Dylan Thomas's Poetry

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We are not yet acclimatized to Dylan Thomas's poetry. Much more knowledge of his poetic technique will be required before his work can be justly appreciated. The following is an attempt to describe various characteristics of Thomas's method, leading into a discussion of the imagery and meaning of the poems after preliminary attention to poetic form and effects.

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The basic unit of Dylan Thomas's poetry is the short rhetorically coherent phrase, i.e. one that will be read or spoken as a unit and is, at the same time, a functional part of a sentence; and the stop and flow of the poetry proceeds according to the disposition of these varying units within the stanza. Each unit has a pronounced rhythm of its own, determined of course by the wording; but invariably in Thomas the rhythmical stresses fall where they would naturally be heard in persuasive speech.

Thomas seems always to have sought the discipline of a more-or-less demanding verse form. He has a villanelle and several sonnets; but much more often he creates his own stanzaic pattern from poem to poem, adhering to a particular line-length and near-rhyme scheme within each poem, but rarely using any form more than once. For example, the first poem of Thomas's collected poems begins:

I see the boys of summer in their ruin
Lay the gold tithings barren,
Setting no store by harvest, freeze the soils;
There in their heat the winter floods
Of frozen loves they fetch their girls,
And drown the cargoed apples in their tides.

We may note the near-rhyme scheme (a a b c b c) and the line
lengths: 11, 7, 10, 8, 8 and 10 syllables respectively. There are feminine endings (if the lines can be thought of as basically iambic) to lines 1 and 2, and a stressed first syllable to lines 2 and 4. All these features appear (with minute exceptions) in the nine identically constructed stanzas which compose the poem. Since this poem is but typical, no further illustration is needed to demonstrate the craftsmanship which went into Thomas's poetry — and which has to be brought out deliberately in this way because a normal reading easily passes over it. Rightly the structure does not distract us in reading; yet it does not fail to provide the reassuring sensation of being sustained by a controlling hand.

It is the soundness of the fundamental make-up of Thomas's verse — the easily flowing line within a usually regular form, and the word accentuations of common expressive speech — which urges us to take trouble over the syntax, which is often far from easy, but which, viewed rightly, supplies to the verse a unique vigour and charm.

Attending to the grammar of the above stanza we should read the first two lines as an 'I see X do something' sentence, the lightness of this construction becoming apparent in the strengthening of appropriate stresses (especially on the infinitive 'Lay') and in the tightness of structure which legitimately allows for the omission of small connective pronouns. Line 3 repeats this technique, 'freeze' being simply parallel to 'Lay', while 'Setting no store etc' is an adjectival phrase referring to 'boys' (understood with the verb 'freeze'). Such series of verbs and phrases dependent upon a subject noun, or other part of speech, given earlier in the poem is common in Thomas. We are made to hold tightly to the beginning of the poem as we proceed through it.

More difficulty appears in the lines:

There in their heat the winter floods
Of frozen loves they fetch their girls. . . .

How shall we read 'the winter floods of frozen loves'? Not as an appositive phrase — because it cannot be other than the object of the main verb 'fetch', while 'girls' is dative. Once given its
true syntactical value, the phrase will be recited not with the parenthetical tone of an appositive but with an extra robustness. The inversion of subject and object is not uncommon in Thomas and always strengthening in this way, e.g. (from a parallel place in the same poem)

There, in his night, the black-tongued bells
The sleepy man of winter pulls.

We have to sustain an elevated pitch until the very last word; it is as if there were a muscular spanning support within the sentence.

These almost Virgilian dislocations have a marked effect upon the way the verse reveals its meanings as well as upon the movement. In addition, the complexities of syntax, since they are almost invariably found to be soluble difficulties and not enigmas, charge the poems with a never failing source of interest for our analytic energies, and supply, the poems once known, satisfactions on their own account.

With the poems in Deaths and Entrances there seems to have begun a tendency towards a more intricate stanzaic form, along with a certain departure from earlier practice immediately evident for example in the first lines of 'A Refusal to Mourn. .':

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking. . . .

