THE DEVELOPMENT OF DYLAN THOMAS' USE OF PRIVATE SYMBOLISM IN POETRY

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PREFACE

In spite of numerous explications that have been written about Dylan Thomas' poems, there has been little attention given the growth and change in his symbolism. This study does not pretend to be comprehensive, but will attempt, within the areas designated by the titles of chapters 2, 3, and 4, to trace this development.

The terms early poems and later poems will apply to the poetry finished before and after 1939, which was the year of the publication of The Map of Love. A number of Thomas' mature poems existed in manuscript form before 1939, but were rewritten and often drastically altered before appearing in their final form. "After the funeral" is one of these: Thomas conceived the idea for the poem in 1933, but its final form, which appeared in The Map of Love, represents a complete change from the early notebook version. Poem titles which appear in this study have been capitalized according to standard practice, except when derived from the first line of a poem; in these cases only the first word is capitalized. An exception has been made in the case of "Altarwise by Owl-light", for this title applies to a group of poems, rather than a single work. Passages of Thomas' poetry cited in this study will be taken from Dylan Thomas' Collected Poems, a volume especially useful for such a study as this because of the chronological arrangement of the poems. Page numbers in parentheses following each quotation will refer to Collected Poems.

I would like to thank those who aided in the preparation of this thesis: my major adviser, Dr. Samuel H. Woods,Jr., for his suggestions and encouragement, and for the material he acquired for my use in this study; and Dr. Mary Rohrberger, for her assistance in reading and advising my work.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the years since Dylan Thomas' death, the opinions of those who regarded his work with apprehension and saw in it a threat of coming anarchy in poetry have given way before increased understanding and appreciation that followed serious study of the poetry. Edith Hamilton had, in 1955, foretold from the work of James Joyce, Thomas, and others, that "there will be a new language for poetry — nay, for every poet."[1] C. B. Cox recalls that Robert Graves, during his 1954-55 Clark lectures at Cambridge, offered a £1 note to anyone who could decipher the meaning of the first line of the poem "If my head hurt a hair's foot." "If Graves made such an offer today," Cox commented, "he could expect a queue of students demanding payment."[2] Bewilderment was the understandable first reaction to the technical complexity of Thomas' early poetry; the twisted syntax and images piled upon images led many people to pronounce the early work the product of the automatic writing then in vogue among the Surrealists. Today, however,

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[1]"Words, words, words; modern school of verse," Saturday Review, November 19, 1955, p. 53.

[2]Dylan Thomas: A Collection of Critical Essays (New Jersey, 1966), p. 1.

Thomas is recognized as a major lyric poet and a craftsman who opened new avenues of potential uses for words.

Recognition had been coming during Thomas' lifetime, though from a comparatively small and limited circle. The first book about his work was begun when Thomas, then twenty-four, had not yet written some of his finest poems. Henry Treece, himself a poet, was the author, and his book, Dylan Thomas: Dog among the Fairies (New York, 1956), remains an authoritative study. Treece established a basis for constructive interpretation: he traced the influences and defined general characteristics, providing the necessary landmarks for the "unconducted tour of Bedlam," as, according to Treece, Hugh Gordon Porteus had once described Thomas' poetry.[3]

In an attempt to ward off possible overemphasis on Surrealism in Thomas' poetry, Treece calls attention to Thomas' painstaking control of his work, a difference in poetic theory and practice between himself and the Surrealist school. Though Treece omits reference to Freud, whose influence other critics had found and discussed in Thomas' work,[4] he does examine the influence of Hopkins and Donne in the allusions and symbols of the poetry. Thomas had read both these poets.

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[3]p. 120.

[4]David Holbrook, Dylan Thomas and Poetic Dissociation (Carbondale, 1964); W.Y. Tindall, Forces in Modern British Literature (New York, 1947); and John Ackerman, Dylan Thomas (London, 1964), are among those who recognize the influence of Freudian thinking on Thomas' interpretations of experience. In Thomas' own words: "...no honest writer today can possibly avoid being influenced by Freud through his pioneering work into the Unconscious and by the influence of those discoveries on the scientific, philosophic, and artistic work of his contemporaries...." Quoted in Constantine FitzGibbon, The Life of Dylan Thomas (Boston, 1965), pp. 326-327.

Henry Treece's study is admirably controlled and objective, constituting neither apology nor high praise. The honesty of his treatment and the perceptiveness which he brought to his criticism and explications no doubt account for his influence on later studies of the poetry. Elder Olson drew heavily on Treece's work for his own book, The Poetry of Dylan Thomas (Chicago, 1954), which is widely accepted as definitive. Olson extends Treece's range, and produces explications of formidable scope. He analyzes the poet's motives, his stanza form and rhythm patterns, and his unique use of language. Just as Henry Treece had averted possible overemphasis on Surrealism, so Olson argues that Freud's influence must have been indirect, for much of Thomas' symbolism was manipulated by himself. For instance, Olson writes that "Whereas, for Freud, caves, churches, and chapels refer to the female genitalia, Thomas uses caves to signify the innermost recesses of the self, and churches and chapels — particularly sunken ones — to signify lost pristine faiths."[5] Olson divides Thomas' poetry into three periods, one of "darkness," the second of concern for others, and the last of reconciliation; he values Thomas as a lyric poet.

Olson's book is outstanding because of its scholarly dimensions. For thoroughness it has never been equalled. If Olson may be criticized, it is for assigning to Thomas more learning than in fact he had. Jacob Korg believes that Olson's explication of "Altarwise by Owl-light" attributes to the poems a complexity even greater than that of Thomas' original conception. Olson worked out an elaborate

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[5] p. 6.

interpretation (one of a possible six) based on the constellations. Korg's response to this piece of work was that

> Thomas was capable of making allusions to bodies of legend and to recondite lore, and even of working out sustained images involving them; but he would not be expected to weave his verse over the lattice of a prepared framework of information as Olson supposes him to be doing here.[6]

Korg's own work deals almost exclusively with the technique of the poems, with emphasis on its expression of the mystical quality of Thomas' writing. The chapter entitled "The Rhetoric of Mysticism" stresses the union of man and creation, both spiritually and materially:

> The unity of matter is paralleled by a unity of spiritual life...
> Thomas' view that life and death are merely stages within the universal process is expressed in his first published poem, "And death shall have no dominion"...
> A second condition of Thomas' universe, and one whose effects are indistinguishable from those of the unity of matter, is unity of time. ...The universe is seen as a whole, an impression of stability rather than change.[7]

The meeting of opposites which occurs because of this singular view of the nature of the universe, Korg believes, produces the mixed syntax, the "derangement of conventional language",[8] and the involvement of numerous and sometimes contradictory meanings in the single use of a word. Korg's work is also controlled and balanced, as was Treece's. His emphasis on the mystical does not make his work one-sided, but is rather the interpretative guide-light by which an eva-

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[6] Dylan Thomas (New York, 1965), p. 131.

[7] Ibid., pp. 30-31.

[8] Ibid., p. 37.

luation of the poetry is made. Korg's view is a detached one; his concern is less with the immediate causes in the circumstances of the poet's life and more with the poetry. This more critical approach, like Olson's, must become increasingly the method of criticism farther and farther removed from Thomas' own life and historical period.

W. Y. Tindall, in his useful A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas (New York, 1962), incorporates any aspects of the poet's life, reading, family background, financial standing, political beliefs, etc., which might have affected the creation of a poem. Tindall's introduction explains his inclusion of such widely disparate elements. He underlines Thomas' ignorance of Celtic poetry, cynghanedd, and folklore, and quotes Thomas' description of himself as not greatly learned,[9] thus refuting, as Korg was to do later, Olson's detailed astronomical interpretation of the sonnets.

Tindall had alluded to events and circumstances of Thomas' life; with the publication of Constantine FitzGibbon's The Life of Dylan Thomas in 1955, the first complete and relatively objective account of the poet's life was made available to readers and critics.[10] This

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[9]John L. Sweeney "finds Thomas all but Grierson's rival in knowledge of seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry. ...Thomas modestly admitted...that Sweeney 'pays tribute to an erudition I do not possess.'" p. 12.

[10]Biographical material had been published earlier, but was not complete. John Malcolm Brinnin's Dylan Thomas in America (London, 1956) is concerned with the American tours. Caitlin Thomas' Leftover Life to Kill (London, 1957) is a story of her life in the period immediately following her husband's death, with only occasional mention of the poet. Derek Stanford, Dylan Thomas (New York, 1954), and E. W. Tedlock, ed., Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet (London, 1960) are critical works which include biographical sections.

is the authorized biography, produced under the auspices of the Trustees of the Copyrights of Dylan Thomas. The book recreates an entire period; a story of Thomas' life, it does not neglect the complexities of his family and friends, or the atmosphere of London in the days when Thomas was making his reputation there. FitzGibbon's attitude toward Thomas is one of sympathetic but limited judgment, for his was the task of controlling the responses and prejudices of his readers toward a man and a way of life that were anything but ordinary or placid.

Critical pronouncements are few in this biography; the author felt himself unqualified to comment, and of course his emphasis was upon the life and the man, and not criticism. Two of the opinions that appear show FitzGibbon's objectivity, however, and his conviction of Thomas' stature as a poet:

> In Country Heaven transcends, or at least was intended to transcend, Dylan's personal awareness of mortality. He was acutely conscious of the menace that has hung, like his hawk, over our world since Hiroshima. And to his knowledge of his impending death he now compounded his fear...lest this whole lovely planet burn.[11]

> Finally there is what might be loosely called a Freudian synthesis in his poems between the death-wish and the urge to procreate, expressed now through one set of images, now another, often through several sets simultaneously, physiological, biblical, even astronomical: death and life cease to be antitheses, but are the yin and the yan of one great, mysterious process that the poet shares through his own body with all nature. Such, in crude oversimplification, was Dylan Thomas' principal contribution to English poetry.[12]

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[11] p. 288.

[12] Ibid., p. 89.

FitzGibbon's statements draw a connection between Thomas' poetry and the personal motivations and conflicts of his life, which is to be expected of a biographical work. Recent criticism, however, has tended to move away from what Thomas had to say and to focus on his exceptional manner of saying it. Winifred Nowottny, in his The Language Poets Use (New York, 1962) has explicitly stated the importance of this trend in literary criticism, which is not limited to the discussion of Thomas alone:

> But the value of examining objective characteristics carefully, before talking at large about the imaginative constructs reared on the foundation of words, is that this results, at least, in a recognition of the part played by the corporeality of words, and by the structure which connects them, not only in determining lesser poetic effects but also in directing the larger mental and imaginative processes activated by the poem; it may well lead, further, to a recognition of the fact that the various elements of poetic language interpenetrate one another with an intimacy which is of first importance in any consideration of how poetry 'works'.[13]

Ralph Maud has examined the interplay of word with meaning as a clue to the simplicity of the later poems in comparison with the obscurity of the early ones.[14] Jacob Korg's principal interest, as has been pointed out, is in technique. John Ackerman notes that "from the beginning his [Thomas'] genius lay more in stylistic than intellectual originality. ...his development as a poet is characterized, in particular, by an increasing technical craftsmanship."[15] Some years earlier, Thomas had described his feeling for words, their power and

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[13] p. 2.

[14] Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry (Pittsburgh, 1963), p. 103.

[15] Dylan Thomas (New York, 1964), p. 10.

music, in this way:

> What I like to do is to treat words as a craftsman does his wood or stone or what-have-you, to hew, carve, mould, coil, polish and plane them into patterns, sequences, sculpture, fugues of sound expressing some lyrical impulse, some spiritual doubt or conviction, some dimly-realized truth I must try to reach or realize.[16]

Thomas' attempt to shape language to his own use was not unique among his contemporaries, or even among those of the generations immediately preceding, as the work of men like Hopkins, Swinburne, Hart Crane, Joyce, and Francis Thompson show. John Bayley may have posed the ultimate question for the evaluation of Thomas:

> The critical uncertainty which must still be felt about Thomas' real stature as a poet arises from the fact that we still do not know whether language is capable of what he tried to do with it; or rather whether the consciousness of the receiver can adapt itself to such a variety of linguistic uses and such a multiplicity of verbal stimuli. Probably it can.[17]

This study will examine elements of Thomas' mature style in an effort to trace their emergence from earlier experimental forms, and to determine the extent to which they become integrated with meaning in the poems. Words alone, when used as symbols or metaphors, carry or imply meaning. But these same words depend upon their context for additional force. Syntactical arrangement, for instance, may throw one word or idea into prominence while deemphasizing another. Syntax also determines the order in which those ideas or words will be presented. Thomas' early poetry shows experimentation with diction, including the sounds of words as well as their symbolic and imagistic

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[16] FitzGibbon, p. 325.

[17] The Romantic Survival (London, 1957), p. 196.

properties. The early poetry also shows concern for form, from the syntax of individual lines to the wider framework of both individual stanzas and whole poems. Thomas' themes, which remain the same throughout the entire range of his poetry, determined the direction of his technical development. The extensive use of biblical and Christian ritual forms in the later poetry, for instance, may be interpreted as the development of a personal Christian conviction in the poet. However, inasmuch as the poems using these elements are not dogmatic, it seems more accurate to see these elements as a part of Thomas' private symbolism and poetic structure, reflecting his celebration of parallel process in man and nature, the unity of all life and all time, and the holiness of all creation. The greater subtlety of the mature style results from less dependence upon heavily symbolic and allusive diction, and a greater interaction of all the aspects of the poetic language which Thomas uses.

