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The Love Song of Dylan Thomas

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THE LOVE SONG OF DYLAN THOMAS

SEVERAL MONTHS before Dylan Thomas' death, New Directions gathered together in one beautifully printed and definitive volume all the poems he wished to preserve.¹ Included are nearly all of the poems from his six previously published books of verse. Two dozen of the ninety poems in this book make it sufficiently clear that Thomas is one of the greatest nature poets in the language and, along with Yeats and Joyce, one of the indubitably great poetic talents of modern times.

The popular notion that he represents a romantic revolt against the classicism of Eliot certainly needs qualification. He is a Romantic who has absorbed into his swinging poetry all the niceties and intricacies of the metaphysical poets. His poetry, like theirs, abounds in conceits, allusions, and puns—qualities we seldom associate with the Romantics. Like Eliot he sees the world as plagued by a prevailing spiritual sterility; Eliot's "hollow men" are matched by his "cadavers," his "summer boys in their ruin." But whereas Eliot, in his dry, intense, pontifical tone, chose to whiplash our civilization with his sermon on spiritual dryness, Thomas, not like a pontiff but like some ancient bard of beginnings, can usually be found by the sea's side, alone, chanting a druidic prayer of rebirth.²

¹ *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas (1934-1953)*. New York: New Directions, 1953. 199 pp. \$3.75.

² Remembering *Gerontion*, Thomas says of his monument to Ann Jones:

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.

The spiritual "house" in which he places modern man is not a dry, decayed one but rather a wet, fiercely mourning one.

Poets no longer regard the image as some type of desirable ornament, some glittering stone which, when judiciously set, lends sparkle to an otherwise dull and prosy line; the image, it is recognized, must be used as a fundamental element in a poem's structure. But with Thomas we can go so far as to say that in his early poems the interrelationship of the images is the poem. "It consciously is not my method to move concentrically round a central image," Thomas wrote. "I cannot either . . . make a poem out of a single motivating experience":

A poem by myself *needs* a host of images, because its centre is a host of images. I make one image—though 'make' is not the word; I let, perhaps, 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.³

If this statement is checked against the early poetry, it will be seen, I think, that analysis was seldom more tightly saddled to fact. The first stanza in *Collected Poems* can serve as example. It can also serve to point toward some of Thomas' most significant themes and poetical devices.

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

Here we certainly do not have any "single motivating experience" upon which a poem may be built. Rather we do have "a host of images," conflicting, contradicting each other, one insti-

³ The full statement can be found in *Dylan Thomas*, by Henry Treece. London: Lindsay Drummond Ltd., 1949. pp. 47-48.

gating and being affected by the next, a dialectical struggle for survival.

The *boys of summer* (the children, fresh, alive, joyous, care-free on a burgeoning green and sunny countryside) are *in their ruin* (shock! they are not summer children at all; they are grown up, and something terrible has happened; the images conflict temporally; they also contradict violently as statement of condition). They *lay the gold tithings* (the golden promise, the golden seed: either seed for planting in the earth or sperm for the womb) *barren* (shock! there is no planting; the seed goes to waste; there will be no fruit). *Setting no store by harvest* (they do not prepare for a harvest now; they do not "store-up" so that they can have a harvest in the future; they do not "set store," i.e., believe, in a possible harvest) they *freeze the soils* (onanism; the seed falls cold on the ground).

There in their heat (the movement begins again; *heat* recalls *summer*; *heat*, too, like animals in heat) *the winter floods of frozen loves they fetch their girls* (hot and cold; not floods of love but *winter* floods of *frozen* love is what they bring to their girls; *fetch* rings foul and ugly) *and drown the cargoed apples in their tides* (the *cargoed apples*, the *gold tithings*, the seeds of promise, are drowned in meaningless lust; the image of shipwreck, total loss, the ship's now-ruined cargo, the apples, bobbing on the sea—this image arises to lend significant ambiguity to the line).

