONNING, Erik, (eds.) The Bloomsbury Handbook of Modernist Archives. Bloomsbury Handbooks . London, Bloomsbury Academic, 183-193. [Book Section]

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'From the Oracular Archives': The Dylan Thomas Poetry Archive

JOHN GOODBY

Dylan Thomas presents an unusual challenge to the archival researcher of modernism. While copies of most of his poems exist in holograph, and much editorial work has been done on this material, it has only recently been fully understood in what ways Thomas could be said to have been a modernist writer, and precisely how his surviving MSS might shed light on the evolution of his signature modernist 'process' style.[1] This is partly because the pioneer analysts of archival material were not interested in Thomas's modernism as such, and partly because a key piece of the archive record – the fifth of five notebooks Thomas kept in his adolescence and early adulthood – remained unknown until 2014.[2] More generally it has to be said that the manner of publication of Thomas's work was, for many years, unhelpful to those who wanted a balanced picture of his achievement. The early short stories, for example, which share the early poems' surrealist-expressionist, gothic-grotesque modernist style, were published piecemeal and did not appear in collected form until 1983.[3] Thomas's letters, which shed valuable light on his stylistic evolution, and help contextualize the other material, were dealt with reasonably well because of their biographical interest; a *Selected Letters* appeared in 1965 and a *Collected Letters* in 1985.[4] However, the radio broadcasts were not collected until 1991, and *Under Milk Wood* existed only in incomplete published form until 1995, the year in which the film scripts were also finally collected and published.[5] As a result, while some work has been carried out on the fiction, research has barely begun on the radio and film scripts, or on the letters, many of which have great literary value. An assessment of Thomas as modernist must begin with his lyric poetry, however, the form in which he was most innovative, and in what follows I focus on the poetry MSS archive for 1930–35.

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[1]Ralph Maud, *Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963).
[2]*The Fifth Notebook of Dylan Thomas*, ed. by John Goodby and Adrian Osbourne (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). After acquiring N5 in 2014, Swansea University funded Osbourne to help Goodby edit it; the annotated facsimile edition was published in 2020. See note 21 below.
[3]Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1983).
[4]Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: Dent, 1985; 2nd edn, 2000).
[5]Dylan Thomas, *The Broadcasts*, ed. by Ralph Maud (London: Dent, 1991); Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Dent, 1995); Thomas, *The Complete Filmscripts*, ed. by John Ackerman (London: Dent, 1995).

THE POETRY ARCHIVE: 'MY EXERCISE-BOOKS FULL OF POEMS'

Thomas published a *Collected Poems* in 1952, the year before his untimely death. This was simply an amalgamation of his five already-published collections, *18 Poems* (1934), *Twenty-five Poems* (1936), *The Map of Love* (1939), *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) and the US-published chapbook *In Country Sleep* (1952). The order of the poems in the collections was assumed to correspond roughly to the order in which they had been written. But a more thorough sense of his development gradually dawned as the contents of the archive poetry notebooks he had kept between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one, from April 1930 to August 1935, came to light. These were five school exercise books into which Thomas entered and dated fair copies of all his poems as he completed them, unknown to readers of the first *Collected Poems* and overlooked by scholars for almost two decades after their sale.

Thomas sold the first four of the notebooks (hereafter N1, N2, N3 and N4) to the Margaret Lockwood Memorial Library at SUNY Buffalo in May 1941, for just £25.[6] He included in the sale what is known as the 'Red Notebook', containing holograph versions of ten of his early short stories, and the worksheets – over 150 of them – for a long poem he had just completed, 'Ballad of the Long-legged Bait'. He had lost the fifth poetry notebook, covering summer 1934 to August 1935 (hereafter N5) three years before, in early 1938, partly because he was unaware then that his MSS might have a monetary value. The task of understanding and making the significance of the SUNY notebooks known fell to Ralph Maud, the doyen of Thomas scholars, who published his findings in journal articles in the late 1950s, in an appendix to *Entrances to Dylan Thomas's Poetry* (1963), and in *Poet in the Making: The Notebooks of Dylan Thomas* (1967), a scrupulously annotated edition.[7] (N5 would remain unknown to Maud, who died on 8 December 2014, the day before it was sold by Sotheby's to Swansea University.)