What is important to note is not so much the extreme case of compound-adjective-making which occurs in the first three lines — though this adds to the general effect — as the fact that there seems to be no longer any compulsion for the rhetorically unified phrase to coincide with the verse line. In all the early poems, with but one or two exceptions, the lines are end-stopped or broken in a manner appropriate to the rhetorical flow of the verse, and punctuated accordingly. Since there is no question of monotony, this added solidarity to the poetry. But coming to
'A Refusal to Mourn . . .' we have our rhetorical unit drawn across three lines and a lack of punctuation that likewise delays the impact of the sense. The effect is quite different from Thomas's sense-determined lines: the elements of the rhetorical unit are no longer subordinate to its over-all coherency and are allowed effects of their own far beyond the simple alliteration, assonance and other customary features of diction that enhanced the earlier verse without attracting undue attention. Now the line-break and lack of punctuation force us to attend to the sense of the single word, or the small group, before — and, momentarily, quite apart from — the meaning of the whole to which it belongs. This, often to good effect, e.g. by having to entertain 'mankind making' and 'flower' as the stressed words of the line-ends in the above passage, both carrying the idea of creation, we are struck the more forcibly by the contrast of 'all humbling darkness' and are thus given vividly the two poles, genesis and doom, by the time the complete unit of meaning has emerged. In another passage from that poem:

And I must enter again the round
Zion of the water bead . . .

the adjective 'round', broken from its noun, receives extraordinary stress; but it is a resourceful word, emphasizing the shape of the water-drop, of the earth-grave, of the life-cycle and of the O (zero) which is our end. In a further example (from 'A Winter's Tale', last stanza):

... he was brought low,
Burning in the bride bed of love, in the whirl-
Pool at the wanting centre . . .

'whirlpool' split into two long-vowelled words, given equal stress, requires a unique pronunciation of the word and slows down the verse while intensifying it. It also supplies in the most striking way possible the image required by the context: not a maelstrom of the sea, but a pool-like hollow containing a whirling — literally of snow, with the connotations of sexual activity and solar motion.
Generally speaking, the many valuable effects produced by concentrating the attention on certain words as the poem proceeds justifies the technique, since the unit of grammatical sense is still operative. There are, however, two pitfalls. One is that emphasis on the splinter element may come too near shattering the sense-flow. It is difficult to present any example of this because as soon as the attention is given to what at first seemed awkward the coherency is strengthened and the complaint becomes redundant. The second possible drawback is the temptation towards laxity. No matter how varied the line length, there is really no challenge in a stanza if the poet allows himself to break lines simply when their syllabic complement is reached. If there are cases of this in Thomas, the adjective-noun splitting in ‘A Winter’s Tale’ would be high on the list; yet, even here, the emphasizing of both adjective and noun does make us see more and might well have its justification in the final effect. Indeed the essence of the whole technique of highly varied line-length, broken rhetorical unit and minimum of punctuation is to increase the number of points emphasized in a poem, compelling our attention upon more objects and qualities of objects, a technique as appropriate to the later, predominantly descriptive poems as the tight series of statements were to the early, basically expository poems. But as the new freedom allows for effects unobtainable in the early poems, so it fails to achieve their remarkable concentration of power. Dylan Thomas described his early poems as ‘formally watertight compartment(s) of words’; to designate his later work he would probably have had to change to some metaphor from kinetics.

What is important to remember, however, is that the later poems are grounded in Thomas’s personal tradition of regard for form, that they are not a precariously maintained imposition upon chaos but a blossoming out from a tighter bud. Also, Thomas’s strict attention to syntax continues till the end, ensuring a resilient stem for his offshoots of language.

So far we have left open the question of whether or not Dylan Thomas’s poems, granted their extremely skillful construction,
are meaningful. Let us now consider the ways in which it is possible to seek meaning in three representative poems: the early 'I see the boys of summer', the longer and later 'A Winter’s Tale', and 'A Refusal to Mourn . . .' as a relief from the obscurity of the other two.

Reading Dylan Thomas, we rarely find uncommon words; yet all the words seem tantalizingly unfamiliar, pressed by the poet into strange image-combinations.

