VERNON WATKINS, METAPHYSICAL POET

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Abstract

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The Welsh poet Vernon Watkins (1906-1967) can best be char-
acterized as a modern metaphysical poet. Not only does he stand
in relationship to certain "Metaphysical Poets" of the seven-
teenth century like Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne, but he is
metaphysical in the more comprehensive sense of being concerned
with the revelation of a transcendent order hidden within the
world of time. Throughout his canon he speaks in a unique voice
of the traditional metaphysical and ontological questions of
God's relation to man, time to the timeless and the Platonic
many to the one. A close reading of many of his poems reveals
the conceptual and symbolic unity of an imagination centered on
the idea of the "overthrow of time." Though the thesis places
special emphasis on the lyrics--particularly on two series of
linked poems (the "Taliesin" and "Music of Colours" sequences)
where Watkins views nature sub specie aeternitatis--his prose
writings and longer dramatic lyrics are also taken into consider-
ation. It is found that symbols recurring throughout his work
take on added resonance and depth when seen in the context of the
carefully woven matrix of which they are a part. The thesis
constructs a traditional and historical context for reading Wat-
kins' poetry by exploring five interrelated aspects of his
essentially metaphysical imagination: 1) his integration of
Celtic myth and Christian belief in the sequence of poems dealing
with the sixth-century bard, Taliesin, 2) his use of Platonic

and Neoplatonic concepts and symbols in the "Music of Colours"

sequence, 3) the relationship of his choice of traditional verse

forms and a musical, vatic style to his metaphysical outlook,

4) his affinities with the seventeenth-century poets, Donne,

Herbert, Vaughan and Traherne, and 5) the impact of the two

modern poets who had the greatest influence on his style, W. B.

Yeats and Dylan Thomas. Watkins' profound comprehension of the

delicate interrelation of the temporal and eternal worlds,

coupled with his impeccable craftsmanship, place him among the

finest lyric poets of the modern period.

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for Mark

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

Books by Watkins cited in text (for full documentation see
bibliography):

BML	Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems (2nd ed., Faber, 1947)
LV	The Lamp and the Veil (Faber, 1945)
LU	The Lady with the Unicorn (Faber, 1948)
DB	The Death Bell (Faber, 1959)
CA	Cypress and Acacia (Faber, 1959)
A	Affinities (Faber, 1962)
F	Fidelities (Faber, 1968)
UP	Uncollected Poems (Enitharmon, 1969)
US	Unity of the Stream (Gomer, 1978)
BOD	The Ballad of the Outer Dark (Enitharmon, 1979)
BW	The Breaking of the Wave (Golgonooza, 1979)

Introduction

"Christen me, therefore, that my acts in the dark may
    be just,
And adapt my partial vision to the limitation of time."
    (from "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision")

When Vernon Watkins was in his twenty-third year, before

he had emerged as a published poet, and during a time of se-

vere emotional crisis, he underwent an experience he was to

refer to later as "a complete revolution of sensibility."[1]

It was not a conversion experience in the ordinary sense of

the word, since he was already a practising Christian (con-

firmed in the Anglican Church) when the event occurred, but in-

volved a complete transformation of his way of viewing the na-

ture of time, and a renewal of his commitment to the poetic ex-

pression of his Christian experience. He spoke later of how

Christ "drew him back from the abyss" and forever altered his

view of time.[2] In an instant he had seen that an invisible,

eternal realm informs temporality at every point, and recog-

nized that he could never again write a poem, as he put it,

"dominated by time."[3] This essentially Platonic theme of the

relation of the temporal world to an everlasting, purposeful,

timeless one became the central issue informing the whole of

his poetry. In essence, his imagination centers on an onto-

logical issue regarding the nature of reality and how various

levels of being, primarily distinguished in his mind as the

temporal and the timeless, stand in relationship to each other.

    Since the kind of art that most attracted him reflected

inward, individual and personal glimpses of such an eternal

order, aesthetics and metaphysics became inseparably wedded

in his mind.   In both his poetry and scattered prose he implied
that poetry's highest function was (insofar as possible) to em-
body or incarnate eternal or universal truths in language.   His
well-known and often-anthologized "Music of Colours, White
Blossom" revealed his complementary sense that the ultimate
reality, the absolute "whiteness" of eternity, was unrepresent-
able.   Therefore, his primarily lyrical impulse channelled it-
self into mediating, mainly through nature, intuitive glimpses
of eternity, and into suggesting the presence of an ineffable,
timeless order hidden beyond, behind and within the physical
one.   The epigraph that opens this section announces through
the mask of Taliesin, a sixth-century Welsh bard, that the spir-
itual dimension Watkins had perceived was to govern the whole
of his life and poetic expression; that the assumption of tran-
scendency, and nature viewed sub specie aeternitatis, lay at
the core of all he wrote; that his art would draw from that as-
pect of the imagination which allows man to transcend time.

My intention in this thesis is to explore several related
aspects of what can be called the "christened imagination" of
this twentieth-century metaphysical poet.   In the chapters that
ensue, I shall be attempting to construct a traditional and
historical context for reading Watkins' poetry by exploring
1) Watkins' integration of Celtic myth and Christian belief in
the sequence of poems dealing with Taliesin, 2) his use of
Platonic and Neoplatonic concepts and symbols in the "Music of
Colours" sequence of poems, 3) the relationship of his choice
of traditional verse forms to his metaphysical vision, 4) his
affinities with the seventeenth-century poets, Donne, Herbert,

Vaughan and Traherne, and 5) the impact of the two modern
poets who had the greatest influence on his work, Dylan Thom-
as and W. B. Yeats. My ultimate purpose is to begin to estab-
lish an adequate method for interpreting the work of a deep,
but too little-read modern, lyrical poet working uniquely in
the metaphysical mode.

Though I am concerned with the question of influence in
Chapters IV and V, the findings of my thesis suggest that
Watkins was not confounded by what Harold Bloom in his recent
book, The Anxiety of Influence, A Theory of Poetry (New York:
Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), sets forth as the modern poet's
crippling sense of inundation by the past. Watkins, in con-
trast, actively links himself to his chosen literary predeces-
sors without losing his own individuality. In fact, he active-
ly invokes and celebrates his relation to a vital stream of
tradition, confident that what he has to say and his way of
saying it will (if carefully resolved and crafted) assume a
place in that stream. With poets like W. B. Yeats, T. S.
Eliot, David Jones and Edwin Muir he can be characterized as a
seeker after continuities and a traditional view of the world.

In the process of examining these related aspects of Wat-
kins' essentially metaphysical vision I hope to demonstrate the
astonishing unity of his imagination. Throughout his work he
develops a complex network of interrelated symbols that recur
in a variety of contexts. Watkins uses his poetic images not
merely as counters or ciphers for his imaginative experience,
but as universal symbols that "partake of the reality which they
render intelligible" in the best Coleridgian sense.[4] A study of

how these symbols recur to accumulate meaning from poem to poem reveals that individual poems are part of a single fabric, that Watkins' lyrics (like those of Yeats) take on their full significance only when read in the context of his work as a whole. The demonstrable wholeness of his work argues that he should be seen as a much deeper and more serious poet than is generally assumed.

In spite of the thematic importance of Watkins' early dramatic poem, "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd," in establishing his concern with the relation of the worlds of the living and the dead, time and eternity, I shall be touching on it only superficially in order to focus on the shorter lyrics where Watkins' religious and metaphysical themes receive their fullest and (I believe) most mature treatment. "The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" has already been studied in detail by Dora Polk in her Vernon Watkins and the Spring of Vision (Christopher Davies, 1977). Rather than cover the territory of his use of Celtic myth already well-mapped by others, I shall be focusing instead on Watkins' incorporation of Welsh and classical motifs within the context of his Christian faith.

It is obvious that both metaphysical and professedly Christian poets are in a minority in the twentieth century. The traditional language of religious experience has become not only fraught with ambiguities, but the basis of it called into question. It is essential, therefore, to provide at least provisional definitions of some of the terms I shall be using to describe Watkins' poetry. I shall be arguing that he is both a metaphysical and a religious poet. By "metaphysical" I mean to

suggest not only Aristotle's categorization of all the specula-
tive knowledge beyond that of the physical sciences (<u>ta meta ta</u>
<u>physica</u>), or his search for a first cause, but the Platonic
sense of metaphysics as that which deals with experience of a
transcendent nature, that which surpasses time, mutability and
process and is the source or origin of the temporal order rec-
ognized by the five senses. In designating Watkins' special
interest to be in that branch of metaphysics known as ontology,
I am not suggesting he approaches the philosophical questions
of the nature of "being" like a systematic theologian, but that
the question informing most of his poetry concerns how the tem-
poral world relates to ever higher levels on a scale originat-
ing in God. In terms of epistemology or the science that seeks
to define the basis of human knowing, Watkins assumes that man
may make deductions from the senses and through the reason, but
that there is additionally a more intuitive, a priori and di-
rect faculty in the mind for grasping ultimate reality which
Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth called "Imagination," and the
early Christian mystical theologians, St. Augustine and the
Neoplatonists identified with "the inner light" or "divine
spark." Watkins' poems suggest that the imagination, though a
part of reason, ultimately transcends it and gives man direct
access to eternity.