N1 TO N4: 'THE WINDY SALVAGE'

Maud's study of N1–N4 revealed that the belief that Thomas's poems had been written in the order in which they appeared in the *Collected Poems*, or even that each individual collection of poems represented his output over a discrete period of time, was mistaken. In particular, he was able to show that many of the poems in *Twenty-five Poems* (1936) and *The Map of Love* (1939), Thomas's second and third collections, derived from poems in the notebooks which largely pre-dated those published in *18 Poems*, his first collection. Letters written by Thomas in 1937 and 1938 to Vernon Watkins, published in 1957, supported Maud; they showed Thomas discussing poems for *The Map of Love*, most of which had originated in N1, N2, and N3, as if they were new compositions.[8] Maud was

[6]The notebooks cover the following periods: N1: 27 April to 9 December 1930; N2: 18 December 1930 to 1 July 1932; N3: 1 February 1932 to 16 August 1933; N4: 17 August 1933 to 30 April 1934. There is no notebook extant for July 1932 to February 1933; however, Maud includes eight typescript poems he believes were copied from it in the paperback edition of Dylan Thomas, *The Notebook Poems 1930–1934*, ed. by Ralph Maud (London: Dent, 1989).
[7]Ralph Maud, *Entrances*, pp. 121–48; Dylan Thomas, *Poet in the Making: The Notebooks of Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions Press, 1967); repr. *The Notebook Poems 1930–1934*.
[8]Dylan Thomas, *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, ed. by Vernon Watkins (London: Dent/Faber, 1957).

then able to show that Thomas had done the same in 1936 for *Twenty-five Poems*. The revelations complicated the trajectory of Thomas's development and promised to shed new light on his strategies as a writer.[9]

The most striking fact about the notebook poems is their sheer quantity. The 1952 *Collected Poems* contained just eighty-nine poems, published by Thomas over a twenty-year writing career. The notebooks contain 234 poems, all written in just five years.[10] Understandably, most are 'prentice work; it is only in N3, and then increasingly in N4, that Thomas hit his stride. Eight of the fifty-three poems in N3 were published in national journals, or collected; for N4, the figure was eighteen of forty-one; and all sixteen of the poems in N5 would be published. From this point on Thomas would publish and usually also collect more or less every poem he wrote. Finally, we might note the extent of Thomas's reliance on the notebooks – roughly half of all his published poems derive from them in some way or other.

Having said this, it should be noted that it is easy to overstate the significance of the notebooks. For some critics, Thomas's recourse to them is simply a sign of his incorrigible immaturity as a writer and as a man. This approach invariably reflects an *ad hominem* animus which can still mar discussions of Thomas; as if a poet at the ripe old age of twenty-six is to be damned for plundering material he wrote as an eighteen-year-old (and at eighteen Thomas was capable of writing 'And death shall have no dominion' and 'The force that through the green fuse'). But even if we allow Thomas to be within his rights, as it were, it is still possible to overstate the case for his dependence. As William Moynihan, the first critic to absorb Maud's findings, noted: 'Maud has a tendency to make too much of the Notebooks. A few tentative jottings toward a poem do not constitute a poem, and the relationship between the Notebooks and the *Collected Poems* is generally little more than that.'[11]

Even so, the notebooks tell us a great deal. Indeed, as they stand they constitute arguably the most complete record of the evolution of any modernist poet. They chart, often on a weekly, even daily basis, the sporadic crystallization of Thomas's process style in N3 in 'And death shall have no dominion' (April 1933) and 'Find meat on bones' (July 1933), and its full emergence in August 1933, in N4, with poems such as 'Before I knocked' (6 September 1933) and 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower' (12 October 1933). As Goodby has argued, in *Under the Spelling Wall*, the key to Thomas's success was his decision, in summer 1933, to abandon free or irregular verse – previously considered *de rigueur* – and to instead cram a series of disorienting devices within the traditional stanza forms adopted by Auden and his followers in order to replicate modernist effects. Traditional constraint paradoxically freed him to replicate

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[9]The first three book-length critical studies of Thomas, by Henry Treece (1949), Elder Olson (1954), and Derek Stanford (1954) show no awareness of the Lockwood Library archive, while the first guide to the poems, by William Tindall (1963) refers to it only in passing; Tindall clearly did not consult it.