The succeeding stanzas of the poem, in fresh and novel imagery, spring from the same motivating center, the same "central seed." In rough paraphrase, the poem states through the interrelationship of its images that the world is topsy-turvy; that men are perverting the natural processes of birth, growth, life; that these men pervert nature itself in their perversion. Significantly the poem ends on a note of exhortation.

The perversion is often specifically sexual in its expression; the imagery is startling; but this should not blind us (as it has, evidently, already blinded some of Thomas' critics) from seeing the

sexual symbolism in its broader context. Sexuality, after all, symbolizes life, not vice versa. Thomas is certainly aware of this. For example, in a later stanza of *I see the boys of summer*,

In spring we cross our foreheads with the holly,
Heigh ho the blood and berry,
And nail the merry squires to the trees;
Here love's damp muscle dries and dies,
Here break a kiss in no love's quarry.
O see the poles of promise in the boys

when he writes *Here love's damp muscle dries and dies*, he intends much more than a mere shrivelling-penis image. He means, by legitimate extension, that the dampness (rain, river, sea—any water) of life, which is regenerative, is *love's* muscle, love's regenerative power, and that that power, that muscle, dries and dies when men wantonly crucify the living love (*nail the merry squires to the trees*—note the orgiastic, homosexual undertones of this stanza). *Poles of promise* reinforces this image, but, again, they represent also antithetic poles of promise and unfulfillment, of fruition and sterility, of life and death. In the first stanza the men who cast their seed upon the ground are much more than symbols of perverse sexuality: their act symbolically represents an outrage against the natural forces of life, against the perpetuation of the living race of men. It was, of course, because of the latter that Onan was punished.

One grows tired of hearing about Thomas' "sexual obsessions," or about his *early* sexual obsessions. What we get in the early poems, where the sexual concern is strongest, is an abundance of striking sexual image artfully employed to lend force and significant ambiguity to certain lines. It is probably true that no other poet has so consciously, so extensively, and, in most instances, so successfully put Freudian symbology to work in the creation of his images. But it is certainly true, one hastens to add, that one will not find a single sexual image in all of Thomas' poetry which functions solely as sexual image. Both sex and death, his two al-

leged obsessions, *are* important elements in Thomas' poetry—but, for the main part, only insofar as they relate to life, or more specifically, to a possibility of life. I would say *spiritual* life, but I fear misunderstanding. Thomas at no time has been near conversion. He believes in churches as he believes in witchcraft, as he believes in the sea or in the loud hill of Wales.

Perhaps I should cling to the simplest and truest word expressing Thomas' quest, namely, love—though the word is alien to most contemporary vocabularies. In an age when our intellectuals and our poets have busied themselves with depicting the impossibility of contemporary life, Thomas, starting from the bottom of the pit, was desperately clawing his way upwards toward "some measure of light," toward a life in which love can exist. This search for love is the dominant and binding theme of all his poetry. It is, in fact, the underlying theme of all the great Romantics, a theme which will always be necessary in a materialistic culture such as our own.

In many of the early poems, however, the images are not adequately contained within their "imposed formal limits." The images well up until they create a swollen stream, which surges along with scarcely a glance at the changing formal barriers. The stream runs over these barriers, knocks them down, and carries them along like broken branches on a flood-tide. This form-destroying flood often runs on from one poem into the next—a fact which Thomas himself recognized and soon brought under control.

In the later poetry not a small part of that control has been secured by a subtle, though significant change in his method of composition. Thomas tells us that the poems have at their center a host of images. But if they are not motivated by a single *experience*, they do have a central, motivating *idea*. The shift in method, as I see it, has been to concentrate more on the manifesta-

tion of this central idea, to yield less to the releasing of the host of images. His thematic material is thereby restricted (not narrowed) and formal unity is achieved. Something of a compromise between a "host of images," contradicting and breeding each other, and a "concentric movement round a central image" can be detected in as early a poem as *After the funeral (In memory of Ann Jones)*. In this poem, one of Thomas' best, what is central is the idea of the two Anns, the real Ann and the monumental Ann—and the attempt to make of Ann Jones a monumental symbol of love. Not a "host" but a selection of images is summoned by this two-part idea. In the war and post-war poems this selective process is even more in evidence.

