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The Poetry of Dylan Thomas

DAVID DAICHES

The sudden and premature death of Dylan Thomas produced elegies and appreciations in extraordinary numbers on both sides of the Atlantic. Thomas was the most poetical poet of our time. He talked and dressed and behaved and lived like a poet; he was reckless, flamboyant, irreverent, innocent, bawdy and bibulous. And his verse, too, had a romantic wildness about it that even the reader who could make nothing of it recognized as "poetic." In the February issue of the new London Magazine a 26-year-old British poet wrote a letter saying that Thomas represented the "archetypal picture of the Poet" for his generation, and that the death of this wild and generous character produced "something like a panic" in the world of letters. He was answered in the next issue of the magazine by a thirty-one-year-old poet who said that this was puerile nonsense and deplored what he called the "fulsome ballyhoo" which Thomas's death evoked on both England and America. There has perhaps been an element of ballyhoo in the recent spate of articles about Thomas; but sober critical judgment is difficult when one is writing of a brilliant young man who has died at the very height of his career (or at the very height of his promise: we shall never tell now). And surely the exaggeration of the sense of loss at the death of a poet is a sign of health in any culture. Now that the shock has in some degree worn off, however, we can turn more soberly to ask the question: What sort of poetry did Dylan Thomas write, and how good is it?

In a note to the collected edition of his poems, Thomas wrote: "These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God...." And in his prologue to the same volume he proclaimed his intention of celebrating the world and all that is in it:

... as I hack

This rumpus of shapes
For you to know
How I, a spinning man,
Glory also this star, bird
Roared, sea born, man torn, blood blest.
Hark: I trumpet the place,

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From fish to jumping hill! Look:
I build my bellowing ark
To the best of my love
As the flood begins,
Out of the fountainhead
Of fear, rage red, manalive, . . .

This prologue is a great hail to the natural world, and man as a part of it, and might be taken by the careless reader as an impressionist outpouring of celebratory exclamations:

Huloo, my prowed dove with a flute!
Ahoy, old, sea-legged fox,
Tom tit and Dai mouse!
My ark sings in the sun
At God speeded summer's end
And the flood flowers now.

Yet in fact this spontaneous-seeming poem is a cunningly contrived work in two movements of fifty-one lines each, with the second section rhyming backwards with the first—the first line rhyming with the last, the second with the second last, and so on, the only pair of adjacent lines rhyming being the fifty-first and the fifty-second. Whether the ear catches this complicated cross rhyming or not, it is part of a cunning pattern of ebb and flow, of movement and counter-movement, which runs through the poem. This single piece of evidence is perhaps enough to prove that, for all the appearance of spontaneity and sometimes of free association that his poems present to some readers, Thomas was a remarkably conscientious craftsman for whom meaning was bound up with pattern and order. No modern poet in English has had a keener sense of form or has handled stanzas and verse paragraphs—whether traditional or original—with more deliberate cunning.

It is worth stressing this at the outset, because there are still some people who talk of Thomas as though he were a writer of an inspired mad rhetoric, of glorious, tumbling, swirling language, which fell from his pen in magnificent disorder. He has been held up by some as the antithesis of Eliot and his school, renouncing the cerebral ordeliness of the 1920's and the 1930's in favour of a new romanticism, an engaging irresponsibility. And on the other hand there are those who discuss his poems as though they are merely texts for exposition, ignoring the rhyme scheme and the complicated verbal and visual patterning to concentrate solely on the intellectual implications of the images. The truth is that Thomas is neither a whirling romantic nor a metaphysical imagist, but a poet who uses pattern and metaphor in a complex craftsmanship in order to create a ritual of celebration. He sees life as a continuous process, sees the workings of biology as a magical transformation producing unity out of identity, identity out of unity, the generations linked with one another and man linked with nature. Again and again in his early poems he seeks to find a poetic ritual for the celebration of this identity:

Before I knocked and flesh let enter,
With liquid hands tapped on the womb,
I who was shapeless as the water
That shaped the Jordan near my home
Was brother to Mnestha's daughter
And sister to the fathering worm.

Or again:

The force that through the green fuse
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots
Of trees
Is my destroyer.

And most clearly of all:

This bread I break was once the oat,
This wine upon a foreign tree
Plunged in its fruit;
Man in the day or wind at night
Laid the crops low, broke the grape's joy. . .

This flesh you break, this blood you let
Make desolation in the vein,
Were oat and grape
Born of the sensual root and sap;
My wine you drink, my bread you snap.

