«The country is holy». Echoes of melancholia, hermitage and nostalgia in Dylan Thomas's later poetry

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ABSTRACT

In spite of Dylan Thomas's evasive, elusive and even misleading attitude towards his readings as well as towards his own poetic production, both literary criticism and critical examination of his poetry testify to the Welsh poet's vast knowledge. This essay aims to highlight the presence, especially in Thomas's later poetry, of the classical concept of melancholia, which the poet possibly inherits and absorbs from Renaissance culture, the Metaphysical poets and the Romantics, then to combine it with the 'newer' concept of nostalgia which is typical of the twentieth century. Both melancholy and nostalgia become most visible and intensified in Thomas's later poetry, where the lyrical voice grows less rebellious and more mature, closer to the elegy and the pastoral genre, and more isolated in a sacred natural dimension which acts as *speculum animae*.

1. «THE GLORY AND THE FRESHNESS OF A DREAM». HOMECOMING

Dylan Thomas's last two collections of poetry, *The Map of Love* (1939) and *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), are inevitably influenced by World War II, which, as any conflict, «enforce[s] a destructive breach that [makes] the past ever more inaccessible, apparently even more distant, which serve[s] to intensify the longing for it» (Hemmings 2008: 5). George Minois (2005: 263) suggests that Edvard Munch's celebrated painting *The Scream* (1893), with its ability of preannouncing the uneasiness and horrors of the upcoming Century, symbolically starts the

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twentieth century. Twenty-four years after Munch's painting, in an essay entitled *Trauer und Melancholie*, Sigmund Freud expounds his theory regarding the mechanisms behind modern man's restless anxiety and existential discontentment. According to Freud, man's unhappiness is due to the 'loss' of a beloved 'thing', so much so that some individuals mourn – in its literal sense – their 'loss'. Melancholic individuals withdraw in themselves, and their detachment from the external world concurrently gives them feelings of suffering and enjoyment (Freud 1914-1916: 251); similarly, László Földényi (2016: 189) recognises that, in 1734, the *Jesuit Dictionnaire de Trévoux* couples melancholia «with sadness but also with pleasure (*un certain triste plaisir*)». What is outstanding is that, in Freud's theory, the melancholic's 'lost object' is not actual, but only ideal; its recovery becomes, therefore, impossible: the melancholic can only introject the 'lost object' and incorporate it in their ego (Freud 1914-1916: 249-258; see Minois 2005: 284-285).

However, one should notice that Freud's conception of melancholia differs from the classical notion of the *humor melancholicus*, whose tradition can be traced as early as the sixth and fifth century BC and whose literature starts developing with the rise of ancient medicine and humouralism (χυμοί), *i.e.* the «study of interactions between soul and body» (Albrile 2010: 65). Greek science puts forth a vision of medicine based on the doctrine of the four humours, fluids naturally present in the human body and whose balances and interactions determine one's well-being[1]. If Empedocles establishes a correspondence of macrocosm and microcosm, this unity is then further articulated by the author of *The Nature of Man* (either Hippocrates or his son-in-law Polybus), who

[1] The doctrine of the four humours is formulated first by the Greek physician Hippocrates and is then further articulated by Aristotle, Galen, and the Arabic physicians such as Avicenna. From the Arabs, the Greek adopt a vision of the human body as a mirror for the body of the cosmos – a vision which is later resumed: in the sixteenth century Robert Greene publishes his *Planetomachia*, where he hypothesises that mental illnesses, such as melancholy, are to be attributed to the influence of the planets and the stars. See Radden (2000: ix) and Földényi (2016: 85-86).

advocates a system wherein to each humour corresponds a season and a subsequent quality of the fluid. The *humor melancholicus*, in particular, would be the result of the overabundance of black bile.