In Chapter IV, I shall be developing my argument that Wat-
kins is close in spirit to the metaphysical poets of the seven-
teenth century, particularly to Henry Vaughan and Thomas Tra-
herne, who drew on some of the same Platonic, Neoplatonic and
Christian sources, and who shared the mystics' sense of the

inwardness and individualness of direct revelation. He is a "metaphysical poet," then, in the secondary sense of standing in conscious relation to the poets of that earlier tradition whom history has designated as "Metaphysicals." In this he is not alone, since both Yeats and Eliot, two of the major writers of the period, took an active interest in the English Metaphysicals.

By designating Watkins a "religious" poet I mean to argue not only that he adheres to a traditional view of the world that assumes the existence of an objective, eternal realm, but that he is concerned with the more pragmatic question of how man can relate himself to it, or, in more Christian terms, of how God has provided a way for man to be so related. His specifically theistic outlook leads him throughout his work to assume the existence of a personal Deity who is concerned with man's welfare, that man is part of a purposeful cosmos, and that the soul is immortal. These basic assumptions are true of religious and metaphysical traditions other than the Christian, and it is obvious from the poems (both early and late) that Watkins was able to incorporate pagan, Platonic and classical mythoi and symbolism within his essentially Christian view of the world. "Religio," as Watkins' friend David Jones uses it in Epoch and Artist (1959), originally meant "a binding" or tying of the soul of the individual to the larger or universal pattern of the whole,[5] and for Watkins the word retains this early etymological association as well as its more restricted sense of attachment to a particular historical tradition or ritual practice.

Though the basis of Watkins' Christian belief is at root experiential, and rests on personal illumination, his vision is far from private or solipsistic. His enormous concern with the past comes out of a need to place his religious experience within a universal context of visionary experience and belief. Yet he is uniquely centered on the mystical side of the Christian and Platonic traditions as encountered in figures from his reading as diverse as Plotinus, Richard Rolle, Henry Vaughan and William Blake. As the subsequent investigation of Watkins' use of earlier metaphysical traditions should demonstrate, his emphasis is less on the doctrinal, liturgical, ecclesiastical side of Christianity, than on the more personal, mystical way. When speaking of the mystical element in Watkins' work, I do not mean to suggest that he is a mystic in the strict sense of one following the traditional path of purgation, illumination and union with God, but that as a poet he is especially concerned with moments of direct contact with an ultimate reality—that such moments of illumination leading to a greater awareness of a divine presence and purpose form the substratum of his art. He assumes that revelation is primarily a solitary experience placing the individual in a vital stream or line of thought sustained by the artistically immortalized experiences of like-minded poets, artists and saints in other ages. His deepest "affinities," to borrow a term he uses for the title of his sixth volume, lie with the visionaries and mystics of whatever age who speak of the ineffable "inner light," and the sense that God reveals Himself intimately and inwardly to the individual.

Whatever the nature of Watkins' personal experiences as he trod the initiatory steps of the traditional mystic way, he is essentially a poet, and the focus of the dissertation is on the poetic expression of his uncommon religious sensibility. I wish to emphasize that Watkins' sweeping metaphysical vision and his exalted notion of poetry go hand in hand with a strict sense of form and disciplined craftsmanship. The choice of carefully worked, mainly rhymed and metrical poetry is, in fact, in his mind the logical outcome of his metaphysical assumptions. The central theme of timelessness struggling with time reflects itself in the tensions between form and content in the poems. Like the work of the English metaphysicals to whom his work is linked by personal affinity, his poems are hieratic, well-wrought, artificial in the best sense of the word. Form is never arbitrary but symbolic, significantly and organically related to content throughout as if to embody in the world of language the great dialogue between time and eternity. As eternity is to time, so for Watkins is the creative inspiration of Spirit (sometimes personified in his work as "the Muse") to the words of the poet that incarnate it.

Both his metaphysical vision and his Christian commitment set him apart from those of his contemporaries who had rejected a traditional religious or metaphysical view of the world. In short, he stands aloof from the mainstream poetry of psychological crisis in the twentieth century, and must be placed among those with whom his spiritual and literary affinities are greatest, the poets he names, invokes and echoes in his work. Because of the early presence of a central core of

belief evident throughout his work, Watkins' poetry is less a record of struggle and search than a celebration, affirmation and exploration of a vision discovered in a flash of insight long before his career as a published poet got underway. Though there is growth and development in his vision, it is the kind of growth that occurs when one gradually discovers the fuller implications of that which was given whole and essentially of a piece in the beginning.

Watkins' work was well-received in both Britain and the United States at the time of its first publication by Faber and Faber on the advice of T. S. Eliot in the forties, fifties and sixties, but little detailed and searching critical work has been written in the interim. Since Watkins' death in 1967, a limited number of critical articles, and at least three doctoral dissertations have appeared. I have cited the articles relevant to my topic and all of the theses and dissertations in my bibliography.

In the critical work that has appeared to date much has been said in general terms about Watkins' sense of timelessness. Kathleen Raine, Brian Keeble, Leslie Norris, Jane McCormick and Roland Mathias have all spoken of the visionary or metaphysical quality of his work. McCormick deals in her doctoral dissertation, "I Sing a Placeless and a Timeless Heaven" (Lehigh University, 1975), with his sense of timelessness in terms of his relation to the Romantic tradition, and Mary Polk in her dissertation, "Vernon Watkins: An Ambience for Reading the 'Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems'" (University of California, 1970), with the Celtic backgrounds

informing his work and his probable knowledge of esoteric Cel-
tic lore. Leslie Norris' dissertation, "The Poetry of Vernon
Watkins" (Southampton University, 1972), presents a systematic
appraisal of Watkins' first seven volumes of published poetry,
arguing a development toward a more chiselled and self-assured
style in the later poems. He asserts that the affirmation of
a transcendent realm is of key importance in an understanding
of Watkins' vision, and sees the figure of the poet in Watkins'
poems acting as a mediator between the world of time and a high-
er order. Yet he does not pursue the implications of this for
Watkins as a specifically Christian metaphysical poet. Kath-
leen Raine, one of the first to draw attention to Watkins'
work, emphasizes his roots in a traditional metaphysical view
of the world, his affinities with Platonic and Neoplatonic
thought, and his relation to the Welsh bardic heritage. Louis
Martz suggests Watkins' close relation to the English tradition
of metaphysical and meditative poetry of the seventeenth cen-
tury, but does not develop his suggestion through an analysis
of the poems. Most of the short articles and reviews published
during the poet's lifetime and since his death, while suggest-
ing directions of thought worth pursuing in regard to Watkins
studies, do not give detailed exegesis of specific poems. In
short, critical and analytical study of this poet is still in
its infancy, and much of his work stands untouched by scholar-
ship. It is hoped that the subsequent detailed exploration of
specific poems and groups of linked poems as seen in the con-
text of the whole development of his work, will reveal him as
the truly incomparable modern metaphysical poet the best of his

work argues him to be.

Biographical Sketch

Few twentieth-century poets have waged as complete and un-
remitting a warfare against time as did the Welshman, Vernon
Watkins. If his practical life appears at all in his work, it
is in a most indirect and transmuted way. Except for "Earth's"
remark in the poem "Dialogue" from Fidelities (1968) that she
"keep[s] an exact account," there is little indication from the
world of timeless and carefully hewn symbols that comprise his
poems to suggest he spent over forty years as a bank clerk. Es-
chewing worldly ambition, he carefully avoided promotion to man-
agerial status to become, in his own words, Lloyds' "oldest
cashier."[1] Yet the position at the bank provided him with the
means necessary to support his wife and five children while re-
maining entirely dedicated to a lifelong, arduous crafting of
his intricate and disciplined verse. The careful exclusion of
the mundane and contingent for its own sake from his poetry,
and his decision to use the particular only as it revealed a
universal and hidden order set him apart from most of his con-
temporaries. His conscious choices force the reader to approach
his work on its own terms as a modern expression of a metaphys-
ical dialogue between time and eternity.

