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Green and Dying in Chains: Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill” and Kenneth Grahame’s The Golden Age

ROGER CRAIK

The next few years will obviously see a spate of writing about Thomas—his vision, imagery, technique etc.—and the writers will be beset by two distinct and opposite dangers—the danger of trying to equip him too exactly with a literary pedigree and the danger of isolating him as a sport, a Villon figure, a wild man who threw up works of genius without knowing what he was doing. The former mistake has been made for years by various academic critics, often Americans, who have dwelt at length on Thomas’s relations to ancient Welsh poetry or to Rimbaud: though . . . it should be remembered that he had never read Rimbaud and could not read Welsh.

—Louis MacNeice (85–86)

Louis MacNeice made this observation shortly after Thomas’s death in 1953, and time has proved him right. As an academic, a poet himself, and a friend of Dylan Thomas, MacNeice was particularly well placed to comment: he had himself experienced the excitement of reading a poetry that, astoundingly, was both obscure and popular, and that found an audience of people who instinctively understood the poet even though they did not always understand the poetry (Shapiro 179). Whatever his subject, Thomas writes compellingly of himself in a voice that cannot be mistaken for anyone else’s. The exhilaration of reading Thomas during his lifetime, of reading a poetry so defiantly antitradiotional and personal, quickly led into a fascination with the charismatic, womanizing, and notoriously drunken poet himself. Thomas’s early death at 39 from excessive drinking brought these
Rabelaisian elements of his personality even more to the fore, just as MacNeice had predicted. Forty-three years after Thomas died in New York, his reputation is legendary. To this day, in Alan Bold’s trenchant phrase, “scores of boozers claim to have known Thomas” (9), and I have met some myself, each with his tale of drinking on first-name terms with Dylan in the White Horse, his favorite bar in New York. And to this day the view persists that Thomas dashed down his poems in a rapture of alcoholic inspiration, pint in hand or whiskey bottle at his elbow, even though his manuscripts show that he would labor painstakingly for several days over a single line, and even though he was always sober when he wrote.

If reading Thomas’s poetry is exhilarating, reading about it is bewildering. Exactly as MacNeice had foreseen, in their various quests to detach Thomas’s poetry from his aura and to place him in a literary tradition, to explicate his poems or to explore his thought, critics call upon a dizzying array of sources and supposed influences: the Bible, the Welsh hwyl tradition, the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, Wordsworth, Blake, Arthur Machen, Hopkins, Eliot, Joyce, surrealism, astrology, the occult, and Egyptology. Even “Fern Hill,” which is hardly an obscure poem in Thomas’s oeuvre, has been yoked to Boethius, Sidney, Donne, Vaughan, Traherne, Marvell, and Freud.

To this list of influences on “Fern Hill,” I venture to add the homelier and less illustrious name of Kenneth Grahame for his The Golden Age. First published in 1895 and reprinted regularly over the following 50 years, this is a collection of stories, written about children but for adults, that reverts to the Wordsworthian and Blakean ideas of children as “illuminati” whose perception is far superior to that of the unimaginative, pleasure-stifling adults (“Olympians”) who control them. The children of Grahame’s book, five orphans living with an aunt and visited by various uncles and grown-up friends of the aunt, had already been well received in The Yellow Book as well as in Grahame’s earlier Pagan Papers, but their reappearance in The Golden Age made Grahame famous long before The Wind in the Willows, for which he is chiefly remembered today, was published (1908). For Swinburne, The Golden Age was “well-nigh too praiseworthy for praise” (qtd. in Chalmers 86), while a host of women’s magazines prescribed it as compulsory reading for all English parents who wanted to understand their children better (Green 161). Furthermore, it is strongly nostalgic and nostalgia-inducing. The critic of the Academy wrote of the Golden Age children: “So typical are their thoughts and actions, misgivings and ambitions, that The Golden Age is to some extent every reader’s biography” (qtd. in Green 162).

