

AN ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE IN THE POETRY OF DYLAN THOMAS

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By

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ABSTRACT

Dylan Thomas belongs to an exclusive group, the Anglo-Welsh poets, who, throughout most of English literary history, have either chosen or have been compelled to write in English rather than in Welsh, a situation which offers someone interested in language analysis an opportunity to study its several implications. Perhaps, in the not too distant future, the way in which human beings think and learn a language will be satisfactorily determined. In what language does a bi-lingual person think? Does a human being think in words or pictures? What emotive value do words possess? Is there an on-going tension between the first language and the acquired language or languages, or, as in Thomas' case, the first family language which he could not speak fluently and the alien language which became his *lingua franca*? To what extent do the latent influences such as personal associations, family background, interests, ancestry, ultimately affect the nature of writing? At present, in the world of critical thought on these subjects, we are still "on a darkling plain" where "ignorant armies clash by night".

Literary critics have often dismissed Dylan Thomas' poetry, and particularly his figurative language, as excessively esoteric and complex. This study will, I hope, go some way to meet this criticism by examining in some detail the dynamics of Thomas' diction, metaphor, and symbolism, as necessary components of a style that is both original and essential to the manifestation of a truly private metaphysical vision. In this study I will attempt to identify the elements that characterize his style: in short, to establish why his poems are the way they are.

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INTRODUCTION

Dylan Thomas appeared on the literary scene in 1934 with what seemed meteoric suddenness when his Eighteen Poems were published, followed in 1936 by his Twenty Five Poems. His mother's comment, in retrospect, now seems prophetic:

I said, "You know, you must try and get into the university--what are you going to do? Anybody'd think you were a Keats or something!" He looked at me--and he wasn't the cheeky type, and he wasn't even a big talker--and he said "I'll be as good as Keats if not better!" I went to his father, I'll never tell him anything again. (MOY, 289)

At the age of thirty-nine he was dead in New York but not before he had popularised his name, leaving untold numbers of baby boys to be named after him. His father, Davy John Thomas, had been so named in the traditional Welsh way, for probably the day he was christened there would have been hundreds of other Davy John Thomases born Davy John Thomas however wanted his son to be original, in name at least, and had gone to the Mabinogion to find a name. In the Mabinogion, a collection of Irish-Welsh tales written in the sixth century, he found "Dylan", "the son of the wave":

And they brought her unto him (i.e. Merlin), and the maiden came in. "Ha, damsel" said he, "art thou a maiden?" "I know not I am". Then he took up his magic wand and bent it. "Step over this", said he "and I shall know if thou art the maiden." Then stepped she over the magic wand and there appeared forthwith a fine chubby yellow haired boy!

"Verily", said Math the son of Mathonwy, concerning the fine yellow-haired boy. "I will cause this one to be baptised, and Dylan is the name I will give him."

So they had the boy baptized and as they baptized he plunged into the sea. And immediately when he was in the sea, he took its nature and swam as well as the best fish that was therein. And for that reason was he called Dylan, the son of the Wave. (ACK, 5)

“Marlais”, Thomas’ middle name, came from his father’s grandfather, a minister and poet who took his bardic name (for every respectable Welsh poet has to adopt a bardic name) from that of a stream; Marlais being a corruption of “Môrlais” (the voice of the sea). Marlais, Thomas’ great grandfather, was educated in Glasgow and became an Unitarian minister at Carmarthen. At that time being an Unitarian was tantamount to being a divine communist in the Cold War period. If nomenclature has any bearing on a person’s attainments in life Thomas had been well prepared.

Thomas’ father was a teacher of English at Swansea Grammar School (High School) and had done well academically at Aberystwyth University College obtaining a first class honours degree in English Literature. He was well known in school as a hard taskmaster, demanding the best from his students, and an impassioned reader of literature. The biggest disappointment in his life was not being offered the chair of literature at the newly created University college at Swansea. D.J. spent a great deal of time exposing his son to the literary classics, the Bible and Shakespeare (FER, 242) being Dylan’s staple diet.

It may seem odd that Dylan’s father should have opted to bring up his son as a monoglot English speaker while he himself was not only fluent in Welsh but also showed a love for his native culture. Dylan’s mother was also a fluent Welsh speaker. There is a reason for his father’s decision and it was to have direct bearing upon the poet’s later development. After the end of the first World War, the children of working-class parents yearned for a better future for their sons and daughters, especially their sons. The opening of new University colleges and the

Normal grants for students entering teacher training colleges becoming available, offered young men possessing the education qualifications from grammar schools the opportunity to become high school teachers. Most teachers in the schools of Wales spoke English to their students regardless of their degree of fluency in Welsh because they regarded it their duty to increase their students' fluency in the language in which they would be required to operate in later life. It was for economic reasons that professional parents brought up their children as English speakers. It is ironic that Welsh children (those living in Wales) whose home language was English saw no purpose in learning Welsh but developed a form of English which was heavily accented and which marked them as "Taffies". However, bi-lingual Welsh children in rural areas and small towns in the south-west learned English as a second language which was nearer standard English and free of accent. Dylan Thomas' father in moving to Swansea, a large town, freed his son from what he viewed as an obstacle to his career. He was taught to speak with a "cut-glass voice" (THO (5), 30). This was destined to endear him to an audience which perhaps had little idea as to what his words meant but who were mesmerised by the sound.

Ever since his poems were first published controversy has raged among literary critics as to Thomas' place in the literary canon. Detractors range from the unappreciative to the acerbic:

Critics, favourable and unfavourable, found the poetry difficult, irrational and undisciplined ... H.G. Porteus called the poetry "an untour of bedlam". Stephen Spender made the categorical pronouncement that it was "just poetic stuff" with no beginning or end, or intelligent and intelligible control. (OL, 1)

Even in his native Swansea, and in the hinterland, Carmarthenshire, in which most of his mother's and father's family lived, few people professed a liking or any degree of appreciation, much less an understanding, of his poetry (OL, 2).

In late 1953 I had a personal experience which seems to epitomise this aversion held by most of the general public towards reading the works of Thomas while at the same time enjoying both his notoriety and his reading voice. I was watching a Rugby game at Pontyberem, some fifteen miles from Laugharne, Thomas' home, when I was joined by a friend of mine, Farr Davies, an estate agent who casually said that he had had a busy morning. I asked him what he'd been doing and he replied, "I had to clearout Dylan Thomas' Boat house and workshed before some prospective buyers see it. It was full of scribbled papers so we had quite a job burning the old rubbish."

The charge, that Thomas' poetry is so obscure as to render it both unintelligible and alienating to the ordinary reader, has been made since the beginning. However, Olson having conceded that Thomas' work presents problems, makes an eminently valid point (OL, 2) to which critics such as Korg, Kleinman Morton, Maud and Daiches subscribe.

Yet had the poetry of Thomas been such, indeed had it been such and nothing more, one may doubt whether it would have been singled out for special notice.... There was a further characteristic which distinguished Thomas' work from that of other poets. It was unclassifiable.
(OL, 2)

David Holbrook, however, was almost vitriolic in his rejection of Dylan Thomas' poetry. His objection was that Thomas the poet is both immoral and

lacking in the sense of responsibility demanded of the true artist, and by “immoral” he implies an inability to face life (HOL (1), 5). Holbrook makes rather a sweeping statement:

The place itself bears no relationship to modern Wales, either in village or town--no such realistic relationship as Joyce's Dublin. It is rather the toy-town of Thomas' childhood, and this is why he calls it “a place of love”--it is the place of his mother's love. The effect of the stylization of the piece is to make the world a pretend-relationship, such as children play, with no morality or reality to impinge..... (HOL (1), 136)

Holbrook is suggesting here that Thomas' poetry is based on a consummate phoniness and the magical town of Llaregyb is nothing more than a fantasy unrelated to life. This I reject out of hand and maintain that Llaregyb is Laugharne. However, this will not be apparent to anyone who does not know Laugharne intimately. It dates from the Middle Ages when it was given a Royal Charter. During the Reformation, the population was greatly augmented when a large contingent of Flemish refugees settled there. For a long time the population spoke three languages, Welsh, English and Flemish. In this respect it was unique in South Western Wales. Roads into and out of Laugharne were poor and helped to isolate Laugharne still further. It came to be regarded as that strange town.

In Laugharne may be encountered the characters of Llaregyb: the mailman who reads your letters before he delivers them, the madman Booda, deaf, dumb and disabled and a neighbour of Thomas, understood by only a few including the poet, the village constable who heard the noises of a village woman being murdered and lacking the gall to enter the house alone ran for help, the wife who went for a boat-

ride with her husband and lodger but returned with only the lodger.

In the space of sixty odd years the epithets that most readily come to mind when discussing Dylan Thomas' poetry are: complex, obscure, unusual, and difficult. Of these there is little doubt and during the years following his death in 1953 not a great deal has changed in public awareness. What is also interesting is the amount of critical interest that Thomas' work continues to spark. This study will address the matter of obscurity in his poetry beginning in Chapter One with his diction. Perhaps the answer to why his poetry is obscure is to be found in his Celtic ancestry, in his childhood and adolescence, his early manhood. I shall examine his declared intentions regarding his use of words, his wide allusiveness, his masochistic efforts to make every word yield all its meaning and perform its several functions.

The second chapter will be devoted to his use of metaphor, which matches Thomas' diction in terms of obscurity and range of allusiveness. I recognize the difficulty of providing a satisfactorily precise definition of the terms metaphor, image, and symbol and so before the chapters on these topics I have provided graphic definitions which I do not claim to be anything other than attempts at clarification. Similarly I shall use the tenor/ground/vehicle formula to analyse metaphor. In all cases there will be an effort made to trace the intricate web of allusions suggested by each figure of speech.

Symbol is often confused with image. My graphics may only add to the confusion but at least the attempt will serve to alert the reader to the need for clarification. This will be my chief concern in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four will deal with the major influences on Dylan Thomas' language, his Welsh ancestry and elements therein, cynghanedd, and his supposed debt to Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Chapter One

PROBLEMS OF COMPREHENSION: DICTION

It will be useful at this juncture to identify the problems of comprehension in reading Dylan Thomas' poems and deal with them. Olson has dealt with this matter at length (OL, 3) and I am indebted to him for his insights.

For convenience sake I have chosen the first three sonnets in the "Altarwise" sequence and "I see the boys of summer" as areas of study.

I

Altarwise by owl-light in the half-way house
The gentleman lay graveward with his furies;
Abaddon in the hangnail cracked from Adam,
And, from his fork, a dog among the fairies,
The atlas-eater with a jaw for news,
Bit out the mandrake with to-morrow's scream.
Then, penny-eyed, that gentleman of wounds,
Old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg,
With bones unbuttoned to the half-way winds,
Hatched from the windy salvage on one leg,
Scraped at my cradle in a walking word
That night of time under the Christward shelter:
I am the long world's gentleman, he said,
And share my bed with Capricorn and Cancer.

II

Death is all metaphors, shape in one history;
The child that sucketh long is shooting up,
The planet-ducted pelican of circles
Weans on an artery the gender's strip;
Child of the short spark in a shapeless country
Soon sets alight a long stick from the cradle;
The horizontal cross-bones of Abaddon,
You by the cavern over the black stairs,
Rung bone and blade, the verticals of Adam,
And, manned by midnight, Jacob to the stars.
Hairs of your head, then said the hollow agent,

Are but the roots of nettles and of feathers
 Over these groundworks thrusting through a pavement
 And hemlock-headed in the wood of weathers. (THO (1), 80)

Since by Thomas' own admission (KL, 8) the sonnet sequence was to have been part of a longer work, a consistency of personae was to be expected in it but the reader is frequently faced with problems of identification, there frequently being no apparent link between the denotation and its object (or the reference is so ambiguous as to make it almost impossible to follow). This ambiguity can be exasperating for the reader.

In Sonnet I, Abaddon is introduced in line 3 and is immediately juxtaposed to the "dog" without any link. In the second sonnet the "child" is identified twice in the first six lines but in the seventh the poet switches again to Abaddon without providing a connection, and further ambiguously addresses an "unknown you" who is positioned "by the cavern over the black stairs". The "you" probably refers to Judas. The "black stairs" are heavily suggestive of infamy and sinister betrayal with unmistakable echoes of Macbeth's conference with Banquo's assassins (Act. 3, Sc. 1). Anyone familiar with an illegal practice current during Thomas' youth of drinking at pubs outside permitted hours will perhaps recognise the subtle reference here. Customers would have been admitted by the back door into the parlor rather than the bar and drink while standing by the back stairs in order to effect a quick get-away in the event of a police raid. However, the point here is the ambiguity arising from the lack of connectives. Who is it "manned by midnight" can "Jacob to the stars"? Who is "the hollow agent"? for it has no clear antecedent. How can "ground-

works thrust through a pavement” (THO (1), 81). The “horizontal cross-bones of Abaddon” may be familiar enough to most readers but what its relationship to “you” is not clear for there is no connective. In the eleventh line the “hollow agent” speaks but where is its antecedent? Who is “hemlock-headed”?

The first sonnet has a better infrastructure. One could rewrite the poem with few, if any, changes without any apparent loss in meaning but, of necessity, with a considerable loss in effectiveness. What follows then is a crude, if faithful, rendering in “reclaimed prose”:

Altarwise by owl light in the half-way house the gentleman lay
 graveward with his furies. Abaddon, in the hangnail cracked from
 Adam, and from his fork, a dog among the fairies, the atlas eater with
 a jaw for news bit out the mandrake with tomorrow’s scream. Then,
 penny-eyed, the gentleman of wounds, old cock from nowheres, and
 the heaven’s egg, with bones unbuttoned to the half-way winds,
 hatched from the windy salvage, on one leg, scraped at my cradle, in
 a walking word, that night of time under a Christward shelter. “I am
 the long world’s gentleman,” he said, “and share my bed with Capri-
 corn and Cancer”. (THO (1), 80)

Despite its having more connectives, the first sonnet still has problems regarding identification of personae. In the four lines beginning “Abaddon” and ending with “scream” one is unsure whether or not Abaddon is the person connected with the hangnail, who resides in the fork, who is a dog, who is an atlas eater and who also bit the mandrake. In the octave, it seems that we have the right persons here, the one known as the “gentleman of wounds” i.e. Christ, also known as the “old cock from nowheres”, “the heaven’s egg”, “the Long world’s gentleman”. To connect the various facets of this one person is a different and more difficult task.

In a later discussion in this paper I will attempt to explain Thomas’ obscure

style. At this juncture I am content to single out the problems which the reader has in reading Thomas' poems, without attempting to offer a solution. Certainly, it would be unproductive to offer the response given by T.S. Eliot and quoted by Tindall that this age was a complicated one and therefore required a poetry which was complicated (OL, 9). It seems a singularly simplistic response by a revered man of letters and a non sequitur so uncharacteristic of Eliot. I am unaware of any satisfying justification of his comment by a critic.

To continue this consideration of the problems caused by ambiguities in persona identification I shall use Sonnet III:

First there was the lamb on knocking knees
 And three dead seasons on a climbing grave
 That Adam's wether in the flock of horns,
 Butt of the tree-tailed worm that mounted Eve,
 Horned down with skullfoot and the skull of toes
 On thunderous pavements in the garden time;
 Rip of the vaults, I took my marrow-ladle
 Out of the wrinkled undertaker's van,
 And, Rip Van Winkle from a timeless cradle,
 Dipped me breast-deep in the descended bone;
 The black ram, shuffling of the year, old winter,
 Alone alive among his mutton fold,
 We rung our weathering changes on the ladder,
 Said the antipodes, and twice spring chimed.