In The Verbal Icon (University of Kentucky, 1964), W. K. Wimsatt analyzes the meaning of iconicity in words:

> In literary art only the wedding of the alogical with the logical gives the former an aesthetic value. The words of a rhyme...are an amalgam of the sensory and the logical... they are the icon in which the idea is caught.[18]

> ...both the logical and the counterlogical qualities of style are iconic. In an abstract and relational way they represent the things which language is otherwise occupied in designating.[19]

Thomas achieved this iconicity because he wrote emotionally rather than

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[18] p. 165.

[19] Ibid., p. 217.

conceptually: he had an intuitive feeling for the vitality of words. The son of a teacher of literature who had himself wished to write poetry but had been frustrated by a lack of ability, Thomas was led from an early age to an appreciation of the English language and its literature. He was well-read by the time he was of high school age. Though he was ignorant of Welsh, both his parents had grown up speaking the language, and his family had followed the pattern of provincial life that had been the established order for generations in the small towns. Thus his roots were in Welsh culture, though his whole education had been English.

The assumptions about reality which are basic to Thomas' poetry are Welsh, and generally Celtic; indeed, his attitude toward his poetry was essentially that with which the bardic poets of Celtic tradition appeared to have approached their art. The ancient Celtic poet exercised a power beyond that of the secular artist: he was a bard or prophet. Thomas is frequently the bard in his own poems; he often speaks as Everyman, claiming for himself the right of judgment and interpretation. The "Author's Prologue" to the Collected Poems is a self-conscious assumption of the bardic role, in which Thomas presents the world as threatened by the coming of a second Flood.

Bardic poetry had ritual qualities, concerned as it was with religious interpretation of experience, and bound by strict technical forms.[20] The Celt's association of poetry with religion reflected his

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[20]Ackerman writes that "the discipline of Welsh bardic poetry is among the strictest in any known literature. It was written in elaborate metres, and continues to be to the present day." p. 5.

concept of the nature of the world and of reality generally, including not only physical reality but also human experience. The Celt looked upon the world as containing essence and perfection within itself as divine creation, unlike the Platonic Idea of abstract perfection removed from this world, which has affected much of Western thinking. As such, the natural world embodied for the Celt religious significance, and both natural objects and experiences were looked upon as sacramental.

Another idea basic to Celtic thought was that of Time as "an eternal moment rather than as something having a separate past and future."[21] Gwyn Williams, speaking of his decision to title his study of Welsh poetry The Burning Tree, states that in this symbol of the half-flaming, half-growing tree is contained the Welsh, and essentially Celtic, awareness of the duality of life, the simultaneous presence of spring and autumn, life and death, time past and time future.[22] These assumptions appear in Thomas' work, and in the work of those who most deeply affected his thought and technical development.

Thomas' "Welshness" determined that his poetry would be emotional rather than explanatory. George Moore has written:

> In so far as Thomas' verse is in keeping with an attitude to poetry which involved complicated patterns it may be called "Welsh in feeling." But it seems to me that the "Welsh feeling" which came from writing in terms of the life around

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[21] Ackerman, p. 6.

[22] Ibid.

> him was more significant in Thomas' case. It gave his verse its essential flavor, its characteristic suppressed passion and music, its mixture of sex and religion.[23]

Henry Treece has noted the vital similarity between Thomas' work and that of Gerard Manly Hopkins, "vital" used here in the sense of "living force" that marks the work of both poets. The religious assumptions of the two have little in common, but both strove technically for the same ends. Treece quotes Charles Williams' introduction to the second edition of Hopkins' poems:

> We can find in this poet's work the two elements which have been mentioned: (a) a passionate emotion which seems to try to utter all its words in one, (b) a passionate intellect which is striving at once to recognize and explain both the singleness and division of the accepted Universe. But to these must be added a passionate sense of the details of the world without and the world within, a passionate consciousness of all kinds of experience.[24]

Treece adds that Thomas learned "both from the manner and the matter of Gerard Manly Hopkins how to tackle his own independent technical and spiritual problems."[25] The often-quoted lines on Thomas' "struggle from darkness toward some measure of light",[26] and the attempt toward "casting light upon what has been hidden for too long",[27] summarize the individual search, and clarify his almost natural tendency toward Hopkins as a source of method. What Treece calls "an emotional rush of words" in the poetry of Hopkins and

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[23]Tedlock, p. 257.

[24]Treece, p. 48.

[25]Ibid., p. 51.

[26]FitzGibbon, p. 142.

[27]Ibid., p. 143.

Thomas may provide a key to a further agreement of intention in both. Each seems driven to dramatize and exclaim rather than discuss. Donald Davie, in Articulate Energy (New York, 1955), states that "poetic syntax is like music when its function is to please us by the fidelity with which it follows a 'form of thought' through the poet's mind but without defining that thought. ...'thought'...in poetry, is 'the experience.'"[28] When Thomas assumes the voices of Christ, of unborn children, of Everyman, he may be recreating experience not by describing it, but by reenacting it in the person of the "experiencer." Ackerman writes that Thomas

> was himself the universe of 18 Poems, Twenty-five Poems and, to a lesser extent, The Map of Love. God, Christ, and the devil, sin and redemption are potentialities, in a sense realities, within his own being. ...At times he writes about religion as if he and the Druids, Christ and Adam, the chapel preachers and the devil were contemporaries.[29]

Seen in view of (1) Thomas' use of Celtic beliefs about reality, and (2) his sense of the bardic function of a poet, these characteristics lose their initial impression of poetical arrogance.

A kinship of idea and technique existed also between John Donne and Thomas, which determined that Thomas could find in Donne further resources for his own needs. Both were preoccupied with mortality. Both recognized and wrote of the force of sexual energy in the world at large. Cleanth Brooks writes:

> For us today Donne's imagination seems obsessed with the problem of unity: the sense in which the lovers become

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[28] p. 86.

[29] Ackerman, pp. 41-43.

> one — the sense in which the soul is united with God. Frequently, as we have seen, one type of union becomes a metaphor for the other.[30]

This statement, like Williams' introduction quoted above, could have been made of Thomas himself. The recurrence in Thomas' work of metaphor based on Donne's sermon, "Death's Duell", is a by-word in Thomas criticism. Donne felt the duality of life, though he emphasized it not as a philosophy, but as a warning of ever-present death and the need for continual spiritual preparation. Birth, Donne states, contains the potential for death: the mother's womb might be a tomb for the child, and the child's birth might mean death for the mother. Birth is an entrance into a world of death, and in this single idea there is a synthesis of the Christian attitude toward this world, and the Celtic view of the paradox of existence. Numerous echoes appear in Thomas' poems of a comparison between the womb and the grave, of the unborn child as preparing a shroud, his body, for a journey.

The metaphysical poets delighted in exacting detail and novel comparisons, not so much for technical show as for freshness of concept, and this technical achievement Thomas strove for also. The revival of interest in seventeenth-century poetry which occurred during the '20s and '30s was no doubt instrumental in Thomas' consciousness of these poet's works. Davie wrote that "in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries poets acted on the assumption that syntax should often, if not always, carry a weight of poetic mean-

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[30] Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment (New York, 1948), p. 365.

ing...."[31] The musical expression of much of Thomas' poetry — and he has written some of this century's finest lyrics — seems to bear out the presence of a similar conception of the function of poetic syntax on his part.

Thomas' semantic needs, then, were based upon the Celtic assumptions about reality, which determined his interpretation of his subjects; and his imagistic, rather than conceptual, method, which determined his use of poetic diction and syntax. Ackerman emphasizes the growth of Thomas' personal maturity as having signal effect on his work. The emphasis on sex in the earliest published poetry he sees as an adolescent preoccupation. Aneirin Talfan Davies, on the other hand, turned his attention onto Thomas' search as a purely aesthetic problem: not all the poems are obsessed with adolescent sexuality. Davies points to a problem facing modern poets as a group:

> The erosion of Christian dogma, which had been the foundation of Western civilization, has faced the modern poet with a double task, the first of which is to assemble or create a dictionary of relevant symbols capable of sustaining his creative ability ... this [is a] task of creating a private dogma with an attendant heirarchy of symbols.[32]

Yeats is an obvious example of one response to this enigma. His attempts to assimilate Celtic mythology into poetry were less successful than his later Byzantium poems, in which he manipulates private symbols into public ones. Blake, whom Thomas had read, had created a private symbolism in order to express a mystical reality. Korg writes that "Thomas' cosmos ... has some of the same energies,

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[31] Davie, p. 63.

[32] Dylan: Druid of the Broken Body (London, 1964), p. 50.

gigantic deities, and above all, the same 'fearful symmetry' of balanced patterns formed by opposing forces."[33] Blake's Energy is recalled in Thomas' method of letting images conflict, and so create poetic tension:

> I let...an image be "made" emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical forces I possess — let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time.[34]

Artistic creativity was one manifestation of Blakean Energy, which was a spiritual power deriving from the body. No contradiction is implied here, for to Blake the body was "a portion of the soul discerned by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age."[35] "Energy is the only life":[36] the impression Thomas gives of his images is that they are living things, for they "breed" each other.

In formulating a personal mythology, Thomas fell back upon a body of symbols widely understood and accepted in Western culture. Certain relationships and conditions could be suggested through certain proverbial stories and persons. This is the most obvious reason for the assimilation of biblical material into the poetry. Another

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[33]Korg, p. 180.

[34]Treece, p. 37.

[35]William Blake, "The Voice of the Devil," The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (New York, 1965), p. 34.

[36]Ibid.

is the relevance of ancient legends and events to modern times, especially in the Celtic understanding of the simultaneity of all existence and all time. The experiences and ethical problems of these legends are universal. The later inclusion of Christian liturgical forms is important not only for their quality of universality, but also for their rigidity. As Thomas uses ancient persons and events to parallel, for his purposes, modern persons and events, so also he uses ritual forms to suggest the orderly, cyclical quality of experience and its religious significance.

Concerning his use of the Bible in poetry, Thomas has written: "I have never sat down and studied the Bible, never consciously echoed its language...."[37] Inasmuch as he does not lift whole texts verbatim from the Bible, his statement may be accepted at face value. Immediately afterward, however, he makes assertions that are harder to credit without qualifications: "All of the Bible that I use in my work is remembered from childhood, and is the common property of all who were brought up in English-speaking communities."[38] He recalls in his poems the stories of Jonah and the Whale, and that of Lot's wife, stories commonly familiar. But phrases like "Jonah's Moby" from the "Altarwise by Owl-light" sonnets, and "that frozen wife" from "Because the Pleasure-bird whistles" may not immediately suggest those stories to the average reader.

Discussing those who have influenced his work, Thomas writes

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[37]FitzGibbon, p. 326.

[38]Ibid.

that Freud's influence was present in his work, though not through acquaintance with the psycho-analyst's writings: that Thomas disagreed with the Surrealists in principle has already been made clear. He commonly produced from fifty to one hundred drafts of a single poem, and could spend hours or days in the perfecting of a single line.

In spite of identifiable borrowings in his work, from the beginning of his career as a poet his method of composition was uniquely his own. The forms of the poems and treatment of words were as personal with him as the mythology which he based upon his own body as representative of all nature, time and experience.

CHAPTER II

CHARACTERISTICS OF DICTION

W. Y. Tindall has written of Thomas' work: "At its worst exploratory and cathartic, this poetry at its best is almost of the first order."[1] Exploratory and cathartic certainly describe both the search for a technique which Thomas felt he could control and which would fulfil the demands of his themes, and his approach to theme in the early poems, centering them as he did on himself, his body, maturity, and reactions to the situations of his life. In the early days, Thomas admittedly let his words run away with him at times. The entire process, though, taught him what he could and could not do with words used iconically. J. Middleton Murry, writing of style, makes this generalization:

> The writer is perpetually trying to make language carry more than it will bear, incessantly doing a kind of exquisite violence to speech. His actual motive for doing so is his impulse to find a precise expression for his content, he is engaged in a purely personal warfare....[2]

This is virtually a statement of Thomas' situation with his early poems.

Thomas experiments with words and sounds in the early poetry,

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[1] Forces in Modern British Literature, p. 357.

