Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill'

C. B. COX

FERN HILL

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
Trail with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
In the sun that is young once only,
Time let me play and be
Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
And the sabbath rang slowly
In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
And playing, lovely and watery
And fire green as grass.
And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the night-jars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
The sky gathered again
And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
Out of the whinnying green stable
On to the fields of praise.

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And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
   In the sun born over and over,
   I ran my heedless ways,
My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
   Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
   In the moon that is always rising,
   Nor that riding to sleep
I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy
   Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

‘Fern Hill’ is deservedly one of the most popular of Dylan Thomas’s poems. Wonderfully fresh and full of vitality, the words combine together in highly original ways to picture the joyful exhilaration of a child. This originality confuses some readers. Striking phrases such as “happy as the grass was green”, “prince of the apple towns”, or “at my sky blue trades”, surprise by their novelty, and at first it is difficult to be sure what effects are intended. These unusual images are evocative rather than precise; and their purpose is to create a strong emotional response, rather than to define a particular attitude. Thomas deliberately uses all his wit and subtlety to gather into each image a wide range of associations. Essentially a romantic poet, he is trying to communicate an experience which is almost beyond expression. In the repetitions “it was lovely”, “it was air And playing, lovely and watery . . .”, he seems to be straining after an ecstasy which can never be wholly confined into words.

This type of poetry has often been held in low esteem by modern analytic critics, who have little to say about the large emotional effects achieved through evocative rhythms and imagery. It is true that some of the images in ‘Fern Hill’ appear to have been chosen at random; for example, what effects are intended by the line: “Down the rivers of the windfall light”? And other similar examples make the poem as a whole a little diffuse; but there is no point in over-emphasising this. Thomas is celebrating the divine innocence of a child, and for him this is a mystery beyond analysis.

The magical landscapes of the poem have a twofold effect. They create anew the freshness and wonder of a child’s vision, but at the
same time they express Thomas's adult interpretation of his past experience. This is not forced upon the reader by direct comment or moralising, but is shown in and through the concrete pictures of the boy's life on the farm. A good example of this occurs at the end of the second stanza:

And the sabbath rang slowly
In the pebbles of the holy streams.

These lines remind us how for a child roaming the countryside, time moves slowly through long mornings of pleasure. But much more than this is implied. The noise of water passing over the pebbles is like church bells calling the boy to worship. Thomas conveys his adult belief that the boy's awakening to the beauty of nature has a divine significance, and that all human joy is holy.

A comparable example can be seen in the middle of the third stanza. After a day of excitement the child, as he falls to sleep, continues to feel the movements of the day—"as I rode to sleep". But the continuation of movement into the night, as the boy hears the owls and nightjars, suggests a mysterious and unending vitality in nature itself. In the phrases "under the simple stars" and "blessed among stables", the words 'simple' and 'blessed' are introduced not to make explicit a definite religious viewpoint, but to evoke a general feeling of reverence for the innocence of a child.

The gaiety and strength of the poem come largely from this type of adult interpretation. Thomas is aware of the power of time, but, instead of becoming melancholy and nostalgic, he sees the joy of his childhood as something for which to be thankful, and as itself part of the wonder of all creation; instead of giving way to regrets, he exults in what has been. The boy does not appear in any way separate from his surroundings. This effect is achieved in part by the use of transferred epithets—"the lilting house", "happy yard", "gay house". These words describe how the boy's emotions transform every object he perceives; but also they prevent us from feeling that he lives in an alien environment. The boy is "honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house"—an integral part of all created things.

For Thomas the child achieves an exalted state, for he is a 'prince', 'honoured' and 'lordly', a rightful inheritor of the blessings of nature. Lines such as "the hay fields high as the house" evoke a sense of abundance, of a world of plenty of which the boy's exuberance is but a part. He is "green and golden", innocent and yet overheaped with gifts. His mind moves rapidly from one impression to the next; and this energy is reflected in the many quick movements
of the poem—“All the sun long it was running . . .” , where the lilting rhythm, with its light stresses—“happy as the grass was green”—carries the reader on in quick surges of delight. The long sentences, beautifully constructed and controlled by Thomas, give this feeling of continuous pleasure; no sharp breaks interrupt the exuberant flow.

These expressions of mystery and power move to a climax in stanza four. When the boy awakes in the morning, the farm appears like the garden of Eden, a revelation of innocence. It is typical of Thomas that this new awareness is expressed in concrete terms. When dealing with comparable experiences, Wordsworth moves away from the actual towards a mysticism beyond the world of the senses. He talks of “something far more deeply interfused” in nature, and tries to find expression for an awareness of the transcendental—“The winds come to me from the fields of sleep.” Thomas’s sense of wonder comes from participation in life itself, for he glories in what is revealed through the senses, and does not look beyond. The spellbound horses are mysterious, to be praised in song, not as symbols of a transcendental reality, but for their own force and beauty.

From the beginning of the poem, the child’s simple unreflecting vitality is seen as a gift of time, soon to be withdrawn. These references to time have a double effect. The words “all the sun long”, “all the moon long”, show how the child measures time by light, not by the clock, and how each day seems a long savouring of experience; but they also remind us that this experience is not permanent. In the final two stanzas, the facts of time become more insistent, and the pathos of transience can no longer be ignored. Yet even in these concluding lines, no suggestion is given that the child’s experience is in any way inadequate. “Nothing I cared” is a simple statement of fact, not a moral comment on the heedlessness of the child. Time may hold the child “green and dying”, but he sings in his chains; he is “like the sea”, full of abundance and infinite power.

The effect of the last line is essentially imprecise, and its success comes largely from the music of the poem. Thomas was a constant experimenter in verse, and always used words deliberately for musical effects. The quality of this poem comes largely from a careful use of ecstatic rhythms; in the last line, we have a last flourish of rhythmic exaltation, with the image of the sea gathering together into itself all the previous evocations of heroism and abundance.

In the literature of the post 1945 world, so often full of anger and despair, Thomas’s faith in life seems to some people naive.
But in this poem time and death are accepted as undeniable facts, yet Thomas's attitude is one of courage and sanity. In a world faced by total destruction, he reminds us of the wonder and mystery of individual experience, and for this we ourselves should be thankful.

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POEM II

The heavens, heavy with silver pins,
Wink my way home up the hill.
Our love, strong in doubting winds,
Pricked my mind away from their still
Cold beauty: Yet I am glad enough
To let these stars and black air
And your love throb out the stuff
Of certitude: I remember the ravens pair,
Though apart, in the mist above Snowdon;
Their sheen flicker before boiling clouds,
Their call from the throat, deep; high on
Knife-smelt sky, swinging in casual rounds.
Ah cariad, is it not thus? paired, though apart,
Sweeping together in tumble-cloud and sundart.

PETER M. GRIFFITH.