My thesis is not just that Kenneth Grahame’s The Golden Age appealed very powerfully to Dylan Thomas as he recalled his own childhood and was
writing “Fern Hill,” but that it furnished him with the phrase around which he built his entire poem, and furthermore that from The Golden Age and its illustrations by Ernest H. Shepard (which first appeared in the 1928 edition and are as much part of the book as the text), Thomas drew a host of details that passed into “Fern Hill” and became his own. My larger concern is to explore Thomas’s relationship, at a critical stage in his work and life, to the literary tradition of which The Golden Age is a part.

But first it is essential to recall the background of “Fern Hill.” The small farm that Thomas idealizes is Fernhill, where as a boy in the 1920s he spent several summers with his aunt Ann Jones and her habitually drunken husband Bill, who between them eked out a meager living from their few cows, pigs, and chickens. The living quarters were dirty and bedraggled. There was also an orchard that Thomas’s American agent John Brinnin, visiting Fernhill with Thomas in 1953, described as “sprawling . . . rotting apples lay by the hundreds under gnarled trees . . . We picked red and golden apples from boughs that almost touched the ground” (237).

In a letter to Edith Sitwell in March 1946, Thomas says that he wrote “Fern Hill” the previous September “in Carmarthenshire, near the farm where it happened” (Letters 583): he was then staying at Blae Cwm Cottage, where he had been writing poems since adolescence if not childhood (Ferris 192). How long he spent over “Fern Hill” is not known, but it must have been several months, for he showed John Brinnin “more than two hundred separate and distinct versions of the poem” (Brinnin 125). These manuscripts have since vanished. Writing out the entire poem each time he made any change, Thomas explained to Brinnin, was “his way of ‘keeping the poem together,’ so that its process of growth was like that of an organism” (Brinnin 125–26). On the same occasion Thomas told Brinnin that he began almost every poem merely with some phrase he had carried about in his head. If this phrase was right, which is to say, if it were resonant or pregnant, it would suggest another phrase. In this way a poem would “accumulate.” Once “given” a word (sometimes the prime movers of poems were the words of other poems or mere words of the dictionary which called out to be “set”) or a phrase or a line (or whatever it is that is “given” when there is yet a poem to “prove”) he could often envision it or “locate” it within a pattern of other words or phrases or lines that, not given, had yet to be discovered: so that sometimes it would be possible to surmise accurately that the “given” unit would occur near the end of the poem or near the beginning or near the middle or sometimes between.

(125–26, my emphasis)
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Was there a "phrase" that Thomas "carried about in his head" around which "Fern Hill" was taking shape, and if so, what was it? Did it come from another poem or novel, or did it simply occur to Thomas? His letters at the time show that he was reading "all Lawrence’s poems, some aloud" (Letters 558). Writing to Oscar Williams on July 30, 1945, he cites admiringly these lines from D. H. Lawrence’s "Ballad of Another Ophelia":

O the green glimmer of apples in the orchard,  
Lamps in a wash of rain!  
O the wet walk of my brown hen through the stackyard!  
O tears on the window pane!

Nothing now will ripen the bright green apples  
Full of disappointment and of rain;  
Blackish [sic] they will taste, of tears, when the yellow dapples  
Of autumn tell the withered tale again.  

(Letters 558)

As William York Tindall points out, these lines probably suggested to Thomas the image of "windfall light" for "Fern Hill" (269), but of course Thomas had read the whole poem, and further on he would have come across Ophelia’s painful recollections:

Once I had a lover bright like running water,  
Once his face was open like the sky,  
Open like the sky looking down in all its laughter  
On the buttercups, and the buttercups was I.  

(Lawrence 17–20)

Here is the narrator of Kenneth Grahame’s The Golden Age relishing a hot summer’s afternoon with his companions:

We three younger ones were stretched at length in the orchard.  
The sun was hot, the season merry June, and never (I thought) had there been such wealth and riot of buttercups throughout the lush grass. Green-and-gold was the dominant key that day. Instead of active "pretence" with its shouts and its perspiration, how much better—I held—to lie at ease and pretend to one's self, in green and golden fancies, slipping the husk and passing, a careless lounger, through a sleepy imaginary world all gold and green!  