The movement from image to image, after all, must be meaningful (in great poems, we like to think, inevitable) both from a temporal sense within the poem itself and from what we might call a cumulative sense; that is, as a sequence of evocative images which operate psychologically upon the reader. In the early poems we get much overlapping of images in both senses. What Thomas calls "the simple thread of action" winds and twists upon itself like a coiling serpent, and soon we can hardly tell the head from the tail. Another way of stating this syntactical problem caused by the warring images is that the early poems (with a few notable exceptions) have no precise beginnings, middles, and ends. Like the coiled serpent they are all middle, or, perhaps more accurately, all beginning. They fail to get by Aristotle's rock.

But not all of these early efforts are marred by equivocal syntax. One of these, *The force that through the green fuse drives the flower*, is a masterpiece of pure craft. It is so intricately perfect, so delicately balanced, that one feels a discomfiting sense, almost of impropriety, when attempting to expose some of its inner workings. Here is the poem:

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

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
 My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
 Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
 Turns mine to wax.

And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
 How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
 Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
 Hauls my shroud sail.

And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
 How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
 Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
 Shall calm her sores.

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
 How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
 How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

There is an exquisite blending of rhythmic movement, sound, and sense in the first stanza. *The force*, like a charge of dynamite, jerks its way underground through the harsh consonants of the opening lines, exploding three times, on *drives*, *Drives*, and *blasts*. There is a lingering fall on *is my destroyer*, and then the last two lines are a sad, slow, halting chant through the long, drawn-out vowels. The hard "d" sounds of the opening lines give way to the soft "t" sounds of the closing line. This stanza I would cite as a fine example of Thomas' "auditory imagination" at work. It has "the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word," which Eliot indicated (in *The Use of Poetry*) to be requisite for an auditory imagination. One thinks of Eliot's own

Then at dawn// we came down// to a temperate valley,//
 Wet,// below the snowline,// smelling of vegetation;
 (*Journey of the Magi*)

(also a "d" to "t" transition) where the heavily accented, halting phrases (indicated by my divisions) enable us to *hear* the halting descent.

In Thomas' poem, note the beautiful craft in which the surge and recession of its lines manifests itself; how the charge of the first part of the line, in rising rhythm, is skillfully arrested and then detonated on an explosive verb; how the evenly paced distich beginning *And I am dumb . . .*, like a heavily weighted refrain, anchors and holds fixed the driving force of the opening lines.

A sense of stasis results which, perhaps even more than the denotative words themselves, establishes the tone quality of the poem. It is an amazingly effortless balance that Thomas has accomplished: on the one hand violently active, the drive of time, creating and destroying; on the other profoundly passive, the tragic figure of man gripped by titanic forces.

Thomas feels this driving force to be omnipresent in nature. And since he himself is as much a part of this natural world as the rocks, the grass, or the sea, he feels operant in his being the same force that blights the rose, that *blasts the roots of trees*. Unlike Marvell, Thomas does not give us "a mind's relation to nature" (Empson). Nor is he, like Wordsworth, a poet who *looks at* nature, an *observer* whose heart with pleasure fills when gazing at the daffodils. Thomas' attachment to nature is primitive, elemental. His is an inside perspective. The sun shines and the moon moves *within* his world. His poetry gives us (to use contemporary jargon) inside information.

In the later poems, "torn and alone," it is in nature that Thomas seeks a possibility of love. Nature becomes the hallowed place for almost mystical holy communion.

It has already been claimed that Thomas' poetry records the

struggle toward a life in which love can exist. The essentially tragic position in which man finds himself (Donne's dialectical truth—that in our birth begins our death) is for Thomas the unalterable context in which the struggle must take place. This dialectical tilt of mind, to borrow a Thomas phrase, informs all his verse. In *The force that through the green fuse*, Thomas sees the truth—that in our birth begins our death) is for Thomas the universal churchyard, but one common grave." His diction liberally partakes of Donne's "shrouds," "sheets," and "worms." But even in this, one of the darkest of his poems, Thomas insists on the thin shaft of light that love casts in the general gloom.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.