[10]The imbalance has posed a problem for editors of the *Collected Poems*. A second edition of 1971, edited by Daniel Jones, made use of Maud's findings to increase the number of poems to over 160. A third edition of 1988, edited by Davies and Maud, reverted to the eighty-nine poems of the 1952 edition, with two additional archive (though not notebook) poems, the unfinished drafts of 'In Country Heaven' and 'Elegy'. In 2014 John Goodby published the first fully annotated *Collected Poems*, updated with material from N5 in the 2016 and 2017 US editions. He followed Jones in including uncollected poems and a sample of the notebook poems, and Davies and Maud in providing a full scholarly apparatus.

[11]William T. Moynihan, *The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), pp. 25–6n49.

collage and paratactical effects via pun, heaped appositive clauses, double syntax, delayed verbs, and unassigned subjects and speakers.[12]

This sustained burst of writing lasted from August 1933 until 30 April 1934, when N4 was filled up. A hiatus followed; N5 contains just two poems for the period from May 1934 to 30 September 1934, when 'Do you not father me' – taken from an earlier notebook – was also entered and extensively revised. Four more new poems followed by October 1934, however, and at this point Thomas knew he had enough poems for *18 Poems*, which was due to be published in December. N4 had supplied twelve of its poems, the additional six coming from among the first seven poems in N5 (the exception was 'Do you not father me?'). At this stage, then, Thomas was developing in accordance with a standard linear trajectory of development, with his most recent, stylistically advanced poems, going into his forthcoming collection.

Maud's researches showed how and why this linear development was modified with *Twenty-five Poems* (1936). By early 1936 Thomas's output of new poems had slowed drastically, but he was desperate to consolidate the success of *18 Poems* with a second collection. He had ten poems from N5 he could use, plus two others, 'Then was my neophyte' and 'To-day, this insect', completed since he had finished it in August 1935. This was not sufficient for a full-length collection. He therefore turned back to rework poems in N3 and N4 to bulk out what he had. He used the three poems in N5 which were already versions of poems from earlier notebooks – 'Do you not father me?', 'The seed-at-zero' and 'Incarnate devil' – and earlier notebook poems which included 'I have longed to move away' (N3), 'The hand that signed the paper' (N4) and 'This bread I break' (N4). The result was that at least sixteen of *Twenty-five Poems*, in some form or other, pre-dated *18 Poems*.

Three years later, in 1939, Thomas found himself short of poems for *The Map of Love* (1939). Again, he turned to his notebooks, adding nine revised poems to the seven new ones he had written since *Twenty-five Poems*. Overall, as Maud notes, 'about half the poems in Thomas's two middle volumes [. . .] had their origin in that amazing burst of creativity in the two years prior to *18 Poems* (1934)'.[13] By way of a coda, Thomas reworked 'The hunchback in the park' and 'On the marriage of a virgin', from N2 and N3 respectively, for *Deaths and Entrances* (1946). Such revisions were always subordinate to Thomas's main activity in advancing the line of poetic innovation stemming from the 'process poems' of *18 Poems*, albeit slowly, in increasingly complex, innovative works, such as 'I, in my intricate image', 'Altarwise by owl-light', 'I make this in a warring absence' and 'How shall my animal' – the poems he called his 'long exhausters'.[14]

This inevitably created some confusion for readers, reviewers and critics, since the revised notebook poems were interpolated among the more complex, recently-composed ones. However, Thomas signalled his continued commitment to a modernist style by opening and closing *Twenty-five Poems* with its two most difficult items, 'I, in my intricate image' and 'Altarwise'. Thomas, it seems to me, was uniquely precocious, and the explosive development of 1933–34 had simply left him with material he was unable to fully process until a few years later. For *Twenty-five Poems*, the procedure was pragmatic, if rather opportunistic, a career move and a way of maintaining writerly momentum. In

[12]John Goodby, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 50–120.
[13]Maud, *Entrances*, p. 122.
[14]Thomas, *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, p. 31.

that collection, the different kinds of poem jostle with each other. In *The Map of Love*, however, the lines between them are more blurred. It is a genuinely transitional collection, and there is interplay and exchange between the two poetic modes.