Man is locked in a round of identities; the beginning of growth is also the first movement towards death, the beginning of love is the first move towards procreation which in turn moves towards new growth, and the only way out of time's squirrel-cage is to embrace the unity of man with nature, of the generations with each other, of the divine with the human, of life with death, to see the glory and the wonder of it. If we ignore the cosmic round to seize the moment when we think we have it, we are both deluded and doomed:

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 cargoes in their tides.

Those boys of light are curdlers in their folly,
Sour the boiling honey; . . .

This is from an early poem; and several of these early poems strike this note—the note of doom in the midst of present pleasure, for concealed in each moment lie change and death. Thomas did not rush towards the celebration of unity in all life and all time which later became an important theme of comfort for him; he moved to it through disillusion and experiment. The force that drives the flower and the tree to full burgeoning and then to death, would destroy him also. Only later came the realisation that such destruction is no destruction, but a guarantee of immortality, of perpetual life in a cosmic eternity:

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not,
And death shall have no dominion.

It is this thought that sounds the note of triumph in "Ceremony after a Fire Raid" and which provides the comfort in "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London."

"A Refusal to Mourn" is a poem worth pausing at, for it illustrates not only a characteristic theme of what might be called the middle Thomas, but also a characteristic way of handling the theme. The poem is ritualistic in tone; its dominant images are sacramental; and the cunningly contrived rise and fall of the cadence of each stanza adds to the note of formal ceremony. There are four stanzas, the first two and one line of the third containing a single sentence which swells out to a magnificent surge of meaning. Then, after a pause, the final stanza makes a concluding ritual statement, an antiphonal chant answering the first three stanzas. The paraphrasable meaning of the poem is simple enough: the poet is saying that never, until the end of the world and the final return of all things to their primal elements, will he distort the meaning of the child's death.
by mourning. One dies but once, and through that death becomes re-united with the timeless unity of things. But the paraphrasable meaning is not, of course, the meaning of the poem, which is expanded at each point through a deliberately sacramental imagery while at the same time the emotion is controlled and organized by the cadences of the stanza. The first stanza and a half describes the end of the world as a return from differentiated identity to elemental unity:

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness
And I must enter again the round
Zion of the water bead
And the synagogue of the ear of corn
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
Or sow my salt seed
In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn
The majesty and burning of the child's death...

There is no obscurity here, to anybody who knows Thomas's idiom. We have only to recall “This bread I break was once the oat” to realise the significance of the first three lines of the second stanza. The water bead and the ear of corn are symbolic primal elements, to which all return at the end. But why “Zion of the water bead” and “synagogue of the ear of corn”? The answer is simply that these are sacramental images intended to give a sacramental meaning to the statement. It is a kind of imagery of which Thomas is very fond (one can find numerous other examples, among them such a phrase as “the parables of sun light” in “Poem in October” or his use of Adam and Christ in his earlier poems). One might still ask why he says “synagogue” and not “church.” The answer, I think, is that he wants to shock the reader into attention to the sacramental meaning. A more everyday religious word might pass by as a conventional poetic image; but “synagogue” attracts our attention at once; it has no meaning other than its literal one, and therefore can be used freshly in a non-literal way. The third stanza continues:

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

Here words like “mankind,” “blaspheme,” “stations of her breath” (recalling “station of the Cross”) play an easily discernible part in the expansion of the meaning, while the pun in “grave truth” represents a device common enough in modern poetry. The concluding stanza gives the reason, the counterstatement:

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
Robed in the long friends,
The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
Secret by the unmourning water
Of the riding Thames.
After the first death, there is no other.

This echoes, in its own way, the opening stanza; but its tone is new; it is that of liturgical proclamation. We need not wince at the suggestion that “long friends” means (among other things) worms; worms for Thomas were not disgusting, but profoundly symbolic: like maggots they are elements of corruption and thus of re-unification, of eternity.

How much a poem of this kind owes to the imagery and to the cadence, as
well as to the careful patterning, can be seen at once if one takes the perhaps extreme method of turning its paraphrasable content into conventional rhymed verse:

   Not until doomsday's final call
   And all the earth returns once more
   To that primaeval home of all,
   When on that insubstantial shore
   The tumbling primal waters foam
   And silence rules her lonely home,

   And I return to whence I came,
   The sacramental child of earth,
   Joining with nature to proclaim
   A death that is a second birth—
   No, not until that final sleep
   Will I for this dead infant weep.

   She lies with her ancestral dead,
   The child of London, home at last
   To earth from whence all life is bred
   And present mingles with the past.
   The unmourning waters lap her feet:
   She has no second death to meet.