It is possible that Dylan Thomas, known for being very vague and elusive with respect to his readings and sources (see Ferris 1985: 26 and 116; York Tindall 1996: 187), is aware of the literary and stylistic features of melancholic representations – if not 'directly', through the 'echoes' of classicism that emerge through Renaissance culture, the Metaphysical poets and the Romantics. The aim of the present essays is thus that of noticing thematic similarities between the classical representation of melancholia and that of Dylan Thomas's production, inasmuch I believe that these 'echoes' are useful to Thomas in order to construct an atmosphere which pairs well with the images of his later poetry, mainly characterised by isolation, hermitage, and nostalgic meditation. Nevertheless, it is most important to notice that, according to Goodby (2013: 42-43), Thomas often denies any knowledge of literary or scientific works of which he is in fact aware in order to deceive readers and critics «out of sheer perversity»[2]. Goodby (2013: 56) concludes his observations by underlying the remarkable amount of obscure uncertainty upon which Thomas's production stands:

> Thomas's voice – one of the most distinctive in twentieth-century poetry – seems to dissolve under close inspection into any number of not-quite-definable components. The only thing it is safe to say is that if it seems he knew about something, he probably did, and that critics have habitually underestimated the range of his reading (Also see Wourm 1999: 27-41).

[2] Also cf. Jones (1978: 57). However, one should remember that Daniel Jones, Thomas's friend, does not always seem to be a reliable source: if Jones (1978: 57) claims that Thomas did not know *The Koran*, Goodby (2013: 42) reports that «Jones himself gave Thomas a copy of *The Koran* for Christmas in 1933».

Contrarily to melancholia, nostalgia[3] – deep rooted in Thomas's later poetry – generally needs to be read as «a collective experience» structured around «familiar tropes and motifs» (Boym 2001: xvi) which forge connections «between personal and collective memory» (Santesso 2006: 24) – connections which are felt as necessary in order to find «a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming» (Boym 2008: 6). Childhood, for instance, represents a collective experience: Carl Gustav Jung advocates that «[t]he 'child' is all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful, the insignificant beginning and the triumphal end» as well as representing «potential future» (Jung 1959: 164 and 179). The Romantics, and Wordsworth in particular, connect childhood with «the deepest parts of the self» as well as with «one's personal history», so much so that the unconscious can be interpreted as a «meta-theory of childhood» (Steedman 1995: 95). As envisioned by the Romantics, childhood «corresponds to the embodiment of natural goodness» (Natov 2003: 4), especially when read in relation to its contraries, *i.e.* adulthood, corruption, industrialisation – all constituents of that system which William Blake denotes as «Experience», one of the two contrary states of the soul of the Blakean philosophy. William Wordsworth's *Ode* (1884), strongly imbued with Neoplatonism, exemplifies the Romantic communion between sacred childhood and the natural dimension:

[3] The first 'entry' of the concept of nostalgia into the scientific field is acknowledged by the young Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer in his dissertation, written in 1688, on a 'new' psychological disease regarding one's strong desire to return to one's own native land – condition which the Swiss scholar proposes to call with the combination of the Greek terms νόστος and ἄλγος, that is, «homecoming» and «pain» (Hofer 1934: 380-381).

> There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
> The earth, and every common sight,
> To me did seem
> Apparell'd in celestial light,
> The glory and the freshness of a dream
> (*Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, I, ll. 1-5)

2. «Time held me green and dying». Child in Time

Considering the above-mentioned «collective» nature of both childhood and nostalgia, it is not surprising that Dylan Thomas's elegiac lyric *Fern Hill* has become, ever since its first appearance in 1945, the «best-known and most anthologised of Thomas's poems» (Neuville 1965: 85). Crewe (1972: 69) believes that part of *Fern Hill*'s success is not due to an actual representation of childhood, but rather to an idealised dimension into which any adult may find trace of oneself – thus the collective experience.

In the lyric, defined as «a modernist pastoral» (Thomas 2016b: 401; Öz 2016: 1050), there are peculiar traits which reinforce the temporal rather than the spatial dimension of nostalgia[4]. The very first line of Thomas's poem immediately establishes two «psychologies», namely «that of the child and of the grown man» as well as «that of innocence and of experience» (Davies 1990: 48). The lyric starts with an accentuation on the two above-mentioned dimensions («*Now* as I *was* young», l. 1, emphasis added): the lyrical voice puts forth a perception of time as eternal rather than linear[5] and further stresses a coexistence between

[4] As Hutcheon – Valdés (1998-2000: 19) justly observe, nostalgic individuals «who did return home were usually disappointed because, in fact, they did not want to return to a place, but to a time, a time of youth».