(24)

Thomas may have been struck at once by the similarity between Lawrence’s Ophelia seeing herself as a buttercup and Grahame’s evocation of a green and golden world of grass and buttercups. To Thomas, who could so easily, in Matthew Arnold’s line from “Dover Beach,” “Find . . . in the sound a thought” (19) and to whose ear from childhood words were “the notes of bells, the sounds of musical instruments, the noises of wind, sea, and rain” (Thomas, “Poetic Manifesto” 45), the phrase “green and golden” may have
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been as enchanting as it was to its originator, and it could surely have become the central phrase of “Fern Hill” even if Grahame had written it just once, and even if Thomas had not been reading Lawrence. But what is crucial is that Grahame himself explores the possibilities of green and gold in the very way that Brinnin reports Thomas as preferring while writing his own poems. From “green-and-gold” (the hyphens suggesting that while the colors are distinct they are also inseparable, and the order indicating that green predominates) Grahame is moved to “green and golden fancies” (the green of the lush grass still taking precedence) and only later, only once the husk has been slipped and the world is imaginary rather than real, can Grahame lead with “gold” (“a sleepy imaginary world all gold and green”). In this way Grahame not only provides the central phrase of “Fern Hill” but he also, in effect, sets Thomas’s famous poem in motion: “Fern Hill” is, as it were, “green and golden fancies.”

Although Grahame’s “green and golden” is the most radical influence of The Golden Age on “Fern Hill,” there are many others. Of course, the children “stretched out at length in the orchard” and lying “at ease” merge into the solitary narrator of “Fern Hill,” “young and easy under the apple boughs” (1). Those apple boughs are mentioned by name a page later in The Golden Age, and Ernest H. Shepard pictures them sprawling as close to the ground as the ones that Thomas remembered and Brinnin describes at the real Fernhill (26, 3). But I think it likely that Thomas was even more impressed by The Golden Age’s enchanting cover illustration. Here in silhouette a boy and a girl, he playing either a pipe or a recorder and she looking at a buttercup that she has plucked, sit beneath a spreading apple tree. Even though Shepard’s tree is a young one with slender branches rather than gnarled boughs, it, too, probably bore on the first verse of “Fern Hill.” Certainly the scene’s Edenic possibilities could not have escaped Thomas, who saw a child Adam and a child Eve each on either side of the tree (as Adam and Eve are often depicted in painting) from which the apples hang prominent and unpicked. These suggestions of prelapsarian bliss led him later to describe as “Adam and maiden” (30) the farm’s phenomenal return “all / Shining” (29–30) each morning when the speaker awakes.

It is very much in this fashion that Thomas draws on Grahame: the sound of a phrase, the impression of one of Shepard’s illustrations, a word here and there—these would be sufficient for Thomas, who would transform such details from The Golden Age and make them his own. For example, in the chapter “Alarums and Excursions” (from which “green and golden” comes) Grahame’s apostrophizing Sir Tristram (whom one of the children is playing in their game of Knights of the Round Table) as “the peerless hunter and harper” (25) suggests “huntsman and herdsman” (15).
Thomas’s phrase also has its origins in Shepard’s picture of the narrator joyfully “chasing Farmer Larkin’s calves” (96) around the field, in which enclosed orbit he can be said to be both hunting them and herding them.

For their part, the foxes in “Fern Hill” remembered from the real Fernhill are too far away on the hills to be hunted, but something of the atmosphere of Thomas’s “the calves / Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold” (15–16) harks back to Grahame’s evocative description of the close of day:

Westwards the clouds were massing themselves in a low violet bank; below them, to north and south, as far round as eye could reach, a narrow streak of gold ran out and stretched away, straight along the horizon. Somewhere very far off, a horn was blowing, clear and thin; it seemed like the golden streak grown audible, while the gold seemed the visible sound. (126)

And as the foxes bark “clear and cold” at night, so

nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark. (23–27)

Could Thomas have had in mind Shepard’s graceful silhouette, which is a tailpiece to two chapters of The Golden Age, of an admittedly un-owllike bird flying above a house at nighttime (81), and had he also a faint memory of Toad in The Wind in the Willows making his way homeward and being distressed by “Night-jars, sounding their mechanical rattle” and “an owl swooping noiselessly towards him” (163)? And when Thomas imagined “the spell-bound horses walking warm” (34), was he recalling The Golden Age’s narrator who is “spell-bound” (26) at the sight of the soldiers and horses that
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Shepard pictures making their unhurried way along a country lane on a sunny July day?