"The lamb on knocking knees" is easily identified as Christ, or the poet (THO (1), 81), the three dead seasons being the time spent in his mother's womb but why seasons? Thomas uses it literally; three seasons is nine months. We are meant, according to Thomas, to read him literally (OL, 3), on occasions. But who is "Adam's wether" and why is this person the victim of the serpent? Who is the "Rip of the vaults"? and what is he doing in the undertaker's van? Why is Rip Van Winkle

dipping the narrator “breast deep” in a “descended bone”? Is the “black ram” “old winter”? To what or whom does “our” refer? And what function do the antipodes serve? These then are the stumbling blocks to full comprehension, the connectives that would render the poems so much less difficult but perhaps far less interesting.

Ambiguity, arising from a lack of connectives, is compounded by an esoteric diction. “I see the boys of summer” (THO (1), 1) will serve as my object of study but I shall consider also other poems.

Olson in his “list of things that Thomas is likely to do with language”, cites the poet’s fondness for “words having multiple meanings and multiple syntactic functions” (OL, 54). These offer opportunities for all kinds of word tricks and Thomas dexterously switches a noun for an adjective, a verb for a noun and vice-versa to achieve an effect. Perhaps the most famous demonstration of this is the title “Do not go gentle into that good night”, and as a consequence it is also the most misquoted phrase in his canon.

In this poem, in which Thomas deplores the moral decay evident in the lives of young men during the depression in South Wales in the nineteen thirties, “ruin” is the operative and dominant word. It is evocative and capable of many interpretations. Richard Morton points out two possibilities that of “being in a ruined building” or else “being ruined as they are” (MOR, 37). Since the theme, ostensibly, has to do with the erosion of moral values and the poem has a number of sexual images one is inclined to visualise Thomas’ “ruin” in physiological terms and to accept his invitation to read him literally. What polite preachers in the thirties referred to as

“self-abuse”, or “ruin” was, in fact, the practice of masturbation, not quite ranked as one of the deadly sins but close enough. Prevalent at the time was the view that masturbation was inimical to good health and could “ruin” a young man. There was also the belief that such activity was symptomatic of other moral weaknesses which, if not remedied, could result in total turpitude. Since “ruin” is followed in the next line by an image of extravagance and poor husbandry, “Lay the gold tithings barren”, “ruin” may conjure in the reader’s mind the prodigal in the billiard room wasting his time (the working class in the depression had nothing else for amusement and recreation other than the pool room). Ruin was familiar to the boys from the valleys who flocked to Swansea on weekends and on holidays. They did so to escape the inescapable: the slag-heaps and the silent shaft wheels of ruined mines.

The pedant would seize upon “Lay the gold tithings barren” and declare it a mixed metaphor. So it is for today most of us think of tithing, i.e. a tenth of one’s income, in terms of money while forgetting that every church in the past had a tithe-barn to hold crops and stock. Within the metaphorical and thematic framework of impotence and prodigality it is both fitting and useful. Even though tithing is more often thought of in terms of things and “barren” suggests “life” (or more specifically) a lack of it, we have here a pair of what Thomas called his “warring images” (MOR, 12) exemplified in “their heat” and “frozen loves” in which he contrasts the passionate heat of the boys with their lack of true affection. “Fetch” is noteworthy as an example of the influence of the Welsh heritage on his language, which will be dealt with later.

“Cargoed apples” is an enigmatic phrase. Thomas takes a noun, cargo, and transposes it into a participle. Its implications, like a pebble thrown into a pond, spread, in all directions. It could mean “apples” held in the hold of a ship. But the theme has to do with living people, and “drown” implies that these apples have life and possibilities just as these young men have potential. Apples held in the hold have reached a stage of maturity but their maturity is wasted for they are trapped in their prison, the ship’s hold, and are consequently sent to the sea’s bottom. In the second stanza, are “light”, “curdlers”, and “folly”; Thomas sets up a tension here. The boys are intelligent enough but lack wisdom and like the bull in the china shop they clumsily disturb what is a wonderful phenomenon of nature, the making of food from raw material. In fact, they are the union destroyers, what Burns calls man’s breaking of “Nature’s social union” in “To a Mouse”. “Curds” is rarely used in reference to honey but Thomas uses it here to denote, a hardening of sensibilities for these “boys of summer” are singularly uncouth. “The signal moon” i.e. the full moon, that which traditionally sends the hearts of lovers into palpitations, has no effect on the boys from the valleys. Thomas puns with “zero”, for the moon is round and their romantic thermometer was at nadir. “Voids” usually used for the vast spaces in the heavens signifies here the empty spaces in the boys’ personalities. “The jacks of frost they / finger in the hives” is syntactically divorced from the rest of the stanza. The preceding line has a semi-colon, and the line itself has a semi-colon, unless there is an understood apposition, “the boys of light” being “jacks of frost”. The reader is thrown back upon his imaginative self to work out the connec-

tion, just as in the successive two lines, “the frigid threads / Of dark and doubt they feed their nerves;” (MOR, 38).

“The brawned womb’s weathers” in the third stanza has a brutal ring to it. “Weathers” is one of the poet’s most used words for it offers opportunities for punning and other word play devices. “Split” when used with “womb” gives the reader almost a physical shock and “brawned” has a distinctively earthly connotation as if the poet wished to remind us that conception and birth were an aspect of life that matches the sordid characteristic of “the boys of summer”. Similarly “fairy thumbs” offering several possibilities. The immediate sense is “magical” which is complemented by “in the deep” as if the “summer children” were busy like Santa’s elves and had been working ceaselessly in the dark to meet an unspecified deadline. Another sense is “clumsy” for they do not use fingers but their thumbs as in the expression, “he’s all thumbs”. “quartered shades” may seem puzzling, until one remembers, and is amused by Thomas’ trick of using a perfectly plain and simple word in a seemingly esoteric sense. After all, our time is almost always thought of in six or twelve hour periods. Morton suggests an intriguing explanation for “paints” and “shelling”, that the chicks when emerging from their protective shells, have bits of shell sticking to their bodies and appear in the sun’s light as if they had been painted yellow (MOR, 38).

“Nothing stature” in stanza four is a curious expression, having echoes of the Welsh phrase “O ddim bwys” (of little weight). Another pun follows, “seedy shifting”. “Seedy”, for the boys are not exactly trustworthy, and “shifting” associated

with “shifty” eyes is a sure sign of deviousness. Thomas’ love of transformative grammar is shown in “lame the air” where an adjective is used as a verb. “dogdayed”, in similar fashion, is the use of a noun as past participle in an adjectival sense. In dogdays dogs are in heat but a different kind of heat from that endured by “the boys of summer”, their heat being generated by lust whereas the dogs are suffering from a fever. And then there is the tension between “summer” and “ice”, the ever present and the all pervasive antithesis. “Lame the air” has a curious Biblical flavour; the poet transposes the adjective “lame” into a verb and compresses the Biblical event into two words, lame and leap.

In Part II of the poem, consisting for the most part of the boys’ response in dialogue, Thomas maintains the pattern of word play and of using words having various interpretive values. “Totter”, an evocative word, suggests a need for the “boys” to supercede the natural law of seasonal constraints of time or else become totally subservient. “As she blows” comes to us straight from the bows of the sailing ship which could be a whaler. The boys, then, are advocating an aggressive stance which is continued in the second stanza of their reply. In a series of antitheses, Thomas provokes the wit of his readers. “Death” comes from a source of life “a summer woman”, “life” from lovers rendered immobile by cramps, from the “fair dead” the “bright-eyed worm”, and from “the planted womb” a “man of straw”. “Summer woman” suggests that women are more likely to conceive in the summer but is a compressed phrase that stimulates thought; “muscling life” inevitably invites a seaside dweller to think of mussels, a dark blue shellfish common in South Walian

waters especially in estuaries quite distinct from cockles which are grey in colour. The life of a mussel is confined, short and “cramped”. “Davy’s lamp” refers to the lamp on a miner’s helmet but the practice of wearing the lamp on the helmet was not in vogue until the early forties in South Wales. “The planted womb” is a rough nest-like structure given to a childless woman in the hope that she will conceive. Thomas skilfully brings in “the man of straw” to extend the sense, an image probably borrowed from T.S. Eliot. “Four-winded spinning”, in the third stanza, is a reference to the seasons, an anathema to the boys of summer who seek to turn upside down the natural order by arresting the sea’s movement, changing the world’s topography, and by flouting convention in disrespecting the dead. The last line captures effectively the pranks so typical of the boys, stealing flowers from cemeteries to place on their family graves or to sell to the unsuspecting.

The final stanza of the response seethes with negativity; the boys do everything in reverse, wearing holly in spring rather than at Christmas; they “nail the squires” instead of carolling them, they neglect to cultivate “their love”, they go through the motions of courtship but have no real affection, and all of this despite the whole range of promise, their potential. Thomas exhibits his skill at producing the warring words, “cross” with “holly”, “nail” with “squires” “love” with “dries”, a “kiss” with “quarry”.

The final stanza is the end of the conversation, the speaker being the persona, with the opening line of the first stanza almost unchanged except for the use of the vocative. Thomas’ “maggot’s barren” is intriguing. Is it another trick where an

adjective is used as a noun, i.e. “barren” something akin to “warren” or is it transposed from “man is in his maggot, barren”? The punctuation demands that it be read thus: “Man in his maggot, is barren.” The “pouch” is the “womb” often found in Thomas’ poems as one of the poet’s archetypal images. “I am the man your father was” echoes Wordsworth’s “The child is father of the man” (“My Heart leaps up”). The persona gives way to the oldest, and to the young. This is the most offensive remark from a father to his child, “I remember when I was your age....”

Continuing with this examination of Thomas’ diction, I will refer in detail to his three sonnets, considered by many the most difficult poems to interpret (KL, 10).

The first sonnet has to do with Christ’s nativity; and there is enough evidence in the poem to warrant such an interpretation. The diction is both evocative and provocative, rich in its association and in its range of interpretations. “Altarwise”, seemingly a straightforward enough word but a strange epithet for a nativity scene which, in normal circumstances, ought to be joyful. Here are no devout shepherds and “heavenly hosts” singing their hallelujahs, only premonitions of death and of human sacrifice. The “gentleman” is lying feet first towards the altar. The time is “owl-light”, between day light and dusk, suggestive of death and mystery. Kleinman cites several instances of “owl-light” (KL, 14) in the works of earlier authors. The “half-way house”, a phrase used in Britain in several senses, could relate to a number of situations. I maintain that Thomas is not averse to writing tongue-in-cheek regardless of the subject under discussion, and this is an example. To the pub crawler “half-way house” suggests only one thing, a pub. To be thus called, the pub

would be half way between two towns or villages, or else lie between two pubs. It could also signify an inn half way to a lodging house or “hospitium” frequently referred to in Welsh as “tafarn y spite”, a corruption of “hospitium”. In religious terms it could be “purgatory”, an interim state between death and eternal life, wherein the soul waits for admission into a permanent celestial residence. Another meaning in Wales in the nineteenth century is a pub located halfway to the cemetery at which the cortege would stop for relief from the onerous business of carrying the coffin. Mourners would park the casket near the pub while they stayed in the inn to imbibe. Many pubs are still known as “half-way” houses. Today, of course, the penal system has yet another use of the name, but strangely enough it echoes its original meaning. Thomas leaves us guessing as to his intended meaning but I agree with Kleinman’s interpretation:

The “half-way house” in which the gentleman lodger is accommodated is not the inn which St Luke tells was crowded. It may be the indefinite point in infinity where the descending Word is poised half-way between heaven and earth; or it may be the manger in which Christ is born; or it may possibly be the Incarnation itself, which was Christ’s half-way house between eternity and Resurrection. (KL, 14)

“Graveward” obviously means having to do with grave and burial, suggesting that the gentleman lies eastward in anticipation of the resurrection with his attendants at the ready. And again his complexion may be akin to Mercutio’s “grave man” (Romeo and Juliet, III, 1. 96) just after Tybalt’s fatal thrust. Yet again, it may be that the “gentleman”, en-route to the cemetery, has a death-like expression especially in the “owl-light”.

“Owl-light” indicates the presence of owls, and the presence of birds in a building is traditionally considered an omen of death. Their stealthy approach in the silence of the night suggests sudden death for the victims. “Hangnail” is a common enough word but it has meanings other than its original one within the context of the poem. There is a syntactical consideration here which is rather confusing. If the line were to read “Abaddon, the hangnail cracked from Adam”, the apposition would clarify matters. Obviously, the punctuation does not suggest such a reading. Abaddon, it seems, is not Adam’s immediate successor but yet is part of the succession from Adam, the original sinner. There is also a hangnail found in every cowshed (with which Thomas would have been familiar at his uncle’s farm, Fern Hill). The farmer would discard his work-jacket and hang it on the hangnail, a ferocious looking nail driven into the barn door. The hangnail on the finger symbolises a part of the body but was nevertheless an irritant just as Abaddon is, peripheral and irritating, a “dog among the fairies” in fact. Kleinman (KL, 14) suggests that the Abaddon in the sonnet, who is also mentioned in *The Book of Revelation*, has a different function and that Thomas’ Abaddon is the “Angel of Death”.

“Hangnail” brings to mind Christ’s Crucifixion, his hanging on the cross and the nails being driven into his hands and feet. The “fork” is traditionally the hallmark of the devil, in this case Abaddon, but it again can have a secondary meaning, that of a creature sitting leisurely waiting in a tree in an extremely furtive way, the fork also foreshadowing the mandrake in the sixth line. Kleinman (KL, 14) notes Thomas’ frequent use of the mandrake in his work, both in prose and poetry, and quotes C.J.S. Thompson:

In some parts of Wales the mandrake (man-dragon) superstitions were also connected with briony with its dark green leaves and red berries.... Its leaves and fruit were called “charnel food” and it was believed only to grow “beside the gallows tree”.... Furthermore, when uprooted it was said to utter shrieks and groans like a human being and its agony was dreadful to hear.... In other districts of Wales there was a belief in the legend that the mandrake grew from the tears of an innocent man who had been hanged on the gallows. (KL, 20)

The “gentleman of wounds” is now “penny-eyed”, Thomas’ favoured word creation trick. Kleinman points out the various possible meanings of the “gentleman of wounds”:

As he leaves the half-way house, now a “gentleman of wounds” we do not know whether he is the wounded, the wounder, or both. He may be wounded because of the radical mutilation by the “dog among the fairies”. He may be the wounder implying or forecasting the Crucifixion. Another transformation reveals the gentleman as an obscene old skeleton (“bones unbuttoned”) and an old cock from nowhere and the heaven’s egg. (KL, 20)

I think there is little doubt that the whole sense of the poem leads one to consider him as Christ-like. “Old cock from nowhere” puts Christ on familiar terms with the rest of humanity, one of the boys, “old cock” being a familiar cockney expression, its bawdy flavour obvious. “Me old cock sparra” has been an endearing form of address in the streets of London, England since time immemorial.

Thomas is fond of using what one may term “pub diction”, evident in the second half of this poem. “Gentleman” or rather “gentlemen” is a term used by the licensee or the bar-tender at closing time in British pubs. Even when the bar is peopled by both sexes tradition has them addressed as “gentlemen”, presumably because not until fairly recently did women frequent bars in Britain unless accompanied by male escorts. “Bones unbuttoned” depicts the customer at the end of the

evening, the worse for drink, a trifle dishevelled with fly unbuttoned and trying to balance on one leg to prove sobriety. “The gentleman” is one with the rest of the non-abstaining world but still a part of Creation, “heaven’s egg”, man made in God’s image. Kleinman supplies us with an interesting allusion regarding “old cock”:

Abaddon ... We learn too that he comes from the Heaven’s egg, a reference to one of the autogenetic myths of God creating himself out of an egg. There is a fascinating parallel to Thomas’ “hatched from the windy salvage” in a choral ode of cosmogony from the The Birds of Aristophanes:

At first there was Chaos, and Erebus, and night ... until at last, in the deep dark, bosom of Erebus an egg, wind-begotten was laid by black winged night. And from that egg ... sprang Eros ... Mating with dark Chaos, Eros hatched us (KL, 21)

The gentleman of wounds makes a final declaration of identity in the final two lines that he is “the long world’s gentleman”, a reminder that Man’s death is his long home (in Welsh “ei hir gartref”). According to Kleinman, “the gentleman identifies himself not only with the sun but with all the slain and resurrected gods” (KL, 21). “Long world’s gentleman” strikes one forcibly; it is obscure enough to jog us out of lethargy into active inquisitiveness which, it seems, was Thomas’ goal.