Vernon Phillips Watkins was born on June 27, 1906, in Mae-
stag, a small colliery town in the Llynff Valley in southeast
Wales. Though memories of mining communities like Bridgend and
Llanelly may be the basis for his early poem, "The Collier,"
where Watkins transforms the abused worker into a biblical fig-
ure of Joseph betrayed by his brothers, and therefore a type of

Christ, the landscape of most of his poems is that of the rug-
ged and picturesque Gower coast where his family moved when he
was ten. It was there amidst pastoral beauty bounded by the
sea (an ever-present symbol in his work) that he was to remain
for the rest of his life, except for a brief interlude in the
R.A.F. during the Second World War. Like Dylan Thomas eight
years later, Watkins attended both the Mirador and Swansea
Grammar Schools in nearby Swansea. At the latter institution
Thomas' father was later to serve as schoolmaster. Watkins re-
membered and celebrated the Swansea of both his youth and adult
years in "Elegy of the Heroine of Childhood" and "Ode to Swan-
sea."[2]

Watkins was the second of three children, the only son of
middle-class parents of Congregationalist faith. His mother,
formerly Sarah Phillips, was the daughter of a gentleman farm-
er from Carmarthenshire, a country district in southwest Wales
that was to become the setting for Watkins' later idyllic in-
vocation of childhood, "Returning to Goleufryn." His father
William, in whose footsteps Watkins was to follow profession-
ally, was a successful branch manager of Lloyds Bank who came
originally from Tynewydd, Taff's Well, near Cardiff. Though
both his parents were staunch Congregationalists of Welsh Non-
conformist background, they sent their son at the age of four-
teen to Repton, an English public school in Derbyshire where
the religious emphasis is that of the established Church of En-
gland. It was there that the young Vernon was confirmed as a
member of the Anglican Church to which he adhered throughout
his life as a loyal and committed Christian. It is no coinci-

dence that the church tradition in which he found himself was the same that nourished earlier seventeenth-century metaphysical poets like Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and Traherne, with whose work his own can fruitfully be compared. Though non-doctrinaire in his religious outlook, he can be seen to share much common ground with poets who drew from the mystical side of the Anglican tradition. Poetically he is an heir of its rich traditional symbology.

The Congregationalism in Watkins' background meant awareness of democratically appointed clergy for each congregation and a tradition of puritan yet cheerful Godliness going back to Milton's sect of Independents, who were early Congregationalists. The shift to Anglicanism was to a formality of service greater than before, an appointed hierarchical system of clergy, and to a "posher" sort of congregation in terms of social class, though not necessarily in wealth. It also meant a less puritanical approach to drink and life in general, a better prayerbook in literary terms; though probably a decline in the standard of hymn singing, and (depending on the particular clergy) a less vigorous pulpit rhetoric. Though Watkins draws little directly from the prayerbook and liturgy, the Anglican formality and literary sensitivity (sensitivity to symbol and ritual) is reflected, I believe, in Watkins' more formal and hieratic style of writing. Though he retains in his mature work the Congregationalist's sense of intimacy with God, the tradition he adopted seems altogether more amenable to his personal and poetic sensibilities than the more popular puritanism of his inherited background. Dylan Thomas, more than Watkins, carried

into his verse the energy of Welsh pulpit rhetoric and the sense of personal reprobation and guilt of the Nonconformist sects.

Watkins' poem, "Revisited Waters," written in 1957 to celebrate Repton's Quatercentenary, idealizes his time there from 1920-24 as a golden age of youthful cameraderie with peers who shared his literary and poetic enthusiasms. In spite of academic success, a single, unfortunate parting encounter with the school's Headmaster, Dr. Fisher (later Archbishop of Canterbury), foreshadows Watkins' later rejection of the academic world as fundamentally inimical to the poetic spirit. On the last Speech Day when Vernon stepped on the stage to receive the Howe prize for poetry, the Headmaster joked that the young poet would "never earn so much per line again." Watkins left with the distinct impression that this representative of academic authority had no comprehension of the poet's high calling.[3]

Though both Watkins' parents were Welsh-speaking, they did not transmit the spoken form of the language to their son, who considered the resources of English fully adequate for his own poetic expression. South Wales at the time of Watkins' upbringing had undergone the steady process of Anglicization begun in the 1870's, and it was fashionable among the "respectable" classes to seek for their children a more English education.[4] Thanks to his father, who read to the young Watkins the poems of Aneirin, Taliesin, Llywarch Hen and Dafydd ap Gwilym, he was in later life able to read Welsh with the help of a dictionary, and retained a sensitivity to the mythic heritage of Wales, as witnessed by his later use of a Welsh folk custom in his

"Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" and of the figure of Taliesin in his
sequence of poems dealing with that ancient bard. It was prob-
ably his mother, however, who encouraged Watkins in the pursuit
of an English education and a broader, more continental out-
look. She herself had attended a finishing school at Bolken-
hain in a German-speaking region between Czechoslovakia and
Southern Poland where she developed the strong interest in Eu-
ropean languages (including German) which her son, who was to
become an adept translator, was to inherit.

Watkins was sent first to a preparatory school at Tytten-
hanger Lodge at Seaford, Sussex, before going on to Repton.
From there, with considerable academic success behind him in
modern languages, he went up as a Pensioner to Magdalene Col-
lege at Cambridge in 1924 where he set out to specialize in
French, German and Italian. Within the year (and not for aca-
demic reasons), Watkins grew disillusioned with the positivis-
tic, analytic spirit that dominated Cambridge at that time and
left abruptly in 1925 after a sharp exchange with the Master
of the College, A. C. Benson. This second conflict with author-
ity parallels his earlier reaction to Dr. Fisher at Repton.
In an interview with Benson at the end of term, when questioned
as to his academic intentions for the coming year, Watkins re-
sponded that he was "interested only in writing poetry and that
he didn't intend to stay in Cambridge and see it criticized out
of him."[5] Benson's insensitive retort--that if he wanted to
become a poet "he would curse the day he was born"--drew from
Watkins the terse reply that "he had cursed it many times al-
ready." The interview ended dramatically with Watkins slamming

the door behind him as he left the room.

It is clear that Watkins withdrew from Cambridge of his own volition over what he conceived as a matter of principle, and not for academic reasons, having just won the Peskett Prize for placing well in his exams. It was a choice that was to affect the rest of his life, an effectual burning of bridges that forced him back upon the economic necessity of a job in the bank. He retained into later life a thoroughgoing antipathy toward the kind of empirical criticism he identified with Cambridge in the 20's--the Cambridge that fostered I. A. Richards and William Empson, two of his contemporaries whose work stands in decided contrast to his own. In light of his unique development as a religious poet, his choice seems more than justified.

After his unprecedented withdrawal from Cambridge, Watkins' father, who up to this point had been extremely tolerant of his son's "impracticality," refused to support him for the year of travel in Europe Watkins naively suggested as an alternative to a university education. He insisted instead that his son promptly take up banking. It was likely this sudden confrontation with ordinary reality which precipitated the "nervous breakdown" that ensued in the autumn of 1927.

Watkins decided to become a poet at the age of six and had been writing poetry more or less continually, except for a year at Repton, since the age of eight. By the time he was twelve he had collected most of the English poets by what his widow describes as "the simple and economical method of giving them to his family as birthday and Christmas presents."[6] At Repton,

he experienced a passion for the Romantics (particularly Shel-
ley), and the Georgian poet Rupert Brooke, identifying with the
extreme Romantic notion that poetry is direct inspiration, an
unpremeditated flow requiring little or no revision or rework-
ing. He was to repudiate this view in later life in favor of
a sense of the necessity for subtle craftsmanship combined with
direct inspiration. At the period preceding his breakdown his
consuming interest was William Blake whose "giant forms" sug-
gested an integrated world of imaginative energy distinct from
the world of ordinary reality. Blake, who continued to be im-
portant to him in the work of his maturity, in fact played a
vital role in Watkins' imagination at the very time of his emo-
tional collapse. In his biographical analysis from the
"Writers of Wales Series" on Watkins, Roland Mathias describes
the incident that led to that crisis:

> ....[H]e [Watkins] returned to his lodgings on the
> Taff embankment in a state of high tension. He had
> been reading Blake again, and rushed hither and thither
> about the room shouting that he had conquered time and
> could control both his own destiny and that of others.
> This penultimate stage was abruptly ended when he heard
> an enormous crash outside: on going to the window he
> saw a motor-cyclist dead on the ground and his pillion
> passenger staggering up the path towards him, his face
> covered in blood. Immediately--the underlying tender-
> ness of his nature supervening--he was convinced that
> he had willed this and himself collapsed.[7]

Directly afterwards, Watkins took the train to Repton and
tried to assault the old Headmaster, Dr. Fisher, who years be-
fore had told him that he could never make a living at poetry.
In Watkins' delirium, the headmaster became an exaggerated sym-
bol of the philistine world that stood in opposition to the
poet.