While he seems not to have told Watkins about the origins of the poems they discussed in 1937–38, Thomas did distinguish between those he felt were 'unsatisfactory', if adequate to their role, not having required much labour, and others, fewer in number, which had.[15] The latter were, in fact, virtually new creations in his most up-to-date poetic mode, marked by the dynamic imagery and linguistic invention of brand-new poems. 'How shall my animal', the best example of making something from almost nothing, exfoliated from a single line in its N1 source. But the process worked both ways, as Maud pointed out. In 'After the funeral', although heavily revised from its N3 source, Thomas allowed the clarity of the original to temper the difficult textures of his current style. After a syntactically tortuous opening, the poem develops a clearer narrative line and expands in human sympathy, eulogizing Ann Jones, its dedicatee. The moment of expansiveness is inaugurated when Thomas signals a self-critique in figurative terms by including a version of his callow, younger, modernist self as 'a desolate boy who slits his throat'.[16] In 'Once it was the colour of saying', also dating from late 1938, he thematized his rejection of what had become a stylistic cul-de-sac, plangently renouncing his youthful addiction to the *alchimie du verbe*.[17] Although the stylistic shift was uneven, and some of the mea culpa is tongue in cheek (there would be *more* 'colour' in the later poetry, not less), with these poems Thomas began to juggle, if not wholly blend, his modernist textures with more pellucid ones, in a way which would eventually lead to major poems in a transparent style, such as 'Fern Hill' (1945).

Although he exaggerated Thomas's dependence on them, Maud's labours on the notebooks disentangled the complex processes by which Thomas came to write the poems of the middle and late 1930s, revealing a shift from the homogenous style of *18 Poems*, derived from a single, almost unbroken creative surge, to the stylistic eclecticism of *Twenty-five Poems*, and the transitional style of *The Map of Love*. It was a major achievement, and all who work on the Thomas archive remain deeply in Maud's debt. What Maud did not do, however, was link those developments to Thomas's modernism and the fate of modernism more broadly in British poetry in the 1930s. With the appearance of N5 in 2014, it became possible to do so.

THE FIFTH NOTEBOOK: 'SUFFER, MY TOPSY TURVIES'

N5 gives the kind of information to be expected of a major new archival source. It clears up punctuation cruxes, for example, such as whether there should be a comma or a full stop at the end of the last line of the first stanza of 'I dreamed my genesis':

> I dreamed my genesis in sweat of sleep, breaking
> Through the rotating shell, strong
> As motor muscle on the drill, driving
> Through vision and the girdered nerve,

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[15] Thomas, *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, p. 36.
[16] Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Poems*, ed. by John Goodby (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), p. 101.
[17] Ibid., p. 107.

> From limbs that had the measure of the worm, shuffled
> Off from the creasing flesh, fi~~a~~led
> Through all the irons in the grass, metal
> Of suns in the manmelting sun.[18]

At the cost of robbing the second stanza of a main verb, all previous editors had bowed to the authority of *18 Poems* and *Collected Poems 1934–1952* by putting a full stop after 'nerve'. N5 had the authority to confirm the long-standing suspicions of some, such as Maud, that it was a comma. N5 also gave more accurate datings, showing, for example, that 'Altarwise', which Davies and Maud suggested was begun in winter 1934, dated from August 1935, and that 'How soon the servant sun', which they conjectured for May 1935, had been completed in January.[19] It also revealed unsuspected links between the poems. Thus, 'salvation's bottle' in 'Altarwise' V can now be seen to have begun life in the third section of 'I, in my intricate image', suggesting that both poems had a shared concern with faith as an intoxicant. Equally, links which had been posited were disproved. Davies and Maud 'deduced' that 'I, in my intricate image' ran on from 'When, like a running grave', but N5 revealed a four-month gap between them, making this unlikely.[20]