[5] Ackerman (1966: 30) observes that temporal fluidity is intrinsic to Welsh tradition: «Another important feature of old Welsh poetry is an awareness of the dual nature of reality, of unity in disunity, of the simultaneity of life and death, of time as an eternal moment […] The basis of this is a sense of paradox, or, in slightly different terms, a paradoxical conception of existence».

'always' and 'now'[6]. Davies (1990: 62) observes that, maybe influenced by T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (*Burnt Norton* is published in 1935), Thomas's late poetry wants to establish «an acceptance of Time through a simultaneous awareness, within it, of the Timeless». The traditional opening of fairy-tales «once upon a time» is inverted, in *Fern Hill*, and becomes «once *below* a time» (l. 7, emphasis added), possibly suggesting that the child is both *in* and *out* of time (see Thomas 2016b: 402).

As in the lyric «Should lanterns shine», where Thomas previously presents Time as a «quiet gentleman / Whose bears wags in Egyptian wind» (ll. 14-5), Time is anthropomorphised in *Fern Hill* as well, wherein he is described as a Saturn-Kronos[7] who drives a cart of apples on top of which the golden boy climbs. Saturn is an ambiguous deity, god of crops and of fertility, but also of infertility, father as well as devourer. Here, Time's presence builds a tension which is always relieved until the final stanza, with its ultimate and conscious recognition of the dramatic nature of existence. The tension is built by means of the enjambement «Time let me play and be / Golden in the mercy of his means» (ll. 13-14), which, as it regularly happens in Thomas's production, generates multiple meanings: Time lets the child exist; Time lets the youth be golden; Time leaves the boy alone.

[6] Due to the Welsh poet's ambiguous attitude, it is not known whether Dylan Thomas is aware of Plato's theories regarding time. However, such concepts are also present in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (see Romero Allué 2019: 66-67), which Thomas hints at in his letters (see Thomas 1987: 49, 506 and 635). It is possible that Thomas, as fond of puns as Carroll, uses in *Fern Hill* the same main themes of Carroll's novel, namely childhood, the natural dimension, and timelessness.

[7] «The Orphics regarded the Titan Cronus, who as Saturn became the incarnation of melancholia, as a seer and soothsayer, and since soothsayers have an insight into time, they identified Cronus, the father of Zeus, with the primordial deity Chronos» (Földényi 2016: 319-320). Time therefore becomes a figure associated with agriculture (Cronus) and destructive forces (Chronos) – interpretation welcomed by the Neoplatonists as well; Dante similarly asserts that «lo tempo va d'intorno con le force» (*Paradiso*, XVI: 9; see Panofsky 1967: 72-77).

Soon «the lamb white days» (l. 46, a clear, archetypical reference to childhood, considering both biblical imagery and Blake's *Songs of Innocence*) meet their end: the owls are here an ominous declination of Time inasmuch they «bear […] the farm away» (l. 24) along with the speaker's childhood. The owl is described by Keats, whom Thomas often measures himself with (see Thomas 1988: 68), as «partner in your sorrow's mysteries» (*Ode on Melancholy*, l. 8), and, in his monolithic *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton (1896: 86) includes owls among the animals to which melancholy extends[8]. Time takes the child of *Fern Hill* to the «swallow thronged loft» (ll. 46-47), where the speaker symbolically enters as a child and exits as an adult. Considering that childhood is traditionally rendered in terms of rural simplicity in contrast with the demanding conditions of adult life (Lowenthal 1989: 20), it is no coincidence that the farm revisited by the grown lyrical voice is described as a «childless land» (l. 51), because the child is in time but also out of it. In recalling childhood memories through the *topos* of the rural setting, the recollection is both individual and collective and wants to emphasise both the reader's and the lyrical voice's «impossibility of homecoming».