The second sonnet opens with a challenging statement. Death is an amorphous word, able to come in all guises, in different circumstances, having a different meaning to different people, causing joy and regret with indifference, being in effect “all metaphors” and signifying the final reality in life. It is all to all. “Shape” is a simple but all-encompassing word suggesting several things: content, meaning, form, biography, existence, the whole range of life, and all of this in the person of the

infant born to be King, and yet to exist on the earth as a common man. “Child” and “sucketh long” are graphic words for “growing up” for they serve to underline the essentially human side of the young Christ. “The planet-ducted pelican of circles” is a compact description. Kleinman analyses the phrase thus:

Packed into this line is a varied vocabulary: astronomical (planet) anatomical (ducted) ornithological (pelican) geometrical (circles) and a rather involved pun: planet-ducted = galaxy = milky way = breast (circles). (KL, 24)

This shows how Thomas is able to flick his poetic fan and give flight to several latent meanings from one word, planet ducted. The “pelican” was believed to feed her young by striking herself to pierce an artery in her breast. “The gender’s strip” lends itself to a whole cluster of possible explanations and interpretations again a tribute to the poet’s versatility in creating new words from the old and to his intuitive grasp of the process of making words do new things in a new way. What is the “short spark” that fires up the “long stick”? Since in the previous line he has been describing the childhood of Jesus and in the opening stanza the Nativity, it follows that “spark” could well be a description of the conception when that “spark”, i.e. an electrical force, drives the sperm into the egg and the “shapeless” country is where it all begins, i.e. “the womb”. The spark was already in familiar use before Thomas found it. In the vernacular we refer to a bright child as a “spark”, the one who can, with wit, electrify a social group.

The “crossbones” is again familiar, a universal picture in the minds of most people during the last three hundred years. Here, its import extends beyond that of the pirate ship.

Kleinman provides four purposes served by “crossbones”:

1. It reintroduces Abaddon and Adam (of whom Christ is created) and links them with Jacob.
2. It is an elliptical image of skull and crossbones a familiar symbol of warning on poison labels, danger signs and pirates’ flags.
3. It introduces through its piratical image the nautical image of a Jacob’s ladder (“rung” and “manned”) which in turn suggests a Biblical reference to Jacob’s dream.
4. It foreshadows the cross. (KL, 28)

“Jacob” is another example of a word having several possible meanings and one which illustrates dysfunctional grammar. It refers to the Book of Genesis where Jacob, fleeing Esau’s wrath, sets out for Haran and on his way, during his sleep, has a vision of God who promises him that the land thereabouts would be given to his descendants. However, the word “Jacob” implies much more than this as Kleinman points out. The poet suggests that God in a plot of sorts conspires with his angels to trick Man, by promising Jacob (Man) a wonderful future and then allowing Christ (man) to die on the Cross. And so the ladder symbolic of Jacob’s dream becomes the Incarnation of the word descending to the world by a ladder fashioned from the bones of Adam and Abaddon. It is, furthermore, suggestive of the ladder used to bring Christ down from the cross.

In his exhaustive treatment of the sonnets, Kleinman offers an ingenious interpretation of the last seven lines of the second sonnet (KL, 28). “Manned by midnight”, in literal terms could conceivably mean that the ladder had been manned by twelve o’clock that night, but one would be clearly at odds with the poet in assuming this. “Midnight”, Kleinman, suggests, is “the cavern in Jacob’s dream”, and “consistent with the cross bones” and the “Rung bone and blade”. The piratical

details suggest divine infamy and the double cross. Another suggestion by Kleinman is that the last four lines are in the form of a warning, “God who can raise Jacob to the stars can nail Jesus to the Cross and the warning is repeated by the (hollow agent). ‘Hairs of your head... / Are but the roots of nettles and of feathers’” / (KL, 29).

The third sonnet is even richer in words possessing multiple meanings or interpretations. As the opening line implies the dominant image in the poem is that of the sheep, but the imagery is derived from a number of sources viz. Genesis, the zodiac, the Incarnation, Shakespeare, Milton, the Gospels, mediaeval legends, Washington Irving, puns, and one unpublished Thomas poem (KL, 32).

The lamb has become a familiar term for an object of sacrifice not only for nominal Christians but also probably everybody in the English speaking world. Kleinman offers an additional importance to the word, the fact that in Hebrew it is also a zodiacal sign (Nisan or March-April). “dead seasons”, a phrase seen often in Thomas’ work, could be interpreted as the Easter season from Good Friday to Easter Sunday the time from the Crucifixion to the Resurrection, but “dead” is at first obscure. Kleinman suggests that it could refer to the inanimate Christ lying in the tomb (KL, 34), lifeless in that all is without hope. Another interpretation that Kleinman suggests is that the Passover is the spiritual counterpart of the natural rebirth in Spring, the nova conspersio. The “climbing grave”, another example of Thomas’ use of the warring images, and an echo of Tennyson’s “forever climbing up the climbing wave” in “The Lotos Eaters”, springs from the legend in which the

cross grows as a tree from Adam's grave (KL, 34). This appears to me a thoroughly valid interpretation but whether it is or not, the modifier is effective in that it forces the reader to think it through. "Wether" is a much favoured Thomas word which is often punned. The meaning "a castrated male sheep" offers various possibilities for punning and other poetic functions. Since it was often used by slaughterers to lead the flock to slaughter, the word is synonymous with deceit for the wether's having led the others to their death. It would veer at the last moment and escape to continue its treacherous work with another batch of victims, unaware that it itself was becoming a victim. Shakespeare's "tainted wether of the flock" (Merchant of Venice, Act. IV, Sc. I) expresses this succinctly.

The opportunities for exploitation of "Butt" are not wasted by the poet. Of course, its vernacular use is obvious. Kleinman offers the following plethora of possible interpretations:

The word "butt" carries a variety of meanings: the wether is the butt of the worm. The climbing grave is the butt "horned down", "skull-foot", "skull of toes", are three esoteric words begging some interpretation. (KL, 36)

The first is from a description of the seduction of Eve in the Garden of Eden and is obviously copulatory in nature. The serpent becomes the "worm". It too is suggestive of skulduggery deserving of contempt. Following hard on its heels, we have Thomas' pun on "horned" with reference to Eve's seducer; he is lusty and immoral. Then again "horned" means literally the use of its horns by the young ram, i.e. Christ, who turns things around not by an aggressive act but by his act of sacrifice on the Cross. Donne sings of his act of Atonement: "O strong Ramme, which hast

batter'd heaven for mee / Mild Lambe, which with thy blood, has mark'd the path...." (J. Donne, "Ascension", Holy Sonnets). With "tree-tailed", Thomas adds a tail to the seducer, the worm, so that in constrictor style it may more easily mount Eve, another example of Thomas' ability to suggest another meaning or an extra dimension to his word.

Kleinman recognises the difficulty a reader would have with this phrase, "skull-foot and the skullfoot of toes" (KL, 38). His explanation, however, is reasoned and valid, and consistent with his interpretation of the whole poem:

Skullfoot is derived from the Gospel description of the place of crucifixion: Golgotha is a Hebrew word for skull. Calvary is its equivalent from the Latin calvaria, a skull, a translation of the Greek Κρανιον ... The hill received its name according to one legend because it was a place of execution and therefore was known as, the hill of skulls ... Modern interpretation holds that the place was called the skull, because of the shape of the hill. (KL, 15)

There may be another allusion to Genesis embedded here, viz; "it shall bruise thy head" (Genesis 3:15-16), a reference to God's curse upon the serpent. Another possible allusion may be an anecdote The Encomium on St John the Baptist, in which this sentence occurs: "... at the very moment when the Saviour said these things the toe-nail of His right foot struck the head of Adam" (KL, 135). "Thunderous pavements" is surely a reference to the judgement of Christ by Pilate when the crowds shouted to Pilate's question "Whom do you wish me to release?" and the crowd thundered back, "Barabbas" (Mark, 15:11). These words require careful reading by a reader alert to allusions and prepared to do the research necessary to uncover them. "Garden time", seemingly a reference to the Garden of Eden, evokes

another kind of trail and a time of a crisis for Adam, for he was about to be judged for his indiscretion in shunning God. Thomas frequently indulges in what may be termed “pub language”, coarse, phallic, and bawdy. Such words as “marrow-ladle”, “wrinkled” and “Rip of the vaults” strike perhaps a discordant note in a poem about a sacrifice but Thomas is never far removed from his plebeian, iconoclastic, Welsh and folksy roots. This does not detract from his consistently serious concerns and his perennially private vision of life, part of which involves sex. “Mutton fold” captures the life and death syndrome ever present in Thomas’ poetry, as are his warring images. Again come his weather puns, for having had “Adam’s wether” in the third line we now have “weathering changes” in the penultimate line; man is an integral part of nature, so the “antipodes” salute this great phenomenon the Incarnation, in his world.

By analyzing four of Thomas’ poems, I have tried to indicate some of the problems of comprehension involved in interpreting them.

METAPHOR

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is spoken of in terms of another:

My love is a red, red rose

A metaphor has three parts:

TENOR A
The thing under discussion

GROUND C
that which has an affinity to each

VEHICLE B
the word in terms of which the tenor is being discussed

TENOR
love

GROUND
a) both are pleasing
or
b) both can hurt

VEHICLE
rose

The tenor and vehicle are both constant but the ground depends on the perception of the reader or the audience.

Chapter Two

METAPHOR

Olson makes the insightful comment on Thomas' poetry: "It was unclassifiable" (KL, 2). Although Olson's comment was meant to include both style and themes, it was particularly true of Thomas' style, especially his diction. Thomas has few mentors in this regard but the imitators are many. It is clear that he strove to wring out the last drop of meaning from each word as evident from his manuscripts in Lockwood Memorial library. What follows, now, is a detailed examination of his use of metaphors. Reference may be made to the diagram on page 29.

Again I am obliged to recognise my debt to Olson for his helpful categorising of Thomas' metaphors. In the analysis of a metaphor I shall use the following formula: tenor, ground, vehicle.

The first type of metaphor is the apparently self-contradictory one, the paradox, in which Thomas gives the reader only part of the statement or gives the missing part later on in the poem. In "Our eunuch dreams", the opening line "Our eunuch dreams" dreams would seem to have no connection whatsoever with "seeds". It is not that we read later in the poem that the poet means not plant-seed but man-seed. In the metaphor formula, therefore, Thomas' image may be expressed thus: tenor/potency; ground/growth, promise; vehicle/seeds. The poet suggests that during an erotic dream, as in a film show, a man dreams about love but the experience comes to nothing and is "seedless". In the dream he has an orgasm and spills his semen, and at the cinema he experiences not true love but vicarious love the effect

of which soon disappears when the lights are put on in the house or else when he steps out into the light of day. None of these experiences are of true love, but only “love on a reel”.

The second category is that of “logical consequence” (OL, 57 (1)). In “In My Craft or Sullen Art”, Thomas sings of the lovers in both the first and second stanza. On the first occasion he speaks of the “griefs in their arms”. The full impact of this metaphor does not become apparent until the seventh line of the second stanza, “their arms round the griefs of the ages”, which suggests that the lovers’ interest and genuine concern is for all people not only for themselves. In the second stanza the line reads, “But for the lovers their arms / Round the griefs of the ages” (THO (1), 128). By a subtle and slight change Thomas suggests that the lovers are concerned about their own problems but have a deep and abiding interest, tantamount to love, in the affairs of their fellowmen: in the universal and timeless problems which have troubled men through the ages, the mystery of death, and the seemingly prodigal way in which God dispenses justice.

Olson (OL, 57) cites as another type of metaphor used by Thomas that which is not clear as to what is being analogised. He suggests that in “like a running grave” the line “time tracks you down” is an obvious reference to a man-hunt but it is not evident until the last stanza that he has in mind a running track. (Incidentally, Thomas counted as his most prized possession, a newspaper cutting from the Evening Post, a picture and a write up of a track meet at his elementary school in Swansea at which he had won first prize in the mile race.) Olson gives this as an

example with the oval shape of the track symbolising the “o” which represents nothing or death (OL, 92). Strictly speaking, of course, this is a simile but for our purpose the difference is of little consequence.

Another classification, this time to be seen in the first of the “Altarwise” sonnets, is that of “the implied or suggested” metaphor, which is effected by using a commonly used phrase and using a part of it to suggest an implied analogy or else by taking a word or phrase and adding to it to do the same thing. The “atlas eater” can do the same thing. In analysing this metaphor much will depend, as in all cases, on the perception of the reader: tenor/a world reporter; ground/both travel extensively in search of sustenance; vehicle/a voracious animal. Kleinman (KL, 4) suggests another possibility viz; the “atlas-eater” being a reporter who would consume large amounts of paper (an atlas being a technical term in Britain for a volume of paper) to report the nativity for world distribution.

Thomas’ limited number of themes in his poetry is rather surprising. There are certain words in his metaphors that appear regularly and suggest either his love for them or else a paucity of themes. Among these are “light”, “green”, “sea”, “mandrake”, “golden”, “weather”, “womb”, “tomb”, “spark”, “shroud”, “time”, “season”, “quick”, “dead”, “flesh”, “nerves”, “tides”, “love”, “grave”, “fork”, “rub”, “seed”, “skull”, “cock”, “marrow”, “tongue”, “cancer”, “breast”, “bones”, “wax”, “candle”, “globe”, “ghost”, “ladder”, “rung”, “grass”, “hemlock”, “mouth”, “genesis”, “naked”, “sucking”, “loin”, “cadaver”, “Christ”. A cursory glance at this collection reveals what seems like an obsession with the physiological aspect of man,

followed by nature, death, the metaphysical, love, sex, and religion. Coupled with this, is his love of the oxymoron as in “Do not go gentle into that good night”. Tenor/death; ground/one cannot see in either of these; vehicle/night. The warring image consists of the epithet “good” for if the night be good then why does the poet ask his reader (or his father) to struggle against it. In this example an interesting point to note is Thomas’ use of dysfunction, “gentle” being used rather than “gently”, gentle being an adjective and not an adverb. The answer, of course, lies in the poet’s desire to use words in a new way, and here he uses the adjective deliberately. Thomas’ use of the oxymoron in the same poem: “And you, my father, there on the sad height” does the same thing. Tenor/a very strong emotion, usually one of happiness; ground/both are above the norm; vehicle/a hill or mountain summit. Usually one associates heights with a happy state, but here Thomas achieves the effect he wishes by associating it with its opposite.

The Anglo-Saxon device of kenning, used so effectively by Hopkins (to whom Thomas is deemed by some to be indebted), is used by Thomas who describes familiar things so accurately as to make them appear unfamiliar. The apple trees in “Fern Hill” become “the apple towns”. To the lad from Swansea, a large metropolis, whose only experience of apples was confined to the Swansea indoor market, having an orchard for himself was like being a mayor in a tree-town, the branches becoming the streets and the apples the citizens. In “Do not go gentle into that good night” the “wisemen’s” regret is that “their words have forked no lightning”. Forked is an accurate description of the appearance of lightning yet in this context (the

noun being used as verb), it has an unfamiliar ring to it. “And I was struck down by death’s feather” in “Before I knocked”, seems enigmatic until one realizes that death’s feather is simply one old method of establishing whether or not someone is alive (echoes of King Lear). The “blowclock” in the eighth of the “Altarwise” sonnets is another unfamiliar use of the familiar, the humble dandelion. “Blowclock” has a number of possible interpretations. Time (KL, 100) as Kleinman suggests is eliminated during the three hours of the Crucifixion when there is an eclipse of the sun. It may be a reference to the modern time-bomb, but what is more interesting is its use as “kenning”, the practice among children of telling the time by blowing on a mature dandelion head and counting how many blows it takes to take off all of the white hairs. The number of blows indicates the time.