But despite their formal and thematic similarities, common to the process poetic, and the fact that both notebooks contributed to *18 Poems*, N5 is not merely a continuation of N4. One difference with the other notebooks is that while it contains no unpublished poems (presumably one reason why Thomas did not mind leaving it behind at his mother-in-law's), it does contain a great deal of *in situ* revision of a kind hardly found in N1–N4.[21] In fact, there are no MSS of Thomas's early poems pre-dating their entry in a notebook, for reasons he explained to Charles Fisher, who requested some MSS in 1935:

> I'm very pleased [. . .] you [. . .] want a manuscript of some poems of mine [. . .] But my method is this: I write a poem on innumerable sheets of scrap paper, write it on both sides of the paper, often upside down and criss cross ways, unpunctuated, surrounded by drawings of lamp posts and boiled eggs, in a very dirty mess; bit by bit I copy out the slowly developing poem into an exercise book; and, when it is completed, I type it out. The scrap sheets I burn, for there are such a lot of them that they clutter up my room and get mixed in the beer and the butter.[22]

Very few 'type[d] out' copies survive, and none of the 'scrap sheets'. In N5, however, thirteen poems have been altered, some substantially – there are variant passages up to eight lines long. There is much deletion and interlineation, ranging from single words and lines, to stanzas and part-stanzas in three poems, plus a deleted octet in 'Altarwise' V. Against his practice elsewhere, Thomas also makes extensive use of the verso pages of N5.

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[18]Thomas, *The Fifth Notebook*, p. 63.
[19]Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934–1953*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Dent, 1988), pp. 210, 202.
[20]Ibid., p. 195.
[21]In spring 1938, Thomas left N5 behind, seemingly without regret, at the home of Yvonne Macnamara, his mother-in-law, in Blashford, Hampshire. Mrs Macnamara seems to have ordered it to be disposed of as rubbish (it is highly unlikely that she did so out of malice, and there is no record of any complaint at its fate by Thomas). N5 was saved from the kitchen boiler furnace by a servant, Louie King, and squirreled away in a drawer until her death in 1984. Her family kept the notebook, unknown to the outside world, until Thomas's centenary year in 2014.
[22]Thomas, *Collected Letters*, p. 209.

For the third section of ‘I, in my intricate image’, he went as far as copying an earlier version of the poem onto the verso page in pencil so that he could revise it and write the new version on the facing recto page in ink. At such points we are justified in regarding N5 not just as a fair copy book, but as a workbook too, almost the equivalent of the ‘scrap sheets’ and a unique record of Thomas’s creative processes.

Why did Thomas suddenly break with his normal procedure in this way? The answer lies in the fact that the interpolations, revisions, and so on, start at the point immediately after he had entered the poem titled ‘Seven’ (‘When, like a running grave’), which was the last of the series of poems that begin N5 and were earmarked to go into *18 Poems*. There is no *in situ* revision in these poems (‘Three’, ‘Do you not father me’, is anomalous in this regard but it would go into *Twenty-five Poems*, not *18 Poems*). However, after entering ‘Seven’, a task had been accomplished. The rest of the poems in N5, except for the three from N3 and N4 – ‘Incarnate devil’, ‘The seed-at-zero’, and ‘Foster the light’ – are frankly experimental pieces, the most daring Thomas was ever to write. He signalled what he was up to by dating ‘Seven’ in unusually thorough fashion: ‘26 October 1934’, underlining the year. Beneath this, at the foot of the page – as nowhere else in the notebooks – he drew an emphatic horizontal line across the centre of the page, delimited by two short vertical strokes. It was a reminder to himself that one phase of his development as a poet had just ended.