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\begin{align*}
\text{I see the boys of summer in their ruin} \\
\text{Lay the gold tithings barren,} \\
\text{Setting no store by harvest, freeze the soils;} \\
\text{There in their heat the winter floods} \\
\text{Of frozen loves they fetch their girls,} \\
\text{And drown the cargoed apples in their tides.}
\end{align*}
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The first step in overcoming the strangeness is to insist to ourselves that the poem means literally what it says. The fact that this is difficult in itself becomes of prime significance; but in the first instance it is valuable to try, for example, to entertain ‘the winter floods of frozen loves’ (which the summer boys fetch to their heated girls) as actual floods, winter ice-breaks bearing cold affections. It is possible to go even further, imagining ‘loves’ as an objective constituent of the floods; indeed a characteristic of this verse is the continual claim upon us to take as perceivable that which normally can be communicated only by a general term. This claim does not overrule, but rather pulls insubordinately against, the word’s obvious abstract or generalized meaning. So that in this case, having accepted the words as supplying as far as possible observed details, we must ease the strain so caused on ‘loves’, taking it in turn in its usual sense as denoting the plural of a certain state of mind or emotion. By virtue of its generic, non-visual nature, this word will then give the status of metaphor to the concrete image, ‘the winter floods’, using the pictured scene to represent the effusion of love at its coldest. We are probably most at ease on this metaphoric level; but it seems in the very nature of the style that the strong rival claims of the descriptive and metaphoric potentiality in the images be left unsettled, the indeterminacy
supplying tensions which it is part of the excitement of reading to undergo.

In the quoted stanza there are several different metaphors (the boys 'lay gold tithings barren', 'fetch winter floods', 'drown cargoed apples', etc.), all, in spite of their disparity, standing for the same effect or concept, i.e. the nullification of ripeness. Just as we found the unexpected combinations of words obliged us to take the images on both descriptive and metaphoric planes, the succession of heterogeneous metaphors requires that we seek the full meaning in the symbolism intrinsic to all. Almost every phrase of a poem will exhibit the interplay between the descriptive, metaphoric and conceptual levels of meaning, ensuring richness, but not the precision of one definite meaning—necessarily not, because to isolate a meaning on one level is to disregard what the poem is saying on all three together. The effort of the imagination involved in abstracting the concept symbolized by the particular image or metaphor at the same time as we try to grasp the image as a concrete representation of the concept is perhaps the most rewarding experience in reading these poems.

Since there is not, at least in the earlier poems, a continuous thread of narrative, the poems being composed of statements, descriptive, expository, imperative, formally connected merely by the impersonal 'I' of the poet; since, also, a single metaphor rarely if ever spans the whole of a poem, there being usually a 'dialectic' of metaphors; the conceptual level is the one on which the poems achieve unity. It is only by considering what general idea the words symbolize that we can make a summary statement of the meaning of a poem which no part of the poem contradicts. Thus, on what might be called a mythological plane, 'the boys of summer' are a species of *enfants terribles*; they are self-confessed 'deniers', gainsayers, cosmic Cupids, breaking down in summer, building in winter: being 'of summer', they go against summer, as Cupid had no mercy on his mother. However, if we are to make a summary statement of their activities—recognizing that it will be very much less than the total meaning communicated by the images—we shall have to place them in the substratum of matter and energy conducting the natural processes in objects, very close to those mysterious
forces within the molecule that produce mutation (is not their father the uncertainty principle?) and govern the metabolism of the universe. In short, the boys symbolize the potentiality for change in all processes of nature.

Further, especially in the early poems it is amazing to note the high symbol-potential that individual words receive by being made part of a tight network of symbol-language. In the present poem ‘a summer woman’ becomes the prototype symbol for several such couplings of the idea of fruitfulness with the feminine principle, e.g. ‘cargoed apples’, ‘boiling honey’, ‘planted womb’, ‘signal moon’. When examined in context these words seem to gain a symbolic power over and above their use in image-making, and it is the echo within a poem among the words symbolizing the same idea that contributes perhaps more than anything else to our sense of unity there.