This discussion of the use of metaphor will be continued with reference to Sonnets IV, V, and VI, in the “Altarwise” sequence. Korg, Tindall, and Kleinman each offer a different interpretation of the Sonnets but it seems that although there is some overlapping, Kleinman’s is the most perceptive. Kleinman takes the sequence to be broadly based on the biography of Christ while Tindall favours the autobiographical interpretation, and Korg, the Zodiacal.

Sonnet IV in the “Altarwise” sequence is concerned with the Nativity and more specifically with Christ’s legitimacy and identity. The series of questions (to which no answers are offered) is presumably addressed to Mary and are characterized by bluntness and insensitivity, much like a modern day press conference. Thomas’ first job after leaving high school was as a reporter for the South Wales Evening Post. He

recalls his appearance during his reporting days in “Return Journey”:

and above medium height. Above medium height for Wales, I mean, he’s five foot six and a half. Thick blubber lips; snubby nose; curly mouse-brown hair; one front tooth broken ... speaks rather fancy; truculent; plausible; a bit of a show-off (THO (3), 75)

Thomas often brings this journalistic flavour into his work whether it be prose or poetry. There is no connective between the time period of the preceding sonnet and this, between the sacrifice and the Annunciation. Thomas plunges into the announcement of the Divine infant with an abrupt question, “What is the metre of the dictionary”? “Metre” is another spelling of “meter”. If, as seems probable, it means “metre”, for a lyrical measure, there is a reference to communication, Thomas poses an unanswerable question in keeping with the other questions in the catechism. A dictionary has no rhythm; it is simply a list of words without shape, akin to the great unanswered and unanswerable questions regarding the great mystery of the Incarnation. Put in simple language it is thought provoking, and effective, in that it challenges the reader. However, it may indeed be only a type of school-boyish question designed to place a teacher in the embarrassing position of being wrong whatever his answer. For example, “Is God omnipotent and if he is, can he create a rock that he cannot move?”. Such was the case when Jesus asked the teachers in the Temple (Luke 2:46).

The other four riddles are in like vein. “The size of Genesis.” Obviously this is more significant than the size of a Biblical book. “Genesis” the beginning, could refer to the Nativity, to the influence that Christ is to have on the course of world history.

“The short spark’s gender” harks back to the typical question asked when the news of a birth is announced, “Boy or girl” but the “short spark”, seen in the second sonnet, has technical and possibly sexual connotation, since the terms, “male” and “female” are applied to electrical plugs. These questions may be “Shade without shape” and “the shape of Pharaoh’s echo” are connected by both sound and sense. “Shade” is another word for “ghosts” (echoes of Dickens) and it appears to ask the age-old question regarding Christ’s paternity, how could he be fathered by a spirit? Its sexual implication is captured and extended by the following question “the shape of Pharaoh’s echo”: implied rather than asked. Kleinman explains it thus:

The “shape of Pharaoh’s echo” is an obelisk, a monolithic echo of the achievements of his reign. What the obelisk originally signified is still unknown, but as E. A. Budge remarks in The Guide to Egyptian Collections in the British Museum, ... “it is probable that they were connected with a solar or even phallic cult, but as the texts afford no explanation of their meaning it is useless to theorize”. Thomas did not have to go to the banks of the Nile to see an obelisk. Cleopatra’s Needle stands on the Victoria Embankment of the Thames, and Thomas must have seen it as early as 1933, the year in which he moved to London. The phallic significance of the obelisk is consistent with the central theme of this sonnet: the mysterious paternity of the child in the manger. (KL, 47)

“Echo” may seem at first rather contrived, but remembering Thomas’ advice to his readers that he wished his poems to be read literally, “echo” is a faithful metaphor. It suggests a continuity of the ages; just as sound reverberates so does this structure link us to antiquity. With “burning gentry” again the question echoes, “By whom were you fathered”, and re-echoes down the ages. “the wounded whisper”, another example of Thomas’ effective transferred epithets implies the whisper of a man who has been wounded, in this case, Christ, if one accepts the poem as referring to the

life of Christ. “sixth of Wind” is a measurement taken from the Book of Enoch (KL, 47) in the Pseudepigraphia. As for “the burning gentry”, Kleinman admits that speculation as to their identity and fate is useless; however, in the Book of Genesis, 20:24-28 the few survivors of the holocaust in Sodom and Gomorrah are “gentry” as in “privileged” for they had been specially selected by God to escape the burning fate of the others. Again, Thomas’ metaphor “blew out” is in keeping with the idea of Lot’s family being forced out by explosion and fire. A reading of Genesis would render Thomas’ metaphors lucid and perhaps even literally true. Thomas, in his statement that his poems were to be read literally, gives a striking illustration of what he means in his “hunchbacks to the poker marrow”. The meaning of the metaphor can be grasped in the literal shape of the interrogative “?”. The correspondence is obvious between the “hunchback” and the question mark. “the poker marrow,” an antithesis which is Thomas’ trademark, combines the implacable nature of the infant with his resilience but simultaneously there is also a reminder that he is a real live person, a “marrow” man.

In the octave, the questions are addressed to Mary, and are uncomplimentary for the most part. “A bamboo man”, and he “among your acres” is hardly what a young woman would welcome as polite conversation. “Your acres” is a sardonic comment on Mary’s ample proportions, but the noteworthy aspect of this metaphor is that Thomas links the preceding metaphor with acres. The “bamboo” man could be the father of Mary’s child, a man of no substance, perhaps a rustic, an hormonic and lusty lout, who like Russel the Fox, lay in wait (among the cabbages) for the

widow's Chaunticleer. Mary is asked whether or not she has tried to "Corset the boneyards for a crooked boy", that is "have you tried to conceal this pregnancy by lacing yourself tightly". "Boneyards", an effective kenning and "crooked boy" refers to the fetal position of the baby, or is it a sly remark about God's double-cross? The "hump of splinters" harks back to the "bamboo man" for this description of his progeny is an accurate one. The disguise is not effective, however, for the perceptive seer can see through the "shrowd". "Camel's eyes" is a reference to the mistaken belief that camels have extraordinarily good eye-sight and that camels carried the Three Wise Men to the Nativity. Not only is it another example of Thomas' elliptical style, but it also is a typical feature, by a Welsh speaker, of spoken English. Here Thomas shows his verbal dexterity. The metaphor springs from Christ's admonition regarding the dangers in store for the wealthy man:

And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.
(Matthew 19, New Testament, King James version)

He deftly changes this around and uses the embedded metaphor to make a pun. "The eye of a needle" was the small opening in each of the several doors giving entrance into a Jewish city. An open city door would allow a vehicle, or men on horseback to pass through but at night entrance could be gained only through the eye of the needle so that the guards could easily control passage into the city there being only room for one person to enter. A camel could certainly not enter. "Camel" and "needle" are cleverly associated in the metaphor and "needle" is further transposed from a noun to a verb. The "shrowd" (THO (1), 81) leads into

the poet's photographic metaphors. Kleinman suggests that the "camel's eye" is itself a photographic metaphor, a pun on "camel's eye" and that the "shrowd" (a Welsh mis-spelling of "shroud") is the cloak which photographers drape over their head and shoulders (KL, 52). Thomas by a process of fusion association gives a collage of metaphors in the concluding five lines of the poem. "Mushroom features" suggest a face devoid of colour and clearly has an association with photographic negatives; "stills" likewise underline the fact that this is a press conference. "Bread-sided field" certainly may be readily associated with the picture of Christ passing through the corn field but it may have another extension when one remembers the parable of the sower and the seed in which some seed sown by the sower is done so carelessly that most of it is wasted but some grows in out of the way places and produces food, just as some still pictures are, at first, deemed useless and are discarded on the floor of the cutting room. An association forms among these metaphors "the wall of pictures", Richard Morton (MOR, 65), suggests is reminiscent of the type of arrangement a beach photographer has outside his kiosk outside of which long strips of prints are exhibited so that customers can find some of themselves. "Arc-lamped" and the "cutting flood" show Thomas' method of juxta-positioning metaphors having a loose connection and mythological basis. The connection becomes apparent only when the reader allows his imagination free rein to discover the thematic framework of the poem.

It seems hardly a coincidence to find arc (ark) and flood in the same line in a poem having such a Biblical theme, if the reader accepts this interpretation as reasonably valid. The final line in particular suggests a Christ rejected (thrown back by

the same sinning-human race whose punishment was the Flood)? Rejection is associated with the “cutting floor”, so that the whole fabric becomes a seamless robe of sin and punishment.

The poem is an integrated metaphorical whole with a pattern carefully crafted using diction rich in associative meanings, and puns, crafty, devious and striking in their wit. The poet had an abiding interest in movies, particularly Westerns, “cow-boys” in British parlance, coupled with a passion for ice-cream. It has been said that Thomas was in the habit of travelling miles across London to an ice-cream parlour where a particular brand was sold.

Sonnet V opens in a Western saloon. Gabriel in the guise of a gun-slinger and card-sharp breezes in from the West presumably covered in dust. However, the western atmosphere disappears after the fifth line when all changes into an Old Testament setting. The Western metaphor may seem incongruous and this I think is the poet’s intention, just as a demagogue or hell-fire preacher would use surprise to arouse an audience from its stupor. Here is no emasculated do-gooder but a real live man of action prepared to do battle with the enemies of society, a modern day Beowulf. That he is a card-sharper is of no consequence; fire, it seems, needs to be fought with fire, with Jesus as his assistant, an anachronism of course, but Thomas does not recognise the parameters of time. With “trumped up the king of spots”, the metaphor indicates Christ’s duplicity in this bit of sharp practice; he double crosses just as well as His father does. Kleinman (KL, 57) suggests a number of derived interpretations for this metaphor. There is the literal meaning as in using one’s

trumps, the charges against Christ are trumped up charges; he is the angel when the last trumpet shall sound on the Day of Judgement. “A shuffled heart” suggests in card terms the agony of Mary, born to bear the agony of a motherhood savaged by the crucifixion of her son, shuffled from pain to pain, the custodian of the divine mystery. “the fake gentleman in a suit of spades” is presumably Gabriel, but he is wearing a suit such as this because the news he brings is fake. The “suit” has two meanings, a suit of clothes or a card suit of spades but why spades? Kleinman offers one explanation, viz: “The spade in playing cards, is an emblem derived from the Spanish espada (a sword) (KL, 58). Another explanation is that the word may derive from the Welsh “sbaddu”, a bawdy word which means “to castrate”, often used in a derogatory sense even when it is not given its literal meaning. After all, the person engaged in conversation is “fake”. Even though the poet was not a Welsh speaker, he would certainly have been familiar with the common or garden Welsh swear words, as is evidenced in Under Milk Wood (THO (5), 8). “Byzantine Adam” leads to a number of metaphors closely packed together and requiring some disentangling. The first derives from Abraham’s giving water to Hagar (Genesis 21:14). “Byzantium” does not seem to have any special significance in the metaphor. Tindall would have it “neither here nor there”; Kleinman is undecided between a reference to the “gaunt figures of the Aramaean motif in Byzantine iconography of the Eastern Church or else a figure representing Oriental sensuality” or “unbridled lusts” (KL, 61). Why not resist the urge to track down each bit of minutiae, take the metaphor at its face value, and respond to the poet’s characterization of Adam,

'black-tongued' (extremely thirsty) and tipsy from drinking the water of salvation (elated by his new spiritual freedom). The octave is structured by metaphors originating in the Bible and Melville's Moby Dick. What may appear, then, as a number of unconnected metaphors will be seen to be related only if the reader accepts that the metaphors are part of a theme, i.e. a sea journey, salvation, rebirth.

"A climbing sea" is paralleled in The Book of Jonah, "The deep was round about me" (Jonah 2:6) and in Moby Dick (436) "a combing sea dashed me off..." The two sources are combined in "Jonah's moby" to create the snatching of the hair to effect the rescue. The "climbing sea" suggests the almost impossible task of escaping from it and the agonised frustration of the victim has two known sources, viz; Tennyson's "The Lotus Eaters" and Melville's Moby Dick. Their use, perhaps, weakens Thomas' metaphor. Not so in my opinion and I quote Sir Isaac Newton's famous remark, "If I have seen farther than other men, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants." Embedded in this metaphor is another, the idea of the tomb's becoming the womb, the motif of re-birth. Thomas successfully extends this metaphor to the end of the sonnet, and seems to acknowledge his belief in soteriology. The whale in this metaphor becomes not a creature of prey but the narrator's saviour in whose cavernous belly he will ponder his future. There are several literary parallels to the sea journey. Much has been said about the influence of psychoanalysts on Thomas' poetry, Freud being the most obvious of them; however, it is Jung who has singled out the sea-journey as a re-birth motif:

Born from the springs, rivers, seas, at death man arrives at the Styx, in order to enter upon the "night-journey" on the sea. The wish is that

the black water of death, with its cold embrace might be the mother's womb, just as the sea devours the sun, but brings it forth again out of the maternal womb. (KL, 138)

“Cross-stroked salt Adam” is open to several interpretations, especially “cross-stroked”. Kleinman (KL, 139) in commenting upon this, asks where the subject of the verb is, but has wrongly thought it to be an active indicative verb whereas it is in fact a past participle passive, modifying “Adam”. He, Adam, is the object of Jonah Moby's snatching and is the mysterious “I” about whom Kleinman is concerned. He is “salt Adam” because he has taken this sea journey, and he could have cross-stroked by having swum using the most basic stroke, the cross stroke. There again Adam is perhaps the second Adam, Christ, who succeeds the Adam who transgressed, the first Adam of Paradise fame.

The sestet presents the reader with syntactical difficulties which must affect his understanding of the metaphors. Kleinman (68) mentions the apparent dislocation of the verb “cross-stroked”, although one could consider this a participle modifying Adam, but as a verb it makes the whole section infinitely more readable with “And sirens singing from our lady's sea-straw” being part of the description of the frozen landscape and held in parenthesis.

“The frozen angel” is one of a group of female manifestations in this sonnet (one often thinks of angels as female); Thomas has “queen”, “black medusa”, “sirens”, “lady's sea-straw”. Tindall who considers the religious sonnets to be autobiographical is alone in suggesting that Thomas has a mother fixation (TIN, 135). “Frozen” suggests immobility, a loss of power, for an inarticulate angel is a contra-

diction in terms since the function of an *αγγελος* is to bring a message. “Pin-legged”, on one level, is a reference to Christ’s crucifixion, but one can also accept this as an allusion to the emaciated and elongated state of Christ seen in popular pictures and carvings of the crucifixion. “pole-hills”, an example of a frequently used type of metaphor in Thomas’ poetry where the word has extensive meanings, refers to the hill of the crucifixion on which the crosses would stand up gaunt against the sky or it could be another of Thomas’ puns, the “poles” being geographical.

“The black medusa is one of Thomas’ bold triumphs ...” (KL, 69). There is speculation as to how Thomas’ obtained his information about jelly-fish and many erudite explanations are given. Perhaps the simplest and most valid is that the poet lived on a street leading directly down the steep slope to Swansea bay about two kilometres away. From his bedroom window, at 5 Cwmdonkin, he could scan the whole length of the bay which compares well with that of Naples. He would have been familiar with the jelly-fish that littered the sand at low-tide. Curiosity and sadism drove young boys to stand around the almost transparent mound of fish-flesh, poke and run, for they were in dread of their sting. Why the “black” medusa? Clearly Thomas identified the medusa with evil and transferred the epithet from the black spider but there is no such creature as a black medusa (KL, 71). “Black medusa” is in good company in a gallery shared by the “fake gentleman” and characters who indulge in sharp card practices.