Yet the most intense and formative experience of Watkins' life was to follow at the convalescent home in Derbyshire where he was sent to recover from the hysterical outburst just described. There, as he recalled later, he was suddenly shown the nature of time and saved miraculously by Christ from "the horrors of the abyss."[8] He was to come to speak of this experience, and the healing and reintegration that followed from it, as part of a profound "revolution of sensibility."

> In my twenty-third year I suddenly experienced a complete revolution of sensibility. I repudiated the verse I had written and knew that I could never again write a poem which could be dominated by time.[9]

The theme of the overthrow of time through awareness of the vital interrelation of time and eternity was to become his central poetic concern. The experience just described assumed in his mind retrospectively the shape of a religious "conversion" to a new way of viewing the origin and purpose of life that was to transform his art. He burned all the poems he had written up to that time, and henceforth spoke of himself as a Christian metaphysical poet. His widow has written that, "His Christianity was the centre of his life, and he wrote only to praise and affirm that belief."[10]

Though the obvious conflict between Watkins' uncompromising ideals and the world's demands led to his breakdown, ironically the commitment to the bank became his means of reintegration. Slowly Watkins came to accept the monotonous routine at Lloyds as a way of protecting his poetry without compromise. In later life, during an "Address to the Poetry Society of Great Britain" on May 7, 1966, he proudly and with some humour

compared himself to Eliot, Masefield, the Greek poet Cavafy

and other poets who worked in banks:

> When I joined Lloyds Bank in Sept. 1925, T. S. Eliot
> had just left it in the same year, the 8th of his
> service. He was so versatile that he was able to
> write the European article for the Lloyds Bank Month-
> ly Review and The Waste Land at the same time.[11]

In that same address Watkins relates how when he first started

at the bank he unintentionally set fire to a packet of bank

notes; and there are other colourful tales, one of him running

after a customer to whom he gave an immense sum of money by

mistake, and another of his leaving the bank unlocked so that

a policeman had to come to his house for the key. In spite of

the comical stories about Watkins' ineptitude, which he himself

helped to perpetuate, he was by all accounts a competent clerk.

After a day of work in Swansea, he would commute home by bus

to his house on Pennard cliffs, and after supper return to his

study to draft and redraft the poems he produced almost contin-

uously throughout his life. Because he was such a meticulous

critic of his own work, destroying at a whim poems that dissat-

isfied him, less than 400 poems survive in print, including

those published in both journals and collections.

After settling into his career at the bank, Watkins met

Dylan Thomas in the early months of 1935. The vital personal-

ity and unusual poetic gifts of the younger poet were to have

a dramatic impact on Watkins both personally and poetically.

Thomas encouraged Watkins to begin journal publication by sub-

mitting some poems, including "Griefs of the Sea," to the first

issue of Kiedrych Rhys' Wales in 1937, and he introduced him

to a community of poets, writers and artists including Daniel

Jones, the composer, Alfred Janes, the painter, and John
Ormond, the filmmaker. Watkins' edition of Thomas' letters,
Letters to Vernon Watkins (Faber and Faber, 1957), testifies
to the strength and duration of this extraordinary literary
friendship, and reveals the two young poets' utter dedication
to the minutiae of their craft.

The other important twentieth-century figure Watkins most
admired during that same period was the Irish poet W. B. Yeats,
whose work he first read in 1928, and continued to study as it
appeared throughout the thirties. Though Thomas had an imme-
diate impact on Watkins' style, and a lasting one on him per-
sonally, it was Yeats who was to have the more enduring poetic
influence. In 1938, Watkins visited the old Yeats in his Dub-
lin home in the spirit of pilgrimage and wrote the long poem,
"Yeats in Dublin," as a result.

In 1939 the nation mobilized for war, and Watkins joined
the Home Guard. Again in 1941 he volunteered to serve in the
R.A.F., first as a service policeman and then in Intelligence
where he remained until receiving compassionate discharge in
1946. As with his banking career, numerous anecdotes abound
relating Watkins' comic unsuitability for military life, sto-
ries of how he was found marching to an important ceremonial
parade without his rifle, how he accidentally turned a hose on
the entire front row of his squad and how he accepted chocolate
bars in place of passes for entrance into the base. In a
radio broadcast of 1947 Watkins portrays himself as a misplaced
person in the military setting:

> During the war I found myself in an environment and
> in a role which I had never expected. I was an R.A.F.
> policeman, and guarding a camp where I was always los-
> ing my way, since I invariably confused one building
> with another. In circumstances such as these there
> seemed to be no place for my poetry, nor, indeed, for
> me; but at night when I stood at the gate examining
> passes I had a critic's authority, for my task was to
> understand in a moment all that was set before me.[12]

When he left the police he is said to have parted jocularly

with the words, "I don't suppose I'll ever meet a bigger bunch

of crooks."[13]

It was during the war on October 2, 1944, that Watkins

married Gwendoline Mary Davies, nineteen years to his thirty-

six. Though she was later to complain of his unsuitability for

married life due to his (in her eyes) almost fanatical dedica-

tion to "the Muse," they seem to have had a harmonious partner-

ship, raising five children, four boys and a girl. Now a well-

educated woman herself, Gwen Watkins continues to edit and com-

ment critically on her husband's works, having recently pub-

lished a book on Watkins' friendship with Thomas, Portrait of

a Friend (Llandysul, Dyfed: Gomer Press, 1983).

Besides poetry and the joys of domestic life, Watkins'

next great love was that of sports. He had been an avid player

of tennis, cricket, squash, hockey and other competitive games

since his schoolboy days at Repton and later at Cambridge.

These were the only pursuits that could distract him from his

poetry. He was by all reports athletic, agile and active

throughout his life, a great lover of the outdoors, capable

even in his later years of scrambling up cliffs and striding

on the Gower sea trails, outdistancing younger men.

Happy in relative isolation on the Gower, Watkins did not actively seek literary acclaim. He believed that publicity was debilitating for the poet, who must work in secret. Yet his career as a published poet developed quietly and steadily parallel to his commitments as husband, father and bank clerk. In 1941, just before his entry into the R.A.F., Watkins' first volume of verse, Ballad of the Mari Lwyd, was published by Faber and Faber, receiving favorable notice from Eliot himself who was one of the first to praise his work. Another significant appearance in print in 1941 in an anthology called The White Horseman tended to link him with the so-called "New Apocalypse" group of poets, a loosely associated body of neo-Romantics led by Henry Treece. From that time onward Watkins was to publish regularly in journals like Wales, The Welsh Review, Life and Letters Today, Horizon and The Listener, eventually establishing a solid reputation in both Britain and the United States. From 1941 to 1968, Faber brought out a series of seven volumes of Watkins' poetry, in addition to a Selected Poems (1967). Some of these were reprinted in America by New Directions. The Faber volumes include The Lamp and the Veil (1945), The Lady with the Unicorn (1948), translations of Heinrich Heine's The North Sea (1951), The Death Bell (1954), Cypress and Acacia (1959), Affinities (1962) and the posthumous Fidelities (1968) which Watkins saw through the press. Since Watkins' death a number of posthumous volumes of his poems have appeared in print including Uncollected Poems (1969), I That Was Born in Wales (1976), Selected Verse Translations (1977), Unity of the Stream (1978), The Ballad of the Outer Dark and

Other Poems (1979), and The Breaking of the Wave (1979), all of which are duly noted in the bibliography.[14] In addition, Leslie Norris has edited a memorial volume with tributes to Watkins by a variety of artists and critics, Vernon Watkins 1906-1967 (1970), and Jane Lee McCormick has edited Watkins' scattered prose gathered from various journals, radio broadcasts and previously unpublished notes in her Master's thesis, "The Prose of Vernon Watkins" (Simon Fraser University, 1969).

Watkins' translations of French, German, Italian, Spanish and even Hungarian poetry provided him with a substitute for critical work (which he shunned) and afforded him a way of sharpening his own poetic skills.[15] His choice of poets reveals a keen interest in the French Symbolists and German Romantics, particularly Heine and Hölderlin who were to him unique exponents of the high and noble Romantic dream he never relinquished of poetry as a mediation of the divine. He also appreciated the manner in which they were able to integrate the classical (Greek) and the biblical traditions. The general critical consensus on Watkins' translations is that they combine scholarly accuracy with a poet's feeling for the spirit of the original. Watkins has written an essay, now published with his posthumous Selected Verse Translations (Enitharmon Press, 1977), on "The Translation of Poetry," developing his own theory of the art of translation.