[2] The Problem of Style (London, 1922), p. 101.

from alliterative effects and consonantal chiming to rearrangements of stock phrases for shock and interest. "To the best of my love", for example, derives from "to the best of my ability", and "fall awake" from "fall asleep." The poem "And death shall have no dominion" contains the line "man in the wind and the west moon", which cannot be understood except as an alteration of "man in the moon and the west wind." The value of Thomas' poetry has been challenged because of just such attempts at freedom of expression. David Holbrook writes that "Thomas' impulse is to believe in that which protects him against the truth." The true tragic process, Holbrook continues, is the recognition and acceptance of the undesirable in oneself and others; Thomas, in Holbrook's opinion, hides from this recognition behind the shield of his technical virtuosity.[3] However, many of the poems do come to terms with this recognition. One of the poems which Tindall might have called cathartic, in his terms inferior, is nevertheless clearly self-condemning and disillusioned. Hesitant about accepting maturity, the poet of "Should lanterns shine" ends strongly:

> I have heard many years of telling,
> And many years should see some change.
>
> The ball I threw while playing in the park
> Has not yet reached the ground. (p. 72)

There is, however, a felt cleverness in these last lines; Holbrook questions Thomas' honesty in playing with expressions in this way. Often the toying of the rearrangements stands in the way of the

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[3]pp. 5-6.

reader's understanding. "The diver's bell" of "I, in my intricate image" "rings out the Dead Sea scale," an obvious pun on the C-scale.

Sound and imagery eventually came to contribute to the effect of Thomas' scenes without making themselves apparent, as do these of "In the white giant's thigh":

> Teach me the love that is evergreen after the fall leaved
> Grave, after Belovéd on the grass gulfed cross is scrubbed
> Off by the sun and Daughters no longer grieved
> Save by their long desirers in the fox cubbed
> Streets or hungering in the crumbled wood.... (p. 199)

Evergreen love contrasts with fall leaved grave, an image of love among the ruins which is reinforced in the following lines by "long desirers in the fox cubbed streets" (animals inhabit deserted or ruined streets) and "hungering in the crumbled wood" (the wood is decayed, but the old appetites live on). In the first of these comparisons fall and spring coexist in the same instant. In the second the beginning of sexual love, desire, occurs alongside its culmination, offspring, present here in fox cubbed. Hungering in the third example is another form of desire; the crumbled wood pictures the end of another cycle, this time not one of conception and birth but of an entire life span.

Just as Thomas expresses these concepts through images, he also characteristically dramatizes an idea rather than explaining it in an abstract fashion. Another unchanging facet of his style, this trait also involves suggestion, with its inherent difficulty in achieving the balance necessary for effective communication. To illustrate by contrast, here are several passages which deal with the same general theme: time as an eternal Now, with all the potential and conse-

quences of an act contained within that act. T. S. Eliot, in his "Burnt Norton", from Four Quartets, writes:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable.
> What might have been is an abstraction
> Remaining a perpetual possibility
> Only in a world of speculation.

Here are comparable statements by Thomas:

> The hand that whirls the water in the pool
> Stirs the quicksand.... (p. 10)

> The oak is felled in the acorn
> And the hawk in the egg kills the wren. (p. 173)

Eliot states his meaning in abstractions, while Thomas uses images.

Simplicity of language is a consistent mark of Thomas' most successful poems, even though the complex mystical symbolism of the early poems remained a useful tool for his interpretation of experience. His individual words were always short and concrete. The obscurity of the early poems resulted from too great a condensation of meaning in his lines, and from a narrative framework based upon private experience, often confusing to the reader. For instance, an unconceived child takes a journey in "I fellowed sleep." He appears to move on three planes, that of earth first, from which he flees to the "second ground far from the stars" and meets "a ghostly other,/My mothers-eyed" (p. 31). Perhaps this is a spiritual union of sperm and egg. The third level to which he moves shows him "dreaming men" (p. 31). Whether these are the dead, sleepers' disembodied spirits, or other unborn individuals is not clear. This journey demonstrates prenatal awareness on the part of the child, implying a unity of time in which

all the circumstances of life and mortality are known already to the as yet unconceived individual. This journey is personal with Thomas; it does not seem to progress logically toward any conclusion with which the reader could become involved. The later long narratives, "Altarwise by Owl-light", "Vision and Prayer", "A Winter's Tale", and "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait", are set in the framework of universal experiences, primarily religious in nature. Thomas uses his symbolic technique to separate the experiences from the limitations of specific time or the individual identities of the actors. Though narratives, these poems were written for other reasons than simple story-telling, as "Ballad..." will illustrate.

"Ballad of the Long-legged Bait", if read literally, sounds like either nightmare or nonsense. Though too long — 54 stanzas — to be quoted in its entirety here, it tells of a fisherman on a strange voyage fishing with a girl's body on a hook at the end of his line for bait. He sails through the violence of a storm and the orgiastic violence of sea creatures drawn to the bait. The bait is left dead, and as she drifts in the water, resurrection begins. The girl seems to lead the dead out of the sea, and after them land appears through the vanishing sea. At the end of the poem the fisherman has returned to his home in the town he left at the beginning of the voyage, the same town which has appeared with the land out of the depths of the ocean.

Elder Olson finds in "Ballad..." a religious theme, a dramatization of a return to blessedness through mortification of the flesh. Resurrection of the dead follows the girl's death, bearing out this interpretation. The revival of both the girl and the town to which

the fisherman returns is a rebirth of innocence. That the fisherman's journey is redemptive is implied in stanza 3, in these lines:

> For my sake sail, and never look back,
> Said the looking land. (p. 166)

Stanzas 22 and 23 are the fisherman's reaction to the death of his bait:

> Over the graveyard in the water
> Mountains and galleries beneath
> Nightingale and hyena
> Rejoicing for that drifting death
>
> Sing and howl through sand and anemone
> Valley and sahara in a shell,
> Oh all the wanting flesh his enemy
> Thrown to the sea in the shell of a girl. (p. 170)

The symbolic journey from corruption to salvation is familiar. Thomas remakes a common myth in "Ballad...." This is the substance of Olson's praise of the poem. It is a lofty conception, he feels, not because of its religious theme but because of Thomas' construction built upon it.

W. Y. Tindall finds the poem autobiographical. His interpretation of the poem is weaker than Olson's, for he attempts to ascribe to the poem meaning that is not strongly apparent in the imagery: the pregnancy of the bait, for instance. Limiting the poem to the poet alone weakens it. At the core of "Ballad...", according to Tindall, is the story of Thomas and Caitlin, his wife.[4] Thomas' development from adolescent "wild oats" (the erotic journey) to adult domenticity (the return to the land and the town) applies not only to Thomas, but to any man, giving the poem a second, broader application.

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[4] A Reader's Guide, p. 250.

Tindall also defines a third meaning, that of artistic development: the young man seeking sexual experience is also the young poet seeking experience that will open his eyes to the world and to his own abilities and let him become a successful artist. In essence, the young poet must pass from youthful judgment of the world to the disillusioned and realistic view that comes from experience. The themes of the poem defined by Tindall are concerned with domesticity and art.

The symbolic technique makes possible the interweaving of all these levels of meaning, suggesting them all. It limits interpretation to no one of them exclusively, as a concrete vocabulary might. Tindall writes: "Carlyle called the unallegorical image a 'symbol,' a thing that conceals and reveals."[5] The allegorical image would represent one object or quality, and thereby be limited in its use. Thomas' fisherman can be, and has been, used as an allegorical image. It is not allegorical in "Ballad...", however, because the poet extends its suggestive quality by the context in which he places it. The fisherman is universally a hunter or seeker, but in "Ballad..." he cannot be said to hunt or seek one specific object or experience. The ambiguity of the bait, which is at once both female and phallic,[6] and its function as both hunter and bait obscures the fisherman's

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[5]Ibid., p. 249.

[6]In stanza 5, the bait "stalked out of the sack," suggesting aggressiveness as well as passive luring (p. 166). In stanza 14 she "nipped and dived," avoiding the assault to which, as bait, she should have passively submitted (p. 168).

role. The ambiguity of the voyage, with land emerging from the sea and the revival of long-dead ancestors (creation or resurrection?) obscures the meaning of the voyage.

Along with those symbols given private meanings, Thomas uses others which retain their public meanings. Part of Thomas' development of a private symbolism was his use of content, or other symbols, that were generally familiar, providing further orientation for the reader and further clarity for his over-all subject. The ballad stanza in which the poem is written adds to the effect of simplicity. Tindall wrote of the stanza form: "Sprung and deliberately roughened, the lines have three, four, or five stresses. The rhymes are various.... Sounds, both terminal and internal, are rich — in the manner of Wales and Hopkins."[7] Hopkins had studied Welsh poetry, Thomas had not. He had read Hopkins, however; it is possible to say that Thomas was influenced, though indirectly, by patterns of Welsh poetry.

Part of the deliberate ambiguity of some passages comes from Thomas' doubtful punctuation. Stanza 12 reads:

> ...nothing shone on the water's face
>
> But the oil and bubble of the moon,
> Plunging and piercing in his course
> The lured fish under the foam
> Witnessed with a kiss. (p. 168)

Tindall interprets these lines as indicating that the moon has become phallic, with plunging and piercing in apposition to moon.[8] Conceivably the appositive could point to the lured fish as well, who might

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[7] A Reader's Guide, p. 251.

[8] Ibid., p. 255.

follow the moon's course because the female "luring" them is controlled in her cycles by the moon. At the beginning of the journey the sun had "shipwrecked west on a pearl", after which "the moon swam out of its hulk." (p. 166) The journey is taking place under the influence of the moon. If plunging and piercing were appositives of fish, the comma following moon would be used as though it were a period, a practice not uncommon with Thomas.[9]

Some of those symbols which carry multiple meanings are church, spire, strike, and climb. Thomas gives these words private meanings in combination with their customary connotations.

Spire, for instance, is phallic in Freudian terms. Thomas' associations with the word are also phallic. "Ballad..." uses the word in stanza 19:

> Over the wakeward-flashing spray
> Over the gardens of the floor
> Clash out the mounting dolphin's day,
> My mast is a bell-spire,
>
> Strike and smooth, for my decks are drums. (p. 169)

Steeples, a variant, appears in stanza 49:

> The country tide is cobbled with towns,
>
> And steeples pierce the cloud on her shoulder

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[9]Some other instances of the comma used in place of the period occur in "Especially when the October wind":

> Caught by the crabbing sun I walk on fire
> And cast a shadow crab upon the land,
> By the sea's side, hearing the noise of birds...
> My busy heart who shudders as she talks
> Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words. (p. 19)

A comma stands for a period between the second and third stanzas of "When, like a running grave", and between lines 9 and 10 of "After the Funeral." (pp. 21 and 96 respectively)

> And the streets that the fisherman combed
> When his long-legged flesh was a wind on fire
> And his loin was a hunting flame
>
> Coil from the thoroughfares of her hair. (p. 175)

Clearly phallic in the first cited lines by association with mast,[10] in the second the word combines sexual implication with religious authoritarianism, because of the connection between church and spire, and marriage with its restrictions and obligations. The "steeples pierce the cloud",a significant image because clouds are often a part of Edenic landscape in the poems. If this can be established, then the steeple is seen to violate original innocence, a religious as well as phallic extension of meaning. Of course, as a part of the landscape, a steeple tall enough to pierce a cloud must be of monstrous proportions, an image Thomas no doubt intended to impress upon his readers and add to the magnitude of both sexual and religious oppression.

Clouds first appear in "Ballad..." in stanza 10: "A cloud blew the rain from its throat." (p. 167) Tindall sees here a young poet blowing words from his throat.[11] If Tindall's opinion is valid, then here is an instance of a cloud mirroring human traits. Similar instances appear in other poems. There is a serpent cloud in "Poem on his Birthday"; to the rejected Adam, pictured in the poem as working under a serpent cloud, Eden becomes associated with the

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[10]Tindall lists a number of male phallic symbols, mast among them, in A Reader's Guide, p. 252.

[11]Ibid., pp. 254-255.

serpent; appropriately the cloud becomes so associated. It is probably unsafe to make limiting generalizations on the nature of a symbol thus used, but Thomas seems to treat the cloud as changing its state just as man changes his under special conditions. The innocence of both fisherman and cloud are violated by the spire in "Ballad...." In "Over Sir John's Hill" a "hoisted cloud" is part of the natural landscape, but Thomas makes it seem that the cloud has been hanged, executed by the agent Death, suffering the same mortality that that is the subject of this poem.[12] The cloud of "Ballad..." might as easily be simply a part of the landscape of the storm through which the poet sails, a storm which is itself symbolic of the conflict which the voyage attempts to surmount:

> Where the anchor rode like a gull
> Miles over the moonstruck boat
> A squall of birds bellowed and fell,
> A cloud blew the rain from its throat;
>
> He saw the storm smoke out to kill
> With fuming bows and ram of ice,
> Fire on starlight, rake Jesu's stream.... (pp. 167-168)

Thus the steeple-pierced cloud of "Ballad..." may well stand for the fisherman's innocence and freedom becoming bound by religious conventions. As for the church associated with the steeple, Elder Olson has written that they represent, in Thomas' work, "lost pristine faiths", as was noted in Chapter 1, besides being female sexual sym-

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[12]Death "sails like the ship shape clouds" in "In Country Sleep." "In the White Giant's Thigh" pictures "...wains tonned so high that the wisps of hay/Clung to the pitching clouds...." Here they are landscape elements, and suggestions of height and magnitude paralleling the cloud-high steeple of "Ballad...." (pp. 185 and 197 respectively)

bols. That which is associated with churches, spires included, may share in this more personal religious meaning. There is a steeple in "Ceremony after a Fire Raid", a poem in which Thomas celebrates his religious interpretation of a tragic death, constructing a faith around that death. In one sense the cathedrals of the poem stand for an old faith through which the death is to burst, revitalizing it:

> Into the organpipes and steeples
> Of the luminous cathedrals...
> Erupt, fountain, and enter to utter for ever
> Glory glory glory.... (pp. 145-146)

Thomas uses the church in "Ballad..." to signify social mores in general, the obligation to marry in particular. "The anchor dives through the floors of a church" in the 53rd stanza (p. 176), just as the steeples had "pierced the cloud on her [the bait's] shoulder." The fisherman's experience, symbolized by the phallic anchor, is limited now by the conventions of religion and society. The church here is the institutional church, Thomas' customary use of this image. His religious poems, including "Altarwise by Owl-light," "Vision and Prayer," "A Refusal to Mourn," and "A Winter's Tale," do not mention churches. In "There was a Saviour", however, Jesus' life and teachings are enclosed within church buildings and formal rites. "The churches of his tears" occurs in this poem along with "lairs and asylums of the tremendous shout" and "jails and studies of his keyless smiles." "Ceremony after a Fire Raid", as has been discussed, has "luminous cathedrals", which are institutionalized literally, for they are the ruins of buildings in a bombed city.