The date is a further clue: 26 October 1934 was the eve of Thomas’s twentieth birthday on 27 October. He attached a special significance to birthdays, and here, having finished his first collection, he marked a turning-point in a literary and a literal sense by allowing his imagination free rein. The poems that follow, ‘Now’ and ‘How soon the servant sun’, are the two strangest and most gnomic he ever wrote. This is the opening stanza of ‘Now’, ‘Eight’, with the ninth line deleted, as in N5:

> Now
> Say nay,
> Man dry man,
> Dry lover mine
> The deadrock base and break the buried anchor,
>   for
> Should he, ~~who had~~ centre sake, hop in the dust,
> Forsake, the fool, the hardiness of anger,
> ~~Draw dress on gristle with a cotton fist~~.[23]

So odd was this pair that Watkins urged Thomas to leave them out of *Twenty-five Poems*:

> for me these two poems presented a face of unwarrantable obscurity. He himself remarked of one of them that so far as he knew it had no meaning at all. He was, however, firm about including them. When I said the reviewers would be likely to pick these out rather than the fine poems in the book he smiled and said, ‘Give them a bone’.[24]

As Goodby and Osbourne argue, the turning point described above marks the start of a systematic attempt by Thomas to see how far he could push his already modernist

[23]Thomas, *The Fifth Notebook*, p. 77.
[24]Thomas, *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, p. 16.

practice in the direction of the avant-garde. His 'process poetic' had developed explosively through the course of N4 and spilt over into the first half of N5. Difficult though these poems can be, however, it is easy enough to see that they explore the anxieties of growing up as these were magnified and distorted by historical and social trauma (the Great Crash, the rise of fascism, the threat of a new world war). They do so through a monist vision of the universe as unceasing process and flux, because understood in the light of the new physics, Darwinian biology and Freudian psychology. Every poem in *18 Poems*, as the title of one of them, 'All all and all', implies, is about totality and interrelatedness, and has the cohesion we expect of a modernist lyric. Their focus on simultaneous creation and destruction can be grasped as a body-centred version of the cyclical schemes found in the work of the older modernists – Yeats's gyres, for example.

However, while the post-'Seven' N5 poems share this vision, they eschew their predecessors' totalizing, synthesizing scope. More paratactic and whimsically fragmentary, they resist incorporation within any single symbolic schema. As Don McKay noted of 'Altarwise', these poems do not have a narrator so much as a bricoleur principle, one which flaunts 'illusion and flamboyance' as each image or scenario 'declares itself, like an item in a Mardi Gras parade, momentous and momentary'. The 'items' presented invite us to construct narratives which could accommodate them, and articulate them with other items, but our attempts to do so are thwarted.[25]

What can be said of 'Eight' and 'Nine', applies to 'Ten', 'A grief ago', which turns on a quibbling play on the word 'she', its subject. The difficulty intensifies with 'Eleven' and 'Twelve', the first two sections of 'I, in my intricate image' – the Thomas poem which, as its title suggests, makes use of the greatest number of different symbolic clusters (ancient Egypt, doppelgängers, a sea-voyage, the burgeoning 'green' world of spring, the Cadaver figure, *Hamlet*, the Bible). 'Thirteen', 'Hold hard these ancient minutes', is an example of Thomas's attempt to create a verbal equivalent of abstract visual art, with even more word-play – on 'county'/'country', 'riding' as verb form and a county division, 'game' as sport and the quarry of hunters, and so on. The 'subject' – the passage of time – is serious enough, but it is enacted as far as is possible in the 'sound of shape'.[26] There is a consistent push towards experiment in the more ambitious experimental, meta-poetic pieces, culminating in 'Altarwise by owl-light'.