Time the destroyer, Thomas' ubiquitous "gentleman" of births and deaths, has here, like a blood-sucking leech, fastened his lips to the fountain-head of life. The *fountain head* is also Christ on the cross (*Time's nerve in vinegar, Sonnet #8*), the spiritual fountain-head for Christianity, the blood-sacrifice which shall bring fresh fountains of love and faith to mankind (*but the fallen blood/ Shall calm her sores*). But in this poem love, laid low by rapacious Time, lies prostrate, a gaping wound in her side. The poem is pitched around the cry "I am dumb before the drive of time."

Most of us usually think of time as an exterior condition of space, as a kind of passive cloud hanging over objects and space in a different, strange dimension. To Thomas, however, time is a reality, sometimes an almost tangible personality. Of his varied stock of symbols, time is one of those most frequently invoked.⁴

⁴ In *From love's first fever to her plague* (to select but one example) time functions as necessary condition of birth. In *When once the twilight locks no longer* time functions both as necessary condition and active agent of birth and death. Time acts as agent of release from the womb in *Before I knocked*. Time is the driving force in nature in *Hold hard, these ancient minutes in the cuckoo's month* (a lovely poem, with much the same tone quality as *The force that through the green fuse*). Time as "destroyer" can be found in *When, like a running grave* and *Then was my neophyte*. The latter is explicit: "Who kills my history?" "Time kills me terribly." "I saw time murder me."

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Time most often appears as the life-destroyer, and in varying guises. We see time as "thief" in *Grief thief of time* and *In country sleep*; as the globe-trotting "gentleman" of *Should lanterns shine* and the *Ten Sonnets* (who structurally binds together the various episodes of that "Christian voyage"); as "devil" in *It is the sinners' dust-tongued bell*; and, most frequently, as "tailor."⁶

In the later poems time is still the destroyer—but in a mellower mood. The mellowness no doubt reflects Thomas' own sense of accomplishment. One might instance two of the great nature poems, *A Winter's Tale* (whose magical opening lines, incidentally, recall *The Eve of St. Agnes* and rival Keats at his best) and *Fern Hill*, where time is the attendant father of the poet's childhood.

Two events occurred in 1939 which were to greatly influence Thomas' poetry during the forties. One was the outbreak of the war. The other, no less important to Thomas I suspect, was the birth of his first son, Llewelyn.

⁶ This last motif probably needs elucidation. In *When, like a running grave*, time "Comes, like a scissors stalking, tailor age." The tailor has snapping scissors to castrate the unwary (not just sex: more important, to destroy one's inner life—and one's chance to achieve great poetry); the tailor can also strait-jacket one into an unfulfilled, empty life and death:

I, that time's jacket or the coat of ice
May fail to fasten with a virgin o
In the straight grave.

In *How shall my animal we see and hear*:

. . . sly scissors ground in frost

Clack through the thicket of strength, love hewn in pillars drops.

In *Twenty-four years* the poem's hero, "crouched like a tailor," is "sewing a shroud," his own shroud, "for a journey by the light of the meat-eating sun." The fullest treatment of this motif is found in *Once below a time*, one of the most delightfully fanciful poems Thomas has written. If there can be such a thing as a poetic equivalent of a Paul Klee painting, this is it. Underneath all the fanciful imagery, however, lies the same sad theme. Tailors cut you to measure, fit you into rigid, lifeless patterns of existence. In this poem, the hero, when his "pinned-around-the-spirit/ Cut-to-measure flesh bit," rockets forth to astound and "set back the clock faced tailors." But he is "pierced by the idol tailor's eyes"; and, mournfully, the poem ends

Now shown and mostly bare I would lie down,
Lie down, lie down and live
As quiet as a bone.

These leads give some notion of the persistency and varied nature of time as a Thomas symbol. The sense of many of his poems cannot be grasped without a sharp awareness of the manner in which time is functioning within them.

