

Letter from Wales

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I DIDN'T PLAN on going to a graveyard. I thought I was going to the beach.

Wales is Britain's West Coast. I was staying in a secret spot, not far from Fishguard, that with the right swell gets some decent waves. Often it's raining too hard to see the waves, but this was one of those times when you needed sunblock and it was almost warm (a wetsuit is still *de rigueur* all year long, in my opinion). The road back to London took us through that part of Wales that will forever be associated with Dylan Thomas, at least in my mind.

Llareggub, the setting for *Under Milk Wood*—his last work, a “play for voices” written for BBC radio—was based in part on the little seaside town where he lived, Laugharne (pronounced, as I discovered, “Larn”). I did what any fan of his poetry would do: all those “green and carefree” poems (and prose) in hand, I went and gazed at one house he had lived in, Sea View, then another, the Boathouse; I peered through the windows of the shed overlooking the “fishingboat-bobbing sea” where he wrote, stopped off at Brown's Hotel where he drank, and finally made the inevitable pilgrimage to his grave in the churchyard of St Martin's. He is buried next to his wife, Caitlin, who died over forty years after he did.

I say “fan” and yet I have a quarrel with Dylan Thomas. It's nothing to do with his exuberant, rhapsodic style. Rather—it occurs to me as I stand at his graveside—there is a disjunct, on the face of it, between his life (if we can include his death in that) and his work. Was he not, after all, the author of those familiar and stirring works, “Do not go gentle into that good night,” and “Death shall have no dominion”? And yet did he not himself seemingly go all too gentle and sozzled into that good night and rush to embrace that dominion? He seems to have been at least half in love with easeful death. We know that (alongside assorted potentially fatal ailments) Thomas drank himself

into oblivion at thirty-nine, not at the pub in Laugharne but in New York in 1953. He boasted of knocking back eighteen straight shots of whiskey (“I think that’s the record!”) in the White Horse Tavern in the West Village and was taken in an ambulance to nearby St. Vincent’s Hospital, where he expired. His body, neatly pickled pre-postmortem, was returned to Wales.

So was that a kind of suicide? A willed or voluntary death for which we can seek psychological explanations and mitigations? A better way, I think, of looking at the fate of the poet might be to see his demise as a form of “wild dying.” There is a certain mode or category of death that has not yet been fully classified. It isn’t accidental, it isn’t suicide, it isn’t “natural causes,” and it can’t be euthanasia either, because it isn’t necessarily pain-free.

I think we have to leave out the heroic death in battle (*à la* Achilles or Patroclus), but there is at least one Greek model that we can refer back to. Empedocles is not the only vulcanologist to have died in (or adjacent to) a volcano, but he might lay claim to being the first. Various legends have been woven around his fate. Diogenes Laërtius maintains that he threw himself into the mouth of Etna, in Sicily, with some idea that people might suppose he had turned into an immortal; but he was exposed as a charlatan when the volcano belched up a stray sandal. It’s a good story, but it seems to me more likely that, like many another vulcanologist, Empedocles was simply caught up in his enthusiasm for volcanoes. Like a lepidopterist inspecting a butterfly, there is no reason why he should not have approached as closely as possible to the object of his scientific inquiry—and, finally, just a little too close. Having been up Etna myself and felt the pull of the crater, the insane desire to look down into the bubbling, molten interior of the earth, I can imagine how it must have happened. Perhaps—in the spirit of the legend—Empedocles may have thought of himself, at the moment preceding his death, as “a deathless god,” immune to whatever the great volcano could throw at him.

I like to think of Empedocles as a role model where wild dying is concerned. Was that an accident? Suicide? Stupidity? Heroism? Philosophical fatalism? He left a note, or notes, or rather—in his

pre-Socratic way—fragments of notes, but they only amplify the mystery. Personally, I see parallels with the fate of surfers. If Empedocles was a vulcanologist, then I might have to write “surfologist” in my passport, although I’m not sure that will help at immigration. Maybe plain old “surfer” will do.

I recently wrote about the “epic life and mysterious death” of an old friend of mine, Ted Deerhurst, who died on the North Shore of Oahu, aged forty. I had to go back there to try to nail down exactly how it happened and why—and who was responsible (need I say that Hawaii Five-0 seemed relatively indifferent to these crucial questions). But a better-known and exemplary case is surely that of Mark Foo. Foo was a Hawaiian, but he drowned at Mavericks, south of San Francisco, in 1994. He was a big-wave specialist who also cannily pioneered many of the then-enigmatic paths of sponsorship. But having survived many a massive and headline-garnering wipeout in Hawaii, he rode his final wave off the coast of California and was found, a few fathoms down, with his ankle leash tethered to a rock. He always said he wanted to go out in just this way, a “glamorous” death for a surfer. And certainly his main rival, Ken Bradshaw, who was also surfing that day at Mavericks, and was obliged to survive, repeat himself, and gradually deteriorate, was jealous of Foo’s now-mythic status. Perhaps it is not so surprising that an alternate version of the fate of Empedocles, mentioned by Diogenes, is that he drowned.

But to come back to Britain’s wild west Carmarthenshire coast and its very own doomed poet. Of course he was not doomed in the sense that he had some kind of sword hanging over his head, independent of his own judgment and choices. But I use the phrase partly because Thomas himself did: he once described himself as a “roistering, drunken, and doomed poet.” Rather like Mark Foo in this respect, he clearly thought that, setting some minor physiological details to one side, going out in a self-destructive alcoholic haze would be “glamorous.” Caitlin Thomas said, “Dylan had this rather odd view that all the best poets died young and that he himself would never make forty.”

He liked to think of the business of getting drunk (call it the Dionysian tendency in him, if you will) as part and parcel of the mission of poetry. The analysis of the way Thomas stretches and twists conventional sentence structure in Christine Brooke-Rose's *The Grammar of Metaphor* is suggestive of the kind of control that is always on the brink of getting out of control, an intensification of and intoxication with language. Thomas, in his "Poem in October" is in his "thirtieth year *to* heaven," compressing something like a death wish—"As I sail out *to* die" (the last line of "Poem on His Birthday")—into that preposition. I am not saying that Thomas needed to be drunk to write in this way, but only that the poet himself saw some kind of necessary interplay between his work and his leisure activities. He needed, rather like a big-wave surfer (and he was certainly wave conscious), to be dicing with death in order to achieve his artistic goals. He was a poetic fundamentalist, a high-wire artist, an extremist who sought out extreme and precarious states of being—and finally unbeing.

Horace grants poets (in which he includes Empedocles) the right to kill themselves: "who saves one against his will murders him." Perhaps, it could be said, Thomas was afflicted only with the rather commonplace twentieth-century-writer's disease of alcoholism. But I prefer to think that he saw the risky game he was playing with large volumes of liquor in the bars of Greenwich Village as an extension of his bardic practice. Just as one speaks of "extreme sports," it is legitimate to speak of "extreme poetry"—and extreme poets. In this sense, then, the death of Dylan Thomas was not dissimilar to the fates of Empedocles and Mark Foo. Each was doing what he did to the point of death. All three were variations on the theme of wild dying.