The institutional church is by nature restrictive, and it is this quality, rather than any particular sect, which Thomas emphasizes when

he uses the term in poetry. The poem beginning "It is the sinners' dust-tongued bell claps me to churches" depicts a rite led by Time, a priest with a cloven foot. The rite is a corollary of a worship service, and stands for the ritual of life process which is controlled by time. This confining quality is predominant in the church of "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait." The phallic anchor does its piercing only through the sanction of the church.

Strike and its variants occur in "Ballad..." as moonstruck in stanza 10, starstruck in stanza 30, and in this line from the last stanza: "Good-bye, good luck, struck the sun and the moon." (p. 176) Tindall finds these uses of strike to purport being stricken, as with disease. The moonstruck boat is affected by the moon with lunacy or poetic inspiration, according to Tindall. Shipwreck might be recalled, because it has already occurred in connection with the moon:[13]

> The sun shipwrecked west on a pearl
> And the moon swam out of its hulk. (p. 166)

"Star-struck Venus" in Tindall's view is the Virgin;[14] struck would mean affected here in the sense of made pregnant. The validity of this interpretation depends upon the whole of Tindall's argument of the poem: the girl has become pregnant, trapping the boy into adult responsibility. Struck must be explained in terms of star-struck, however:

> Venus lies star-struck in her wound
> And the sensual ruins make
> Seasons over the liquid world. (p. 171)

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[13] A Reader's Guide, p. 254.

[14] Ibid., p. 259.

Venus, goddess of erotic love, lies star-struck, echoing "Sin who had a woman's shape/Sleeps..." of stanza 28 (p. 171). This use of struck suggests sleep or mesmerism, and is more consistent with the context than the idea of pregnancy.

Tindall points to the effect of finality in "Good-bye, good luck" of the last stanza:[15]

> Good-bye, good luck, struck the sun and the moon,
> To the fisherman lost on the land.
> He stands alone at the door of his home,
> With his long-legged heart in his hand.

Striking is like the striking of the hour, a reminder of the passing of time, a signal of an end or a beginning. "Twice spring chimed" in "Altarwise by Owl-light" has just this implication. The entire passage from this latter poem reads:

> We rung our weathering changes on the ladder,
> Said the antipodes, and twice spring chimed. (p. 81)

Here chiming is a way of marking time and indicating the change of seasons, or weathers. Weathers, to Thomas, were also the stages of process in man.[16] Time is death's vehicle and an omnipresence in the

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[15] Ibid., p. 264.

[16] "I see the boys of summer" has "chiming seasons" (p. 2). "Shall gods be said to thump the clouds" and "The spire cranes" (pp. 52 and 95 respectively) use strike and chime to indicate process. The gods of the first poem are made of stone: shall they "drum" or "chime"? Can they have life process? The carved birds of "The spire cranes" may not "blunt their striking throats against the salt gravel", they may not participate in natural life. Striking produces bluntness, a figurative statement of the wearing away of life by time. The chiming is ominous in "It is the sinners' dust-tongued bell":

> The clocked and dashed-down spire
> Strikes the sea hour.... (p. 92)

Ruin marks the march of time.

earlier poems. In the later work death becomes less ominous. The images Thomas uses to portray his early attitude toward the passage of time were changed as his outlook changed. The early poems show a predominant use of striking as a signal of doom. Thomas brings further meanings for the word to the writing of "Ballad..." It means affected or affecting in a broader sense, and marks an end of one period of the fisherman's life and the beginning of another. It suggests a cycle, a "death and entrance."

Chiming, churches, and spires overlap, both in literal and connotative relationship. Each has different properties, while maintaining a general connection with the image of a church building. Their presence in "Ballad..." serves to foreshadow the consequence of the journey, and to represent that consequence symbolically. Striking suggests the passage of time, signifying change from one condition to another. The connotation of affected adds strength to this interpretation. The image of the moonstruck boat appears early in the poem, foreshadowing the change which will take place. That change is represented by the church, which becomes a controlling force. The spire, while it accentuates the authority of the church,[17] also seems to parallel the spiritual ascension of the fisherman climbing his bait's hair. Spires of churches were intended to direct the eye toward heaven. The spire does not stand in isolation

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[17]"Chimes cheat the prison spire" in "The spire cranes." Chimes fly from the spire in two senses: the spire produces them (a sexual allusion perhaps, for the spire is phallic), and the chimes fly in the sense of fleeing: they are not bound to the spire as are the carved birds. Restraint in connection with the spire recalls restraint in connection with churches.

as an image; in its piercing function it occupies approximately the same position as the fisherman would have in climbing her hair. The implication may be that of formalizing individual religious experience.

Olson has written that while climbing is sexual with Freud, with Thomas it indicates spiritual ascension.[18] When the fisherman clings to the hair of his bait and climbs in "Ballad...", this would hardly be the sexual act, for conception would already have occurred, according to Tindall, and in any event the metamorphosis of sea into land has begun in this part of the poem, a return to Eden that is a form of religious experience better paralleled by spiritual than by sexual climbing. Olson's opinion about climbing is substantiated by others of the poems. "Into her lying down head" and "Unluckily for a death", poems having to do with sexuality, do not mention climbing, but in "The conversation of prayer" a man climbs to his love in her high room, not amorously, but in the fear that she will be dead. "The climbing grave" of "Altarwise by Owl-light" must be the womb because of its "three dead seasons", making a total of the nine months of pregnancy:

> First there was the lamb on knocking trees
> 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.... (p. 81)

The womb with its dead seasons can be compared to Donne's view of birth as an entrance into death. This condition of life as essential death, a consequence of birth and thus of the womb, is what Jesus by

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[18] p. 6.

his sacrifice "horned down with skullfoot and the skull of toes." Climbing here is embryonic growth, an extension of the concept of increase and related to spiritual growth. Climbing seems to be joined with resurrection in Thomas' thinking. The boy of "Ballad..." climbs to spiritual rebirth through his bait, in conjunction with the resurrection of the land and the dead. According to Tindall, the girl's pregnancy is the resurrection of the dead, for their physical features and the circumstances of their lives will be repeated in those of their descendants.[19] It is the literal resurrection of the dead, if Olson's reading is preferred. The climbing grave of "Altarwise..." may be, then, a resurrecting womb.[20]

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[19]Tindall's equation of birth with resurrection is consistent with the cyclical aspect of experience, which may explain his reason for the interpretation. The poem, however, does not support the idea. Tindall reads "graveyard in the water" (p. 170) to mean the womb, whereas the dead are raised from the graveyard which is the sea. The sea gives up its dead literally in "Ballad...", making the "graveyard" more consistent if interpreted to mean the sea.

[20]That a climbing sea could have one down (sonnet V of "Altarwise...", p. 82) seems paradoxical:

> A climbing sea from Asia had me down
> And Jonah's Moby snatched me by the hair....

Tindall, who equates sea with womb with tomb, reads this line to mean that the mother restricts the child, not in the sense of exercising authority over him, but in the sense that the womb restricts. His discussion is on p. 263 of A Reader's Guide. His explanation is a likely one, especially in light of the following line. The whale which seizes the speaker is mythic from two sources: Jonah was prevented from running away from God by a whale in the Old Testament story. The whale was an agent of fate. Moby Dick of Melville's novel is equally inescapable, and has been said to stand for fate, which decrees that man will consume his life in the pursuit of goals that are beyond his ability to reach. Perhaps, then, these two lines might be read "I was a prisoner of mortality, and fate had me by the hair." Jesus is the speaker here, for he was mortal, and foreordained (in orthodox Christian belief) to crucifixion.

"Ballad of the Long-legged Bait" displays Thomas' mature ability to control his technique when writing symbolically about experience. A narrative line is clear, and the action can be visualized, though certainly in exaggerated form. The poet does not "question claws from a mouse's bones" in "Ballad...": jokes, rearrangements, and puns are absent here, with the possible exception of country tide for countryside in stanza 48. Here, though, the pun underlines the reversal of the positions of sea and land, and is not merely an attempt to shock or amuse the reader.

Thomas is not experimenting: the terms most common here have been tried in other poems. The sounds of the lines are part of the ballad framework, and are not the product of words assembled for the purpose of resonance alone. Sound and clear imagery combine in

> Round her trailed wrist fresh water weaves. (p. 174)

Tindall cites stanza 13, recommending that it be read aloud for full realization of its perfection:

> Whales in the wake like capes and Alps
> Quaked the sick sea and snouted deep,
> Deep the great bushed bait with raining lips
> Slipped the fins of those humpbacked tons. (p. 168)

"Ballad..." is one of the mature poems which demonstrate that Thomas could make his words carry a considerable load without rendering them incomprehensible. In that sense, simplicity is also a mark of this mystical and symbolic poem.

CHAPTER III

SYMBOLS OF THE ART-LIFE THEME

The art-life theme was one for which Thomas never found a resolution; indeed, a search for resolution was not his purpose when using the theme. As a comparison of values it would remain a moot question. Typically, however, Thomas did not merely discuss insoluble problems with his poems; rather he applied a theme to a given situation, combined it with other themes, or made it contribute to a wider idea or theme.

As Thomas used it, the art-life theme was bound up with the man-made versus the natural. Natural energy, for instance, parallels man-made energy in the explosion images of "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower"; both machines and people function mechanically in "All all and all the dry worlds lever," "My world is pyramid," and "I, in my intricate image"; art-forms are coupled with life-forms to heighten the contrast between them in "Our eunuch dreams" and "After the funeral." The root of these contrasts is nature versus man. In a sense this basic theme is a paradox in Thomas, who is regarded as celebrating unity in man and creation.

Thomas is not the first artist who has felt that man belonged in creation through the biological link produced by common physical needs and make-up, and by mortality: the unity themes grow out of this conviction. However, neither was he the first to recognize that

this very fact of man's existence gives the tragic note to his estrangement from creation. The conviction of original sin was doubtless an early explanation for the feeling of belonging to, yet being rejected by, creation. Thomas is a religious poet inasmuch as he deals with this paradox.

The problem of communication is also involved with the art-life theme. Ackerman writes that "Thomas was deeply disturbed by the contrast between the vitality of living things and the utterly different vitality that belonged to art."[1] Ackerman was writing of one of the poet's concerns in The Map of Love, published in 1939, but as early as the poem, "Shall gods be said to thump the clouds", written in 1933, Thomas was addressing carved gods: "Let the stones speak with tongues that talk all tongues." (p. 52) Art objects have a type of life and communication of their own, but one that is intriguingly different from that of the natural world.

Communication problems also arise from the estrangement of man from the rest of creation. The poet of "The force that through the green fuse..." is

> dumb to tell the crooked rose
> My youth is bent by the same wintry fever. (p. 10)

The mood of reconciliation which Olson finds in the later poems is reflected in part by man-made and natural objects both speaking:

> We rung our weathering changes on the ladder,
> Said the antipodes... (p. 81)

> All the fishes were rayed in blood,
> Said the dwindling ships. (p. 167)

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[1] p. 85.

"Especially when the October wind", from 18 Poems, represents creation conceived of in terms of words ("Some let me make you of the vowelled beeches" p. 19). God "burned sea silence on a wick of words" (p. 83) in "Altarwise by Owl-light", restating Genesis' "Let there be light" and "In the beginning was the Word", from the Gospel of John. Vernon Watkins has called attention to Thomas' attitude toward his own verbal creation, with reference to the writing of "The Orchards" in 1935:

> The writing of the story, the very pencil with which it is written, becomes the symbol of exultation and of destruction ... [Dylan is] a writer distrusting, not himself, but himself as writer.[2]

The art-life theme in all these respects mirrors Thomas' early pessimistic outlook, and yet looks forward to the resolution of tension that comes with the work of his mature style.

