Introduction

The prose written in the last ten years of his life reveals Thomas's mature powers as an artist in comedy. It is more varied than the early work, more certain yet more subtle in its effects. Most of it was commissioned work, much of it for the BBC, and while he regarded these excursions into prose as primarily a means of earning money, and something subsidiary to the task of writing poetry, what is at once evident is the pleasure he took in this writing, his enjoyment of the role of entertainer, whatever the sadness behind the laughter, and the consistently high quality of the writing. By the early forties and the war years Dylan Thomas had become, as Richard Burton observed, famous among the bars, and he was often the fount of entertainment as he leaned against the bar, cigarette in mouth, while his talk and comic stories soon filled the room. Such talk is, of course, as ephemeral as the beery conviviality that encouraged it, though I think we can find echoes and instances of these arias of comedy not only in his later stories and dramatic narratives but also in such occasional prose-pieces, often set-pieces, as his letters. Vernon Watkins soon and perceptively realised that while Thomas's poetry arose from the poet's isolation, his in some ways no less remarkable prose arose from his social life. The poet of tragic vision was also the born jester, Lear and Fool as one, and quickly responsive, as Watkins noted, to the 'heroic comedy of people's lives',[1] for Dylan Thomas had the gift of comedy as abundantly as the gift of imagination. And the originality of his later prose style was honed on the accomplished reader's sharp awareness of the potential of the speaking voice. If there is a literary ancestry, it is no longer Caradoc Evans or Joyce, but that earlier popular and theatrical performer Dickens. Gwen Watkins has recalled her and Dylan's enjoyment of reading Dickens aloud one happy afternoon in the garden at Pennard, and his life-long delight in his writing.[2]

J. Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*
© John Ackerman 1991