This is doggerel, of course, but it contains, in however crude a form, the essential paraphrasable meaning of the Thomas poem—yet misses everything of any significance about it. The note of ritual, of sacrament, of celebration, achieved through his special use of imagery and by other devices, is central in Thomas's poetry.

I have not given a critical analysis of the poem, which space forbids, but merely suggested a way of looking at it. "A Refusal to Mourn" is a characteristic poem of one phase of Thomas's career, during which he was drawing together his impressions of the unity of all creation and all time to serve the purpose of a specific occasion. His earlier poems often fail by being too packed with metaphor suggestive of identity. Words like "Adam," "Christ," "ghost," "worm," "Womb," phrases like "the mouth of time," "death's feather," "beach of flesh," "hatching hair," "half-tracked thigh," abound, and though each has its orderly place in the poem the reader often feels dulled by the continuous impact of repeated words of this kind. The sonnet-sequence, "Altarwise by owl-light," contains some brilliant identifying imagery (suggesting the identity of man with Christ, of creation with death, of history with the present), but it is altogether too closely packed, too dense, to come across effectively. The opening is almost a self-parody:

   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.

The careful explicator will be able to produce informative glosses on each of these phrases, but the fact remains that the poem is congested with its metaphors, and the reader is left with a feeling of oppression. A fair number of Thomas's earlier poems are obscure for this reason. It is not the obscurity of free association or of references to private reading, but an obscurity which results from an attempt to pack too much into a short space, to make every comma tell, as it were. With his continuous emphasis on birth, pre-natal life, the relation of parent to child, growth, the relation of body and spirit, of life to death, of human and animal to vegetable, and similar themes, and his constant search for devices to celebrate these and identify them with each other, he does not want one word to slip which may help in building up the
total pattern of meaning. One of his poems shows how the making of continuous connections and identities can bewilder the reader:

To-day, this insect, and the world I breathe, 
Now that my symbols have outelbowed space, 
Time at the city spectacles, and half 
The dear, daft time I take to nudge the sentence, 
In trust and tale have I divided sense, 
Slapped down the guillotine, the blood-red double 
Of head and tail made witnesses to this 
Murder of Eden and green genesis.

He is saying here, in his compact metaphorical way, that expression in language (which means expression in time) breaks up and so distorts the original vision. In his desire to avoid that breaking up he sometimes piles up the images and metaphores until the reader simply cannot construe the lines (as in the sixth stanza of "When, like a Running Grace"). But it must be emphasised that this is not the fault of a bad romantic poetry, too loose and exclamatory, but comes from what can perhaps be called the classical vice of attempting to press too much into a little space.

Thomas progressed from those poems in which his techniques of identification are sometimes pressed too far, through a period of "occasional" verse in which he focussed his general notions on particular incidents and situations to give a grave and formal ceremonial poetry ("A Refusal to Mourn," "Do not go gentle into that good night," "On the Marriage of a Virgin," etc.) to a period of more limpid, open-worked poetry in which, instead of endeavouring to leap outside time into a pantheistic cosmos beyond the dimensions, he accepts time and change and uses memory as an elegiac device ("Poem in October," "Fern Hill," "Over Sir John's Hill," "Poem on His Birthday"). But these divisions are not strictly chronological, nor do they take account of all the kinds of verse he was writing. There is, for example, "A Winter's Tale," a "middle" poem, which handles a universal folk theme with a quiet beauty that results from perfect control of the imagery. It is far too long a poem to quote, and it needs to be read as a whole to be appreciated: it is one of Thomas's half dozen truly magnificent poems.

Another remarkable poem, which does not quite fit into my three-fold classification, is "Vision and Prayer," a finely wrought pattern-poem in two parts of six stanzas each. In no other poem has Thomas so successfully handled the theme of the identity of himself, everyman, and Christ. He imagines himself addressing the unborn Christ who, in his mother's womb, seems separated from himself by a "wall thin as a wren's bone." The infant in the next room replies, explaining that it is his destiny to storm out across the partition that separates man from God, and the poet identifies himself with the glory and suffering of Christ's redemptive career. The first part of the poem blazes to a conclusion with a vision of the triumph and pain of Christ's death. The second movement begins in a slow, hushed, almost muttering cadence: the poet prays that Christ remain in the womb, for men are indifferent and wanton and not worth redemption. Let the splendour of Christ's martyrdom remain unrevealed; "May the crimson/ Sun spin a grave grey/ And the colour of clay/ Stream upon his martyrdom." But as he ends
this sad prayer the sun of God blazes forth and takes up the poet in its lightning. "The sun roars at the prayer's end." No summary or partial quotation can do justice to the force and brilliance of this most cunningly modulated poem. The stanzas of the first part are diamond-shaped, and those of the second part hour-glass shaped, and this visual device is not arbitrary, but reflects and answers the movement of the thought and emotion at each point.

