

Essay on Editing a Scholarly Edition:
Collected Poems by Dylan Thomas

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List of Abbreviations

18P	<i>18 Poems</i>
25P	<i>Twenty-five Poems</i>
CP52	<i>Collected Poems 1934-1952</i> (1952)
CP88	<i>Collected Poems 1934-1953</i> (1988)
CP14	<i>Collected Poems: The New Centenary Edition</i> (2014)
N1	Notebook 1
N2	Notebook 2
N3	Notebook 3
N4	Notebook 4
N5	Notebook 5
NP	<i>The Notebook Poems 1930-1934</i>
TP	<i>The Poems</i> (1971)

Introduction

The year 2024 marks 110 years since Dylan Thomas's birth in Swansea, Wales. Ever since his premature death at the age of 39 in New York in 1953, his legacy has been constantly celebrated and debated, but his reputation, either as a literary genius, or a profound cultural icon, or even simply an impetuous drunkard, never really waned. The past decade alone, since his centenary celebration, has witnessed the outpouring of symposiums, lectures, publications, festivals in his honor, and tours through his literary map in Wales, even the sci-fi epic "Interstellar" used "Do not go gentle into that good night" as a center piece in the movie. With his singular poetic voice and a legendary short but eventful life, he remains one of the most talked-about Anglo-Welsh poets today and still speaks through his poems to the high and middle and low brow alike. Meanwhile, he can also be marginalized and given the cold shoulder. The reception of his poetry as seen in *The Times Literary Supplement*, the "establishment literary voice", for example, leads one scholar to wonder why the "hatred Thomas seems still to inspire in some English reviewers".¹

It is against this background that I would like to propose a new digital scholarly edition of his magnum opus, *Collected Poems*. The reasons are threefold. First, *Collected Poems* is his most important and famous work, so it would make sense to provide a new definitive online version that can speak to a broader readership, and reflect more up-to-date scholarship. Second, a new digital online edition can facilitate further research by incorporating as comprehensive as possible all relevant materials in one place, such as all text variants and emendations, the not-widely-accessible notebooks manuscripts, exhaustive and in-depth annotations, historical background, varied and ever-changing theoretical takes, audio recordings of his poems among other multimedia performance, all of which cannot be easily accommodated in a single volume book via a traditional platform. Last but not least, previous *Collected Poems* editions, despite their respective successes, are all in need of overhauling for reasons stated in the examination of the editorial history below.

¹ James A. Davie, *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 259.

Collected Poems: An Editorial History

There are four major editions of the *Collected Poems* excluding several revised reprints, the first being the one published under the auspices of the poet himself in 1952, just one year before he died. In its “Author’s Note”, Dylan explains that:

This book contains most of the poems I have written, and all, up to the present year, that I wish to preserve. Some of them I have revised a little, but if I went on revising everything that I now do not like in this book I should be so busy that I would have no time to try to write new poems.²

The authorial intention from CP52 seems clear and that is to prepare a collection that represents the best of his up-to-date poems. The result is an amalgamation of 89 poems from his five previous poetry publications: *18 Poems* (1934), *Twenty-five Poems* (1936), *The Map of Love* (1939), *Death and Entrances* (1946), and *In Country Sleep* (1952). In an ideal world, this should be the final verdict: no need for textual emendations, no need for new editions, just a stream of reprints.

But an ideal world this is not. Looking at his aforementioned “authorial intention” again, we could also see that when he said this, he did not seem committed to a definitive collection yet and was ready to keep on revising the poems or re-selecting poems that he would love to preserve, for in no way could he foresee his sudden death the following year. This naturally raises an important but difficult question for later editors: Should Thomas’s own criteria for poem selection be upheld? In this case, I believe the answer seems to be no for mainly two reasons. First, had Dylan Thomas known that CP52 would be his final selection on his poetry oeuvre, he might have chosen differently. This is pure conjecture of course, but I believe is not entirely unreasonable. Second and more important, an author’s concept of what a “collection” is does not necessarily mean they have the ultimate authority on this issue. After all, times change, the fluctuations of taste and a poet’s reputation give readers different but equally valid expectation for a “collection”. It should be up to the later publishers and editors to decide and justify what makes a best “collection”.

² Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1952* (London: Dent, 1952), p. vi.

Moreover, CP52 is tarnished in its use as the authoritative copy-text. For example, a problematic reset of 18P was used by Dent as the source text for CP52, carrying all misprints over.³ Dylan Thomas himself does not seem to be a conscientious proof-reader either. As early as 1937, when a reader wrote and enquired whether the line “Once in this **wind**” in the poem “This Bread I Break” was not a misprint for “Once in this **wine**”, Dylan Thomas confirmed this was indeed so and he would request urgent correction.⁴ The promised correction never materialized though and as late as CP52 it was still the same misprint on page.⁵ The fact that Dylan Thomas was having a turbulent time prior to the publication of CP52 does not help either, with his father dying from cancer, his marriage was on the breaking point and his finance in a shambles. We have recollection from an editor at the Dent who confirms that “...in putting together, and revising them, he lost all interest periodically, even going so far as to lose the actual material on several occasions”.⁶ It is no wonder new editions exist.

A revised edition, *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, duly arrived in 1971 in response to the shortcomings of CP52 and the collection of Dylan Thomas’s poems from his letters, journals and notebooks. Edited by Dylan’s life-long friend Daniel Jones, TP vastly enlarges the collection by including a total 192 poems, a hundred more poems fatter than CP52. The enlargement, Danile Jones stresses however, does not mean the complete poems of Dylan Thomas, only that TP is more representative. In his words, “... it is still a selection, based upon editorial judgement”.⁷ His editorial judgement however, in including some poems but not others, can be quite unconvincing sometimes. For example, when he decides to exclude poems from *Under the Milk Wood*, he justifies it by arguing that the play is “easily accessible to the public... and the poetry of it...should be read or heard in context...”.⁸ A common reader might believe otherwise, not least for convenience’s sake.

³ John Goodby, *Discovering Dylan Thomas: A Companion to the Collected Poems and Notebook Poems* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), p. 151.

⁴ Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Letters*, ed. by Paul Ferris (London: Dent, 2000), pp. 243-44.

⁵ Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. by Ralph Maud and Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1988), p. 163.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁷ *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Daniel Jones (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. xxiii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

All of CP52's original poems are intact in TP, but not in their original order. In fact, Daniel Jones has boldly re-arranged all poems in chronological order of composition in the hope to "reveal the relationship between poems written at the same time, and the development of the poet in technique and imagery".⁹ Since the publication of TP, the issue of chronological ordering of poems has been constantly debated. While Daniel Jones believes it is worth the effort, there are others, such as Ralph Maud, strongly against the notion. For example, Maud observes that

...from the time it was discovered that Thomas went back to his notebooks and revised early poems for later publications, the whole notion of chronology of composition has been blurred.¹⁰

His solution, however, is equally if not bolder in adopting an alphabetical order. That seems a very extreme way of presenting these poems and does not really justify the revolutionary editorial choice.

TP's scholarly apparatus is quite limited. For a much-awaited new edition it is very thin in annotations (with only twenty-odd pages and mostly about publication details). A much fuller and richer scholarly apparatus was finally offered by yet another new edition, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, edited by Walford Davies with Ralph Maud and published in 1988. In many ways CP88 is a strong reaction to TP. For example, CP88 strongly criticizes TP's chronological order approach, and restores the CP52's original order. However, CP88 is more careful with the copy-text, taking as copy-text individual volumes that make up the CP52, instead of the CP52 itself. The result is a much-more reliable text that is better spelt, punctuated, and supplemented by lengthy notes to individual poems. The selection of poems is still an enlargement of CP52, just to a lesser degree compared with TP. A couple of poems Dylan Thomas was working on in the last year were added.

The centenary celebration of Dylan Thomas's birth in 2014 brings forward the most recent edition of the *Collected Poems*. In *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The*

⁹ Ibid., p. xxiv.