The recognition of adulthood comes with the recognition of the ambiguity of Time, which allows the lyrical voice to be a child out of «mercy» (l. 52): Time has let the lyrical voice be «green», unripe, young, and golden; however, the speaker now acknowledges that the process of dying was dramatically present in the dimension of childhood all along (see Thomas 2016a: 335 and Ackerman 1996: 129-130).

[8] Thomas (1987: 18) only references Robert Burton's study in a letter, written to the friend Trevor Hughes in the Summer of 1933, in which the poet jokes on the «morbidity» of his friend's writings. However, it is not known to which extent Thomas knows Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, the most important and «most influential treatise on black bile of the whole European Renaissance» (Romero Allué 2010: 237). Burton, who writes using the pseudonym of Democritus Junior, extensively traces the history of melancholia from its classical origins to the the interpretation of the temperament as a punishment for the original sin, ultimately merging madness, frenzy and genius in one, unique trait: melancholia is thus recognised – as Marsilio Ficino would put it – as a prerogative of the man of letters.

Bitterly, the poem wants to state that the child does indeed represent, in Jung's words, «potential future» (Jung 1959: 164), but also 'potential decay'. The lyrical voice's nostalgic reminiscence of childhood is thus bitterly concluded: «Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea» (ll. 53-54).

Such simultaneity of growth and death is previously stressed with the same bitterness, but without the typical *topos* of nostalgia, in the lyric «Then was my neophyte», where the unborn embryo's joy of being born soon turns into melancholic fear, because he realises that birth, an *exitus a mortem*, is going to imply death. In this respect, it is worth noticing that Sir Thomas Browne, himself a melancholic recognised as an influence by the very Dylan Thomas, asserts, in his *Religio Medici*, that «[i]t is a symptome of Melancholy to be afraid of death, and yet sometimes to desire it; this latter I have often discovered in my selfe, and thinke noe man ever desired life as I have sometimes Death» (Browne 1977: 109). «Time kills me terribly» (l. 43), says the embryo of Thomas's «Then was my neophyte», who does not believe the deceiving images of love projected on the womb as a film on a screen. God responds with the ingenuous consolation that Time will spare the unborn child («'Time shall not murder you', He said, / 'Nor the green nought be hurt'», ll. 44-45), but the child does not believe him and speaks words that are reminiscent of Saturn devouring his own children: «I saw time murder me» (l. 48). The embryo's ominous knowledge of mortality makes sense when one considers, firstly, that the uterus symbolizes unconsciousness (Jung 2008: 336), and, secondly, that the foetus represents the beginning of a process which has previously come to an end and has, therefore, already met, known, and lived death. Melancholic people are «partakers not just of human but also of superhuman existence, [and] even death will fail to bring an end to their solitude» (Földényi 2016: 34); such fear thus sheds a dim, sad light on the embryo's refusal to be born.

3. «A LONELY MISTER». HERMITAGE

Childlike conceits of imagination, reality, and the self merge with the poetic, divine force of creative power in the portrait of the melancholic poet as depicted in *The hunchback in the park*. The lyric, almost entirely devoid of punctuation and described from multiple viewpoints, is centred on a hunchback derided by children because of his physical deformity.

The hunchback is presented as a mixture of most of the elements melancholia has been associated with throughout the centuries, with a particular emphasis on the creative aspect, since those who engage in intellectual labour are usually melancholic[9]. Thomas presents the hunchback as a «solitary mister» (l. 2), as a hermit who avoids human presence[10] and who ritually attempts his hermitage in the enclosed park produced and created by his own poetic powers: the «garden lock» (l. 4) 'generates' all the elements of the park within its walls from the hermit's entrance into the garden «until bell time» (ll. 6 and 31). It is most

[9] The concept is elaborated by Aristotle and then resumed by Marsilio Ficino, as hinted at above. It is Aristotle (or, maybe, one of his followers) who wonders, in 'Problem XXX, 1' of his *Problemata Physica*, why the most remarkable statesmen, poets, philosophers and artists are melancholic: melancholic disposition is considered, to some degree, heroic. During the Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance, Aristotle's perception of melancholia is retrieved, thus culminating in a relatively new interpretation of the melancholic man as a genius, especially thanks to Ficino (Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl 1979: 225). As a matter of fact, if, in medieval miniatures and illustrations, the melancholic is typically portrayed in his sleep, from the fifteenth century onward the *homo melancholicus* «is no longer sleeping but ruminating[,] brooding, straining his attention» in a pensive, contemplative attitude aided by the influences of the planet Saturn (Földényi 2016: 40), as depicted in Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I*, Domenico Fetti's *La Meditazione*, or in Cesare Ripa's representation of melancholy in his *Iconologia*.