In spite of the relative modicum of criticism on Watkins during his life and since his death, he did receive numerous literary honours in the last two decades of his life. In 1951 he was appointed Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and

in 1953 won the Levinson Prize from _Poetry_ (Chicago). His vol-

ume _The Death Bell_ earned him "First Choice" of the Poetry Book

Society in March in 1954, and in 1957 he claimed the Guinness

Poetry Award for the poem, "The Tributary Seasons."

In 1966 Watkins retired from the bank. He was granted an

honorary D. Litt. from the University of Wales (1967), and in

that same year became the first holder of the Calouste Gul-

benkian Fellowship of Poetry at University College, Swansea.

The Times of October 11, 1967 reported in his obituary that he

was being considered seriously for the Laureateship at the

time of his death to replace the post left vacant by John Mase-

field.[16] Therefore, despite his refusal to seek honours, Wat-

kins received some measure of recognition in his lifetime, and

his reputation continues to mount as more of his work is pub-

lished and more critical work appears. What is most needed now

is a "Collected Poems" that would provide readers with a sense

of the wholeness of his work; for, as suggested earlier, his

canon appears to have the kind of thematic and symbolic unity

we find in the work of a major poet like Yeats.

Before retiring, Watkins had already taken time off from

the bank in 1964 to serve a term as a visiting professor of

English at the University of Washington in Seattle. Washington

asked him back again in 1967 to resume that same position.

After only three weeks of class on October 8, 1967, at the age

of sixty-one, Watkins died unexpectedly of a heart attack dur-

ing a vigorous game of tennis, his longtime favorite sport.

For a poet who asserted that death is but a shifting of con-

sciousness it seemed somehow an appropriate way to die. His

body was transported to Wales where he was buried in the
church he had attended throughout his life, St. Mary's at
Pennard. Watkins' own words from his last volume, _Fidelities,_
may best serve as an epitaph:

> For me neglect and world-wide fame were one.
> I was concerned with those the world forgot,
> In the tale's ending saw its life begun,
>
> And I was with them still when time was not.

CHAPTER I

THE FIGURE OF TALIESIN:

POET AS BARD AND PROPHET

Chapter I

The Figure of Taliesin:

Poet as Bard and Prophet

In a radio broadcast on the Welsh Home Service on November 25, 1953, Watkins introduced the figure of Taliesin in his poem, "Taliesin and the Mockers" as follows:

> The Welsh poet Taliesin, who claimed to have lived in
> all ages, is to Welsh poetry the archetype of inspira-
> tion, as Orpheus was to the Greeks.[1]

Watkins was to call on this figure of the early Welsh bardic poet recurrently in a series of poems scattered throughout the published volumes of his verse, beginning with "Taliesin in Gower" in The Death Bell (1954).[2] Internal evidence reveals that in spite of being published in separate volumes the Taliesin poems were originally linked as a series, and intended by the author to be read as an interrelated sequence.[3] Common to the poems is the theme of the timelessness of poetry, a poetic conjoining of Welsh myth and Christian vision to the poet's personal experience, and a similar landscape in which the images of sea, sand and rock take on a heightened, symbolic significance. Dr. Ruth Pryor, who has studied the unpublished manuscripts, points out that the Taliesin sequence remained unfinished at the time of the poet's death, and that another draft dating from 1967 entitled "Taliesin Considers His Calling" exists in incomplete form.[4] The poet's continuing interest in the Taliesin theme, beginning as early as 1938 when he drafted his first Taliesin poem,[5] and lasting until his death in 1967, indicates that Taliesin was of abiding impor-

tance to him poetically. In this chapter I shall examine the
Taliesin poems in order of their appearance in the published
volumes to explore what they reveal of Watkins' sense of the
relation between a pre-Christian and Christian mythos, as well
as his sense of himself as a poet of metaphysical vision. I
wish to demonstrate that although the poems can be read and
appreciated separately, they take on added resonance when read
as a whole.

Watkins' early interest in the Celtic material dealing
with Taliesin is apparent in "The Salmon," a poem first pub-
lished in 1949,[6] where he incorporates the Irish legend of
Finn and the sacred salmon of wisdom, which bestows immortal
life on whoever is able to catch it, into the stories surround-
ing Taliesin. In that poem, Watkins alludes to Taliesin's re-
ceiving of the three miraculous drops of inspiration and to the
incident of his being discovered as a child by the man Elphin
in the salmon weir as detailed in Charlotte Guest's translation
of The Mabinogion (1906).[7] The reader may refer to the Appen-
dix for a synopsis of the Taliesin story. The revised version
of "The Salmon" (typescript dated 1960) in The Ballad of the
Outer Dark (1979) makes reference to the Welsh meaning of the
name "Taliesin," or "radiant brow." Both early and late ver-
sions allude to the child's swallowing of the drops of inspir-
ation:

> In Elphin's weir the child was caught. All ages then
> were hung.
> The radiant forehead by those drops that lit upon his
> tongue
> Knew all the changes from his birth. His inspiration
> freed

> Souls from the swinish devils that mocked the Savior's
>   creed. (BOD, p. 30)

Even in this relatively early poem it is clear that the

Taliesin figure enables Watkins to combine his interest in the

Welsh material with his sense of the timelessness of Christian

vision; for Taliesin as a transformational agent present in all

ages, on whom "all ages then were hung," represents the power

of poetic inspiration and the poetic imagination to surmount

the limitations of time. In a manner characteristic of the

Taliesin poems as a whole, "The Salmon" draws together al-

lusions from The Mabinogion and the gospels--in this case the

incident from the synoptics (Matt. 8: 28-34) where Christ

drives demonic spirits into a herd of swine. Taliesin's know-

ledge, here associated with the purgative energy of "the Sav-

ior," is "freeing" because it involves the ability to see time

from the perspective of eternity. As in the poems that follow,

Watkins focuses upon the poet as a "divine child" whose know-

ledge is that of the prophet, encompassing past, present and

future, and whose tongue is inspired with a kind of timeless

wisdom. A tone of controlled but intense exultation comple-

ments this theme of the poet as "vates" or prophet throughout

the series.

Before turning to the Taliesin poems in the published

volumes where Watkins explores this exalted notion of poetry,

it is important to establish his sources for the myth. As

Leslie Norris points out, Watkins would have been aware of the

early Welsh materials dealing with a historical Taliesin, as

well as the more mythical image of the bard, through his

reading of H. I. Bell's The Development of Welsh Poetry

(1936).[8] The original sources for the story are the Llyfr

Taliesin (The Book of Taliesin, 1275) and Llyfr Loch Hergest

(The Red Book of Hergest, c. 1400), medieval manuscripts con-

taining conventional "skaldic" type poems ascribed to the his-

torical Taliesin, a warrior-hero said to have lived in the

sixth century. The Book of Taliesin contains a separate sec-

tion of "saga" poems and miscellaneous poetic fragments dating

back possibly to the ninth century, presenting the utterances

of a more mythical Taliesin.[9] It should be noted that the his-

torical figure is also mentioned in the Historia Brittonum, a

Latin compilation by the Welsh monk Nennius (c. 800 A.D.) pur-

porting to give an account of early British history from the

time of Julius Caesar to the end of the seventh century. Nen-

nius locates Taliesin as a sixth century bard. Finally, a

prose Romance of Taliesin found in sixteenth-century manu-

scripts (The Penniardd MSS.), but believed to derive from me-

dieval sources, tells the earliest stories of a mythic child

called Gwion Bach who became the bard Taliesin through a mi-

raculous transformation. The Hanes Taliesin (or Lay of

Taliesin), the central poetic fragment presenting the so-called

"transformational poems" or the riddling song of the bard, de-

rives from the earlier Book of Taliesin (1275), while the prose

Romance containing "The Tale of Gwion Bach" and its sequel,

"The Tale of Taliesin," comes from the sixteenth-century manu-

script of Elis Gruffydd, who (with Nennius) sets the tale of

Gwion Bach in the sixth century during the days of Arthur and

Maelgwn Gwynedd.

Though Watkins' father used to read English translations
of the older poetry to him as a child, Watkins himself did not
speak or read more than a smattering of Welsh. His primary
source for the Taliesin myth, therefore, came from his reading
of Lady Charlotte Guest's translations of The Mabinogion (1848
and 1906).[10] It is important to realize that her translation
of the Taliesin material, placed at the end of her book and
not essentially a part of the "Four Branches" of The Mabinogi,
is very much a creative composite drawn from various earlier
sources. She incorporates the poetic fragments from the Hanes
Taliesin into the prose narrative of the story of Gwion Bach,
weaving them together in her own ingenious manner. As we look
at Watkins' poems in relation to her translations, it is help-
ful to be aware that she based her text on eighteenth and
nineteenth-century Welsh manuscript versions--a quarto-sized
MS. from the Welsh School in London, dated 1758 and the Iolo
MSS. of Iolo Morganwg edited in 1848. She did not have access
to the sixteenth-century work of Elis Gruffydd on which most
modern scholarship relies.[11] Iolo Morganwg (b. 1747), whose
real name was Edward Williams, was a notorious Welsh fabricator
of ancient texts who attempted to prove that Glamorganshire
bards had preserved a continuous tradition going back to the
prehistoric druids. Like the fabrications of the "Ossianic"
translations of the Scottish James Macpherson, these corrupted
texts contributed greatly to a more romanticized image of the
ancient bards, but also presented enormous problems for later
scholarship. Through Guest, Watkins is dealing with what by
scholarly standards may be regarded as "contaminated" sources

to arrive at his own more romantic notion of the bard.