¹⁰ Ralph Maud, *Where Have the Old Words Got Me: Explications of Dylan Thomas's Collected Poems* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2003), p. xv.

New Centenary Edition, the editor John Goodby from Swansea University revisits the old debate regarding the selection of poems and its presenting order. For the former issue of selection scope, CP14 is oriented more to TP rather than CP88 in that it strives to maximize the number of poems. Its inclusiveness means there are more poems selected, including those scattering across magazines, letters, stories, and notebooks that were not independently collected.

For the issue of ordering, CP14 follows TP in adopting a chronological order, arguing that the benefits of providing insight the development of Dylan's poems far outweigh the risks. As to the difficulties posed by reworked poems— for example in which year do we put a poem first noted down in 1933, majorly revised in 1934, and published in 1935? — Goodby suggests “dealing with each poem pragmatically on a case-by-case basis” without a hard-and-fast rule.¹¹ The scholarly apparatus of CP14, running to more than 200 pages (much unlike its sub-standard TP counterpart), is of great help to readers.

The Proposed New Digital Edition

CP14 is an improvement on previous editions but not without its own problems. For one thing, its scope, though much enlarged, is still not a complete one. For an edition that strives to maximize its inclusion of poems, it is not clear why it leaves out poems that exist only manuscripts. Maybe it is because, as the editor himself admits, *Collected Poems* “was always going to take the form of a trade edition for a mass market, whatever my preferences, as an academic, might be”¹², and an all-inclusive approach might render the single-volume book too bulky. For the same reason the editor excludes all variant passages and poems, which is a great loss for readers. I believe the time is ripe to redefine “collection” as “complete collection”. To overcome the “bulky” obstacle, a digital edition could please readers, publishers and editors alike in providing Dylan Thomas's poems in its entirety without scaring them away with too hefty a tome.

¹¹ *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The New Centenary Edition*, ed. by John Goodby (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson), p. xlv.

¹² Goodby, *Discovering Dylan Thomas*, p. 8.

Going digital is still confronted with difficult editorial choices to make, of course. For the ordering of its poems, the digital edition generally follows the chronological approach first proposed by TP and refined by CP14, for the reason that despite difficulties in consistent execution, it provides genuine gain for readers to appreciate the development of themes, metaphors, voices, and techniques of Dylan Thomas in stages. But the refining process apparently can go on. For example, in 2014 the fifth notebook of Dylan Thomas (the previous four, N1-N4 were held in the US when Thomas sold them in 1941, and published in the 1960s) was auctioned by Sotheby's and bought by the Swansea University. The discovery of N5, which contains chronological ordering of 19 of Thomas's poems in the 1930s, casts doubt on the precision of the chronological ordering of CP14, whose editor later admitting that "the majority of ...guesses are out".¹³ This a new edition can readily remedy. Also, the two poems "The seed at zero" and "I dreamed my genesis" contain previously unknown stanzas, which now a new edition can incorporate.¹⁴

The scholarly apparatus aims to collate the most important individual notes for each poem from especially the four previous major editions, not unlike a variorum edition. The annotation notes will be broadly divided into three subsections of **textual note**, recording in full its emendation history from manuscript to major revisions to publication, with all textual variants recorded and compared; **biographical note**, explicating the poem in historical context; and a **poetic note**, doing justice to the poetry by bringing out the fullest analysis from accumulation decades of research. In addition, a performance archive will be set up, depositing all major recordings of the poems, from the poet himself to Richard Burton among others. The audio or video content will be hyperlinked to the individual poem, providing a holistic appreciation in rich senses. An "Essay" section collects major articles discussing aspects of the poetry, and invites the community of Dylan Thomas scholars to respond and debate. Detailed index and concordance will also be integrated into a search function, which allows users to find words, phrases, or metaphors easily. A column will also be set up to provide an interactive experience by inviting common readers to respond to individual poems and sharing their thoughts onto their social media.

¹³ *The Fifth Notebook of Dylan Thomas: Annotated Manuscript Edition*, ed. by John Goodby and Adrian Osbourne (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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