DOWN THE ROAD THEY CAME
Childhood pleasures, as Grahame and Thomas both knew, are ephemeral. The eighteen vignettes that comprise *The Golden Age* are gently pricked with reminders of the passing of time, and the prologue has the narrator in a wistful mood that subtly overshadows the entire book:

Somehow the sun does not seem to shine as brightly as it used; the trackless meadows of old time have shrunk and dwindled away to a few poor acres. A saddening doubt, a dull suspicion, creeps over me. Et in Arcadia ego—I certainly did once inhabit Arcady.

These observations would have chimed with Thomas’s, who, when revisiting Fernhill with John Brinnin on the occasion mentioned earlier, “remarked many times how shrivelled and colorless everything now seemed” and who became “nostalgic and unhappily thoughtful in this pilgrimage to a house memory and imagination had furnished so differently” (Brinnin 237), and whose sun in “Fern Hill” is “young once only” (12). But whereas Kenneth Grahame, with a larger canvas than Thomas, allows time to permeate his book through the narrator’s gradual aging, Thomas from his opening words declares himself, in insistent hindsight, to have been all the while in the thrall of a powerful personified Time: “As I was young,” occurring in three of the poem’s six verses, is on each occasion subordinate to an instance of Time’s mastery over the speaker. As we have already seen, Thomas made “green and golden” and Shepard’s cover illustration temporal, but there are other instances too, albeit less obvious ones. For example, only with Time’s apparent permission can Thomas “hail and climb” (4) and be “honoured among wagons” (6). These phrases from “Fern Hill” have received scant critical attention, with only Alastair Fowler hazarding that they mean “a child hailing the wagon driver and climbing on” (233), but this very scene is prominent in *The Golden Age*, where the narrator and his elder friend Edward are “revelling in the privilege of riding in the empty wagons from the rickyard back to the sheaves” (72), whence they walk back to the rickyard for another ride. This gleeful activity has been going on for some time before Grahame’s narrator recounts how “Another wagon had shot its load, and was jolting out through the rickyard gate as we swung ourselves in, shouting, over its tail” (74). Shepard catches this moment: against a background of a farm building and a tall “house high” haystack, the narrator and Edward are seen swinging themselves into a great farmyard wagon (then known as a “land ship”) on which they will stage a mock battle between a privateersman and a British captain before the narrator, discovering the wagon to be swarming with earwigs, rolls off to leave Ed-
ward in sole command “execut[ing] a war-dance of triumph” and thus “honoured among wagons.”

As well as being attracted to this scene for its details, which pass into “Fern Hill,” Thomas saw in it a significance that would have astonished Kenneth Grahame had he lived to read “Fern Hill.” For the latter, the boys are sporting themselves just as boys used to on those magnificent carts, but Thomas sees them in Time’s grip. The wagon driver (the only trace of whom in Shepard is his hat) is already making his jolting way “out through the rickyard gate,” and although he can hardly be oblivious to the boys shouting, swinging themselves into the cart and wrestling boisterously once
aboard, he ignores them. To Thomas it was thus with Time, who “let [him] hail and climb,” but was rolling on regardless.

Thomas’s reading of Grahame’s later chapter, “Exit Tyrannus,” is again metaphorical. Edward, once again in high spirits, is

swinging on a gate and chanting a farmyard ditty in which all the beasts appear in due order, jargoning in their several tongues, and every verse begins with the couplet:

“Now my lads, come with me
Out in the morning early!” (129)

It is entirely in Grahame’s line to fashion an appropriately morning song from the first two lines of Robert Burns’s “Up in the Morning Early” (“Up in the morning’s no for me, / Up in the morning early”) and from the “Old Macdonald Had a Farm” type of song with animal noises. In “Fern Hill” Grahame’s farmyard ditty appears in a very different guise:

And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace. (42–45)

Thomas has taken Grahame’s jaunty command “Now my lads, come with me” and placed it, not in any “morning song” of his own, but, by implication, in the mouth of Time after he has allowed “so few and such morning songs” and no more. Consequently Thomas’s “children” (a less robust word than “lads”) hear Time calling them (“Now . . . come with me”) and accordingly “follow,” seemingly with free will but in fact because they have to.