We know that Thomas continued his experimental vein, but that it eventually became impossibly difficult; after completing 'Altarwise' he wrote just three poems in 1936, and 'I make this in a warring absence' took him most of 1937. As early as April 1936, he had confessed to Watkins that he was

> afraid of all the once-necessary artifices and obscurities [. . .] [I] can't, for the life of me, get any real liberation, and diffusion or dilution or anything, into the churning bulk of the words; I seem, more than ever, to be tightly packing away everything I have and know into a mad doctor's bag [. . .] what I fear is an ingrowing, the impulse growing like a toenail into the artifice.[27]

By 1938 he would tell Bob Rees, reflecting on his impasse, that while still attracted to 'the idea of extremely concentrated poetry', and 'writing without concessions' to the reader, he

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[25]Don McKay, 'Crafty Dylan and the Altarwise sonnets: "I Build a Flying Tower and I Pull it Down"', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 55 (1985–86), 375–94 (p. 383).
[26]Thomas, *Collected Poems* (2014), p. 75.
[27]Thomas, *Collected Letters*, pp. 249–50.

had concluded that this writing must be more 'dramatically effective' to avoid being 'dull'.[28] Of his own efforts in 'Altarwise' he concluded, in a letter to Glyn Jones of December 1936:

> But I'm not sorry that, in that Work in Progress thing, I did carry 'certain features to their logical conclusion'. It had, I think, to be done; the result had to be, in many of the lines & verses anyway, mad parody; and that I'm glad that I parodied those features so soon after making them & did't leave it to anyone else.[29]

The point about 'parody' indicates the limits to Thomas's experimentalism; it was always restrained (or earthed, if we prefer) by a self-mocking self-consciousness regarding the avant-garde. The stanza form of 'Now', for example, looks Dadaesque, but if the opening four lines are added together they constitute an iambic pentameter, and the stanza as a whole becomes a quatrain – a conventional form within an apparently experimental one, good-naturedly mocking both approaches.

Apart from the internal limits to his experimentalism, as we might call them, we must remember that Thomas was also an experimentalist trying to make his way within a deeply conservative poetry culture. Thomas and Auden had both initially developed modernist-influenced responses to their apocalyptic times, versions of what Marjorie Perloff calls 'mannerist modernism', which flourished briefly in the early 1930s.[30] After *The Orators* (1933), however, Auden and his followers turned their backs on experiment. Formalism was deemed irresponsible; instead, they strove to stabilize modernism's disruptive tendencies in a poetry of ironic balance. This would become the standard mid-century mode on both sides of the Atlantic. It was in a situation of increasing isolation, then, and the difficulties it brings, that Thomas tenaciously persisted with his version of the 'revolution of the word' until, near the end of 1937, some way had to be found back out of the labyrinth.

As I have argued elsewhere, Thomas could do so partly because he was shielded from metropolitan pressures to conform by his marginal, Anglo-Welsh hybrid condition.[31] Understanding Thomas, and his successes and ultimate failure in trying to maintain a mainstream, modernist lyric in the late 1930s gives us a fuller sense of the afterlives of High Modernism in a decade which has been too easily dubbed the Age of Auden.

ARCHIVING THE FUTURE: 'THE INTRICATE SEAWHIRL'

There is much scope for future archival study of Thomas's work, and many possible directions in which it might go. As has already been mentioned, the letters, film scripts and radio broadcasts are still at the stage of preliminary investigation. More work has been done on Thomas's fiction, but the relationship between the stories in the Red Notebook MS and the notebook poems needs investigating, while an annotated edition of the collected stories is long overdue.

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[28]Dylan Thomas, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1993), p. xxxiv.
[29]Thomas, *Letters*, p. 272.
[30]Marjorie Perloff, '"Barbed-Wire Entanglements": the "New American Poetry", 1930–32', *Poetry On & Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), pp. 53–54: 'The taste for the "natural" [. . .] gives way to artifice and a marked taste for abstraction and conceptualization. In the same vein, irony [. . .] gives way to the parodic, but even parody is not often sustained, with abrupt tonal shifts and reversals in mood becoming quite usual. Indeed, this "time of tension" [. . .] exhibits a mannerist style as distinct from its modernist antecedents as from the socialist realism to come.'
[31]See Goodby, *Under the Spelling Wall*, pp. 238–301.