Of the more limpid, open-worked poems of the third period, "Poem in October" (though written earlier than the others in this group) can stand as an excellent example. The poet, on his thirtieth birthday, is remembering his past and seeing himself in the familiar Welsh landscape as a boy with his mother:

It was my thirtieth year to heaven
Woke to my hearing from harbour and
neighbour wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron
Priested shore
The morning beckon
With water praying and call of seagull and
rook
And the knock of sailing boats on the net
webbed wall
Myself to set foot
That second
In the still sleeping town and set forth.

Again we have the sacramentalising of nature ("heron priested shore") and we have also a sense of glory in the natural world which Thomas learned to render more and more effectively as his art matured. Again, one cannot see the quality of the poem from an extract; elegy is combined with remembrance and commemoration, and the emotion rises and falls in a fine movement.

Thomas's most recently published work is his radio play, "Under Milk Wood," which was broadcast by the B.B.C.'s Third Programme some months ago and won instant approval among professional critics and laymen alike. In writing for the radio Thomas naturally avoided any too close packing of the imagery, and chose a style closer to that of "Poem in October" than to that of his earlier poems. In spite of an occasional touch of sentimentality, "Under Milk Wood" is a remarkable performance—one of the few examples in our time of spoken poetry1 which is both good and popular. In estimating the loss to literature of Thomas's early death, I should be inclined to put the cutting short of his career as a poet for the radio as the most serious of all. Thomas was by instinct a popular poet—as he wrote:

Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spendthrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art.

He had no desire to be difficult or esoteric. He drew on the Bible and on universal folk themes rather than on obscure late classical writers or Jessie Weston's "From Ritual to Romance." In "Under Milk Wood" he put into simple yet powerful and cunning verse a day in the life of a Welsh village, with each character rendered in terms of some particular human weakness or folly. Unlike, Eliot, Thomas accepted

1I call the language of "Under Milk Wood" poetry, though it is prose to the eye. When I wrote this, I had heard the play twice but I had not read it, and there is no doubt that to the ear it is poetry. The opposite is true of T. S. Eliot’s later plays, where the language is verse to the eye but prose to the ear.
man as he was: he had a relish for humanity. By the end of his life he had learned to be both poetically honest and poetically simple—a difficult combination, especially in our time. And in choosing the spoken verse of the radio as a medium he was pointing the way towards a bridging of the appalling gap in our culture between professional critic and ordinary reader.

Was he a great poet? Against him it can be argued that his range was severely limited, that (in his earlier poems) he overdid a handful of images and phrases to the point almost of parroting himself, that many of his poems are clotted with an excess of parallel-seeking metaphors. I doubt if he wrote a dozen really first-rate poems (they would include, among those not hitherto mentioned here, "In the White Giant's Thigh" and "In Country Sleep"). In his favour it can be claimed that at his best he is magnificent, as well as original in tone and technique, and that he was growing in poetic stature to the last. Perhaps the question is, in the most literal sense, academic. It is enough that he wrote some poems that the world will not willingly let die.

**Bibliography**


*Added by the editor; not available to Mr. Daiches in England at the time of writing.

"Writers ever since writing began have had problems and the main problem narrow down to just one word—life. Certainly this might be an age of so-called faithlessness and despair we live in, but the new writers haven't cornered any market on faithlessness and despair, anymore than Dostoevski or Marlowe or Sophocles did. Every age has its terrible aches and pains, its peculiar new horrors, and every writer since the beginning of time, just like other people, has been afflicted by what [a] friend of mine calls "the fleas of life"—you know, colds, hangovers, bills, sprained ankles, and little nuisances of one sort or another. They are the constants of life, at the core of life, along with the nice little delights that come along every now and then. . . . So is Love invariable, and Unrequited Love, and Death and Insult and Hilarity. Mark Twain was as baffled and appalled by Darwin's theories as anyone else, and those theories seemed as monstrous to the Victorians as atomic energy, but he still wrote about riverboats and old Hannibal, Missouri. No, I don't think the writer today is any worse off than at any other time."

[Quoted from an interview with William Styron, author of *Lie Down in Darkness*, in the *Paris Review*, Spring, 1954.]