It is also possible that Watkins' interest in Taliesin may have been renewed by the publication in 1948 of Robert Graves' The White Goddess, which attempted to decipher the Gwion Bach riddle of the Hanes Taliesin. Watkins' interest, like Graves', seems certainly to have centered upon the poetic fragments, the "transformational poems," presumed to have been the prophetic speaking of an archetypal, magical figure of myth and lore-- one associated with a native prophetic strain characteristic of the wandering minstrels rather than with the static professionalism of the court bards.

A final important source for Watkins' Taliesin as a figure of mythologized history is Charles Williams' Taliesin in Taliesin Through Logres (1938) and The Region of the Summer Stars (1944). From the first publication of these long poems, Watkins was deeply interested in Williams' effort to unite the Taliesin material with the Arthurian sagas. His "Three Sonnets for Charles Williams" in Affinities represents an effort to do homage to the dead poet not only by imitating his style and recasting his subject matter, but by confirming his vision of "Taliesin the nightingale" (A, p. 37) as an idealization of the poet. Both Watkins and Williams were concerned with reshaping the Celtic material within a more specifically Christian context.

In his Taliesin sequence, Watkins follows Guest in blending elements from both the prose Romance and the Hanes Taliesin--namely, Gwion Bach's acquisition of the magical drops of poetic inspiration from the "witch" Caridwen's cauldron, his

pursuit by Caridwen, his rebirth as Taliesin, his discovery in

a coracle by Elphin, and his challenging of the court bards'

(see Appendix). The Taliesin of myth, as Watkins receives him,

is clearly a supernatural figure, a shape-changer, and a kind

of shamanistic bard, capable of transmigration and rebirth in

a myriad of forms. However, as Jane McCormick points out in

her unpublished dissertation, Watkins makes reference in some

of his poems to the historical bard, and it is probably a mis-

take to argue the irrelevance of the historical figure in his

mind.[12] McCormick writes:

> But to argue that Watkins is interested only in the
> more romantic of the two figures, the archetypal
> Taliesin rather than the historical, is to miss part
> of his point in choosing that particular name. The
> attraction of Taliesin is that he is both historical
> and mythic. To Watkins this suggested a poet who by
> his creative perception escaped the fallen world and
> was translated to the mythic or divine level, thus
> providing an archetype for what, Watkins felt, it is
> every poet's task to do.[13]

The issue for Watkins is the translation of history into the

timelessness of myth; and Taliesin, being associated both with

temporal events, and with prophetic awareness beyond time,

affords him the elements of potential synthesis.

The first of the Taliesin poems to appear in the pub-

lished poems, "Taliesin in Gower" (from The Death Bell, 1954),

begins and ends with the image of the "violent, colossal,

reverberant, eavesdropping sea." Both here and in the later

"Taliesin's Voyage," Watkins relocates the myth of his hero

at Pwlldu (Welsh for "black pool") on the Gower coast near

Pennard. He alters the myth by casting Taliesin up on the

shores of his own coastline rather than "on the strand between

Dyvi and Aberystwyth" as in Guest's translation.[14] By so
doing, Watkins assumes a closer identity with the bard, one
which enables him to claim as Taliesin's native land the land-
scape he most intimately knew and loved.

In the opening stanza, Taliesin emerges from the sea as
in the original myth, and claims Wales as his true homeland--
the place of his origins. The imagery establishes his full
identification with the landscape:

> My country is here. I am foal and violet. Hawthorne
>   breaks from my hands.

A complete reading of Watkins' canon reveals that the above
images of foal, violet, and white-blossoming flowers set up
complex cross-references with a number of other poems. The
poems dealing with foals and mares ("The Mare" and "The
Replica" in CA) and the Mari or "gray Mare" of "The Ballad of
the Mari Lwyd" establish the importance of horse imagery in
Watkins' poetry. The "Music of Colours" sequence, which I
shall explore in the next chapter, begins with a meditation on
falling, white blossoms. However, a longer poem in Affinities
(1962), "The Childhood of Hölderlin," provides the best clue
as to what foals and violets symbolize in the context of his
poems, and how the two images are linked in his mind. That
poem opens with the following lines:

> Surely the racing foal has discerned through darkness
> The light out of which man came, and the violet-root
> Has sucked the fountain over which Dante bent
> And found the river of light. (A, p. 57)

Here, both foal and violet represent aspects of nature which
have contact with a hidden and invisible order of life assoc-
iated with "light" and "the fountain." "Light" and "the

fountain," in turn, are recurrent symbols in Watkins' poetry

for the origin of things in time, images of eternity. And in

"Taliesin in Gower" it is these eternal aspects hidden within

(but originating beyond) the natural order that Taliesin has

come to celebrate and redeem. We note also that the reference

to Dante as a poet of visionary experience is also present in

a Taliesin poem yet to be discussed, "Taliesin and the Spring

of Vision."

The "I" of the poem is at once merged with the forms of

nature, and their acute, semi-omniscient observer.

> I watch the inquisitive cormorant pry from the praying
>   rock of Pwlldu,
> Then skim to the gull's white colony, to Oxwich's
>   cockle-strewn sands.

The description of nature in these rhymed (abab) and rolling

seven-stress lines is precise and particularized. The rhythmic

line attempts to echo the motion of the sea as well as to

establish the oracular quality of the voice. The speaking

voice is that of one who claims intimate knowledge of nature,

and the ability to read its secret script--to hold the key to

the interpretation of its manifested signatures.

> I have seen the curlew's triangular print, I know every
>   inch of his way....
> ....
> I have been taught the script of the stones, and I know
>   the tongue of the wave.

As in the transformational fragments from the Guest translation,

Watkins uses the "I am....I have seen" pattern of declamation

to suggest the speaker's omniscience.

In the third stanza, the landscape to which the poet comes

as a "witness" becomes increasingly symbolic:

>   I witness here in a vision the landscape to which I
>   was born,
>   Three smouldering bushes of willow, like trees of fire,
>   and the course
>   Of the river under the stones of death, carrying the
>   ear of corn
>   Withdrawn from the moon-dead chaos of rocks overlook-
>   ing its secret force.

The "Three smouldering bushes of willow, like trees of fire,"

suggest both the miraculous burning bush of Moses on Mount

Sinai, and the magical properties of the Celtic willow branch.

Watkins may also be referring to the local custom of farmers

burning bundles of twigs in the fields at the end of winter.

The fact that there are "three" bushes recalls that the number

"three" and triads in general are significant configurations

in Welsh mythology, as well as representative of the Christian

Trinity. Confirmation that at one level Watkins had the Trin-

ity in mind when working on the Taliesin poems can be deduced

from a draft of a poem entitled "Taliesin on the Beach," dated

1948-49, now in the British Library, which refers explicitly

to the three persons of the Holy Trinity in the final verse.[15]

The allusion becomes more clear in "Taliesin and the Spring of

Vision" where Watkins writes, "I looked; creation rose, upheld

by Three." The vision of nature aflame, and the image of the

underground river carrying the "ear of corn," or possibility

of regeneration, combine to create the impression that Taliesin

is seeing nature "transfigured" through the eyes of vision,

and reading its hidden meanings.

The "moon-dead chaos of rocks" overlooking the visionary

landscape may represent those seemingly inanimate aspects of

nature which have not yet been humanized, enlivened and

incorporated into his vision. In a commentary on another poem

dealing with Taliesin, "Poet and Goldsmith," from Cypress and

Acacia, Watkins makes an important distinction between "nature"

and "transfigured nature," arguing that he is not a nature poet

in the usual sense:

> This poem...is about nature, and about transfigured
> nature. To those who have never looked through or
> beyond nature, if there are such people, it must be
> meaningless....[T]his poem is about Taliesin looking
> at the created universe from the standpoint of Chris-
> tian faith, which I call the pivotal point between
> one way of writing and another.[16]

"Taliesin in Gower" and the other Taliesin poems are concerned

with this pivotal moment in time when nature is seen from a

transcendent perspective.