[10] The figure of the poet as a hermit, as hinted at by Wordsworth and Coleridge, underlines the deep relationship between man and the natural dimension, so much so that the latter grants the poet visionary abilities through isolation: «While with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things» (William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, ll. 48-50).

interesting to notice that the town boys mock the hermit by substituting the water of the hermit's cup with gravel, a sterile element associated with Saturn[11] and, therefore, with melancholy, in a manner which recalls Rhea's replacement of her child with a stone which Kronos eats (see Graves 2017: 412).

Moreover, the hunchback, described as «an old dog sleeper» (l. 25), literally sleeps «at night in a dog kennel» (l. 11) in an attempt, I believe, to reconcile consciousness with unconsciousness in order to fuse innocence and experience, reality and the creative act aiming for poetical inspiration. Jung (2008: 336) notices that the *Mabinogion* (a collection of stories which are based on the Welsh bardic tradition and which Thomas knows) narrates of «white dogs with red noses and eyes in the underworld», guarding, like Cerberus, the entrance to the realm of the dead. In addition, Jung claims that «[j]ust like the uterus, the underworld is […] a symbol of the unconscious. Both indicate a state of unconsciousness that, however, simultaneously represents a potential state – *in utero* – before birth». The connection of dogs with the underworld and the unconscious therefore corroborates the above-cited interpretation of the unconscious as «meta-theory of childhood» (Steedman 1998: 95). The dog, whose bite is compared to acedia in the Middle Ages[12], is also found in visual representations of melancholia such as Domenico Fetti's *La Meditazione* or Albrecht Dürer's famous *Melencolia I.* Frances Yates (2004: 66), however, does not interpret the starving dog of Dürer's engraving as a sign of «depressed mood of failure» but rather as an allegory for «the bodily senses, starved and under severe control

[11] Ripa (1766-1767: 70-71) reminds us that the melancholic is as sterile as the rock he usually sits on: «il Malinconico è duro, sterile di parole, e di opera, per se, e per gli altri; come il sasso, che non produce erba, ne lascia, che la produca la terra, che gli sta sotto»; Keats similarly speaks of «gray-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone» (*Hyperion. A Fragment*, I 4).

[12] Aegidius Albertinus compares melancholy, synonymous with acedia, to a rabid dog's bite. See Földényi (2016: 80-81).

in [the] first stage of inspiration in which the inactivity is not representative of failure but of an intense inner vision» – a vision almost experienced by Thomas's hunchback.

Moreover, if Ripa (1766: 70-71) describes the melancholic as sitting on a rock (or a cube, which symbolizes the earth and, therefore, Saturn), below a tree devoid of foliage, the hermit of Thomas's poem has a vision of a woman[13] and speaks of his muse in terms of a tree which, he hopes, remains in the garden after he leaves. However, the hermit does not experience the above-mentioned «intense inner vision», for the muse abandons the garden; the hermit leaves right after her, and the garden disappears with the hermit.

4. «O BIDE IN THAT COUNTRY KIND». NATURE AS *SPECULUM ANIMAE*

The concepts of nature and timelessness implied by *Fern Hill* may as well be encountered in *Poem in October*, Dylan Thomas's first 'poem of place' which consecrates a paradoxical space as much as a paradoxical time in what John Ackerman (1994: 36) recognises as an «intimation […] of paradise regained»[14].

The lyrical voice praises space by fleeing human presence and dwells on the conception of birthdays as reminders of mortality and, more generally, on the very concept of birth as a death. In accordance with the metaphysical manner (Thomas 2016b: 386), Thomas connects the *topos* of womb-tomb (most exploited in the early poetry) and of birth-decay in relation to the larger processes of the cosmos (see Palomba 2016: 4). The metaphysical conceit of womb-tomb is found in the Old Testament (see Jeremiah 20, 18) as well as in the poetic production of John Donne,

[13] It should be observed that Robert Burton speaks of melancholy in feminine anthropomorphised terms («our dame Melancholy»), and so does John Keats: «She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die» (*Ode on Melancholy*, l. 21).