The impact of the contrast between art and nature originates in certain assumptions connotatively present which the contrast calls up in the reader's mind from past experience. An art form, being non-living, has no potential and no process as understood in terms of living things, and is not subject to their change or decay. Direct, personal communication is not possible: art communicates after a fashion, but that communication is not one of mutual stimulation and response. Thomas generally sees the substance of art objects as unpleasant in comparison with living things: while living creatures will be supple and warm, artificial objects tend to be hard, cold, and stiff. Such description concerns the plastic arts, the examples of

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[2]FitzGibbon, p. 189.

which are the art objects present in the poems. Art objects are dry; moisture is a property of living things. These contrasts are understood, and produce responses in the reader, arising perhaps from familiarity with the legend of Midas, perhaps from the kinetic response to the pleasantness of living bodies, and certainly from Thomas' presentation and choice of types of art forms.

Producing a negative prejudice in the reader does not seem to be Thomas' purpose in drawing unpleasant physical contrasts. The differences pointed out above are tensile differences; a visual similarity remains. Tension is produced in the image by the multiple associations of similarity and difference; the vitality of the art-life contrast depends upon this ambiguity. Nowottny's discussion of metaphor in The Language Poets Use emphasizes the importance of conflicting forces in metaphor. Metaphor is typically thought of as a form of comparison; it is, however, most effective when it balances the like and the unlike:

> ...much of the impact and interest of metaphor in poetry depends on our sense of a gap between the two members of the relationship: the object and the terms in which it is alluded to (known as the 'vehicle' of the metaphor). ...there has to be a similarity between two things sufficient to hold them together and a disparity between them sufficient to make their encounter exciting....[3]

The effectiveness of a metaphor depends upon close conflict and interplay of connotations. Thomas' early poetry had been built upon some metaphorical situations that mixed too great extremes to allow for the subtlety that is a mark of his mature style. The man-

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[3]p. 58.

machine trope is absent in the later work, for instance. Such a comparison is almost didactic: man functions automatically, because he is incapable of responsible action or free will, and is controlled by set behavior patterns. This comparison is a literary cliché, and for this reason cannot suggest fresh insight. There is no balance of the like with the unlike: unpleasant similarity far outweighs any other properties of the image. The "poor nerves so wired to skull" of "My hero bares his nerves" (p. 11) is a superficial graft of one of John Donne's images,[4] a pastiche rather than an assimilation. In "All all and all..." mechanical parts correspond closely to parts of the human body: "ribbing metal," "the bridal blade," "the jointed lever." (pp. 38-39) Earth itself functions mechanically. The poem pictures an

> earth that turns the ashen
> Towns around on a wheel of fire. (p. 38)

People are called worlds, thus introducing the microcosm-macrocosm theme. The sexual act is mechanical in "I dreamed my genesis" and "My world is pyramid" respectively:

> motor muscle on the drill, driving
> Through vision and the girdered nerve. (p. 33)

> Rotating halves are horning as they drill
> The arterial angel. (p. 35)

"Stroke of mechanical flesh on mine" of "All all and all..." (p. 39)

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[4]Donne's poem "The Funerall" employs a conceit of hair compared to nerves. The lines echoed in Thomas' poem are these:

> For if the sinewie thread my braine lets fall
> Through every part,
> Can tye those parts, and make mee one of all....

H. J. C. Grierson, ed., Donne's Poetical Works (Oxford, 1912), I, p. 58.

individualizes the act, and recalls Thomas' youthful anxiety over sex.

"Love on a reel" of "Our eunuch dreams" is also mechanized love-making. This poem uses an artificial device that is closely related to human beings: the motion picture. Images of living, or once-living, people move on the screen. In the later poems Thomas tends more and more to contrast living creatures with modified living things, achieving a different, but equally as sharp contrast as that affected by a parallel between art objects and natural creatures or people. "Our eunuch dreams" is one of the earliest published poems, dating from 1934, and antedating those which parallel man and machine, also written during 1934. In one respect this poem is simply a part of Thomas' early experimentation with method; in another, however, it presents the first treatment of a thread of ideas which Thomas was to pick up later.

The machine poems discussed earlier have common origins in Thomas' highly subjective and mystical concepts of prenatal awareness and life process. "Our eunuch dreams", on the other hand, is not an "I" poem but an "us" poem: it is comparatively easy to understand because it deals with a public image, the motion picture. Resurrection is one thematic idea which is brought up in varied forms in other poems. The motion picture is the agent of resurrection here:

> The shades of girls, all flavoured from their shrouds,
> When sunlight goes are sundered from the worm...
>
> ...the gunman and his moll,
> Two one-dimensioned ghosts, love on a reel,
> ...When cameras shut they hurry to their hole...
>
> We watch the show of shadows kiss or kill...
>
> This is the world...

> The dream that kicks the buried from their sack
> And lets their trash be honored as the quick. (pp. 16-17)

The poem poses the question of what is essential, permanent reality:

> Which is the world? Of our two sleepings, which
> Shall fall awake when cures and their itch
> Raise up this red-eyed earth? (p. 17)

The question is not directed toward the comparative value of films and the daylight world; these two lines at the end of part 3 are critical to an understanding both of the poem and the use of motion picture imagery:

> The dream has sucked the sleeper of his faith
> That shrouded men might marrow as they fly. (p. 17)

Thomas was to write strikingly similar lines in "In Country Sleep", in 1947:

> He [the Thief, death] comes to take
> Her faith that this last night for his unsacred sake
> He comes to leave her in the lawless sun awaking...
> Naked and forsaken to grieve he will not come. (p. 186)

The faith of "In Country Sleep" is the consoling thought of the approach of death. Such a thought is seldom consoling in the early poetry, and yet in "Our eunuch dreams" it appears to be the only logical explanation: the two lines quoted above from "Our eunuch dreams" may be paraphrased in this way: "the dream has robbed the living man of his belief in the oncoming of restful death, for the dead are seen to rise again to life." This poem foreshadows Thomas' fascination with resurrection, taken up first as organic metamorphosis in "I dreamed my genesis" and "And death shall have no dominion", and in the later work as part of religious imagery as well. "Vision and Prayer", written in 1945, has a supplicant who is afraid of resurrection. "In the White Giant's Thigh" (1950) imagines women buried for years

to be longing not for remembered sexual play, but for the children which might have been born of those unions. The birth of children begins the cycle again, and is a resurrection of sorts for parents and ancestors.

Thomas' greater success in "Our eunuch dreams" stems from his reliance upon his own imagination for the movie images,[5] as opposed to the triteness of the machine imagery with which he would experiment later; and for the metaphoric situation of the poem, for the movie images are not in themselves thematic. Beyond them is the further meaning, as has been shown. The poem ends cynically. "We" takes on the function of God, bringing about resurrection by motion pictures:

> For we shall be a shouter like the cock,
> Blowing the old dead back... (p. 17)

This poem does not anticipate the reconciliation of the later work, but it is important as an example of the art-life theme used to further another theme, rather than to focus attention on itself, as do the machine images.

Henry Treece has done an interesting and informative reading of "Because the pleasure-bird whistles",[6] a poem written in 1939. This is one of the denser poems, made so by Thomas' exaggerations and accumulation of metaphors. It also incorporates an art object as a vehicle for another theme. The poem begins with the arresting lines

> Because the pleasure-bird whistles after the hot wires
> Shall the blind horse sing sweeter? (p. 86)

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[5]Motion pictures were a childhood enthusiam with Thomas, and became a means of support during the war years, when he wrote scripts.

[6]pp. 148-150.

The first line, Treece explains, refers to the practice of blinding larks in order to improve their singing. The same operation applied to a horse would, obviously, not accomplish anything constructive. The conclusion is that any principle, though appropriate in one case, will not necessarily be appropriate in another. The bird, though a living thing, has been changed, "worked on" as an artist works on natural material to create an art object. The bird is now an "art object", its condition having been altered for the purpose implied by the term pleasure-bird, which is used instead of the generic name for the bird. The bird is more effective for pleasure in altered form, whereas the horse is useful left in its natural condition. Again, the art-life image is simply illustrative, as the poet tells his reader in these lines:

> Convenient bird and beast lie lodged to suffer
> The supper and knives of a mood. (p. 86)

These creatures, as Treece explains, are convenient for my, the poet's, mood and purpose. As Treece interprets the theme, the past has truths to teach the present, and because Lot's wife was turned to salt for looking back, shall the same thing happen to Dylan Thomas, the poet?

"After the funeral" may well be Thomas' most sophisticated use of the art-life motif. The poem dates from 1933, though its final form was not completed until 1938. Again, the art-life contrast is a contributing theme; the symbols are closely interwoven with the subjects of the poem. Here is the complete text, from pages 96-97 of Collected Poems:

After the funeral, mule praises, brays,
Windshake of sailshaped ears, muffle-toed tap
Tap happily of one peg in the thick
Grave's foot, blinds down the lids, the teeth in black,
The spittled eyes, the salt ponds in the sleeves,
Morning smack of the spade that wakes up sleep,
Shakes a desolate boy who slits his throat
In the dark of the coffin and sheds dry leaves,
That breaks one bone to light with a judgment clout,
After the feast of tear-stuffed time and thistles
In a room with a stuffed fox and a stale fern,
I stand, for this memorial's sake, alone
In the snivelling hours with dead, humped Ann
Whose hooded, fountain heart once fell in puddles
Round the parched worlds of Wales and drowned each sun
(Though this for her is a monstrous image blindly
Magnified out of praise;her death was a still drop;
She would not have me sinking in the holy
Flood of her heart's fame;she would lie dumb and deep
And need no druid of her broken body).
But I, Ann's bard on a raised hearth, call all
The seas to service that her wood-tongued virtue
Babble like a bellbuoy over the hymning heads,
Bow down the walls of the ferned and foxy woods
That her love sing and swing through a brown chapel,
Bless her bent spirit with four, crossing birds.
Her flesh was meek as milk, but this skyward statue
With the wild breast and blessed and giant skull
Is carved from her in a room with a wet window
In a fiercely mourning house in a crooked year.
I know her scrubbed and sour humble hands
Lie with religion in their cramp, her threadbare
Whisper in a damp word, her wits drilled hollow,
Her fist of a face died clenched on a round pain;
And sculptured Ann is seventy years of stone.
These cloud-sopped, marble hands, this monumental
Argument of the hewn voice, gesture and psalm,
Storm me forever over her grave until
The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry Love
And the strutting fern lay seeds on the black sill.

The framework of a religious ceremony, the funeral service which has just been completed, presents one thematic idea: the sacramental nature of all creation. All aspects of the natural world are involved: the sea, woods, plants, people, and animals. Creation is unified in holiness. Thomas frequently parallels the human and the natural world, and in "After the funeral" he does so with human, plant,

and animal life. The "stuffed fox and the stale fern", both standard paraphernalia of the bourgeois Welsh parlor, are at once part of the physical surroundings and part of the theme, for both are dry and dead. Like the lark of "Because the pleasure-bird whistles", the fox and fern are artificially altered natural creatures. Compared to the early machine imagery, the fox and fern run a close parallel to living things, increasing the tension of comparison. Because such ornaments are common in Welsh middle-class homes, dryness is made by implication typical of Welsh middle-class life. This connection is established in part by the presence of fox and fern in the parlor, traditionally a room reserved for social formalities and not for day-to-day living. The words stuffed and stale reinforce the unpleasant connotation. The stuffed fox first appears in the line following "the feast of tear-stuffed time." The funeral feast is a community tradition. Stuffed connotes eating one's fill; "tear-stuffed time" is then "tear-filled" time or "tearful" time. Other public forms of mourning are mentioned: "the teeth in black," "spittled eyes," "salt ponds in the sleeves," and these are also, by association, without life of their own, but merely conventions of mourning. The aunt's "hooded, fountain heart once fell in puddles round the parched worlds of Wales and drowned each sun"; here the antitheses of wet and dry, fertility and infertility, tell that the aunt's warmth and humanity surrounded the people with whom she came into contact. Worlds, again, are people. The drowned suns may be the sun symbol as Thomas used it in the early poems, an agent of death, because, as it marks the passage of days and seasons, it is marking time, which is also an agent

of death. Such a sun would be consistent with parched worlds, for the sun causes parching. When rain comes, the sun is blotted from view, metaphorically drowned. Thus spiritual and physical drought is made an implicit part of the community involved in the funeral of Ann Jones. The aunt herself is, in death, only a copy of life: the poet calls her a "skyward statue" — one bound for heaven — "carved from her." She, the fern, and the fox make a trilogy of human, plant, and animal life, reinforcing the theme of unity.

The dead Ann Jones is a grotesque figure: she is "dead, humped Ann", with the "wild breast and blessed and giant skull", with "scrubbed and sour humble hands" lying in a cramp. The circumstances of mourning are grotesquely personified: she lies in a "fiercely mourning house in a crooked year." These are appearances, and the storming poet wants to turn away from emphasis upon the death and the artificiality of the funeral observances and celebrate the living love. The contrast is carried by that wonderful picture of the closing lines:

> ...until
> The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry Love
> And the strutting fern lay seeds on the black sill.

It is the natural world to which the poet appeals: the "ferned and foxy woods" become a "brown chapel." In the woods the ferns and foxes would be alive, suggesting fertility which further adds to the contrast. The poet calls "All the seas to service", continuing the parallel movement of both human and natural worship. The aunt's virtue would be its own liturgy, and "Babble like a bellbuoy over the hymning heads."