The fourth stanza presents the coming of spring through

its numerous images of rebirth--the "breaking iris" and the

"dripping branch" shedding its burden of frost. Taliesin reads

the signs of spring's emergence from "Winter, season of death,"

and recognizes the presence of human suffering--"men's groans"

--in this season of rebirth. As in Eliot's The Waste Land,

where "April is the cruellest month," spring in the poem is a

time of painful awakening as well as a time of regeneration,

and the poet's "task," as defined in stanza five, is the

Blakean one of weighing time against an eternal pattern and

somehow regenerating or restoring the landscape in terms of

that larger vision:

> Yet now my task is to weigh the rocks on the level
>   wings of a bird,
> To relate these undulations of time to a kestrel's
>   motionless poise.

Taliesin's function is not only to celebrate the yearly cycle

of the regeneration of nature with the "holy creatures" who

"proclaim their regenerate joys," but to open those cycles of

time and relate them to that which, like the kestrel at its

still point of ascent, is "motionless" and timeless. Here for

the first time the image of the kestrel or hawk appears, which

is to reappear in "Taliesin's Voyage." In many of Watkins'

poems, including "The Curlew" and "Kestrel" (CA, pp. 54-55),

birds are symbols of the poet, or that which it is the poet's

task to celebrate and preserve.

In stanza six, Taliesin defines the landscape as a "mighty

theatre" and enters that theatre as an actor--an active power

present in "the rising pewit's call" and in the "last of the

nine" waves. Watkins here alludes to the symbolic significance

placed upon "nines" in Welsh myth. In the transformational

poem, "Cad Goddeu" ("The Battle of the Trees") from The Book

of Taliesin, the shape-changing speaker usually identified with

Taliesin says,

> Not from a mother and father was I made;
> As for creation, I was created from nine forms of
>   elements:
> From the fruit of fruits, from the fruit of God at
>   the beginning;
> From primrose and flowers of the hill, from the bloom
>   of woods and trees;
> From the essence of souls was I made,
> From the bloom of nettles, from the water of the ninth
>   wave.[17]

As in the Gwion Bach story, the "sea-changed" bard of Watkins'

poem assumes many shapes, but his final form is that of

Taliesin.

> In a hundred dramatic shapes I perish, in the last I
>   live and sing.

Taliesin's song or music begins as a celebration of

present forms, "sheep," "ravens," "Larks," "porpoises" and the
"heron" of "Three Cliffs Bay" near his home in Gower. But in
the tenth stanza, he begins to expand the song by imagining
the history of earlier ages. Prehistoric animals, as well as
what Watkins' friend David Jones would call "sacramental man"
(man the sign-maker), emerge in the poem.[18] The record of
man's "script" left in the rocks is evidence of his artistic
activity even from Paleolithic times. Like Jones, Watkins cel-
ebrates the gratuitous and sacred nature of sign-making as both
a characteristically human and inherently religious activity.
Jones writes in "Art and Sacrament,"

> So it is here supposed that man is a creature whose
> end is extra-mundane and whose nature is to make
> things and that the things made are not only things
> of mundane requirement but are of necessity the signs
> of something other. Further, that an element of the
> gratuitous inheres to this making.[19]

Here in the poem it is as if the poet recapitulates in himself
the entire history of the race and the evolution of conscious-
ness. His vision restores an earlier, prehistoric Wales when
men were "makers" in Jones' sense:

> Rhinoceros, bear and reindeer haunt the crawling
>   glaciers of age
> Beheld in the eye of the rock, where a javelin'd arm
>   held stiff,
> Withdrawn from the vision of flying colours, reveals,
>   like script on a page,
> The unpassing moment's arrested glory, a life locked
>   fast in the cliff.

Watkins was excited by the recent archeological surveys (begun
in 1943) of the remains of a Paleolithic burial chamber in a
cave on Gower, and he celebrates the discovery of the "red lady
of Paviland" (who turned out to be a young man) in his poems,
"Digging the Past" and "The Red Lady" (F, pp. 84 & 89).

In "The Cave Drawing" (LU, p. 99) he deals with the record of prehistoric man's artistic activity in the caves of Lascaux. Two poems from Affinities, "The Fossil" and "Expectation of Life," also explore the presence of prehistoric man. In his prose Watkins has written,

> It is necessary to dig the past up to understand the present, but all good artists have something ancient about them too, and the earliest trinkets and ornaments dug from Welsh clay may jostle against the work of a living contemporary who has looked on that mirror and then set his hand to his task. [20]

Both he and Jones, who carried on an active literary correspondence, were fascinated by this invasion of the present by the past, and the idea of the essential unity of all times. It is because Taliesin's vision encompasses both past, present and future that he can go on to claim a faith "surmounting the Titan," and assume a victorious stance over the land he greets. Through his song, he is able to capture "the unpassing moment's arrested glory" and release the life held in matter--"a life locked fast in a cliff."

In the final stanzas, Taliesin's assertion that he is "safe with an ear of corn" again evokes the original Romance where as a grain of corn or wheat Taliesin is swallowed by Caridwen, only to be reborn; and at the same time it associates him with the pre-Christian and Christian mysteries of regeneration. Watkins may also have in mind the passage from the gospel of John where the "grain of corn" is used as a symbol of the resurrected Christ:

> Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die; it bringeth forth much fruit. (John 12:24)

In the last stanza, Taliesin turns to his ultimate task,
that of cutting the wood and measuring the strings for his harp
"to make manifest what shall be"; for his poetic vision must
encompass the future as well as the past and present if it is
to be truly prophetic. He must be able to "sing" what man's
and nature's forms will be, and aid in realizing their poten-
tial. The poem, "Three Harps" (CA, pp. 16-17), may help to
clarify Watkins' sense of what is demanded of the poet who
would play the harp of true inspiration. For in that poem the
"third" and "shrouded harp" can only be played by one who has
rejected worldly "renown" and has lain down in the grave with
the dead.

> Then at once the shrouded harp
> Was manifest. I began
> To touch, though pain is sharp,
> The ribs of man.

Taliesin here is like the harpist of that poem, one who has
experienced pain and suffering, and who has passed through the
initiation of a death of many past selves.

Taliesin's final desire, "to loosen this music to the
listening, eavesdropping sea," posed here as a question (How
shall I accomplish this task?), suggests that the vocation of
the true poet as Watkins sees it is to free or loosen the
music of earth to the vastness and wholeness of the "sea" that
is eternity. The sea, a predominant and somewhat ambiguous
symbol in the Taliesin sequence and in Watkins' work as a whole,
takes on a positive connotation in this poem, indicating that
which encompasses the activity of man and the poet's song in
a larger, harmonious order. It is as if eternity in the poem

is "eavesdropping" upon time. The line, "All earth being
weighed by an ear of corn, all heaven by a drop of blood,"
with its allusion to both the pre-Christian and Christian sac-
raments of bread (corn) and wine (the sacrificial drops of
Christ's blood), suggest that Watkins' effort in the poem is
not only to draw forth the latent Christian implications of the
earlier material, but to fulfill and complete what he believes
to be lacking in it by raising it into the realm of Christian
revelation. Taliesin, the faithful "Titan" or god-like hero,
by cutting and playing his Orphic-Celtic-Davidic-Druidic harp,
will make manifest in his song the truth of the Christian vi-
sion of sacrifice. It is this act that allows him to partici-
pate with Christ as a redeemer and restorer of the created
order. In terms of his craft this implies that Watkins-
Taliesin has chosen to write of "transfigured nature" in the
lyrical mode from what he calls in his note to "Poet and
Goldsmith," "the standpoint of Christian faith."

"Taliesin and the Spring of Vision" in Cypress and Acacia
(1959) illuminates more fully than any other Taliesin poem the
relationship between paganism and Christianity. It treats what
Kathleen Raine in her essay on Watkins in Defending Ancient
Springs calls "a deliberate baptism of the bardic spirit."[21]
Watkins' Christianity for her is "a seed or acorn into which
the essence of the pagan cosmic sense...has been distilled."[22]
I would argue that here Watkins' Christian perspective becomes
more explicit.

In the opening stanza we encounter Taliesin in his tradi-
tional and symbolic place "at the sea's edge"--the meetingplace

of sea and shore, time and eternity. Watkins conveys the pass-
ing of time through the images of sand and the hourglass, im-
ages that recur in "Poet and Goldsmith" (CA, p. 36). Later in
the poem (stanza 5) he borrows Blake's phrase from Jerusalem,
"the Minute Particulars,"[23] to describe the discrete entities
of experience as perceived by man in time. Watkins follows
Blake in his use of the phrase to indicate those phenomena of
time capable of reflecting eternity. In Blake, when the grains
of sand fail to reflect the eternal due to man's lack of vi-
sion, they become opaque and harden.