Coincident with the birth and growth of his son, Thomas' poetry becomes much less introspective. The highly personal, almost private note of the early poems of self-discovery, of imaginative exploration of pre-natal experience, gives way to a more generalized treatment of the interrelationship of the ages of man. The focus is upon childhood. Probably Thomas re-experienced much of the wonders of childhood through his son's eyes.

The loss of his childhood spontaneity can be lamented by the poet in either of two ways: he can philosophize on the matter, or he can attempt to recreate the lost sense itself. Wordsworth chose the first way:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
 To me did seem
 Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
 Turn wheresoe'er I may,
 By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Thomas, however, is not a philosophical poet, and it is the second way which suits his natural bent. In *Fern Hill* (and in *Poem in October*) he magically recreates what Wordsworth called "that dream-like vividness and splendour" of the child's vision.

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

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

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

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

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

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

One of the marked characteristics of Thomas' verse is a heavy use of pathetic fallacy. In this poem its use makes for half the magic. The child takes on attributes of nature; nature takes on attributes of the child. Like the grass the child is *green*; like the sun the child is *golden*. Conversely, like the child the yard is *happy*; like the child the sun is *young once only*. This overlapping of attributes produces not a confused but a unified vision. The intense heat of the child-nature relationship melts and solders together the two separate elements of the relationship and makes them one.

All nature, both animate and inanimate, comes alive. The grandiose and the familiar are intimately blended. The line *The night above the dingle starry* brings in a sense of the immensity of nature, but the homey word *dingle* links this immensity with the familiar world of the child. The child is *prince of the apple towns, honoured among wagons, famous among the barns, and blessed among stables*. He *lordly has the trees and leaves/ Trail with daisies and barley/ Down the rivers of the windfall light*. The familiar objects—the wagons, apple towns, daisies, barley, barns, and stables—give the grandiose expression a solid, earthy body. Conversely, the high-flung expression invests the homey objects with fresh, unaccustomed grandeur.

The easy, flowing rhythm of the first two lines suggests the gentle swaying of the apple boughs and helps establish the child's

carefree condition. The new morning for the child is all shining, it is *Adam and maiden*. *Maiden* has in it both Eve and Eden. The poet's interpolated comment upon the child's experience,

So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
 In the first spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
 Out of the whinnying green stable
 On to the fields of praise

are four of the great lines of English poetry. They allude to the first chapter of Genesis, where God, after creating light, brings forth the firmament, the earth, and all the earth's creatures. The expression "and God saw that it was good" is repeated after each of His acts of creation. Hence, as the new creatures appear they walk *on to the fields of praise*.

But we are also made aware of a sinister presence in the poem. *Now as I was young and easy*, the very opening words, tell us that the poet no longer *is* young and easy. The fourth line, *Time let me hail and climb*, identifies the evildoer. In the seventh line *once below a time* not only produces a fairytale effect, with a fresh twist; it also indicates that the child *is* below time, i.e., subject to time's inexorable exactions.

The third and fourth stanzas give the child full rein. But the ending of the fifth stanza clearly foreshadows the impending tragedy. Like a high priest bringing a sacrificial lamb to the altar, time takes him *up to the swallow thronged loft*. *The lamb white days*, in the preceding line, has already announced the imminent sacrifice. Time is here represented as an all-powerful yet intangible force. Not by the hand but by the *shadow* of the hand it leads the child out of the momentary grace it had allowed. The third line of the stanza, *In the moon that is always rising*, tragically parallels the third line of the preceding stanza, *In the sun born over and over*. The child's sunny day is at an end; the long night of adulthood is beginning. While he sleeps time carries off the farm and fields of childhood.

But the closing image,

Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea

is not an image of despair. For all its surging life and motion the sea is chained forever to its seabed. But neither the sea nor the child *weeps* in bondage. Implicit is the fact that the life-force in the child, and by extension in mankind, is as powerful as the life-force in the sea. Though time holds the child *green and dying*, childhood itself (and all the life it symbolizes) can never be destroyed.