Ackerman has written that Thomas developed in The Map of Love a theme that had concerned him for some time, that of art and religion

as illusion.[7] Institutional religion might be a more appropriate term than simply religion, for as he matured, Thomas turned more and more toward religious themes, using even the forms of institutionalized worship, which he applied to his own celebrations. Here he is more concerned with bursting out of the forms of mourning and giving voice to that which would more perfectly celebrate the death than would the funeral service: her love and virtue, and the unnaturally preserved fox and fern. Articulated speech in this instance belongs to the religious ceremony; the natural world, which represents vitality and fertility, must find itself a voice. This is grotesquerie of another type. It is true, however, that in this poem the natural world has movement. "Sing and swing" suggest more movement than "hymning heads." Movement signals the hypothetical revival of the fox and fern: the stuffed lung would twitch, and the fern strut. Ferns do not strut, but Thomas did not like to use hackneyed words, and may have picked strutting in an effort to affect surprise.

Perhaps Thomas was distrustful of ceremonies because they assigned a restrictive pattern to a religious experience or event, externalizing it into a fixed shape rather than letting it grow from within the worshipper. This seems to be his appeal to the child of "Ceremony after a Fire Raid", that the death of the child be allowed to develop in significance within each participant in the "ceremony":

> ...forgive
> Us your death that myselves the believers
> May hold it in a great flood...

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[7] p. 84.

> As the grains blow, as your death grows, through our heart.
> (p. 143)

In part 3 of the poem,

> The masses of the infant-bearing sea
> Erupt, fountain, and enter.... (p. 146)

A significant event enters ruins, the ruined cathedrals along with all the ruins of bombed London: this is a symbolic statement of the inner growth of religious experience.

No artist can escape assigning patterns to the objects and experiences which are the materials of his art, for selection and arrangement are typical of art. As the artist chooses natural objects or elements of experience to invest with meaning, he essentially creates order out of chaos. Thomas sees in this process, however, a destruction of natural vitality. The grotesque mourning of "After the funeral", echoed in the ruins of bombed London in "Ceremony...", has still another form in "Altarwise by Owl-light", in which newsmen "cover" the Nativity,[8] and their irrelevant questions, in sonnet IV, seem to be a satire on theologians' attempts to interpret the events and significance of the Nativity:

> What is the metre of the dictionary?
> The size of genesis? the short spark's gender?
> Shade without shape? the shape of Pharaoh's echo?...
> Which sixth of wind blew out the burning gentry?...
> What of a bamboo man among your acres?
> Corset the boneyards for a crooked boy? (pp. 81-82)

The Holy Family is posed and photographed, an obvious shaping of the action. Afterwards, the photographs, according to newsroom practice,

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[8]This interpretation is based upon that of H.H. Kleinman in The Religious Sonnets of Dylan Thomas (Berkeley, 1963), pp. 51-53.

are criticized, selected, cut, and discarded:

> Stills snapped by night in the bread-sided field,
> Once close-up smiling in the wall of pictures,
> Arc-lamped thrown back upon the cutting flood. (p. 82)

The newsmen of sonnet IV have limited the event to their own specifications. A great deal is implied in this image: general misunderstanding of the magnitude of the event, which would involve the mass of humanity; the shaping of a theology based upon the event, involving religious scholars; the emphasis upon certain aspects of the event, which would involve the various sects of Christianity and their dogmas. The term satire might be inappropriate in discussing the newspaper reporting device which Thomas uses in sonnet IV, because satire presumes the use of a detached method, and the poet is a participant in "Altarwise by Owl-light": also satire is implicitly a form of judgment, and it appears that Thomas is not judging, but is rather presenting the event and its consequences. Here, as in "Ceremony...", the art-life theme is not an end in itself, but a means of representing one situation within a broad range of meaning.

Acceptance of physical death, a mark of Thomas' mature style, begins to appear in Twenty-five Poems, with such works as "And death shall have no dominion" and the "Altarwise..." sonnets. It is a theme, perhaps the dominant one, of "After the funeral." The forms of the dead are unnatural, as are those embodied in the fox, the fern, and the woman "seventy years of stone", but only when death itself becomes the focus of attention. The funeral service, for instance, revolves around the physical death, but the poet has come to see death as a part of natural process and thus a part of holiness.

Perhaps this is the "true joy of the long-dead child" which sings "burning in the sun" in "Poem in October", (p. 115) and the basis for the celebrations built around dead children in "A Refusal to Mourn..." and "Ceremony...." The emotional contribution of art-life images to this idea in "After the funeral" becomes both "horizontal", in the parallel of the dead and living foxes, ferns, and people; and "vertical", in the poet's desire to storm "over" her grave, to be "Ann's bard on a raised hearth", calling her virtue to "babble...over the hymning heads." This symbolic inundation of sterile forms by natural virtue may be another "drowning" of "parching suns." At any rate, in "After the funeral", acceptance and optimism take precedence over the artificial and the liturgical.

"After the funeral" is one demonstration of Thomas' ability to make symbols widely suggestive, and to create symbols from his own subjects, as he did with the fox and the fern. Meaning is found through the symbols rather than in them, for the contrast of the artificial and the natural embodies an attitude which becomes part of the emotional working out of themes, and a means through which the reader is brought to an understanding of the poems.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE LATER POEMS

Thomas has stature in the literary world as a lyric poet. He was not didactic: he did not preach, he "sang." Though the presence of Christian symbols and ritual imagery in his later poetry is obvious, he never wrote narrowly doctrinal verse; it would be more appropriate to call him a poet of religious experience than a religious poet.

Constantine FitzGibbon deals briefly with Thomas' lack of formal denominational affiliation, for after the poet reached maturity, there was none. The biographer is hesitant about passing judgment, and reminds his reader that Thomas'

> use of biblical and Christian ritual imagery would seem to me no more to prove his Christianity than his use of astronomical imagery indicated that he was an astronomer or that his repeated references to birds make him an ornothologist.[1]

The beauty, uniqueness, and validity of the poems are not affected by whether or not they grew out of Thomas' personal convictions. It has been established, though, that the biblical allusions and ritual forms grew out of the same fascination with sound and form, the iconic quality of words. As FitzGibbon remarks,

> It would be nearer the truth to suggest that he felt, as a poet, the beauty and glory of the divine concept as revealed to, and by, the great English religious poets, Donne, Vaughan,

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[1]FitzGibbon, p. 230.

George Herbert, Hopkins.[2]

Being moved by the beauty of a concept is probably similar to Thomas' childhood response to the rhythms and hortatory vigor of children's rhymes, which impressed him through their expression and not through their meaning. He describes this early feeling in the Poetic Manifesto:

> The words "Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross were as haunting to me, who did not know then what a cock-horse was nor cared a damn where Banbury Cross might be, as, much later, were such lines as John Donne's "Go and catch a falling star, get with child a mandrake root," which also I could not understand when I first read them.[3]

Many of the poems could be called religious in that they have as themes various concepts of the nature of man. The themes of man-world unity and of death as a part of natural process might be called religious. Those in which Thomas consciously employs what FitzGibbon calls biblical and Christian ritual imagery, however, are those which raise the question as to overt religious meaning for the poems. These are the poems in which Christ appears, a biblical event or sacrament is enacted, a personal religious experience takes place, or in which ceremonies are celebrated: "Before I knocked," "And death shall have no dominion," "In the beginning," "This bread I break," "A Refusal to Mourn," "Altarwise by Owl-light," "A Winter's Tale," "There was a saviour," "Vision and Prayer," "Ceremony after a Fire Raid," and "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait." Only half of these, seven to be exact, allude to a specific biblical event, and even these do not adopt

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[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., p. 324.

a Christian viewpoint. None address God, though the prayer of "Vision and Prayer" is made to Jesus. None conclude with praise or acknowledgement of benefits received from God; there is no doctrinal Christian conversion. Affirmation ends "Ceremony...", but a dead child and not the persons of the Trinity has been the center of the ceremony. All the poems stress mankind, generally in the person of Thomas himself. The poet uses elements of the Christian story and of liturgical worship just as he uses any source that will provide him with a framework or symbols that will carry meaning. Christianity dramatizes for Thomas a truth, that man needs saving. Other truths have been discovered in other traditions: the mythology of the Old Testament, like that of the Greeks, dramatized cyclical experience, experience common to all men, and so gave Thomas images of universal reference.

Early poems referring to Christ or to biblical events used these as representatives of other events. "Before I knocked" and "This bread I break" expressed unity, using biblical terminology. The former poem is a monologue by Jesus, beginning before his conception and continuing after his death. The Incarnation thus becomes a device for a theme of time unity, all time being contained in the consciousness of Jesus. "This bread I break" uses the act of communion, which is already an equation of the bread and wine with the body of Jesus, to carry the view of a greater unity than merely that of Christian dogma. The natural and the human are paralleled in the elements of communion ("My wine you drink, my bread you snap" p. 45), and the simultaneous existence of potential and fulfilment links the still-

living body with the prepared food. Resurrection occurs in "And death shall have no dominion", but it is a resurrection of the physical body through the elements of nature. The decomposition of the body releases the elements, which begin another cycle: resurrection becomes metamorphosis. Thomas always identifies himself with the Christ-figure, a constant factor in the poetry. In general all the religious poems contain the same features of style, the difference lying in proportion and in their relation to each other.

The common themes of all these poems, and which remain vital to the fabric of all the poems, are the unity themes, and the themes of time and of childhood innocence. In "Altarwise by Owl-light" and those religious poems which follow, the experience itself becomes the subject. "A Winter's Tale," "Vision and Prayer," "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait" have to do with primary religious experience. "Ceremony after a Fire Raid" and "A Refusal to Mourn" are rituals, in that they show stylized activities, such as dances or dramas sometimes connected with public worship. The first four poems, which are long narratives, dramatize discoveries of truths; the latter two celebrate recognized truths, which have become widely understood.

Religious experience in the poems is not specifically Christian, as has been pointed out, but follows a pattern which is consistent with all such occurrences within all organized religions. Solitude is one characteristic of this kind of experience. Spiritual leaders and reformers of all faiths — Moses, Buddha, Christ — have retreated for periods of time into a wilderness, returning with revelation and a purposeful direction to their lives. The poet of "Vision

and Prayer" and "Ballad..." is alone; in the latter poem he is on the wilderness of the sea.

These periods of retreat are times of hardship for those who endure them; they are "trials by fire" from which the men emerge purified. The fisherman of "Ballad..." is tried by temptation, as was Jesus. His bait, a girl on hooks, is thrown to the sea. She is "sin who had a woman's shape", representing "all the wanting flesh his enemy." The man of "Vision..." "wrestles with the angel" and is finally blessed. He had at first prayed in the name of the damned that Jesus allow them to remain dead, salvation being too frightening a responsibility.

Because these experiences are intensely personal, Thomas avoids a liturgical vocabulary here and in certain other poems, for the formal language of ritual would suggest the enactment of community worship or group activity, and not private meditation. Robert Adams, comparing Crashaw's overblown conceits with Thomas' Wild West, mythological, and Apocalyptic imagery of the "Altarwise by Owl-light" sonnets, overemphasizes the sensationalism, and finds in both poets a similarity of intention: "The point of view is explicitly that at which Crashaw only hinted — that Incarnation represents a vicious joke played by a malicious God on Christ, Mary, and mankind."[4] If this is true, it is a point of view singular among the religious poems. Adams distrusts, much as Holbrook did, Thomas' welter of images,

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[4]"Crashaw and Dylan Thomas: Devotional Athletes," Dylan Thomas: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. C. B. Cox (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), p. 136.

his lack of a central image, and the resulting confusion. On the other hand, Elder Olson, Jacob Korg, Edith Sitwell, William Empson, and H. H. Kleinman are among those critics who see in the sonnets a monumental poetic undertaking. Olson and Korg, for instance, agree on the basic point that the difficulty of the sonnets stems from the complexity of images and symbols, and not from any attempt to be facetious or to create a deliberate chaos. "Two-gunned Gabriel" and the "old cock from nowheres" God are images that strongly reinforce the argument of the vicious joke on mankind, but the argument breaks down in the lines such as "Unsex the skeleton this mountain minute" and "Suffer the Heaven's children through my heartbeat" from sonnet VIII (p. 84). As has been indicated, slang and contemporary allusions do not necessarily represent iconoclasm in a religious poem. Thomas uses modern, common conventions just as he used conventions from the past; it would be a prudish notion that only prescribed and formal reverence was appropriate when referring to the Deity. This factor may be one reason for his use of terms like "all glory's sawbones" and "Jack Christ", also of sonnet VIII. Yeats once wrote that only the true believer dare blaspheme, and it is likely that, seen in this context, "two-gunned Gabriel" and the "old cock" represent the poet's expression of the way in which modern worldliness would accept the story of Christ's birth, life, and mission, an interpretation not inconsistent with the newspaper reporters of the earlier sonnet.