[14] In this respect, I believe it is meaningful to notice that Thomas 'absorbs' and 'echoes' Milton's imagery in his late poetry and even broadcasts some readings of *Paradise Lost* for the BBC in 1947 reciting Satan's parts.

who associates cradle and tomb[15] in «An Anatomie of the World» («Spring-times were common cradles, but are tombes», l. 385), and who describes, in the sermon entitled *Death's Duell*, birth as *exitus a morte*, and thus as an *introitus in morte* (Donne 1962: 231-232)[16].

The speaker of *Poem in October*, on the day of his «thirtieth year to heaven» (l. 1), leaves the «sleeping town» (l. 10) in order to reach «the hill's shoulder» (l. 25). In spite of the immediate association of October with Autumn and, as a consequence, with melancholia (Burton 1896: 196; Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl 1979: 52), the most pivotal, melancholic trait of this poem (and, in general, of the later poetry) is the isolation of the speaker as a poet: the very Robert Burton describes Democritus as «very melancholy by nature, averse from company [...] and much given to solitariness» (Burton 1896: 12), and Romero Allué (2010: 251-252) reminds us that, in *Il Penseroso*, John Milton emphasises the nocturnal, melancholic and isolated aspects of nature. Similarly, the speaker of *Poem in October* climbs the hill in order to have a better view of the town below (namely Laugharne, in Wales), in a manner which, fortuitously, recalls the portrait of Democritus as depicted

[15] Schleiner (1970: 92-93) notices how the 'life as a circle' *topos* might be adapted to Donne's poetry and considers Williams's observation that, in Donne's system, man loathes death inasmuch it represents the closing of a circle which starts again with birth.

[16] Thomas's fascination with the concept of womb as tomb and life as death may have as well been prompted by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* («The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she, / Who thicks man's blood with cold», ll. 193-4) and by Sir Thomas Browne, who asserts, in *Urn Burial*, that «[i]f we begin to die when we live, and long life be but a prolongation of death; our life is a sad composition; We live with death, and die not in a moment» (Browne 1977: 306). However, I believe one should also do one's best, as Goodby (2013: 56) puts it, not to underestimate the range of Thomas's readings, inasmuch the correspondence womb-tomb and birth-death is also present in Egyptian symbolism, which, I believe, Thomas must have known, albeit superficially. Thomas, who admires William Empson and reads his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, must have been fascinated by the fact that «the early Egyptians wrote the same sign for 'young' and 'old'» (Empson 1971: 194).

by Christof LeBlon in the frontispiece of Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.

As a matter of fact, while the speaker of *Poem in October* is sitting, in a contemplative attitude, on the top of the hill («the town below lay leaved with October blood», l. 67) with the tweets of the birds as the only sound, «the weather» symbolically «turn[s] around» (l. 40 and then again at l. 62), under the influence of Autumn, to unfold the recollections of summer, and, therefore, of childhood. However, childhood is only remembered in vague terms (Bailey 2006: 82), and the reader is not told 'what' the speaker misses in particular: such void reinforces Freud's theory according to which, in spite of his 'mourning', the melancholic does not know what he has 'lost' (Freud 1914-1916: 251). This reading is further corroborated by the strong presence of birds throughout the poem (as in ll. 11-12, 21-22, 34, 60): birds and their songs of «lamentation» are associated with «the immortality of poetry in the face of death» as well as with «mourning» (Nelson 2019: 20), the most exemplifying case being Philomel's transformation into a nightingale in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* ('echoed' by Eliot in *The Waste Land*). Since birds symbolise, at least in Western cultures, the poet, I would define *Poem in October* as a choral elegy for the speaker's lost childhood, supported by a natural dimension which acts as *speculum animae*. The choral signing of the birds helps the speaker's contemplation, as much as in Coleridge's *The Nightingale*, where the birds «answer and provoke each other's song, / With skirmish and capricious passagings, / And murmurs musical and swift jug jug» (ll. 60-62). Therefore, as Orlemans (2018: 9) suggests, «[there] is not a single bird, but a group that produces the listener's ecstasy».