Thomas’s attitude toward The Golden Age and its style raises more far-reaching issues than that of direct influence. Kenneth Grahame, writing with wit, satire, and whimsy (all of which qualities Thomas is innocent), inhabits “divided and distinguished worlds of mature awareness and innocent vision” (Green 177), a mode of writing that he made distinctive in the 1890s but that, again, harks back to Wordsworth and the Blake of the Songs of Innocence. With Grahame the reader can feel and think what many children at some time feel and think as Grahame shifts, without strain, from the role of grown-up commentator to that of childish narrator. Although the prologue to The Golden Age is nostalgic, it is neither sad nor mawkishly despairing: Grahame’s five orphans are confidently undeceived in their view of the world, and on most occasions are more acute than the Olympians whom they encounter. Their childhoods gradually vanish and they grow up.

This manner of writing requires both self-confidence and daring: one risks being dismissed as childish oneself, naive, or just daft. (To their credit,
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most contemporary reviewers of The Golden Age recognized Grahame's sophistication even if it did not happen to be to their taste. Unlike Grahame, Dylan Thomas never quite dared to take the risk even though he wanted to: this, above all, is what his borrowings from The Golden Age reveal. From The Golden Age, as I have tried to demonstrate, Thomas took the truly childish things, such as enjoyment of buttercups, playing on wagons, farmyard ditties—the things that are enjoyed simply as children enjoy them—and then prized them from their setting and garbed them with metaphor and allegory. To write this way is to write as an adult poet remembers rather than as a child thinks—"Fern Hill" has none of The Golden Age's freshness—but the very pains that Thomas takes to disguise the literal serve to underline the power of its effect on him. He was strongly drawn toward childhood and wanted to write about it: his own childhood is a major theme in Deaths and Entrances, the book to which "Fern Hill" was a late addition. But whereas in his earlier books Thomas had created his own self-referential yet refreshingly unembarrassed swagger of language to convey the urgency of sex, for childhood he was faced by the need for an altogether simpler, more direct, register. It is this that Grahame provides. Here, free of adults for a day, his child narrator cuts loose with untrammeled zest:

The masterful wind was up and out, shouting and chasing, the lord of the morning. Poplars swayed and tossed with a roaring swish; dead leaves sprang aloft, and whirled into space; and all the clear-swept heaven seemed to thrill with sound like a great harp... Colt-like I ran through the meadows frisking happy heels in the face of Nature laughing responsive. Above, the sky was bluest of the blue; wide pools left by the winter's floods flashed the colour back, true and brilliant... Out into the brimming sun-bathed world I sped... The air was wine, the moist earth-smell wine, the lark's song, the wafts from the cow-shed at the top of the field, the pant and smoke of a distant train—all were wine—or song was it? or odour, this unity they all blent into? I had no words then to describe it, that earth-effluence of which I was so conscious: nor, indeed, have I found words since. I ran sideways, shouting; I dug glad heels into the squelching soil; I splashed diamond showers from puddles with a stick; I hurled clods skywards at random, and presently I found myself singing. The words were mere nonsense—irresponsible babble; the tune was an improvisation, a weary, unrhythmic thing of rise and fall: and yet it seemed to me a genuine utterance, and just at that moment the one thing fitting and right and perfect. (7–12)

The same joys—the blue sky, the running, singing, and the watery playing—all are enjoyed by Thomas at his "sky blue trades" (42) and "singing as the
As his childhood ecstasy proves to be beyond the power of formally written language to convey, Thomas’s syntax breaks down, even more than Grahame’s does, into fragmented impressions:

it was lovely, the hay
Fields as high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
And playing, lovely and watery. (19–21)

