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Religion, Repression and Sexual Violence

Late in the Spring, Herzog had been overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends.

(Saul Bellow, *Herzog*)

Shall we never get rid of this Past . . . . In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried.

(Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*)

I

Dylan Thomas’s early stories present a number of problems for the reader. They are unconventional even by the standards of Joyce and Chekhov. They contain few clearly defined characters, shift confusingly between symbolism and realism, and, in sometimes bizarre ways, tend to sexual violence.

There are parallels between the difficulties presented by the early prose and those presented by the early poems. In both Thomas fostered obscurity, as Moynihan says, ‘as a structural device . . . . If newness or freshness could not be achieved by a statement of immediate force and compelling strength . . . . Then freshness might be achieved by a sense of verbal, thematic or imagistic struggle’.¹ Hence, in the stories as in the early poems images jostle with each other in what Thomas described himself in a letter to Vernon Watkins as ‘a sequence of creations, recreations, destructions and contradictions’. But this is not the whole picture for there is an indigenous link between the seeming obscurity and compression. In the stories as Thomas once said of his poems

¹ L. Peach, *The Prose Writing of Dylan Thomas* © Linden Peach 1988
'everything it tightly packed away in a mad doctor's bag'. Indeed, to quote Moynihan, 'he reached a point where his language implied so much that it seemed to say nothing'.

The little critical attention that the early stories have received has regarded them as vehicles of expression for Thomas's innermost anxieties and obsessions. The lynchpin of this argument is that they do not delineate the exterior world in an empirical way but contain, as Walford Davies maintains, the 'fusion of objective realities like people, places and events' with 'the distorted vision made out of them by the poet's deeper fears'. The mawkish violence and often bizarre sexuality in the early stories constitute an interface between these two.

Walford Davies finds behind the farrago of the early stories 'the hysterical implosions of an imagination unable to accept order and control'. It is true that in Thomas's work there is a deep-rooted suspicion of order which borders on aversion and which even in the much later work, Adventures in the Skin Trade, belies Mr. Allingham's insistence 'that there's sense in everything'. But Walford Davies's explanation is not entirely satisfactory. The conflation of order and control with the negation of desire, of self-fulfilment and self-hood was not simply an 'hysterical implosion', but the result of Thomas's thinking about the repressive religious life of the narrow, rural communities. The recurring concern with sexual violence and perverse, secret desire which has been regarded only as an externalising of Thomas's personal obsessions is also an important part of Thomas's attempt, inspired at least partly by Caradoc Evans, to expose the hypocrisy and the sham of a dying Welsh chapel culture which he saw as a strait-jacket upon the Welsh people.

There is undoubtedly some truth in the thesis that the candid concern with sex in Thomas's work is part of an attempt on his part to confront, and come to terms with, his own subconscious anxieties about sex, as there is also in John Ackerman's assertion that surrealism and Freudian Psychology had an impact upon his young mind. However, it must be remembered that Caradoc Evans achieved considerable notoriety for his candid treatment of sex, too. Moreover, his work often deals with the conflict between sexual desire and a solipsistic, repressive, local culture that threatened either to stifle it or transform it into something shameful. In such a culture moral lapses received short shrift. Evans never forgot the way his own father, accused of adultery,