Nature is the agent through which the speaker is able to connect present and past reaching a divine state, and this is why this lyric is an example of *contemplatio* of Thomas's later poetry: «a boy / In the listening / Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy / To the

trees and the stones and the fish in the tide» (ll. 54-7)[17]. Moreover, if, according to Sir Arthur Eddington (twentieth century British astronomer and physician Thomas is influenced by), man is of «cosmic significance» and can be drawn closer to God through the contact with nature (Kaempffaert 1932: 9), Sir Thomas Browne (1977: 105) claims that «[t]he whole Creation is a mystery» – a mystery which, in Thomas's *Poem in October*, is echoed: «And the mystery / Sang alive / Still in the water and singingbirds» (ll. 58-60). Eddington's conception of man connected to the processes of the cosmos (a Platonic theory in vogue in the Renaissance) is thus corroborated, for the lyrical voice of *Poem in October* is vaguely aware of being closer to something immense and «dimly sees something of the plan» (Kaempffaert 1932: 9). The «mystery» surprises the speaker, who reaches a divine state in a luminous, fugacious moment in which, as in *Fern Hill*, present and past, innocence and experience, and childhood and adulthood are overlapped. I believe the influence of T.S. Eliot's later poetry is most evident in *Poem in October* and that «the weather»'s turning «around» (ll. 40 and 62 of Thomas's lyric) acts like the cloud of Eliot's *Burnt Norton*: «Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty» (*Burnt Norton*, I 41). It is, in Melchiori's words, the point of convergence of eternity (Melchiori 1956: 90) which allows «an acceptance of Time» which comes with the «awareness […] of the Timeless» (Davies 1990: 62).

As observed above, birds are very much present in Thomas's later poetry, so much so that the only protagonists of *Over Sir John's Hill*[18] are the birds, God, and the poet – all identifiable with each other. Placed in a macabre staging of violence, fear and subjugation, the birds of *Over Sir John's Hill* are an allegory of «natural order, man's destructive impulses, innocence, guilt, judgement, death and the poetic act» (Thomas 2016b: 409) and establish a process which, as it is usual in Thomas's process poetics, wants to underline the «sense of the interplay of forces

[17] Burton (1896: 196) observes a connection between solitariness and melancholy, and, in his turn, Johannes Hofer asserts that those who are affected by nostalgia appear to be «rapt in ecstasy from profound meditation» (Hofer 1934: 385).
[18] Sir John's Hill is a wooded promontory near Laugharne, in Wales.

beneath the ordinary events of life» (Maud 1963: 80). Although, as in other process poems of Dylan Thomas, death is felt as a pervasive presence, this lyric is outstanding inasmuch it puts forth a conception of the natural dimension as 'holy' while paradoxically underlying the violent order that makes it sacred. In considering nature as 'holy '(the lyrical voice of Thomas's *In Country Sleep* asserts: «The country is holy: O bide in that country kind», l. 39), Thomas is reformulating Blake's perception of a God who pervades nature and «only Acts & Is, in existing beings» (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 16: A Memorable Fancy), but he could also be referring to Sir Arthur Eddington's studies quoted in the previous paragraph.

I find *Over Sir John's Hill* paradoxical inasmuch it advocates a divine conception of nature while reversing the typical image of birds as angelic singers as well as representing God as melancholic. The hawk is the only active character, with its maniacal delirium of violent omnipotence: the others are melancholic and characterised by their passive refusal to react, God included. I believe that Ted Hughes's comments on his own poetry may shed some light on Thomas's poem: Hughes, influenced by Thomas and whose poems are often characterised by the presence of animals, believes that «[a]ny form of violence – any form of vehement activity – invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe. Once the contact has been made – it becomes difficult to control», therefore moving the focus not on the animal themselves but on the «energy» that moves them instead (Faas 1976-1977: 87). Set «at the drop of dusk» (l. 3), the lyric is focused on the murderous, warlike fury of the «hawk on fire» (l. 2) who preys on the «small birds of the bay» (l. 4). The atmosphere becomes ominous as soon as one focuses, firstly, on the fact that the «sparrows and such […] swansing» (l. 7), where the curious verb suggests a forthcoming death acknowledged by its very subject[19], and, secondly, on the ambivalence