“... the white bear quoted Virgil” has several precedents in literature. Kleinman (KL, 140) cites one woodcut of the Nativity published in 1701 on a sheet of carols: one scene is the stable in Bethlehem with several animals standing at the crib having

labels in their mouths bearing Latin inscriptions: the cock declares “Christus natus est”, the raven asks, “Quando?”; the cow replies, “Hac nocte”; the ox asks, “Ubi, ubi?”, the sheep answer, “Bethlehem”, and a heavenly voice concludes the catechism with, “Gloria in excelsis”. The white bear represents the whole of the animal kingdom which rejoices in the nativity but his appearance begs the question “Why a white bear?” It is appropriate, of course, for this is a wintry landscape but even more to the point, the polar bear’s potential for savagery has been known for centuries and Kleinman (72) quotes from Melville:

With reference to the Polar bear, it may possibly be urged by him who would fain go still deeper into this matter, that it is not the whiteness, separately regarded which heightens the intolerable hideousness of that brute; for, analysed, that heightened hideousness, it might be said only arises from the circumstance, that the irresponsible ferociousness of the creature stands invested in the fleece of celestial innocence and love; and hence, by bringing together two such opposite emotions in our minds, the Polar bear frightens us with so unnatural a contrast. But even assuming all this to be true; yet, were it not for the whiteness, you would not have that intensified horror. (MEL, 188)

And why does the bear quote Virgil? In Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue the birth of a saviour is foretold and since Vergil is misspelt with an “i” instead of an “e” it was thought to refer to the Virgin Mary in the Messianic Eclogue (TIN, 136). It would have been more appropriate, perhaps, had it been a reference to the Aeneid, the quest of Aeneas, and his compliance with the mandate from the gods to found Rome. Mary’s association with Virgil is continued in the final two lines of the poem in “sirens” and in “our lady’s sea-straw”. The sirens, now, are not the evil seductresses on the rocks but figures of regeneration offering visions of hope associated with the Nativity.

In the seventh sonnet there is a distinct difference in the kind of metaphor found in the sestet from that of the octave, the former having to do with vegetation, whereas the latter, for the most part with time and water. “A Bible-leaved of all the written woods” and the imperative “Strip to this tree”, is, I think, a deliberate stratagem by Thomas to lead the reader somewhat astray. The first part is clear, “Bible-leaved”, especially if the participle is held to mean “contained as the Bible” or “leaved as the Bible is”, either of which suggests its comprehensiveness, the Alpha and Omega of divine mystery. The piece of paper nailed derisively by the Roman crucifiers to the cross with the words, “Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum”, testified to the contempt with which Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews was held by the Roman conquerors. Thomas transfers “woods” to the “tree” and the reader tends not to think of “woods” as paper. There is also the sense in this metaphor of the divine being inextricably bound up with nature. “Strip is an omnibus epithet capable of several associative interpretations. Kleinman suggests that:

“Strip” is a bookbinding term and therefore the sense of the line is “bind these”: “bind these leaves to this tree”. In book binding “strip” is the process of affixing strips of muslin or book cloth to the edges of pads or over the fold of a cover or insert to hold the pages and cover of the book together. “Strip” is also a logger’s term for marking a particular tree for cutting: the tree out of which the cross is to be hewn. And lastly, “strip” may also mean “blind”. Thomas asks that the Bible be stripped or bound to the tree as a posted warning containing an alpha-omega history, literally the ABC or christ cross of creation and destruction. (KL, 86)

Continuing this idea of the papers’ being nailed to the cross as warning by imperial Rome to would-be political activists and false prophets, Thomas considers this a kind of show-and-tell where the warning (the paper) and instigator (Christ) are

found on the same cross. And so the “rocking alphabet” is Christ on the cross, the last word (Alpha and Omega) in the Incarnation, who rolls his head to ease his pain and is mocked by the bystanders rolling their heads in derisive imitation. “Light”, much loved by Thomas as an image, is used here as “enlightening” and refers to the two books of the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, the “language” being the Bible which brings the word of God from the perspective of two time periods.

“Doom on deniers” uses a word which I suspect is manufactured, “deniers”, “those who deny”. I cannot trace a verb ending in “y” having an agent or subject, in transposition with a “y” changed into an “i”. Here is an example of the poet’s flouting of standard rules of spelling for effect. As it stands the metaphor suggests the act of weaving. It is followed by a type of metaphor in which Thomas uses a kenning for effect, in this case the weather cock, the interpretive possibilities of which are several. With a little imagination one’s mind can wander to Peter’s denial (Matthew 26:70), and his remembrance of Jesus’ words, “Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice ...” (Matthew 26:75). The weathercock itself is a strong reminder of Peter’s personality, impulsive, responsive to whim and wind and lacking the intestinal fortitude to be true to one’s belief when the odds are not in one’s favour (Matthew 14:32) (1:88). “Ladies with the teats of music” is arresting, bold and mildly bawdy. “Teats” and “music” do not immediately have an affinity except that Thomas is suggesting a physiological distancing from the comely sirens met in an earlier sonnet but the “bagpipe image” does appear in Sonnet VI as the “bagpipe-breasted ladies”. It lacks the seductiveness of the sirens; they are now matronly,

earthy and plebeian. One must recognize the poet's verbal skill, however, in seizing these elements "teats", "music", "breasts" and "bagpipes" to create this image. He neglects to mention the nature of the music produced by such an instrument, whether it be percussive or stringed. The "scaled sea-sawer", again a kenning, and a clever pun, uses the children's playground favourite, the sea-saw, and the scales. The sirens are scaled because they are creatures of the sea, and musical because of their scales. They are sea-sawers because they have changed from being tempters in the security of "our lady's sea straw" but now are merely wanderers in the sea, entirely at the mercy of the elements. The sponge is readily recognizable as that offered to Christ on the cross. It contained hyssop or wine dregs to help Christ withstand the pain of crucifixion but symbolically it could be a representation of the second Adam whose sins are to be redeemed by Christ's death. Time is of the first importance now, and its effects are painfully obvious. Time affects the "bald pavilions" (the world of romance) and "the house of bread" (reality), man and cloud and the natural world. In the thirties the discovery of some prehistoric caves in the Gower peninsula some ten miles from Swansea raised great interest in Britain and elsewhere. Named "yr Ogofau coch Paviland" (the Paviland Red Caves) they contained on their walls both manual markings and sophisticated art which had survived more than twenty-five thousand years of climactic wear and tear. The term "red" was given because archaeologists found a skeleton painted red in one of the caves (JON, 4), as well as several hand marks. Similar caves from the same period were also discovered in Laugharne in 1823. Thomas would certainly have been

familiar with these discoveries both in his native Swansea and in Laugharne where he was to spend a great deal of his working life.

“Bald pavilions” illustrates the poet’s ability to build a striking metaphor upon an incongruity. What has “bald” to do with “pavilions”? “Pavilion”, of course, is a commonly used word for a tent or temporary dwelling place but in a Biblical sense it is a resting place for the Ark of the Covenant. The “pavilions” are “bald” because they are dome-shaped. As for “the house of bread”, Kleinman presents an interesting explanation derived from a Nativity sermon delivered by Lancelot Andrews in 1615:

1. ... the very name of Bethlehem, that is the house of bread. For He that was born there was “Bread”.
2. “Beth” is a house, “lehem” bread ...
3. Never take Him without bread, His house the house of bread inasmuch as He Himself is Bread; that in the house or out of it--wheresoever He is, there is Bethlehem. There can no bread want.
4. Bethlehem, is the house of bread is his house.
5. And in this respect it may well be said Bethlehem was never right, had never the name truly till this day this birth, this Bread was born and brought forth there. Before it was the house of bread, but of the bread that perisheth; but then of the Bread that endureth to everlasting life.
6. ... and where that Bread is, there is Bethlehem ever. (KL, 90)

To return to the metaphor of the pavilion, it now becomes the process of Incarnation in which the Word (i.e. Christ) has set up a pavilion, a kind of embassy in us. This involves a conceit worthy of Donne.

What has been attempted in the last two chapters may be characterized as a piece of unartistic surgery, opening up the Roman chicken to determine the colour of its blood, or dispassionately compiling a catalogue of words and images. How-

ever, such a process, it seems, is necessary before one can offer a rationale of the poet's technique, at least in terms of diction and imagery.

Thomas was once asked about his method of composition and answered:

I am a painstaking, conscientious, involved and devious craftsman in words, however unsuccessful the result so often appears and to whatever wrong uses I may apply my technical paraphernalia. I use everything and anything to make my poems work and move in the direction I want them to: old tricks, new tricks, puns, port manteau words, paradox, allusion paranomasia, paragram, catachresis, slang, assonanted rhymes, vowel rhymes, sprung rhythm. Every device there is in language, is there to be used, if you will (KO, 35)

Such a frank and practical statement of a poet's technique may not be unique but it is rare and says a great deal about the poet's artistic honesty.

Thomas' love of words, not only as means of communication but also as objects of aesthetic pleasure, as "things of beauty" and "a joy forever", is legendary. I attribute this love partly to his connection to the Welsh oral tradition and partly to his upbringing both of which emphasize the art of declamation. (Until recently a weekly competition was featured by the Welsh B.B.C. Ymryson y Beirdd: The Battle of the Bards, in which amateur bards competed in impromptu poetry competitions in which they were required to compose poems on the spot within strict rules of composition on topics issued by a panel of judges.)

Moynihan (quoted by Kleinman) would have added to Thomas' list:

Dialectical words with uncommon meanings, clichés, words based on hidden metaphors, common words with uncommon meanings, grammatical shifts and wrenched syntax. These were the building blocks of his poetic structures--and stumbling blocks to his poetic meaning. And yet to call them stumbling blocks is not quite accurate since

when they are finally properly interpreted they usually provide vividness and clarity. (KL, 78)

The phrase “properly interpreted” is open to question and I seriously doubt the ultimate validity of any critic’s claim to possess his own “proper” vision of Thomas’ eternal truths or those of Blake for that matter. Pilate’s cynical question remains unanswered while “seekers of truth” make futile and pretentious claims to an ability to separate the gold from the dross.

Thomas strives to refurbish the language and uses all the techniques he cites in the explanation of his methods. Several critics have cited Thomas’ expansiveness as the work of a modern Merlin who mesmerises his audience or reading public and reduces their critical faculties rendering them quite unable to look objectively at his poetry or poetic prose, Holbrook writes “Significantly, once he abandons the attempt to argue cogently against objections to Dylan Thomas’ faults, Olson lapses into a hwyl of his own ...”. However, one may object to Holbrook’s arguments on more than one score. Firstly, one may ask why ought poetry to be, “essentially metaphorical, concerned with the extension and deepening of our reality sense and with gaining effective hold on life” (HOL, 37).

Secondly, since Holbrook uses the term “hwyl” why has he not researched this phenomenon adequately in order to give an informed and unbiased opinion? “Hwyl” as practised not only by evangelical preachers (my conservative Anglican vicar would lapse into hwyl quite regularly) but by most poetic preachers as in art form. It was not a superfluity of emotion that prompted a person to burst into this musical speech, his hwyl was carefully orchestrated to produce maximum effect. An

audience familiar with it could recognise the tell-tale signs of an impending hwyl, not so much by increasingly higher emotional pitch but by constant emphasis on certain points in his sermon or on a sustained metaphor being slowly developed. It was not “speaking in tongues” but a witty, crafty, artistic ploy, in which the speaker would reach poetic heights, develop imagery complementary to his topic, move his audience not by the scholarship of his theology but by an appeal to their sense of beauty, their natural sense of rhythm, the drama of the cadences of language, so that during the hwyl even if the preacher’s words would sometimes be lost, the beauty of the experience would remain.

Thirdly, Dylan Thomas, by his public readings, demonstrated the values of this throughout his lifetime; the experience begs the question, “Which is the more powerful, emotion or intellect?”. I am not implying that the poet is simply concerned with sound, but rather that Thomas bent and fashioned the written word to achieve his desired effects much like a blacksmith making a piece of wrought iron or (which is a better analogy) a harp player tuning his instrument.

Holbrook would consider the opening of Under Milk Wood as an example of “hwylish” writing, the effect of which, in his view, is to lower the tone of twentieth-century poetry. Having had some years of acting in the play in Laugharne, I can easily attest to the emotional effect it always had on an audience. To begin at the beginning:

It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobble-streets silent and the hunched, courtiers'-and-rabbits' wood limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishing-boat bobbing sea. The houses are blind as moles (though moles

see fine to-night in the shouting, velvet dingles) or blind as Captain Cat there in the muffled middle by the pump and the town clock, the shops in mourning, the Welfare Hall in widows' weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound town are sleeping now. (THO (5), 1)

Such a heightening of emotion speaks of a careful, methodical poet writing purposefully with method in his madness.

The language is dense and compact and this frequently causes obscurity. Moynihan argues "late in his career Thomas habitually dismissed his opacity as a youthful aberration" (MOY, 62). If he had supplied the reader with notes and explanations as Eliot did one wonders how such an action would have affected the level of acceptance by his readers. Is the process not akin to royalty; once the mystery is removed and stripped of its mystique, what is left is so much like us, a "bare forked animal", a common or garden "Lear". And so, when the uncommon word strikes us is it a source of annoyance or an invitation to explore and ponder?

In Sonnet VIII of the "Altarwise" series the poet speaks of the "gallow grave", gallow being resistant to all my research except for a reference to "gallow glasses" in Shakespeare's Macbeth (Act 1, Sc. 2, 13). I suspect that the need for alliteration suggested this to Thomas but "gallow" is a multi-allusive epithet that alliterates with grave. It suggests deviousness, treachery, fraud, bad-faith and all kinds of nefarious things. If the question were asked why Thomas has used a word capable of several meanings, in fact, inviting the reader to think in several different ways, one could answer, so be it, that is his way. What is the "proper interpretation" the reader asks? Surely the question is anathema to the serious artist. Once the arrow is shot it is no

longer in the control of the archer but in the possession of the finder to do with it as he pleases, with one proviso, that he exercise his “imaginative logic”.

This brings us to another aspect of Thomas’ style, the frequent lack of connectives. One can offer a simplistic answer in view of the great variety of interpretations offered by critics of his poetry. A reader needs to form an interpretative framework that is satisfactory to him, however flawed it may appear to others, and then consider each word, phrase, or metaphor as it relates to the framework. Again, there will not always be a perfect fit and there will be times when logic or imagination will need adjusting. The rewards of such an exercise are many.

In analyses of the poet’s diction and imagery what is frequently neglected is the poet’s use of slang but for which I prefer the term “pub humour”. It includes irreverent punning, iconoclasm, bawdiness and thinly masked sexual talk. It constitutes a stylistic pattern reflecting the endemic inability of the Welshman in Thomas to suppress his laughter at life. Such lines as “Old cock from nowhere and the heaven’s egg, / With bones unbuttoned to the half-way winds, / Hatched from the windy salvage on one leg,” spring to mind.