Almost gratuitously, as it were, the war provided Thomas with a tremendous backdrop for his rebirth theme. During the first years of the war Thomas was in London writing scripts for British documentary films and serving as a member of an anti-aircraft battery. Rebirth for the Londoners of the early forties was no abstract literary term. Each morning the rubble to which part of their lives had been reduced had to be pushed aside so that life could begin afresh.

Though deeply moved by the inhumanity of the destruction (see the beautiful *Holy Spring*, where the very arrangement of the lines indicates his antiwar feelings), he takes as his basic theme the indestructibility of the human spirit. *And death shall have no dominion*, the opening line of one of the war poems, epitomizes much of their content. The best of these, *A Refusal to Mourn* and *Ceremony After a Fire Raid*, appeared shortly after the war, when he was able to see the war in perspective. *A Refusal to Mourn* is much anthologized and deservedly famous, but little attention is given to its equally remarkable companion-piece.

Both poems deal with the death, by fire, of a child in London, a subject which only a poet of Thomas' immense rhetorical gifts could hope to control. The pitch of rhetoric in *Ceremony After a Fire Raid* is almost unbearably high and intense. Much that was merely implied in *A Refusal to Mourn* is given full expression in this poem.

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61

I

Myselves

The grievers

Grieve

Among the street burned to tireless death

A child of a few hours

With its kneading mouth

Charred on the black breast of the grave

The mother dug, and its arms full of fires.

Begin

With singing

Sing

Darkness kindled back into beginning

When the caught tongue nodded blind,

A star was broken

Into the centuries of the child

Myself grieve now, and miracles cannot atone.

Forgive

Us forgive

Us your death that myselfes the believers

May hold it in a great flood

Till the blood shall spurt,

And the dust shall sing like a bird

As the grains blow, as your death grows, through our heart.

Crying

Your dying

Cry,

Child beyond cockcrow, by the fire-dwarfed

Street we chant the flying sea

In the body bereft.

Love is the last light spoken. Oh

Seed of sons in the loin of the black husk left.

II

I know not whether

Adam or Eve, the adorned holy bullock

Or the white ewe lamb

Or the chosen virgin

Laid in her snow

On the altar of London,
 Was the first to die
 In the cinder of the little skull,
 O bride and bride groom
 O Adam and Eve together
 Lying in the lull
 Under the sad breast of the head stone
 White as the skeleton
 Of the garden of Eden.
 I know the legend
 Of Adam and Eve is never for a second
 Silent in my service
 Over the dead infants
 Over the one
 Child who was priest and servants,
 Word, singers, and tongue
 In the cinder of the little skull,
 Who was the serpent's
 Night fall and the fruit like a sun,
 Man and woman undone,
 Beginning crumbled back to darkness
 Bare as the nurseries
 Of the garden of wilderness.

III

Into the organpipes and steeples
 Of the luminous cathedrals,
 Into the weathercocks' molten mouths
 Rippling in twelve-winded circles,
 Into the dead clock burning the hour
 Over the urn of sabbaths
 Over the whirling ditch of daybreak
 Over the sun's hovel and the slum of fire
 And the golden pavements laid in requiems,
 Into the bread in a wheatfield of flames,
 Into the wine burning like brandy,
 The masses of the sea
 The masses of the sea under
 The masses of the infant-bearing sea
 Erupt, fountain, and enter to utter for ever
 Glory glory glory
 The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder.

The first stanza provides a terrible background for the ceremony. A new-born infant has been burned to death.

A child of a few hours
 With its kneading mouth
 Charred on the black breast of the grave
 The mother dug, and its arms full of fires.

The child's mouth no longer kneads (or needs) the mother's dug; the grave which the mother dug is now the child's black breast. The word-play here helps suggest the indescribable horror of the infant's burning. But the immediate, literal horror is merely suggested, not described and dwelt upon. The phrase *its arms full of fires* raises the event on to a symbolical plane, where it is kept throughout the remainder of the poem. The literal level is never abandoned, however. By suggestion it is always present to underscore the symbolic statement of the poem.