He is even more successful with the remarkable line (quite the best in the poem), “the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold” (16). The phrase “clear and cold” works adverbially to suggest how the foxes barked—that they should do so “coldly” is typical of Thomas’s sharpening one sense against another—but also exerts itself adjectivally to suggest the child snug in bed imagining how it felt to be out on the hills at night. Here, more than anywhere else, Thomas reminds us of the romanticism (slippery a word as that is) not just of Kenneth Grahame but of his masters too, the Wordsworth of the “Immortality Ode” and the Blake of *The Songs of Innocence*. But Thomas is seldom thus: no sooner does he venture into the straightforward than he scampers back into his verbal cleverness, his accustomed way of writing. Accordingly Thomas’s foxes are not left to bark clear and cold on the hills but do so in chiasmatic relation to the child as herdsman (Tindall 270), while the running, loveliness, and watery pleasures take place “all the sun long” (19), a variant of “all day long” that distractingly interposes Thomas’s verbal trickery between the reader and the subject.

Such unease of register has even made those sympathetic to Thomas brand him a charlatan. In John Fuller’s view, “Fern Hill” “tries to bowl the reader over by evoking all the delirious moments of the sensitive childhood familiar from countless sensitive autobiographies” (219) and he concludes by condemning the poem as “dishonest” (220). John Bayley, on the other hand, while being generally milder to Thomas, conjectures that “Thomas was aware in his last years of the failure of his attempts to find a voice, and . . . the recitations which came to obsess him were a kind of substitute for this” (68). (Certainly, his reading of “Fern Hill” is superb and never palls in the way that silent rereading of the poem does.) The observation is a tantalizing and far-reaching one, with its suggestions that the work came to influence the life rather than vice versa. In the last eight years of his life the road stretches inexorably through increased drinking and buffoonery to the famous squalid death in New York.

*The Golden Age* is crucial partly because it furnished Thomas with his point de départ and partly because more of it than of any other book made its way into “Fern Hill,” the record of the greatest poetic crisis in Thomas’s life—one that finds him wanting. His reading of *The Golden Age* vivified his
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already keen memories of his childhood yet at the same time faced him with a tradition that, despite himself, he found himself admiring but could not bring himself to follow. He was, after all, Dylan Thomas. Never unforthcoming in his contempt of Victorian poetry in general and of the 1890s in particular (the period with which The Golden Age is most closely associated), he had scoffed at poets such as John Gawsworth for being “not poets at all but just bearded boils in the dead armpit of the nineties” (Letters 311). When one has been acclaimed as a master of an obscure and idiosyncratic style, as Thomas had been, it would be a far greater risk to write directly and conventionally than it would be for a famously conventional writer to write cryptically. In his commerce with Grahame, Thomas took only some of that risk, and by intellectualizing with metaphor what he and Grahame both felt, created a poem whose imagery, feverishly exteriorizing itself from its subject, does not seem to stem from inner sensation.

This is not to say, with Fuller, that “Fern Hill” is dishonest pastiche, or even, with Bayley, that Thomas could not find a voice. On the contrary, what emerges from “Fern Hill” is a tremendous yearning for a voice that Thomas recognized but from which, finally, he knowingly shrank away. This in itself is a voice: it is the voice of a poet who knows he lacks the confidence and strength of character needed to look into his heart and write, and thus take the only path to poetic maturity open to him. “Fern Hill” is intensely sad. “A poem for evening and tears” was how Thomas characterized it, but the most poignant judgment is the lines on which the poem itself comes to a close:

Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea. (53–54)

NOTE

1 As Thomas never once mentions The Golden Age we cannot know when he read it. It is tempting to conjecture that he came across it for the first time when young, possibly in his father’s library, and to imagine him experiencing Fernhill farm both through his own and through Grahame’s eyes, seeing a literary landscape in a real one rather as John Buchan in his autobiography Memory Hold-the-Door sees Old Testament Judea in the Scottish border country (16–17). But the youngest that Thomas could have been when he read the illustrated Golden Age was 14, and it is unlikely that the book would have appealed to a 14-year-old boy. Virtually everyone literate in the first half of the twentieth century knew Grahame, and Thomas, fascinated by childhood as he was, could have come across it any time whatsoever in his life, aided by a memory that, his wife Caitlin Thomas recalls, “was extraordinary; he could remember where he had read a certain line and go straight back to it” (124).
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