To conclude these observations on Thomas handling of metaphors, the quality of his imagination must be discussed. If assurance were needed that the tangential flights of imagination witnessed both in his poetry and prose are natural and necessary to the expression of his private vision one need only examine his letters:

... that faculty which, as we have seen in a variety of ways already, combined Blake and “boily boy” idealism and agnosticism, surrealism and pastoralism. What is first necessary in considering Thomas’ obscurity is an awareness that that he was always capable of making

untraceable imaginative leaps.... Although all of these remarks are true they are of little help when the imagination of Thomas takes flight. At that moment, at the moment of the poem, the commonplace disappears in a series of statements and images that seem to bear no relation to the commonplaces the poem is dealing with. (MOY, 66)

Thomas was aware of the difficulties that unbridled flights of the imagination were likely to cause, but to impose upon an artist any such arbitrary restrictions in the practice of his craft (telling Picasso, for example, not to feature dismembered women in his paintings) is to be crudely philistine. In his letter to Desmond Hawkins, Thomas says:

I wanted to get the look of this stanza right: a saint about to fall, to be born, heaven shifting visionarily under him as he stands poised: interpolation, linked to the word visionarily, which circled: changingly, the landscape moving to no laws, but heaven's, that is: hills moving, streets flowing etc., the stained flats, the low lying lands, that is, and the apartment houses all discoloured by the grief of his going (for heaven must fall with every falling saint): on the last wave of a flowing street before the cities flow to the edge of heaven where he stands about to fall, praising his making and unmaking and the dissolution of his father's house etc. (This, as the poem goes on to talk about, is his father, is his father-on-the-earth's veins, his mother's womb, and the peaceful place before birth): (FUS, 398)

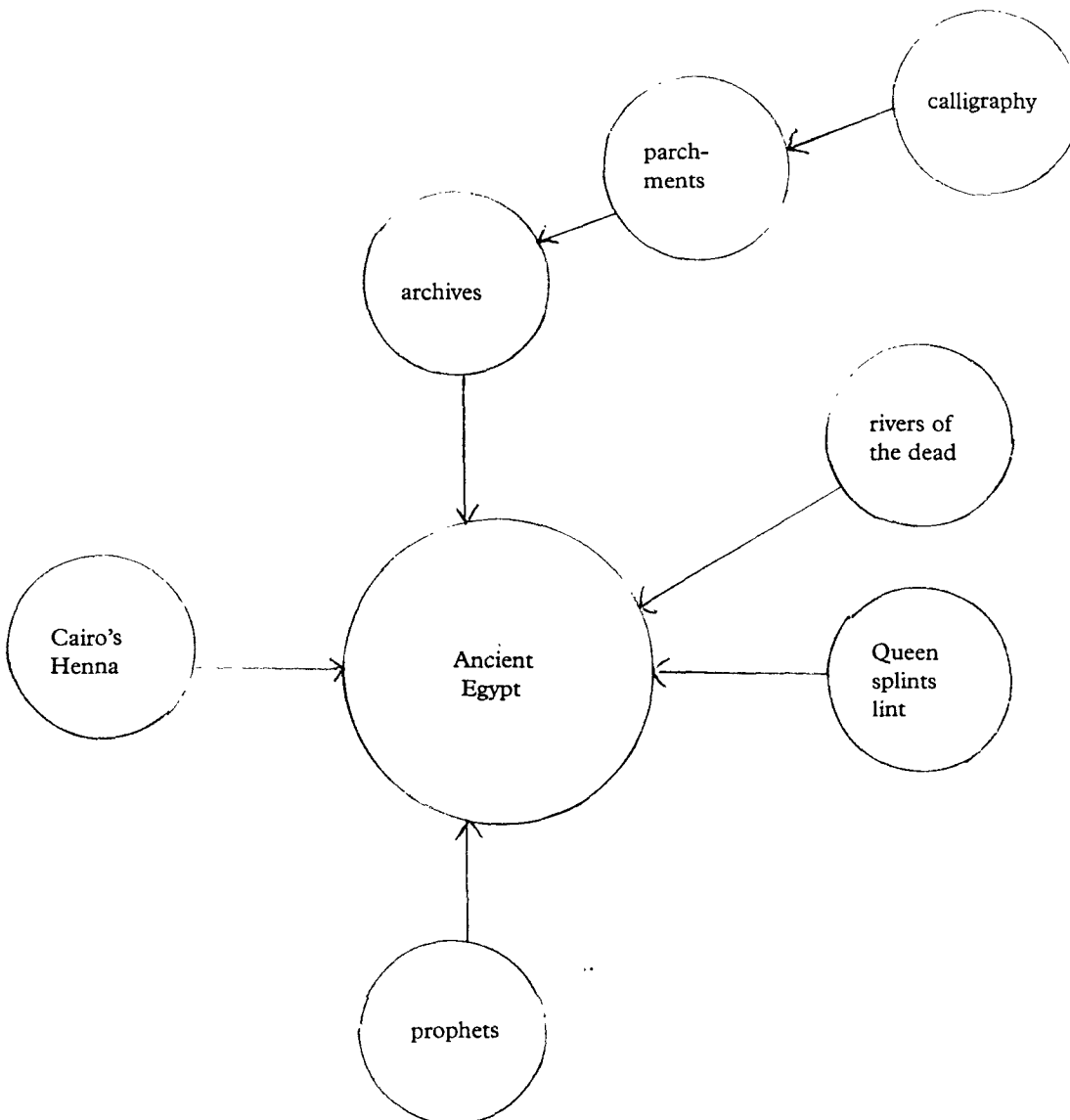
I suggest that Thomas' imaginative writing is not an artifice but an essential and endemic feature of his eschatological vision.

IMAGE

“from the oracular archives and the parchments ... /”

(Altarwise sonnets #8)

- a cluster of mental pictures or epithets forming a loosely structured larger picture ...
- an inductive process resulting in the formation of a collage ...
- it differs from a symbol in that it is inductive whereas the symbol is deductive

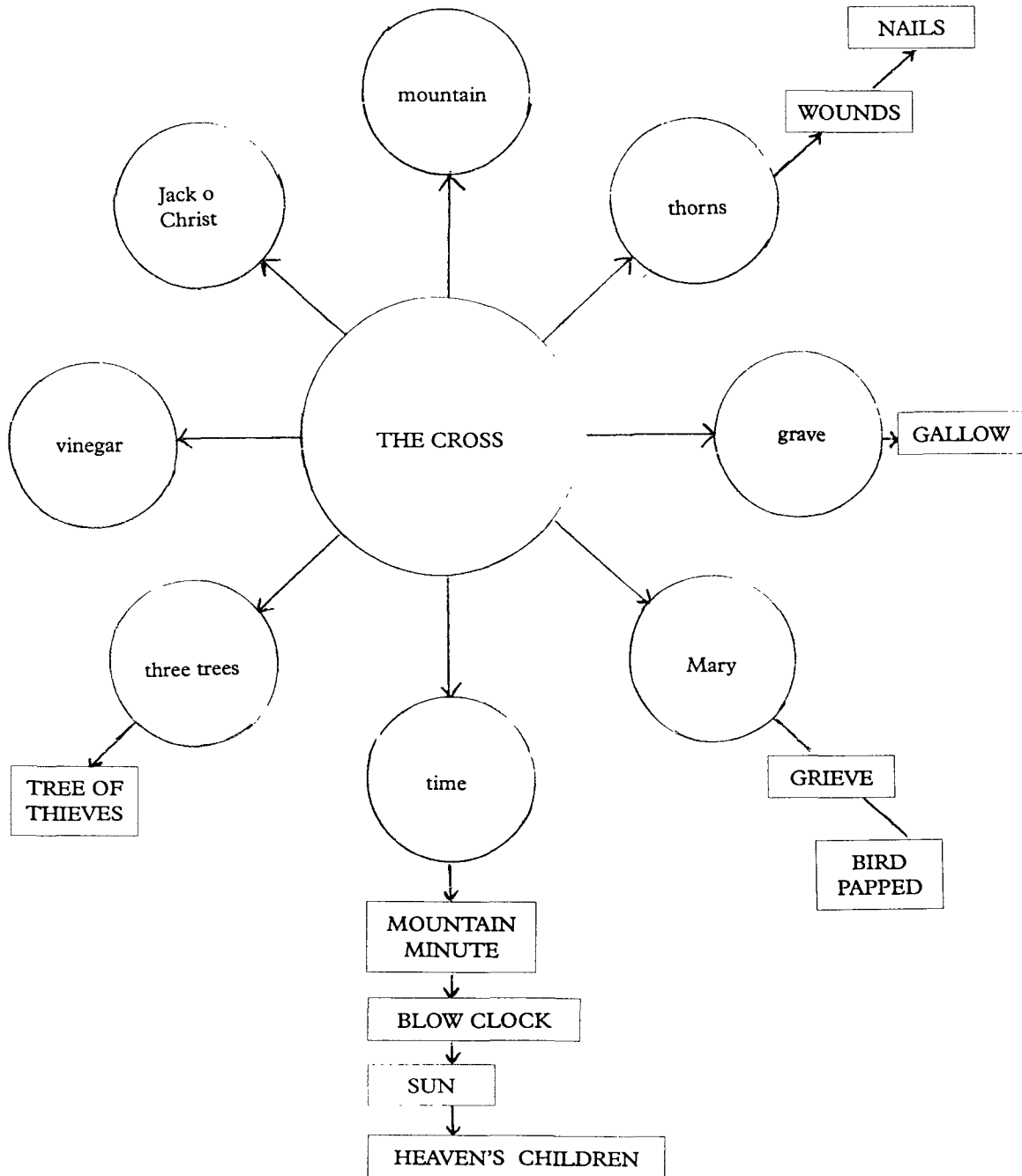


SYMBOL

PRIMARY = O

SECONDARY =

"This was the crucifixion on the mountain."



The symbol is central and usually has a constant meaning. However, the symbol sometimes has different meanings according to the culture, preferences, values and experiences of the reader. The symbol radiates allusions in a deductive fashion, especially with poets such as Thomas, and is a catalyst. "Arbeit macht frei" would have a different meaning for an extermination camp prisoner than for a Nazi guard.

Chapter Three

SYMBOL

The terms “symbol”, “image”, and “metaphor” are often used indiscriminately causing a great deal of confusion in literary criticism. A brief consideration will perhaps go some way to clarify the function of each and establish the difference among them. I quote the definition of “image” from M.A. Abrams Glossary of Literary Terms. The diagram (29) shows the making of an image as an inductive process in which various aspects of the image contribute to the central figure.

Image is one of the most common terms in modern criticism, and one of the most ambiguous. Its applications range all the way from “mental pictures” to the total meaning presented by a poem; C. Day Lewis, for example, has said that “a poem is an image composed from a multiplicity of images”. Two particular senses of the word, however are of frequent occurrence:

1. The word “imagery” (i.e. images taken collectively) is used to signify descriptive passages in poetry, especially if the descriptions are vivid and particularized, as in Coleridge’s:

“The rock shone bright, the kirk no less
That stands above the rock:
The moonlight steeped in silentness
The steady weathercock”

The term “image” should not be taken to imply a visual reproduction of the scene described; some readers of the passage have visual images, some do not. Also, the descriptions may be of any sensations, not only visual ones.

2. Still more commonly, “imagery” is now used to signify figurative language, especially metaphors and similes.... Caroline Spurgeon, in Shakespeare’s Imagery and What it Tells Us pointed out the presence in Shakespeare’s plays of “image clusters” or recurrent groups of metaphors; ... she also presented evidence that a number ... of the plays ... have characteristic image motifs ... one instance is the frequency of the images of sickness (Abrams, 42)

In a metaphor a word which in ordinary usage signifies one kind of thing, quality, or action is applied to another without express indication of a relation between them.

It is my premise that Dylan Thomas uses symbolism in his poetry, especially in his early work, simply because he needs it, to go beyond the limitations imposed upon the seer, the man of vision, the mystic, by the strictures of ordinary language. It is interesting to note the symbolism used in oriental or mid-Eastern mystic language. The language is figurative, cryptic and yet at times over floral, symbolic and unusual, just as the words in a specialised area such as law or medicine may seem to a layman.

Magnify Thou, O Lord my God, Him Who is the Primal Point, the Divine Mystery, the Universal Essence, the Dayspring of Divinity, and the Manifestation of Thy Lordship, through Whom all the knowledge of the past and all the knowledge of the future were made plain, through Whom the pearls of Thy hidden wisdom were uncovered and the mystery of thy treasured name disclosed, Whom Thou hast appointed as the Announcer of the One through Whose name the letter B and the letter E have been joined and united, through whom Thy majesty, Thy sovereignty and Thy might were made known (BAI, 258).

Korg makes the following point with respect to metaphor and symbolism:

Thus, even apocalyptic metaphor and mystical symbolism do not enable the mystic to escape the limitations of language or to pierce the wall of the inexpressible. They simply enable him to refer to the transcendental by referring in the first place, to a version of actual experience imaginatively reshaped for the purpose. In such imagery, the natural world is penetrated with mystic reality, so that its ordinary values, appearances and relationships are disrupted. What is called mysticism in literature has as its subject a mixed cosmos, a point of intersection between natural and supernatural meanings. In this context language cannot maintain its conventional meanings; its terms are rendered ambiguous, twisted and perverted, acquiring new possibilities of meaning.... Thomas' idiom employs the derangement of language to express perceptions of the sort which Rimbaud described as

accessible to a derangement of the senses. Religious writers working within established traditions may successfully exploit conventional symbols and terms. But the secular mystic must use language in ways that forestall a banal intelligibility and force the mind toward new ranges of meaning. For Thomas, as for Blake and Yeats, this entailed the development of a private symbology, a system of metaphor capable of expressing a visionary reality. (KO, 28)

If Thomas needs an apology for his symbolic language Korg has provided one that is clear and adequate.

To do justice to Thomas' use of symbolism, one would need far more research than this dissertation allows. My consideration will necessarily be curtailed, and include discussion of only the following symbols: light and darkness, and time.

One of Thomas' definitions of his poetic role is the bringing of poetry from darkness into light (MOY, 214), "My poetry is", he replies to an enquiry in 1934, "or should be, useful to me for one reason: it is the record of my individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light ..." (EM, 6). Light may well be the most frequent symbol used in Thomas' canon. There is no consistency in its uses as may be expected since this is also true of his diction and the identities of his personae.

“Light” and “darkness”, in ordinary speech, are symbols. Thomas takes this further and reconciles these two opposites in “Do not go gentle into that good night” (THO (1), 116) a finely crafted villanelle. Just as Thomas regards time as an unified world in human existence, so are these elements, light and dark, not two irreconcilables, but merely parts of a whole. The poet must have heard, ad nauseam, in his youth the Welsh folk tune “Ar hyd y nôs” (All through the night) with the

words, "Gôlau arall yw tywyllwch" (the dark is but another light). However, it seems to me that Thomas has used here another sense, that of sound as a corollary to his main concern that death will mean silence for his father sitting on "the sad height". He asks his father either to bless or curse, for either will require speech to pierce the silence. And yet Thomas' objection to the "night" is not without amelioration for it is, after all, a "good night" (and all humans need a "good" night). By deft extension, he succeeds in using the symbol to good advantage.]

In "In the beginning" (THO (5), 22-23) light is used by the poet in three different ways. The poem vividly describes creation. In the first stanza, light, the first light of creation, is described as sweeping across "the empty face". It is benign and the beginning of life on earth. In the third stanza the world is alive, its vegetation pulsating with vigorous growth. And from God's volition, comes the Word, the Logos, the form of light gives shape, form and order to the world. Light, in the final stanza, is an explosive force that helps to bring to the whole universe that civilising and pristine love which preceded the industrial age. Such has always been the Utopian view.

While the word "light" remains unaltered, the associated meanings can move out in all directions, such is the function of the symbol, to act as a verbal catalyst. One notes that light is spoken of in terms of a "smile", an incendiary device, something associated with winds.]

In "Light breaks where no sun shines" (THO (5), 24-25) light is synonymous with intelligence, the psyche. However, one names that element of the human being which is, and yet is not, part of it. The poem's title suggests that this light is not

physical, and can illuminate without need of a physical element. It is antithetical to darkness, it can act “where no sun shines”. This light, then, is independent of the flesh and is not “fenced, nor staked”. It is a symbol of man’s indomitable spirit, and the poem a panegyric to human intelligence.

Thomas admits in an interview (TIN, 12) that Yeats was one of his most important mentors in the development of his craft. It is not surprising then that unity of time is so often featured in his poetry since the idea is so important to Yeats, for example in, “Sailing to Byzantium” (1927). Unity of both time and matter is a major concern to Thomas.