As far as the poetry goes, several avenues for further investigation present themselves. Many of the most promising have to do with Thomas's historical and literary contexts, which remain underexplored. The role played in Thomas's late-1930s change in style by the Paris-based writers associated with *Delta* (Lawrence Durrell, Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin), and by Djuna Barnes, could be tested in an examination of the as-yet unstudied MS of 'Deaths and entrances' and 'Unluckily for a death' held at Swansea University. (Barnes's *Nightwood* was a crucial text for Thomas; he lifted word clusters from it for 'If my head hurt a hair's foot', and it is known that 'Deaths and entrances' originally concluded with a hyena image taken from Barnes's novel.) The 150-plus worksheets for 'Ballad of the Long-legged Bait' held at Buffalo are a rich and as yet completely uninvestigated MS; there are strong arguments for an annotated facsimile edition of the poem, which is one of Thomas's longest and most rewarding, since this is the only complete set of worksheets for a single poem in existence.

Such work would match and help foster the recent growth of critical interest in the New Apocalypse poets, and 1940s poetry more generally. Long derided and delegitimized by the Movement and its successors, the apocalyptic, surrealist and expressionist poetry of the decade – influenced by Thomas (in *Deaths and Entrances*), and including masterpieces by W. S. Graham (*The Nightfishing*), David Jones (*The Anathémata*) and Lynette Roberts (*Gods with Stainless Ears*) – is increasingly being seen in modernist terms, and has recently been given quasi-canonical form in an Apocalypse anthology edited by James Keery.[32] It will undoubtedly be a growth area in English Studies in the years to come.

The full digitization of the Thomas archive would make such developments easier and more thoroughgoing, of course. At the moment, the most extensive Thomas holdings, at the University of Buffalo, SUNY, and at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, have been digitized and are easily accessible; so too are those at the British Library and the National Library of Wales.[33] Swansea University has digitized N5, and the holograph drafts of the poems 'Unluckily for a death' and 'Deaths and entrances', in what is billed as a joint programme with the Harry Ransom Center. However, while the Ransom Center side of the joint programme is evidently well-resourced and functions perfectly, Swansea has not yet itemized its holdings or made them available on its website.[34] Nor has it begun to digitize the large and fascinating Thomas archive belonging to Thomas's publisher, Dent, which it acquired around five years ago.[35] If resources are the problem, it is much to be hoped that the Richard Burton Centre at Swansea, which

[32]*Apocalypse: An Anthology*, ed. by James Keery (Manchester: Carcanet, 2020). Keery pioneered critical exploration of this area in a series of groundbreaking articles published in the journal *PN Review* in 2002–06. Two Apocalypse symposia in 2022, at Sheffield Hallam and Huddersfield Universities, testify to the growing footprint of this area of research in academia https://research.hud.ac.uk/institutes-centres/centres/international-contemporary-poetry/.

[33]The Buffalo material is itemized and accessible here: https://digital.lib.buffalo.edu/collection/LIB-PC008/ https://findingaids.lib.buffalo.edu/repositories/3/resources/37/collection_organization#tree::archival_object_6795

[34]The Ransom Center's holdings are more extensive than those at Buffalo – 6000 items – and are invaluable to any archival researcher. They may be found here: https://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingAid.cfm?eadid=00375. However, the most important items at Buffalo – N1–N4 and the Red Notebook are essential, and the basis of much of the most important research hitherto.

[35]The online portal for Swansea's Richard Burton Centre, which holds the poetry archive, currently lists numerous minor items relating to Thomas's life and times but not, frustratingly, these most important research texts. Nor is any straightforward method offered for accessing the materials researchers might need.

holds the MSS, is allocated them as soon as possible so that it can make its material as accessible as those of other institutions. It is a problem generally in contemporary archive studies that universities purchase trophy MSS at great cost, and then fail to follow this up with the duty of basic provision for access once the fanfare of publicity has faded. If this has been the case at Swansea, it is much to be hoped that it will be corrected in the very near future. As the university based in and bearing the name of Dylan Thomas's birthplace, Swansea should be at the very heart of future research into the poet's work.

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