The hodge-podge of allusions in the sonnets, though perhaps overwhelming, nevertheless serves a purpose. Thomas' personal revelation is symbolic and mystical, and the poet suits his method

to his matter in the sonnets by constructing a representational account of the events rather than a literal one. According to Korg:

> What is called mysticism in literature has as its subject a mixed cosmos, a point of intersection between natural and supernatural orders. In this context language cannot maintain its conventional meanings; its terms are rendered ambiguous, twisted, and perverted.... 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.[5]

A mystical approach is not new in the poems, but the motives are. Thomas used common religious experience as his framework in the long narratives instead of the obscure originality of "Before I knocked." Here is the Resurrection from "Vision and Prayer":

> The woundward flight of the ancient
> Young from the canyons of oblivion!
> The sky stride of the always slain
> In battle! The happening
> Of saints to their vision!
> The world winding home! (p. 159)

The "ancient young" are the long dead who are raised to new life. "Woundward" shows the gathering of the resurrected to Christ, who suffered wounds. "The sky stride" is ascension, with a curious suggestion of Valkyries carrying slain warriors to Valhalla. "The world winding home" states again the universality of the event, and connects the idea of cyclical process with religious experience, for home, ostensibly a point of origin, becomes here a destination, implying a full circle. If home is a noun in this line, and has the

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[5] p. 28.

meaning "world-winding home", the aspect of universality remains, with the added suggestion of winding as encircling, enforcing the inescapable effect and consequences of the event. Winding may also imply a winding sheet in time of death. The mystical quality of this image derives from the notion of home, an abstraction in comparison with the concrete house, being made a material entity, capable of enfolding, like a wrapping or another person. "The happening of saints to their vision" is an obvious rearrangement of "the happening to saints of their vision." The distortion of the expected order is not a syntactical distortion, however, as have been so many experimental phrases from the earlier poems. What has been rearranged is the expected account of an accurrence; the reader expects that actions happen to a person or object. Thomas has reversed that direction. The implication of this distortion is that the vision has an existence of its own and is a stable entity, and that those who have visions come to the visions, as they would come to a physical location in order to acquire material supplies of some sort. The reader's assumption of a line of division between the spiritual and the physical worlds is broken in this line, which is one of what Korg has called "points of intersection between natural and supernatural orders."

With the long narratives comes an increased interplay of structure with over-all meaning. In his introduction to The Religious Sonnets of Dylan Thomas, Kleinman calls attention to Thomas' intention to expand the sonnet sequence: Thomas had intended to write more and make it a much longer work. How much he had intended to add leads to speculation that he had perhaps wanted to produce a "liturgical" num-

ber of sonnets: 12, for instance, or 24, or some multiple of seven.[6] This is at best conjecture, but one of Thomas' comments on "Ceremony after a Fire Raid" shows that this poem was to have been an actual liturgy, with the last stanza being the music, the voluntary. In a letter to Vernon Watkins, Thomas wrote that "It really is a Ceremony, and the third part of the poem is the music at the end. Would it be called a voluntary, or is that only music at the beginning?" "Vision and Prayer" is composed of 12 stanzas; the shape of the stanzas has been the subject of much critical guesswork. Certainly the shape has to do with the total expression of the experience. Here is Korg's conclusion:

> The shape of the stanza in Section 1 seems to reflect the idea of "opening" which prevails in it, both in relation to birth and to spiritual awakening. In Section 2, the convergence of forces or reversal suggested by the stanza form corresponds with the conflict of impulses which is the subject. It also reflects (more particularly by its rhythm), the withholding, followed by the yielding of assent.[7]

Considering the mystical approach to the subject, this interpretation seems most consistent with Thomas' intentions because it does not attempt to equate the shape of the stanza with literal, finite objects. The shape is symbolic and the contribution is emotional.

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[6]Critical opinion is divided concerning the cohesion of the individual sonnets of the "Altarwise..." sequence. Olson's imposing exegesis (chapter 6, "The Sonnets") in his The Poetry of Dylan Thomas, is based upon the idea of progression in the movement of heavenly bodies and in man's movement toward death. Marshall Stearns and David Daiches see at best a loose organization in the poems. H. H. Kleinman sees the sonnets as an orderly progression, following the events of Christ's life from the Nativity to the Resurrection. W. Y. Tindall also considers the poems to be chronological, but following Thomas' life and not that of Christ.

[7]p. 153.

The words ballad and tale in the titles of the remaining two long narratives imply universality by giving a sense of a folk-tradition to the poems. The ballad stanzas in which each is written further add to this connotation, though the actual number of stanzas is of no consequence, "A Winter's Tale" having 26, and "Ballad...", 54. In these ways, Thomas subordinates the organizational, interpretational aspect of religious experience to the primarily personal and emotional.

When the liturgical poems were written (those concerning community expression and not personal response), they were constructed on a narrative line, as were the long poems. This time the narrative was that of formal ritual. "Ceremony after a Fire Raid" begins with the fact of the individual death, celebrates the significance of the death as a unifying factor between the child and mankind and as a part of natural process, and closes with what Thomas called the voluntary. Compared with "A Refusal to Mourn", which was conceived with much the same intention, "Ceremony..." is weak because it is too explanatory. In the same way in which a worship service will follow its accustomed pattern and arrive at the same conclusion of praise, whether or not all the worshippers have followed in spirit, so "Ceremony..." works through its themes, then concludes with a burst of music, as though an affirmation logically followed the burial of Adam and Eve in the "cinder of the little skull" and the frustration of the child's individual potential. "Myselves the grievers" identifies Thomas, or the speaker of the poem, with all the mourners, and by extension with the mass of mankind, just as the baby is identified with them. Section 2 loses the lyric, chant-like quality of Section 1 because the poet

drives his point home, rather than dramatizing it:

> I know the legend
> Of Adam and Eve is never for a second
> Silent in my service
> Over the dead infants. (p. 45)

An organic integration of all the elements is lacking here, an integration which is found in "A Refusal..."; "Ceremony..." uses a liturgical progression of events, but not of thought. "A Refusal..." is less self-conscious. In fact, the poet implies that he is creating an anti-ceremony: he does not intend to pray ("let pray the shadow of a sound") or eulogize ("murder the mankind of her going with a grave truth"). This poem is much like "After the Funeral" in intention: like it, "A Refusal..." resists the sterility of liturgical form. From page 112 of Collected Poems, this is the entire text:

> 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.
> 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.
>
> 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.

Not content to simply deny, both "After the funeral and "A Refusal to Mourn..." reconstruct an interpretation of a death. Neither follows closely the form of the funeral service echoed in the background. The three parts of "Ceremony...", on the other hand, approximate the divisions of Christian liturgical worship: part 1 corresponds to a call to worship and repentance ("Myselves the grievers grieve...a child of a few hours...Begin with singing...Forgive us your death" p. 143); part 2 resembles the message or sermon, which may account for the more literal language; part 3 is affirmation and praise. By comparison, there is only a suggestion of liturgy to add to the quality of religious celebration in "A Refusal..."

The long, allegorical periodic sentence which opens "A Refusal..." has the nature of a creed. Creeds, simply defined, are statements of a codified body of beliefs. Creeds impose an order, however, upon what might otherwise be a chaotic situation. A need for order was, indeed, the basis for the growth of creeds in the early Christian church; they afforded agreement on basic points of doctrine for the early church, which as it grew was spreading farther and farther away from any possible central authority.

The first sentence of the poem assumes, in credal fashion, certain conditions. The "darkness" of the first stanza is a "mankind-making, bird-, beast-, and flower-fathering and all-humbling darkness" (the addition of punctuation and hyphens clarifies the reading considerably). The unity of all creation is implied in the combined references to plants, animals, and men; "all humbling" recalls such cliches as "death is the great leveller"; and the morning of creation is

suggested simultaneously with the concept of the "last days", when all things will return to their elemental dust. The darkness is active, both creating and destroying, and seems to assume the role of God in this poem. Certainly there is no God here in the customary anthropomorphic sense. The darkness which contains both beginning and apocalypse also represents cyclical process in the world, in that it seems to contain or to be the force which sets process in motion. The speaker of the poem says that when darkness so ordains ("tells with silence the last light breaking") he will have to

> enter again the round
> Zion of the water bead
> And the synagogue of the ear of corn.

The word <u>again</u> is important, and underlines the cyclical nature of the occurrence. The child's death reduces her to dust and unites her in condition with all the dead; this most significant part of the poem emphasizes the repetitive quality of life. The child's death is metaphoric, but not mystical. There is no mysticism in "A Refusal...", with the possible exception of the use of <u>darkness</u> to represent God.

The difference in technique becomes apparent when the creation of "A Refusal..." is compared with that of "In the beginning", one of the earlier poems. The obscure symbolism of "In the beginning" can be explained, but it does not present coherent images of physical events or persons and is therefore confusing. The "bough of bone across the rooting air" of stanza 1, and "the pale signature/Three-syllabled and starry as the smile" of stanza 2 (both on page 27), imply parts of creatures or a person, and not a whole individual. "The substance forked which marrowed the first sun", from stanza 1, recalls Blake's

print of God striking the circumference of the world. God is also absent from "In the beginning", in the sense of a Person creating. Force and cause are present, but they are as fragmentary as the evidences of a human being implied by the smile and the bough of bone. A "mounting fire...set alight the weathers", "the word flowed up", "the substance forked." The smile of light across the empty face" probably refers to the "face of the deep" in Genesis, and not to a human face; a smile upon a metaphorical face would be metaphorical as well. "The blood that touched the crosstree and the grail" echoes the doctrine that Jesus was a participant in creation, being a Person of the Godhead. In this case, the blood, another fragmentary suggestion of a living presence, would represent the whole person. It still may not be safely assumed, however, that God and not a Force is the mystical creator in this poem. The "thought" of the last stanza suggests an active intelligence, but throughout the poem a person is never seen, and no closer allusion is made to a supernatural God.

"A Refusal..." pictures "the still hour...of the sea tumbling in harness", which is concrete, and yet seems to present a paradoxical situation: "still hour" is hardly a fit setting for a wild animal straining at its fetters, which is the image of the sea here. The emphasis at this point is on order, however; the boundaries of the sea have been assigned, and in spite of its energy and potential destructive force, it is restrained and order established. This second idea is also echoed in the child's death, for in spite of the seemingly chaotic pattern of the individual life, which is as unpredictable as the fire which killed the child, the process of all life is uniform

and orderly. The archaic verb form is come emphasizes a ceremonial quality in the opening statement.

From a purely syntactical point of view the opening sentence is credal because of its periodic structure. Basically the sentence says "Never shall I let pray the shadow of a sound or sow my salt seed." Never receives emphasis by its placing in the initial position, while the inverted syntax of the entire statement lends a hortatory quality to the poem. Conversationally the poet would say "I shall never...", but the focus of attention in this case would be I, and the poet's motive is the depersonalization of the event. He interprets through himself, but keeps himself in the background just as he abstracts the child, looking not at her individual suffering but at the wider meaning of her death. This is an additionally ceremonial aspect; the priest or minister leads his congregation in worship, and attempts to direct their attention beyond themselves and beyond himself. The poet is priest or bard in "A Refusal..." as he was not in "Ceremony...": "Myselves the grievers grieve" emphasizes, before everything, himself as participant.

Three conditions are put upon the poet's mourning. He will not mourn, he says, until 1) darkness tells the last light breaking, 2) the still hour is come of the sea tumbling, and 3) "I" must enter again the water bead. The first two have been discussed as parallels to the child's death. The poet does not mention himself until last in the order, suggestively de-emphasizing himself in the order of importance in creation. Explanations of the phrases "round Zion of the water bead" and "synagogue of the ear of corn" have brought out the

poet's intention to identify himself in substance with the elements of the natural world. He is referring to his own reabsorption into dust when he speaks in this way of entering water and the ear of corn. It might be possible to argue that these are also images of resurrection, because entering an ear of corn recalls the earlier phrases "my second struggling from the grass" (p. 37) and "heads of the characters hammer through daisies" (p. 77), from "I dreamed my genesis" and "And death shall have no dominion"respectively. This third idea is also repeated in the condition of the child's death, for she is "deep with the first dead", and "robed in the long friends, the grains beyond age." Cyclical life and the unity of the individual with all time and all mankind is made here not through overt statement, as in "Ceremony...", but by repetition within the structure of the poem itself.

In another sense the opening statement is made credal, because instead of qualifying its assertion, it simply sets forth certain things as being true or conditional. The Apostles' Creed calls God "maker of heaven and earth" and Jesus "his only son Our Lord." These are statements made out of belief and faith, and not out of scientific certainty. Another creed calls Jesus "very God of very God", another assumption impossible to prove. The first sentence of "A Refusal..." makes eschatalogical assumptions about darkness (or God, if they are the same here), and about the nature of mankind, as if the poet were qualified to do so, which he would be from the bardic point of view. Within this sentence, such superficial references to objects with religious associations as Zion, synagogue, pray, and sackcloth do not add to the feeling that a religious observance is being held, as they

allow compression of thought. The "valley of sackcloth" might be reworded as "depths of despair", but emotional overtones are present in the former phrase that the latter misses because of the Old Testament accounts of the custom of wearing sackcloth. Sackcloth suggests a more active demonstration of grief than that to be found at a conventional funeral; weeping and wailing, an Oriental display of emotion, is a part of the wearing of sackcloth. It is an ancient custom, adding to the effect of timelessness about this child's death during the London bomb raids.