Taking the idea of a symbol as a verbal catalyst (i.e. while it remains the same it influences all around it), one may cite a number of examples from his poems. In each example the poet’s premise is that when unity of time is acknowledged time is abolished, a basic concept in transformational grammar in which the present tense is the only one of import.

In this connection an interesting idea is presented by Korg:

As the mystic, in his attempt to grasp absolute reality, includes more and more of the cosmic scene in his vision, he perceives that life and death recur in a more or less regular way; and they create, when the universe is seen as a whole, an impression of stability rather than change. Kenneth Burke’s principle that the widening of the “circumference” of a context changes what is within it, operates here, for, sub specie aeternatis, the alterations of life and death, cease to oppose each other and become stages in a single process. (KO, 31)

Korg refers to some of Philip Wheelwright’s statements: “mythic time is felt to be cyclical”, “time spirals rather than marches”, “Past present and future coalesce”

(KO, 31). These, then, help us understand Thomas' beliefs in the unity of time, and my comments are based on Korg's discussion (KO, 33).

"Before I knocked" (THO (1), 8) is based on the symbol of mythic time. The persona talks of all the events (presumably those in the life of Christ) as happening in the present although the past tense is used. I suggest this because the biography of Christ is presented as a flat, single page document rather than a three dimensional one, so that one may oversee it at a glance. The structure of the poem, in six-line stanzas except for the final one, moves in a repetitive cyclical movement. A feature that contributes to this movement is the rhyme scheme, for lines one, three and five in each stanza end in "er", "ur", or "or". The remarkable aspect of this poem is that the symbol is not mentioned by name but we are reminded of it continually which suggests that a symbol may sometimes be functional without its being stated. What binds Thomas' poem together is its timelessness, that the persona had prescience of all the events in his life in that all are part of the present.

We need to put this discussion into focus. Olson warns us of the dangers of presumption in any consideration of symbols, that it is foolish to assume that symbols have an universal validity, and "it is worse folly to declare what a work of art must be, before you have observed what it is; if universal symbolic systems had unconditional validity there would be no problem in interpreting Thomas" (OL, 6). It is important, therefore, to recognise that there are different classes of symbols viz. (1) natural (2) conventional (3) private. Thomas, for the most part, uses private symbols although he may begin with conventional or natural ones which develop

into private symbolism as in “Incarnate devil” in which Satan, beginning as an incarnate devil, ends in “A serpent fiddled in the shaping time” (THO (1), 40).

Thomas seeks to present in his poems esoteric truths that elude the scope of conventional language and often strain the limits of mystic symbolism. This inevitably causes confusion and obscurity but the poet would be disloyal to his calling were he to abandon the revelation of his private vision in order to facilitate the loose grasping of an aspect of mystic truth by a reader unwilling to think imaginatively.

The reader must constantly bear in mind that the poet sees as part of his poetic function, the refurbishing of the language by making words and symbols yield up their full meaning by whatever means are at his disposal. The responsibility, therefore, falls on the shoulders of the reader, as much as possible, to be in tune with the poet, to think imagistically and to let the poet’s symbols take him where they will.

Chapter Four

INFLUENCES ON DYLAN THOMAS' LANGUAGE

It takes a sensitive person to become aware of the influences on his life and most of us acknowledge particular debts. Sir Isaac Newton gave this response, "If I have seen farther than other men it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants" (Bartlett, Familiar Quotations, published by Little & Brown). This chapter will deal with the "other men" in the development of Thomas' language, and "men" I take to mean, not only human beings, but the whole world of rivers, mountains and seas, of family and friends (and critics), of all that makes a man feel "the green fuse" throbbing alive in his being.

Thomas, as he proudly acknowledges, was a Welshman, having said that, he may smile at the jury, wink at the judge, look around with a sheepish smile, confidentially slide back in the prisoner's box and put his feet on the ledge. Much has been written and spoken about Thomas' being a "token Welshman", always in a derogatory fashion. This has been addressed earlier in this study. However, little has been said about the influence of his father in Thomas' formative years, nor has much weight been given to the private education he received at home. The poet speaks of his father's library, of the kind of literature available to him at a time when the depression denied most young people the opportunity to read widely:

Our books we divided into two sections, Dad's and mine. Dad has a room full of the accepted stuff from Chaucer to Henry James, all the encyclopaedias and books of reference, all Saintsbury, and innumerable books on the theory of literature. His library contains nearly everything that a respectable highbrow library should contain. My books on the other hand are nearly all poetry and mostly modern at

that. I have the collected poems of Manley Hopkins, Stephen Crane, Yeats, de la Mare, Osbert Sitwell, Wilfred Owen, W.H. Auden, and T.S. Eliot, volumes of poetry by Aldous Huxley, Sacheverell, and Edith Sitwell, Edna St Vincent Millay, D.H. Lawrence, Humbert Woolf, Sassoon and Harold Monro: most of the ghastly Best Poems of the Year; two of the Georgian Anthologies, one of the Imagist anthologies, "Whips and Scorpions" (modern satiric verse), the London Mercury Anthology, the Nineties Anthology (what Dowsonery), most of Lawrence, most of Joyce, with the exception of Ulysses. All Gilbert Murray's Greeks Translations, some Shaw, a little Virginia Woolf, and some of E.M. Forster. This is inadequate really, but added to Dad's it makes a really comprehensive selection of literature. (ACK, 4)

In the hungry thirties Thomas was singularly blessed to have a Grammar School teacher as father for it provided him with a standard of living and social status envied by a large section of British society. The Grammar School of that period was extremely exclusive and entrance demanded that a student either passed a rigorous examination at the age of ten and a half years old or else have his parents pay fees to Grammar School. Out of a class of thirty elementary school children about three obtained admission. During the first week of the first term the successful students wrote another examination, an internal one which further segregated them into A, B, C classes with the A class having the best teachers, the B and C having what remained of the faculty. I have been unable to discover the method whereby Thomas entered Swansea Grammar School but since his father was teacher at the school one can draw one's own conclusions. Discipline was quite humane at most Grammar schools and in my experience nobody cared whether or not you attended classes. In the second year, the top three students were promoted to the third year class to complete their secondary school education in four years at the age of fifteen or so. However, a diploma required success in the final examination of four or five

years' work after which the student proceeded to a higher course involving a two year stint in three subjects as pre-university training. In Thomas' case he was apparently competent only in English literature, probably because that was the only area of interest to him. However, the school magazine provided him with a medium of expression which he used to good advantage. At the age of fifteen he wrote an erudite essay on modern authors which augured well for his future:

The most important element that characterises our poetic modernity is freedom-essential and unlimited--freedom of form, of structure, of imagery and idea. It had its roots in the obscurity of Gerard Manley Hopkins' lyrics, where, though more often than not common metres were recognised, the language was violated and estranged by the effort of compressing the already unfamiliar (FITZ, 56)

He concludes the essay with a prophetic comment:

The poetry that will be ultimately built upon these foundations seems, as far as can be conjectured at present, to offer promise of a high and novel achievement. (FITZ, 56)

The year was 1929 and Thomas was 15. The school may not have demanded much in the way of discipline from its students but as far as the poet was concerned its freedom enabled him to begin practising his craft in an environment that was friendly and secure. In this environment, he met another of his formative influences, Daniel Jones with whom he was to spend many hours of productive fun and serious contemplation. Thomas wrote:

We stayed with Dan Jones in Harrow for a few days. He reads all the time, and is cleverer than ever but his mind is a mess for he doesn't know any direction. He isn't sure either of music or writing, though he does both competently and often brilliantly. I shouldn't be surprised to see him turn into a first rate literary critic, producing a standard study or a comparison of European literatures. He has all that Jamison had with more wit, more sensibility, and, within his time limits, a far comprehensive erudition. (FITZ, 59)

In their Grammar School days Dan Jones and Dylan wrote poetry together, one writing one line, the other the next, for example:

They had come from the place high on the coral hills
Where the light from the white sea fills the soil with ascending grace
And the sound of their power makes motion as steep as the sky
And the fruits of the great ground lie like leaves from a vertical flower.
(MOY, 21)

Vernon Watkins, whom Dylan met near the end of his Swansea days, before he moved to London, had a friendship with Dylan until his death. Watkins had a comprehensive knowledge of literature, English, French, German and Italian and was a student at Cambridge (until he had a run-in with Dr. Fisher, later Archbishop of Canterbury) (FER, 128). Watkins, although different from Thomas in so many ways, provided Dylan with the academic background that enriched what he had received from his father.

So much, then, for people who helped make Thomas' medium what it was. Much has been said about Thomas' inability to speak Welsh and the implication is that his "Welshness" was false, another item in his box of tricks to present a bohemian image, the wild bard, the "two-gunned Gabriel" "from the windy West". The truth is somewhat different; although, from time to time, he made scathing comments about Wales and expressed a desire to emulate Yeats and Joyce in their flight from their native land, Thomas did most of his productive work in Wales and returned time and again to Cymru.

How a writer's culture affects his work, even if it is second generational, is, I think, directly relevant in Thomas' case. I think, also, that a critic like Holbrook, a

monoglot from another culture would find it extremely difficult to understand the nuances of this trans-cultural situation. Also, I acknowledge the fact as a first language Welshman, objectivity could cloud the situation for me, because of the soul-like nature of my attachment to the language, the singing, the poetry and the matrix of memories that I barely understand but which, I know, affects the way I think, write and feel.

John Wain, according to Walford Davies argues this point cogently:

I realize, of course that to utter the word "Welsh" in connection with Dylan is to throw a very hungry cat in among a collection of fat and frightened pigeons. And I readily concede that as much nonsense has been uttered on this aspect of Thomas' work as on all its other aspects. In the early days of his fame, say from 1934 to 1945, the Welsh qualities of his work appear to have been overlooked entirely, at any rate, within the London cénacle to which he turned for companionship and confirmation. Then came a period in which it was, briefly, a vogue to detect traces of traditional Welsh poetic craft in his work. Since this cynghanedd spotting penetrated as far as the editorial page of *Poetry* (London), we can assume it was, by that time, the accepted thing within a five-mile radius of the Fitzroy Tavern. The backlash followed immediately and angrily: critics who wanted to deny Thomas this kind of licence for verbal intricacies were quick to point out that he knew no Welsh and had no more inherited a Welsh cultural style than say Tambimuttu had.... My own position can be stated shortly.... In fact, Thomas wrote in the way he did because he was a Welshman. He grew up in an Anglicised part of Wales and was effectively cut off from Welsh literature and history; but it is equally true that Yeats grew up largely in Hammersmith, knew no Irish, and yet never wrote English poetry like an Englishman or an American. Both poets are Celtic in their basic attitudes to poetry. That is they have no dealings with English understatement or English casualness; they love form; they love to sing; they love striking imagery; they respond ecstatically to natural sights and sounds, to birds, rocks and the sea, to season and renewal (DAVI, 7)

Fitzgibbon elaborates on how long people who have lost their language are able to retain their distinctive cultural patterns:

Perhaps the most drastic examples, and the ones most easy to observe are to be found in the United States since 1850. Imaginative cultural distinctions do here appear to have a capacity to survive for one, two exceptionally even for three generations, particularly in highly cultured families, though the roots of that culture may have been snapped almost with immigration or sometimes even before. (FITZ, 3)

My view is that despite Thomas' inability to speak Welsh, he qualifies as a Welsh bard, by the quality of his poetry. However, for the purpose of this analysis, one needs to find hard evidence of Welshness in his poetic style.

Welsh tends to be spoken at a fast rate, much like Italian or Spanish. In the case of Welsh the term "sing-song" provides an apt description. A kinder description would perhaps be "cumulative", a characteristic of much of Thomas' poetry in ordinary speech. Words glide into one another, elision is standard, and the result is frequently speech that is incomprehensible to all but fluent Welsh-speakers. In Under Milk Wood there are several examples of declamatory pieces in which the words tumble down in gushes:

It is night in the chill, squat chapel, hymning in bonnet and brooch
and bombazine black, butterfly choker, and bootlace bow, coughing
like nanny-goats, sucking mintoes, forty winking halleluyah; nigttin
the four-ale, quiet as a domino; in Ocky Milkman's lofts like a mouse
with gloves; in Dai Bread's bakery flying like black flour. (THO (5),
2)

English second names tend, for the most part, to illustrate trade names like Cobbler, Farmer, Carrier, Joiner, but in Wales surnames took the father's first name transposed by adding an "s" for example John became Jones, David became Davies, so that they were limited in number, and the Welsh were compelled to further add distinguishing words to identify each other. Evans became Evans the Milk, and Davies became Davies the Butcher.

Thomas' compactness both in poetry and prose, also, has its roots in Welsh. The musical effect of the Welsh language often attested to by non Welsh speakers, is achieved by a natural in-built linguistic economy seen particularly in the verb. Like Latin, Welsh is inflected, and the subject is included in the verb. For example, "He is walking" is "Cerdda", "I am walking" is "Cerddaf", "He was raising" is "Codasa". Another feature which increases Welsh's musical component is the initial mutation. In this, Welsh, to my knowledge, is unique among European languages. It is not elision but mutation. With the possessive "fy" which is Welsh for "my" and "pechadur" (sinner), "my sinner" becomes not "fy pechadur" but "fy mhechadur". The "p" becomes "m" while an "h" is added. "Your sin", "dy (your)" is not "dy pechadur" but "dy bechadur". This involves internal rhyming, and while it is exasperating for a person trying to master the language, it produces a beautifully smooth and musical effect. Thomas, in attending his uncles' churches, would have been exposed to sonorous sermons, and while not understanding them fully would have experienced them enough to be conscious of the internal rhyming taking place, to write later:

Too proud to die, broken and blind he died
 The darkest way, and did not turn away,
 A cold kind man brave in his narrow pride. ("Elegy", THO (1), 200)

Fitzgibbon makes the claim that the Celt thinks differently from his Anglo-Saxon counterpart (FITZ, 5). To test the validity of Fitzgibbon's observation, I shall compare an ode in terms of figurative language, written by a friend of mine, a James Jones, a fellow actor and First Voice in the first production of Under Milk Wood at Laugharne, with a translation (J.J.):

<u>Brasgamodd yn ifanc i erw</u> <u>hênaint</u>	He strode so young to old age's acre
<u>cyn i geiliog rhedyn ddisgyn ar</u> <u>ei war</u>	before the grasshopper settled on his shoulder
<u>heb weld galarwyr yn loetran yn</u> <u>yr heol</u>	without seeing the mourners loitering in the road
<u>na'r chwantau'n pallu dan ei</u> <u>groen</u>	nor the lusts failing under his skin
<u>plentyn prin yn neidio nentydd</u> <u>y boreuau</u>	scarcely a child jumping over the brooks of the morning
<u>nes i angau gydio yn ei law</u>	until Death took his hand
<u>fel tad busneslyd a'i lusgo adref</u>	like a busybody father and dragged him home.

What Fitzgibbon had in mind, I believe, is the kind of imagery that Jones immediately thought of to express Thomas' young age, pastoral, allusive, precise yet magical, retentive and expressive of Thomas' perennial childhood.

Discussion of cynghanedd (harmony of sound) needs to be amplified not only because it is often mentioned by critics when discussing Thomas' use of language but because it provides an insight into his ancestral background, particularly details of the bards' training. These details are relevant to the study in view of Thomas' dedication to his craft, the painstaking care he took with his composition, and his complete exclusion of anything that would have endangered his becoming a first rate bard in the tradition of the twelfth-century Welsh poets.