If the later poems are less obscure it is because they are usually unified on a narrative level: they have a setting, a time and a place, more of what is commonly known. In ‘A Winter’s Tale’, for instance, Thomas gives a vivid word-picture of a man alone by firelight in a valley farmhouse, watching the snow fall outside. But the technique has not changed, only relaxed; for the farm is ‘cupped’ in the valley of snow beneath a ‘bread white hill’, and in the firelit room are ‘the cup and the cut bread in the dancing shade’; and descriptive as this is, it is also symbolic — of simple economic existence and also, through the Christian imagery, of that which is immortal in mortal life. Also, along with the very real ‘puffed birds hopping and hunting’ we have the ‘she-bird’ which ‘rose and rayed like a burning bride’, almost certainly symbolic of the man’s death, here made coincident with love, the whole poem being a mystical expression of the love of death and the finding of love in death, with the implication of a phoenix rebirth. The subject of the early poems seems to have been the various processes operating within the world of everyday without being recognizably of that world, their nature being communicated symbolically by means of such key words as ‘blood’, ‘wax’, ‘damp’, ‘dry’, ‘knock’, ‘rub’, ‘weather’; later, the subject is human life and death from the point of view of an individual facing them as events not processes, and the resultant attitudes are
generally symbolized by objects in a consistent narrative, the choice of descriptive word contributing to the portrayed scene's power as a symbol.

This is not to say, however, that the later poems are completely clear. Many images, often the most important in the poem, still cannot be said to be precise (or otherwise) simply because we are never quite certain what exactly they are images of on any level. ‘The drifts of thickets antlered like deer’ we can readily take in and enjoy; but ‘the spun bud of the world’, for instance, is difficult: the image is suggestive and its value lies in that it demands we try to imagine a range of visual and conceptual notions no doubt previously beyond our range of comprehension, the success of which is difficult to judge by ordinary standards.

Some of Thomas’s manifestly occasional poems, however, do provide opportunity for applying the usual standard of appropriateness of language to meaning. In the case of one such poem, ‘A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London’, the title pins down the topic. The lines which give the reason for the refusal to mourn are these:

I shall not murder
The mankind of her going with a grave truth
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
With any further
Elegy of innocence and youth.

‘Murder’ is an important word: its very immoderateness is a confirmation of the poet’s seriousness; for him, to mourn would be to murder, destroy, the quality of the child’s death. ‘To murder for the second time’ is implied, the only place in the poem which suggests what we all feel to be the case: that the death took place during an enemy air raid and was therefore not an accident but a deliberate killing.

‘Mankind’ is obviously a word that brings out the universal implications of the child’s going, as we momentarily read ‘murder... mankind’. The syntax is peculiar, since only a noun of quality or manner is strictly appropriate to that idiom; yet the word feels natural enough there. Verbally it is close to
two suitable words: 'the manner and kind of her going'; while 'humanity' is a synonym which, with its alternative meaning of humaneness and kindness, is a quality as well as a generic term. With the precision of 'humanity', however, we would have lost not only the link with 'mankind making' of the first line of the poem but also the very fact of strangeness forcing us to think more deeply about the significance.

Within the logic of the metaphor the instrument of murder is 'a grave truth' — not because it is a truth, or even a truth about the grave, but because it is grave, i.e. sedate and dignified, the sort of 'truth' that might pompously be expressed at gravesides, here totally inadequate to the death the poet is writing of, indeed, so much so as to be as outrageous as the original murder.

'Blaspheme' is parallel to 'murder' both in construction and effect. Further, it makes us hear the religious echo behind 'the stations of the breath', productive of meaningful ambiguity. The poet is refusing to add further to the monodies which have made the road to death (as it were, the Stations of the Cross) a mere passage for elegiac wind. On the other hand, he is pledging himself to keep as sacred as the Stations of the Cross his own poetic road (literally, his throat), the various stages of his poetic life to his own death. The very core of the poet's activity before God must be preserved from the gross violation of meeting the child's horrible death with words necessarily inadequate. The devotional nature of this refusal to mourn makes the act — and the poem — one of great dignity, and the heightened and religious language entirely appropriate.