The second sentence, with its "mankind of her going" and "stations of the breath", reinforces and stresses the sacramental in human life. "Mankind of her going" compresses the ideas of death as natural and human. "Stations of the breath", a clear derivation from "stations of the cross", adds to the ceremonial aspect of the poem, without restricting the reference to a Christian meaning. As stations of the cross record chronological events of the crucifixion of Jesus, so stations of the breath suggest a similar chronology leading to death in life process.

Within this framework the child remains abstracted: she is London's daughter, identified with a segment of mankind rather than with an individual family. The child is related to both "the grains beyond age" (dust) and "the dark veins of her mother" (the living body of her own flesh). In the coupling of these images is the further expression of her involvement in all mankind, living and dead. "The long friends" repeats the idea of death as a natural condition. The grave worm is "friendly." The entire line, "robed in the long

friends", recalls Donne's sermon, Death's Duell, and its exaggerations of the state of the body in the grave, with worms spread under and around the body. Donne calls worms Mats, Carpets, and the Canapye.[8] Thomas would not have had to stretch Donne's idea far in order to describe a body as being robed in worms. The friendly grave worm is Thomas' own idea, however, though Thel's encounter with the worm in Blake's "Book of Thel" is suggested. The friend is familiar and intimate; the humanness of the child's death places her in a communal relationship with the worm. Thus the vocabulary signifies the ritual, with no explanatory statement.

"Unmourning water", a phrase created by the poet, underlines the normality of death by suggesting death's effect upon, and importance to, nature. Both connotations of the prefix "-un" are combined in unmourning: the meaning of not, as in unhappy; and that of reverse or erase, as in undo. The water does not mourn, and with its unperturbed and unceasing flow erases mourning as the child's body is reunited with the natural elements. "First dead" and "first death" are abstractions: the dead child remains the focal point of the poem. If "first dead" is a nonspecific reference to Adam and Eve, it is skillfully subordinated to the child. As she shared life with the rest of mankind, so she shares the death common to all. This is the quiet affirmation of "After the first death, there is no other." Here, as in "After the funeral", the poet turns away from the pain of the individual death (Ann Jones died with her "fist of a face

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[8] The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne, ed., Charles M. Coffin (New York, 1952), p. 585.

clenched on a round pain") and looks at the death as a part of the process of life.

That Thomas was attracted by various methods, from Christian liturgy to the fable and ballad, and that he never settled on a single form or symbolism, makes FitzGibbon's "beauty of the concept" explanation the most likely when accounting for the poet's interest in the symbols and ritual of Christianity. William Empson has called Thomas religious views "pessimistic pantheism."[9] Thomas was certainly a poetic pantheist; if all created things were holy, all could contribute to the iconic conception of experience. This is overwhelmingly true of the later religious poetry.

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[9]FitzGibbon, pp. 229-230.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study has tried to make clear that Thomas' development of a private mythology or symbolism cannot be considered independently of other factors which served to make up his mature style. Controlling factors such as the use of external rather than personal experience, use of narrative, and use of themes of individual interest to Thomas directed the development of metaphor, imagery, and symbol. Certain factors of his style did not change, as has been pointed out, from the beginning of his writing of poetry to the end of his career. The growing effectiveness of his poetic language was essentially a growing control of the symbols and what they came to imply.

Important to a discussion of the private symbolism in Thomas' work is his practice of employing a word to which he had added, for his own purposes, a new meaning. Far from being a self-contained device, an eccentricity of Thomas' style, this may be one of the more important contributions of his experimentation with words and with method, for it stretches the suggestive quality of words. When Thomas added meanings, he was not obscuring the words; he was simply calling into play meanings for which the words had potential, but which had not yet come into common use. The word climb, discussed in chapter 2, implies spiritual ascent, a meaning peculiar to Thomas, and yet one which re-

quires no stretch of the imagination, for such a suggestive sense is well within the range of the act of climbing which is pictured literally by the word. The act of climbing is colorless, being nonspecific. Thomas makes reference to a particular sort of climbing, just as Freud did when he saw in the word associations with the sexual act.

Thomas' statement on the importance of narrative movement in a poem indicated his awareness of the need for a point of reference and orientation in his poetry, the essential story-telling quality and dramatic nature of poetry, and the vital addition of narrative to the sound of poems. The growth in narrative movement marks a shift in style, a movement toward greater clarity.[1]

A movement toward clarity does not necessarily mean restriction to a literal meaning. It means that the symbolism becomes consistent. The adoption of a narrative framework placed certain understandable restrictions upon the arrangements of symbols used and made possible a greater uniformity in them. Narrative, which is descriptive rather than interpretative, required only those symbols and images which would contribute to the reader's ability to interpret: Thomas became less didactic, and so less obscure. By letting an experience speak for itself, he allowed the reader to both identify the experience and apply to it his own understanding, instead of following Thomas' mystical and symbolic thought processes through an experience created by, and often

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[1]FitzGibbon quotes Thomas' replies to the New Verse questionnaire of November 11, 1934, from which these remarks are taken, p. 142: "The more subjective a poem, the clearer the narrative line. Narrative ...satisfies what Eliot...calls 'one habit of the reader.' Let the narrative take that one logical habit of the reader along with its movement, and the essence of the poem will do its work on him."

for, Thomas himself.

Religious imagery, and that based upon art versus life, served as vehicles for Thomas' basic themes of life process. The fox and fern of "After the funeral" were a case in point, as discussed in chapter 3. Though not common symbols in literature, they combine antitheses which the reader can clearly comprehend: an appearance of life over against actual death, and the natural versus the human. They are used to suggest resurrection and the unity of all living things. Because art versus life has immediate bearing on the problem of death, Thomas' early morbid preoccupation with death led him to draw severe contrasts between the natural person or creature, and that which was without life. Hence, the machine imagery of certain of the early poems, and the destructive force created by man as opposed to the creative force that induces growth, leads to death, and perpetuates the life cycle. These images were altered as Thomas' acceptance of death as a necessary part of the process developed. The art objects became more meliorative in form: the reader is in sympathy with the fox and the fern of "After the funeral."

As was stressed in chapter 4, those poems constructed around Christian imagery do not necessarily stand for Thomas' personal beliefs. FitzGibbon quotes Thomas' sketch for "In Country Heaven", which shows the poet's God weeping over the condition of earth, but doing nothing. To create such an image of God, the poet must have felt its validity, or its potential as poetic material. In a broad sense, this may also have been a religious conviction, because it has to do with what are generally regarded as religious questions: the

nature of God, the nature of man, and the significance of living. There is no dogma attached to such a conviction, however, and when Thomas uses imagery based upon Christian ritual and liturgical forms, he is not directing attention toward a Christian interpretation of experience as much as he is indicating the ritual quality of existence. Ritual is stylized activity, such as dancing. Inasmuch as life occurs in cycles and is thereby predictable and orderly, it becomes also a type of ritual. Liturgy, on the other hand, is the act of worship. Thomas creates this for himself in the later religious poetry, such as "Ceremony after a Fire Raid", in which the literal form of a Christian worship service is filled in by Thomas' vision of process; and "A Refusal to Mourn", which corresponds to a credal statement of belief.

Thomas' effects on poets who have written since his death cannot be taken as reliable measurements of his worth as a poet. His imaginative, and at times sensational, imagery would attract imitation regardless of the literary worth of the poems. There has been considerable duplication of his method, however, in just such concerns for word sounds and compression of imagery. It is well to make this cautioning point, that not all lines which sound like Thomas can be said to derive from conscious imitation of him, just as Thomas himself declared he had never read Hart Crane, though Crane's style contained some strikingly similar elements, a coincidence Treece mentions. Though poets who have experimented with word sounds, conceits, and syntactical rearrangements do not all trace their poetical anscestry back to Thomas, they nevertheless demonstrate a concern with these

elements in poetry, and thus show an affinity with Thomas' methods and what he regarded as important in poetry. A poem called "5:00 O'clock", by John Frederick Nims, appeared in the February, 1966, edition of the Atlantic Monthly, and shows a compressed and descriptive style. Several lines from the first stanza illustrate its technique:

> ... — as some
> Torero in his bravery, gold and red,
> Ignites with a playing wrist that ton of plumb
> Thunder, all testy rump, hot hovering head —...

Besides assonance and alliteration, these lines show a selection of parts to represent the whole in the description of the bull. The animal is never mentioned as such, but only those parts which would produce the greatest impression of movement or mass. "Hot hovering head" is more reminiscent of Hopkins than of Thomas, but "ton of plumb thunder" is not unlike the "humpbacked tons" (whales) of "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait."

Eve Triem tries for concentrated images in her poem "The Hostage", published in the July, 1966, issue of Poetry: these are her first two stanzas:

> Neither inn nor prison the three-tiered cube of wood
> soot-and-snowstained, has a military look,
> like Castle Pomfret a place for hostages.
>
> He lies in a bed by the window, watching
> the spin of king's-yellow leaves. Invisible points
> of an invisible crown pierce to the bone.

Miss Triem's imagery is much more obvious than Thomas' might be in a similar poem ("Love in the Asylum", for instance, for the general subject is the same). "The three-tiered cube of wood" is thrown into a degree of ambiguity by absence of punctuation which might indicate

apposition to prison. Punctuation is also omitted in the last line of the first stanza, where it might be used to clarify "a place for hostages."

Ellipsis is no new device in poetry. Thomas used it to gain ambiguity, and an interesting echo appears in Peter Allan's "Tortoise — April Sunday", in the Spring, 1966, edition of Poet Lore. Part 1 of the poem is quoted here:

> Under stone, the tortoise rose;
> His burrow flakes as teetering
> He claws up
> Its shrunken gallery
> To phlox. His rough-
> Cut hand cleaves air
> Blinks down the garden
> Where (sleep hangs from him
> Like weed) he does not see
> Who clips the hedge;
> And whose trowel cruelly parts
> Dawn's risen worms.

A "rough-cut hand" may cleave the air, but it could not "blink down the garden." The reader's ability to comprehend the action described here is not hampered by the omission of a subject for the verb blinks; this is compression of the same type as that achieved by the use of a single body part to represent the whole: extraneous matter is excluded, and suggestion makes up for the loss of literal detail. Thomas' "In the beginning" suggested the presence of God in ambiguous combination with natural elements in such lines as "One smile of light across the empty face." Smile and face suggest a human presence, but it is a smile of light, and thus metaphorical, while face recalls the equally metaphorical face of the deep of the creation in Genesis. Only that part of God which was manifested in a given act of creation would be relevant and so deserve mention in the poetic

description of the act. This type of compression, which Thomas used successfully, is being tried apparently in the most contemporary work of recent poets. None of these have been preoccupied with the fantastic conceit, but have shown a serious attention to the sound and concentration of the word itself, a concern much like Thomas'.

Thomas' poetry deserves reading for the enjoyment and mental stimulation of his style. It deserves study for the reasons already given: his experiments with word sounds and symbolism have opened but by no means exhausted new resources of poetic language. In terms of individual symbols, Thomas' birds are extensively and variously used. The bird is a familiar symbol of the spirit; Thomas uses it in this way in "After the funeral", in the image of the "four, crossing birds." He refers to the legend of the phoenix in "A Winter's Tale." The hawk is an agent of death in "Over Sir John's Hill",killing other birds, who represent humanity. God is an "old cock" in "Altarwise by Owl-light." This is doubtless based upon cock as sexual slang, and on the rooster who wakes sleepers at dawn; again, an image of resurrection. The "holy, stalking heron" of several poems ("Over Sir John's Hill," "Poem on his Birthday," "Poem in October") echoes the same bird of Yeat's play, Calvary, and seems to suggest an esoteric detachment, perhaps of the priesthood, the poet, or God himself. Birds have voices more obviously than do other animals; this may have been a factor in Thomas' use of the image, for they often function either to bring or to suggest messages or truths.

A great deal remains to be done in interpreting Thomas' use of syntax; indeed, the whole framework of the poems. Thomas' ambiguity

and the way in which he achieves it would make an informative study. Elements of ambiguity have been mentioned: confusion of parts of speech, omission of an auxiliary word or a conjunction, punctuation. Syntactical derangements produce an almost musical syntax in lines such as these from "Our eunuch dreams":

> The shades of girls, all flavoured from their shrouds,
> When sunlight goes are sundered from the worm,
> The bones of men, the broken in their beds,
> By midnight pulleys that unhouse the tomb.

The expected order of the lines is distorted. They would be more literally clear like this:

> The shades of girls, the bones of men, the broken
> in their beds, all flavoured from their shrouds,
> When sunlight goes are sundered from the worm
> By midnight pulleys that unhouse the tomb.

As Nowottny has said, concentrated study in this area of criticism is only beginning; a workable and comprehensive terminology is still lacking. Much of this type of criticism is encompassed by general explication, which has been concerned primarily with explanations of individual terms without emphasis upon the subtler emotional contribution of syntax, diction, and metaphor. Linguistic explication would add to the judgment of Thomas and to the understanding of his individual symbolism.

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