Myselfes indicates the communality of the grief. By singing, as by a magical incantation, an attempt is made to kindle life out of the darkness of the infant's death. But even the miracle of rebirth, of *darkness kindled back into beginning*, can not atone for the death of the child, whose now-broken seed had been waiting for centuries to be born.

Speaking for himself and for all those who believe with him in the possibility of a good life, the poet begs the child's forgiveness for the sin committed against it. This forgiveness, plus the full realization of what the death of the child means (*as your death grows through our heart*), will enable the believers to keep alive their hopes until the day when man's spirit, like the mythical phoenix, will rise from the ashes of the child's death and sing again like a bird.

The last stanza of the dirge bemoans the irretrievable loss which the believers have suffered. *We chant the flying sea/ In the body bereft* carries a double significance. On the one hand the believers chant that the sea of life has flown out of the child's body; on the other, the sea of life is *chanted to*, i.e., called to service to put out the fires of grief, sin, and guilt.

Section II makes apparent the sacrificial aspect of the death. In all its snow-white innocence the child has been burned on the sinful altar of London. The present sacrifice recalls, and is linked with, all the deaths and sacrificial ceremonies since Adam and Eve. The father and mother of the race, present to grieve at the grave of the child, bring to the scene not the hope of another idyllic garden of Eden (that dream is dead, white as a skeleton) but the fact of a *garden of wilderness*, a sinful world which they have created and passed down to all later generations.

The final section of the poem is perhaps the most highly charged stanza in modern English poetry. It is also one of the most carefully controlled. It presents an apocalyptic vision of purification and rebirth. The two great warring elements in the stanza are fire and water, destruction and creation. All London, all the world by extension, is lit up by the flames which have burned the child to death. This is fire-time. No clocks tell the hour; no weathercocks tell the weather; the weeks are measured not by sabbaths but by funeral urns. Now that the child is, like Jesus, *beyond cockcrow* (see Mark. 14), daybreak comes up wildly like the whirling ditch of the child's grave. Man's cathedrals, slums, and hovels are burning with guilt and grief. Midway in the stanza Thomas skillfully works in the idea of redemption for all through the child's sacrifice: the bread and wine in lines 10 and 11 suggest the bread and wine of Holy Communion; further, his *Glory glory glory* parallels the "Holy, Holy, Holy" of that service. Into this nightmare world, answering the believers, comes the great, redeeming sea of life, extinguishing the fires and creating a second genesis. Like *A Refusal to Mourn*, the poem is an affirmation of deep faith in mankind's ability to survive any calamity it inflicts upon itself. It sweeps into the imagination with all the salty rush and power of the sea. It is the high-water mark in his full tide career. From this point on, the ebb sets in.

In his last seven years Thomas published but seven poems.⁶

⁶ Six of these poems, printed in huge black type, make up the volume *In Country Sleep*. New York: New Directions, 1952. 34 pp. \$2.00.

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Good as some of these are, none of them belong with his best. Somehow they lack the conviction of the earlier great poems. Perhaps it is simply that he had already had his say. In these poems echoes of earlier images begin to appear, the shadows in his natural settings become darker, the gloom slowly thickens. In *Poem on His Birthday*, for example, we get this gloom-ridden stanza:

In a cavernous, swung
Wave's silence, wept white angelus knells.
Thirty-five bells sing struck
On skull and scar where his loves lie wrecked,
Steered by the falling stars.
And to-morrow weeps in a blind cage
Terror will rage apart
Before chains break to a hammer flame
And love unbolts the dark.

Yet, in the same poem, as he "sails out to die," he finds

That the closer I move
To death, one man through his sundered hulks,
The louder the sun blooms
And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults;
And every wave of the way
And gale I tackle, the whole world then,
With more triumphant faith
Than ever was since the world was said,
Spins its morning of praise.

Why the triumphant faith? Why the insistence on the affirmative note? His preface, written in the year of his death, gives us his answer.

I read somewhere of a shepherd who, when asked why he made, from within fairy rings, ritual observances to the moon to protect his flocks, replied: 'I'd be a damn' fool if I didn't!' These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't.