[19] «Like the nightingale, the swan had a tradition attached to it that rendered it a particularly suitable model of lamentation. The legend ran that swans on the point of death would break out into beautiful song, proleptically lamenting their demise […] The legend is presupposed by several Aesopic fables, as well as Clytemnestra's

of the picture of Sir John's Hill as a judge. After the hawk's first attack, «a black cap of jack- / Daws Sir John's just hill dons» (ll. 13-14): the black cap, along with the use of the adjective «just», suggests, indeed, that of the hill as a judge about «to pronounce a capital sentence» (Thomas 2016b: 410; Korg 1965: 125), but is also reminiscent of Charles Baudelaire's melancholic «drapeau noir» which covers everything which its halo of anguish: «l'Espoir, / Vaincu, pleure, et l'Angoisse atroce, despotique, / Sur mon crane incline plante son drapeau noir» (*Spleen. Épreuve de 1857*, ll. 18-20).

If the hill of *Poem in October* welcomes the lyrical voice in his contemplative hermitage, Sir John's Hill is presented as a sinister and unpropitious place where the speaker does nothing but observing, in Ted Hughes's words, the «elemental power circuit of the Universe», or «the bigger energy» (Faas 1976-1977: 87). The speaker of *Over Sir John's Hill*, as a «young Aesop fabling» (l. 35)[20], watches the entire scene while hiding in the foliage and praising the murderous hawk («All praise of the hawk on fire in hawk-eyed dusk be sung», ll. 23-27), which subdues the «holy stalking heron» (l. 11) and invites the other birds to surrender: «'dilly dilly', calls the loft hawk, / 'Come and be killed'» (ll. 22-23). The most melancholic trait of the poem is not only the other birds' passively giving themselves to the hawk and singing, in their turn, «'dilly dilly', / 'Come let us die'» (ll. 31-32), but also the fact that, despite the prayers of the speaker and the heron, God is similarly passive and can only watch the scene:

> Thomas' God does nothing to alleviate the absurdity of the position of rational man in an irrational universe; Thomas's God does nothing to explain death in terms of higher values. As the eternal sympathetic spectator, He simply weeps, offering none of the usual consolation (Maud 1963: 112).

comparison of Cassandra to the swan in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*» (Nelson 2019: 36).

[20] Aesop writes the fable of *The Hawk and the Nightingale*.

Karl Shapiro (1955: 104) similarly observes that, in general, in Thomas's poetry, God is «in the background […] hard to identify but always there». Despite the violence of this 'holy nature', God is completely unbothered because, as Thomas states elsewhere, «Heaven is blind and black» (*In Country Heaven. [Fragment]*, l. 16), which reinforces the reading of God as the ultimate melancholic in a 'sacred' nature:

> It is the heron and I, under judging Sir John's elmed
> Hill, tell-tale the knelled
> Guilt
> Of the led-astray birds whom God, for their breast of whistles,
> Have Mercy on,
> God in his whirlwind silence save, who marks the sparrows hail,
> For their souls' song.
> Now the heron grieves in the weeded verge.
> (*Over Sir John's Hill*, ll. 40- 47)

Over Sir John's Hill proves that man senses something of a divine «plan» in the natural dimension, but his perception is inevitably vague because God does not seem to have the intention of manifesting himself, not of intervening on the violent power circuit of the universe, even though He has powered the circuit himself. This interpretation inevitably leads back to the Blakean doubt about whether He who made «the Lamb» also made «the Tyger»: the God represented by Thomas's early poetry is «the god of beginning in the intricate seawhirl» («I, in my intricate image», l. 107), but now the mature speaker has learnt that God sadly hides «in his whirlwind silence» (*Over Sir John's Hill*, l. 45).

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