A brief historical sketch is needed followed by a consideration of two poems illustrating cynghanedd. The verse form which features cynghanedd originates far earlier than the sixth-century (AL, 22). There was, in the mediaeval period, a school

for bards, the period of training lasting nine years followed by an examination. The school of bards was extremely protective of its professional status and jealously maintained the secrecy of its craft (AL, 23):

Rhaid cofio mae dysgeidiaeth lafar ac addysg gyfrinachol oedd addysg y beirdd. Dyna un ffordd o warchod y grefft rhag ymyrrwyr o'r tu allan, rhag i ymhonwyr a beirdd eilrhadd ddarganfod o'r dirgelion.... Gwyddom ychydig am addysg y beirdd ... gwyddom am ddarnau ryddaith yn cynnwys rhestri hirfaith o eiriau cyfansawdd ac o ansawdd eiriau a diben yr areithiau hyn oedd cael nofisiaid i ymglywed â sŵn geiriau ac i gasglu geirfa yr un pryd. (AL, 22)

Translated:

It needs to be noted that the bards' education was oral and that their instruction was a secret. That was one way of maintaining the mystery of their craft from second-rate poets who wished to learn the secrets from outside the circle. We know a little about the secrets of the bards. We know about their lectures in prose ... the pieces of rhetoric comprising long lists of synonymns and adjectives and the purpose of these lists was to have the novices hear the sounds of these words together and to enlarge their vocabulary at the same time.

We need to note firstly that the craft of composing poetry was a serious business having degrees of competence and a system of apprenticeship. Secondly, it was cabalistic, a kind of masonic system for poets. The emphasis in training was on the acquisition of a sensitive ear to the sounds of words. One may also note how the description of the bardic school and the attitude of students to their craft reminds us of Thomas' working in his wooden bicycle shed on the cliff in Laugharne (FITZ, 45).

A close look at a verse from the englyn, which includes cynghanedd will be helpful at this point. It is a four line epigram.

The englyn has its origins in Vergil's poetry and some maintain an earlier date is

probable. Sir John Rees (AL, 17) proved this by comparing Latin inscriptions with that of the englyn in early Welsh poetry. For example, “Tityre tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi” could be arranged thus: “Tityre tu patulae--recubans / sub tegmine fagi” to produce an englyn. The englyn is characterized by a severe economy of words. It demands a sharp wit, a keen sensitivity to word sound, verbal dexterity in word creation, all prerequisites for cynghanedd.

I

<u>Duw'r mor wrth grwydro marian - a</u>	The sea while cruising the beach
<u>rannodd</u>	has split
<u>Odre'i wenwig sidan</u>	The hem of her silk, white dress
<u>I dorri'n edau arian</u>	And broken the silver thread
<u>wely oer creigiau'r lan</u>	On the cold bed of the shore's rocks

One notes immediately the continuing rhyme at the end of the line except the first line where the last word is not properly included but stands apart as a kind of echo. The rhyme is embedded in the last word, rannodd; the part that rhymes with sidan, arian, and lan is ran. So we have ran, sidan, arian, lan. Internally we have odre oer edau and creigiau'r. The repetition of the consonant “r” sets up an internal rhyme as in line 1, 13, dorri'r, and arian, line 4 ar, oer, creigiau'r.

2

<u>I esgor ar ragor waith--rhaid uno'r</u>	To begin a new project we must join
<u>Deunydd yn gyfanwaith</u>	the thread completely
<u>Da ddiben gorffen y gwaith</u>	What is the point in finishing the job
<u>Heb ei orffen yn berffaith</u>	Without finishing it perfectly

The “or” syllable is evident, Esgor, ragor, gorffen, uno'r, orffen and gorffen, the first three in the first line. The second rhyme is with aith, waith, gyfanwaith gwaith,

berffaith. The illusion is that the first line ends not with the “Th” sound; in fact the line does end with waith and rhymes with gyfanwaith not with uno’r, and is internal rhyming.

Thomas has demonstrated in “The Conversation of Prayer” that he is perfectly at home in the world of internal rhyme and despite his comment about cynghanedd not being suitable for English verse his poem shows the contrary.

It is prudent at this point to amplify the earlier discussion of cynghanedd in order to clear misconceptions that may have accrued since it was first discovered by literary critics.

Cynghanedd is a verse form having complex internal rhyming schemes, of which there are fourteen. However, the type that is commonly referred to by most critics is internal rhyme. It has its roots in early sixth century poetry, the era of the Saxon conquest of Britain, when the Celtic domination of Britain began to falter when Scotland and the North of England were separated from Celtic Wales and Cornwall. Bards used words that were anachronisms even in their time. This is relevant to the present discussion, since Thomas also uses unusual words. The bards used cynghanedd to demonstrate their skill at word play and in order to be esoteric. The verse form generally used was the awdl or ode which spoke of bravery on the field of battle. In a tribal gathering several odes would be incorporated to form one long poetic unit and cynghanedd was used in each. In the awdl every line had the same rhyme and since the number of words that could be rhymed was limited it never exceeded forty lines in length. This art form continued to be continually honed until 1350. From that date until the present day its form has not changed and is still

widely used in Wales. The following is from an awdl by Cynddelw, a famous bard in his day (1247):

Parawd o'i adaf cyn no'i adaw,
Pareu post enwair pair pedryiaw
Ped ryliw ei lafn i ladd rhagddaw
Pedrylef cwynfan cyrdd amdanaw
Ped ry dawg defniawg dyfnais ei gwynaw

(Most of these words are obsolete and I regret that I am unable to provide a coherent translation; enwair = noun; pedryliw = four hands; llafn = sword; rhagddo = proceed; cwynfan = a place of sorrow; cyrdd = he beats the drum.)

I shall, however, comment on the poet's craft.

Every line begins and ends with either, “pe” or “pa”, and “aw” to end. In the body of each line there are two kinds of poetic constructions, a consonantal response and the awdl in which all lines rhyme. In the first line, adaf and adaw correspond. In the second line four of the words begin with “p” and two words rhyme enwair and pair. In the third line two words alliterate, i.e. lafn and ladd, and in the fourth, cwynfan and cyrdd; pedrydawg rhymes with deinfniawg which then alliterates with dyfniais.

What was said about Thomas' inability to speak Welsh may equally be said of his Welsh prosody in which he had had no formal training. However, Bateson (DAVI, 221), has put it in perspective by pointing out, in his essay, The Conversation of Prayer, that from a casual reading of the poem, it may appear unrhymed, but that a closer reading shows it to be carefully crafted and internally rhymed. He proves this by writing the whole poem out in half lines.

The conversation of prayers
 about to be said

By the child going to bed
 and the man on the stairs
 Who climbs to his dying love
 in her high room
 The one not caring to whom
 in his sleep he will move
 And the other full of tears
 that she will be dead.

“The Conversation of Prayer” is dependent metrically on its internal rhyming and this is a feature not often seen in English poetry. Classical Welsh poetry of the twelfth-century known as the Gogynfeirdd involved internal rhyming as a prerequisite element of a poet’s craft. Sir Idris Bell, an Englishman who learned Welsh so well he became an authority on the language, gives this example by Cynddelw (DAVI, 225):

Lliw golau tonnau taenferw gwenwyg,
Llan ebyr ar llyr lle ni mawrdryg.

(translated):

colour light waves
 spread boiling billows,
 flood-tide river mouths
 on sea where not abides.

There is a striking similarity between the English translation of Cynddelw’s verse and Dylan Thomas’ style. In Under Milk Wood there is the same poetic effect as in Cynddelw’s poem where the “ll” sound is produced by letting the air gush through the mouth on either side of the tongue’s tip which is pressed against the palate.

Captain Cat muses in his sleep:

Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night. Only you can see, in the blinded bedrooms, the coms and petticoats over the chairs, the jugs and basins, the glasses of teeth, Thou Shalt Not on the wall, and the yellowing dicky-bird - watching pictures of the dead. Only you can hear and see, begin the eyes the sleepers, the movements and countries and

mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes
and flight and fall and despairs and big seas of their dreams (THO
(5), 2)

Dylan Thomas' poetic style has often been compared with that of Gerard Manley Hopkins. When Thomas was questioned about Hopkins' influence on his poetry his answer was surprising. In a letter to Treece he wrote: "I have read Hopkins only in the most lackadaisical way. I certainly haven't studied him or, I regret, any other poet" (DAVI, 93). Later, having read the manuscript of Dylan Thomas: A Dog among the Fairies Thomas admitted, "I never realized the influence he must have had on me." Both have Celtic ancestry. Hopkins is a Welsh name and he was of Cornish stock. The old Cornish language is still spoken in Cornwall and the Cornish still send representatives to the National Eisteddfod in Wales where the Cornish emissary speaks a greeting in Cornish. Other Celtic delegates from the Isle of Man, and from Brittany attend annually. Hopkins learned Welsh at St Beuno and was so fluent that he composed cynghanedd. The most striking similarity is in the use of syntax for both distort it. By doing so a special effect can be achieved as in Thomas' "I, in my Intricate image":

Beginning with doom in the ghost, and the springing marvels
Image of images, my metal phantom
Forcing forth through the harebell
My man of leaves and the bronze root, mortal, unmortal
I, in my fusion of rose and male motion,
Create this twin miracle.

I may add at this juncture, that Welsh differs in another significant way from English in that it frequently omits personal pronouns and prepositions. Here are some examples: head = pen, dŷn = man so that a man's head in Welsh is pendŷn; "girl =

merch” and “dyn is man”, so in Welsh it is “merch dŷn” (girl man’s). What this means is that Welsh is more economical in its word usage sometimes at the cost of clarity. Hopkins does the same thing when he forces the ultimate from his diction.

In Hopkins’ “To His Watch” his opening lines:

Mortal my mate, bearing my rock-a-hart
 Warm beat with cold company, shall I
 Earlier or you fail at our force, and lie
 The ruins of, rifle once a work of art?

are syntactically difficult. Does “warm” refer to the “I” or to his auditor? Does “mortal” refer to his auditor, “his mate”, and is his mate baring his heart or is his heart heavy because his “mate” is mortal?

Both poets’ poetry is characterized by compactness of thought and imagery as well as a lack of connectives. Both poets were powered by a deep religious faith, Hopkins being a devout Roman Catholic and a Jesuit, Thomas better described as pantheistic. In this respect he resembles the ancient Celts to whom everything was sacred. However, as Kermode has shown (KO, 193), Thomas and Hopkins are alike in accepting the Crucifixion as the archetype of their spiritual situations. There is a fundamental difference, however, in their religious attitudes. Hopkins fails to equate God’s justice with His mercy and considers this his culpa mea. Thomas, on the other hand, identifies himself as part of the natural process and accepts his role as the voice of the natural world that speaks of the sea, a divine hill and a dying father.

In the poetic language of each there are comparisons to be made. In the diction of each, examples of words used in a new way are legion: portmanteau words, kennings, internal rhyming all are used to produce a new voice in English poetry.

Both poets wrote declamatory verse that yields its full power and magic only when read aloud by a competent reader, sensitive to poetic nuances and to poetry written by those who respect words not merely as tools of communication.

In the last analysis, it is not possible to ascertain with complete certainty the influence of any tradition, person or environment upon an other artist's work. We can only conjecture. Nevertheless, by being aware of the artist's beginnings, his biography, of writers with whom he formed an association and above all by reading his work with care, and with clarity of vision, we may come to better informed judgements and analyses.

CONCLUSION

The life and work of Dylan Thomas provides an interesting opportunity for the study of cultural divisions in which an artist is required to function in a language and culture different from that of his parents and ancestors. Notwithstanding division, the artist still retains a deep love of his native country and language. Thomas is sometimes an enigma, a poet who sought “refuge” from a formal education at the age of fifteen, who eluded the benefits of an university and later disliked the company of academicians seeking instead the joys of the inebriate in the public houses of this world. Thomas is a bawdy, bumptious, bacchanalian but also a careful, crafty, conniving poet, who, in the space of a brief lifetime, became as notorious a celebrity as Lord Byron.

A perennial problem I had to contend with in this study was of being too close to the subject, of not being fully able to be completely objective. Living some three miles across the water from Thomas’ boathouse in full sight of Laugharne I grew up closely connected to a legend that I could not escape. Dissociation became difficult, adverse criticism even more so.

That being so the problem remains. I recognised the obscurity that readers of his poetry experience because of the unusual character of his diction and syntax. The reasons for this I have attempted to discuss viz. the desire of Thomas to provoke his readers to think radically, to make language work in sound as well as in sense. The quality of Thomas’ diction I have examined in terms of its allusiveness and multiplicity of meanings. I have provided a field day for interpreters and verbal archaeologists to work in the sands of Swansea Bay forever, uncovering boathouses

and cynghanedd, often providing interpretations to contradict their fellow critics. That such a non-university man as Thomas could become such a cat among the literary pigeons as to provoke the Holbrooks of academe to cry out in a discordant chorus, “Will no one rid us of this melodious priest?” is a subject of continuous interest.

I have discussed Thomas’ verbal dexterity. Thomas uses effectively a full range of tricks to produce exactly what he wants.

Other reasons why readers find the poems difficult to understand are Thomas’ diction, metaphor, and symbol and these I have discussed in order to provide some clarification. It seems to me that since each reader will bring with him his own set of experiences and preferences that he have an overall framework in which to place Thomas’ figurative language. He needs imagination seasoned with logic. I have expressed concern that terms included in “figurative language” are not always precise enough. To that end, I have included some diagrams which I hope will clarify matters.

In my discussion of the major influences on Thomas’ poetry, I have focussed on Wales and Welsh as the most obvious ones. This is not easily proven and I crave the reader’s indulgence here on the ground that to know is not necessarily to prove. The reasons I offer for the importance of Welsh to Thomas’ poetry are the music in his artistry, the rhetoric in his verse, the economy and control of his language reminiscent of the mediaeval bards and his soaring imagination. Hopkins’ influence on Thomas’ poetry was discussed all too briefly and is worthy of a more intensive study.

His place among twentieth century poets has not been finally established. It may

be that the waning in his popularity is merely temporary and that a new generation will see, through the “Altarwise” fog, a new gentleman to whom they will respond as they hear his tipsy boots scraping at their cradle, and embrace him as their own.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACK	<u>Welsh Dylan</u>
AL	<u>Y Flodeugerdd Englynion</u>
BAI	<u>Bāhai Prayers</u>
BAU	<u>A Literary History of England</u>
BU	<u>Saga of Prayer</u>
BOL	<u>Craft or Sullen Art</u>
BRI	<u>Dylan Thomas in America</u>
DAI	<u>A Critical History of English Literature</u>
DAV	<u>Hanes Cymru</u>
DAVI	<u>New Critical Essays</u>
EM	<u>The World of Dylan Thomas</u>
FER	<u>Dylan Thomas: A Biography</u>
FUS	<u>Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters</u>
FITZ	<u>Dylan Thomas</u>
HOL (1)	<u>Poetic Dissociation</u>
HOL (2)	<u>Llaregyb Revisited</u>
HOL (3)	<u>Dylan Thomas: The Code of Night</u>
J.J.	<u>Tribute to Dylan Thomas</u>
JON	<u>My Friend Dylan Thomas</u>
KAU	<u>Goethe's Faust</u>
KL	<u>The Religious Sonnets of Dylan Thomas</u>
KO	<u>Dylan Thomas</u>

MAR	<u>Sound and Sense in Dylan Thomas</u>
MAU	<u>Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry</u>
MEL	<u>Moby Dick</u>
MOR	<u>An Outline of the Works of Dylan Thomas</u>
MOY	<u>The Craft of Dylan Thomas</u>
NEU	<u>The Poetry of Dylan Thomas</u>
OL	<u>The Poetry of Dylan Thomas</u>
PAR	<u>Hanes Ein Llên</u>
STA	<u>Dylan Thomas</u>
THO (1)	<u>Collected Poems</u>
THO (2)	<u>Adventures in the Skin Trade</u>
THO (3)	<u>Letters to Vernon Watkins</u>
THO (4)	<u>Portrait of an Artist as Young Dog</u>
THO (5)	<u>Under Milk Wood</u>
TIN	<u>A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas</u>
TU	<u>Elizabethan and Metaphysical Poetry</u>