> Every Universal Form was become barren mountains of
> Moral
> Virtue, and every Minute Particular harden'd into grains
> of sand....[24]

In Blake's "Mock on, Mock on Voltaire, Rousseau," the grains
of sand become Democritus's and Newton's particles of matter
transfigured by imaginative vision:

> And every sand becomes a Gem
> Reflected in the beams divine....[25]

For Blake as for Watkins, the highest good in art and life ex-
presses itself through "Minute Particulars." As Blake writes,

> For Art and science cannot exist but in minutely organized
> Particulars
> And not in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational
> Power.[26]

Like Blake's "Bard" in Songs of Experience who "Present, Past
& Future, sees," Watkins' Taliesin has the visionary function
of raising the "Minute Particulars" through his song. With
Blake, Watkins is romanticizing the early bard as a prophetic
figure. In his "Jerusalem" (Chap. II), Blake presents the
prehistory of druidic culture as a "Golden Age," and Watkins

is establishing Taliesin as an apotheosis of the poet from an
earlier period in a similar manner.

The Blakean "grains of sand" in Watkins' poem, here
personified, sing to Taliesin, greeting him as "my nearmost,"
"my constant,"

> '....you...who have endured all vicissitudes
> In the cradle of sea, Fate's hands, and the spinning
>   waters.
> The measure of past grief is the measure of present joy.
> Your tears, which have dried to Chance, now spring from
>   a secret.
> Here time's glass breaks, and the world is transfigured
>   in music.'

Nature, or the temporal order, in its divine aspect claims a
kinship with the poet who is capable of transfiguring the
world through music. The reference to Fate suggests the
classical Fates who are weavers or spinners. And the "spinning
waters" remind us that Taliesin has been cast as from a vortex
or whirlpool from the primordial waters--that he has endured
a sea journey or initiation, and arrived at a new point of
departure. He, as the "virtuous pagan" is a bard of experi-
ence--one who has known "past grief" as well as "present joy."
In other words, he has experienced life as a Blakean tension
of contraries.

Despite his experience and accumulated wisdom, Taliesin
is not yet ready to respond to the song of the "grains" and
meet them in the timeless moment of the shattering of "time's
glass." While they whirl "to a pattern" (i.e., reflect at
their own level the larger, unlimited. patterns of eternity),
Taliesin retreats into a cave, taking refuge "under the un-
fledged rock." The image of the cave is rich with significance,

suggesting both the Platonic cave of time where men are
prisoners, and the dark, interior recess which holds a secret
source of light. As in the "via negativa" strain of Christian
mysticism, with which Watkins was familiar, the soul must
descend into its own interior darkness and meet the "cloud of
unknowing" or experience a "dark night of the soul" before it
is ready to face the light of supreme reality.[27] In Neo-
platonic sources such as The Enneads of Plotinus and Porphyry's
Life of Plotinus, which Watkins came to know through Yeats,[28]
souls are said to enter the world of generation through a
darkened cave. In Homer, Virgil and other pre-Christian
sources, the mouth of a cave is often the entrance to the
underworld or a place of mystic initiation--the abode of the
Sibyl. As Mary Polk states in her thesis, "the otherworld of
Celtic lore...was often thought of as located under a hill (as
in the case of the Irish sidh[e] folk) or reached through
caverns in the mountains."[29] For Taliesin, the cave is not only
a place of refuge for the "unfledged" (the uninitiated into the
Christian mysteries), but a place of discovery where he reaches
the "spring of vision" by groping with his hands. The rock
itself is "unfledged" (undeveloped) also in the sense that as
a stone or inanimate thing its inner form has not yet been
drawn forth and awakened by Taliesin's song. It is as if all
nature is awaiting his discovery of the "spring of vision."
The word "spring" of the title also carries more than a single
meaning, suggesting simultaneously the season, a source of
water, and a coiling or rebounding power. Here in the cave the
momentarily blind Taliesin, with his eyes closed to outer

seeing, touches the source or origin (the spring) of human

vision:

> And the rock he touched was the socket of all men's eyes,
> And he touched the spring of vision. He had the mind
>   of a fish
> That moment. He knew the glitter of scale and fin.
> He touched the pin of pivotal space, and he saw
> One sand grain balance the age's cumulous cloud.

Taliesin the shape-changer has his epiphany, his moment

of transcendence, when in a flash of insight he finds the

pivotal point of time that enables him to abolish it. By so

doing he becomes temporarily omnipresent, that is, present at

many levels of being. As in the earlier Romance where

Taliesin takes the form of a fish to escape Caridwen, he here

assumes "the mind of a fish," the image of which again suggests

his identification with Christ and the Christian symbol of the

fish. The pin or pivot is also a frequent image in Watkins'

work for the point of balance between time and eternity. Here

and in the following stanza, Taliesin is granted a picture of

the "penumbra of history." History (time-bound experience)

appears as a terrible shadow blocking man's vision of eternity

symbolized by the sun. Doubly horrifying is the lack of a

"sheet-anchor," a point of reference or stability that would

relate temporal experience to a larger pattern. The domination

of time would be insurmountably oppressive were it not for

Taliesin's recognition of the transforming power of love. Here

Taliesin begins to speak:

> 'Time reigns; yet the kingdom of love is every moment,
> Whose citizens do not age in each other's eyes.
> In a time of darkness the pattern of life is restored
> By men who make all transience seem an illusion

                   Through inward acts, acts corresponding to music.
                   Their works of love leave words that do not end in
                         the heart.'

The notion of a "city" as a symbol of organized human existence
where mutual exchange and love predominate is a favorite symbol
for Watkins, and he would have found parallels to his own sense
of the divine city of art in Blake's Golgonooza and Jerusalem
and in Yeats' Byzantium. In "Peace in the Welsh Hills" (CA,
p. 30), he speaks in similar terms of "a city we must build
with joy / Exactly where the fallen city sleeps." This "king-
dom of love," first built inwardly through acts of love,
eventually comes to have its own objective reality. This is
what I think Watkins means when he, through Taliesin, says that
poets' "works of love leave words that do not end in the heart."
Through poetic utterance ("acts corresponding to music") man is
capable of building the Blakean Jerusalem where "citizens do not
age in each other's eyes" even in the midst of time and place.
The emphasis here upon human love as a reflection of divine love
strikes a theme in Watkins' work that parallels his sense of the
temporal order as a reflection of a timeless one.

     In the fourth stanza, Taliesin, who is still gripping the
interior of the rock (which has now become his "sheet anchor"),
receives from an interior spring the "three drops" of poetic
inspiration that he requires to fulfill his purpose as one who
transfigures the world through music--music being, as typically
in Watkins, a symbol of creative expression in general and the
poet's craft in particular. Again we are reminded of the
Romance where Gwion steals from Avagduu ("utter darkness")

three drops from the cauldron of inspiration and is pursued by

Caridwen for his deed. In the moment that the drops fall on

his fingers, past and future converge "in a lightning flash,"

and the voices of Taliesin's Muses--the spirits of prophecy

who inspired his literary forebears--speak:

> 'It was we who instructed Shakespeare, who fell upon
>   Dante's eyes,
> Who opened to Blake the Minute Particulars. We are the
>   soul's rebirth.'

The three ancestors who are revealed in a moment of vision are

Taliesin-Watkins' literary progenitors, and in a sense his

collective Muse. Particularly through the references to Dante

and Blake, poets who explored the cosmographies of heaven and

hell, Watkins reveals his literary affinities with poets of

visionary experience.[30]

Taliesin's summation of his poetic stance in the final

stanza is paradoxically a rejection of "the omniscience" of

eternity in favor of the temporal world which greeted and

claimed him through the voice of the sand grains in the first

stanza.

> Taliesin answered: 'I have encountered the irreducible
>   diamond
> In the rock. Yet now it is over. Omniscience is not
>   for man.
> Christen me, therefore, that my acts in the dark may be
>   just,
> And adapt my partial vision to the limitations of time.'

Because he has encountered in a moment of vision "the irreduc-

ible diamond," the absolute light of eternity which is devas-

tating from human perspectives and too great a weight of con-

sciousness for mortality to bear, he requests that his "partial

vision" be adapted to "the limitations of time." Partly

because he is not yet ready to sustain heightened conscious-
ness, and partly out of a sense of willing sacrifice and
commitment, he embraces the time-world of mortality and limi-
tation. His "Christening," therefore, is in terms of a
Christian acceptance of and descent into time. Insofar as
Taliesin is a type of the Christian artist, we can say that
Watkins chooses to write about the eternal from the standpoint
of time in its most particularized and human aspects.

In an early Yeatsian poem, "Earth-Dress" (BML, p. 45),
Watkins had written of the fear of human mortality before the
absolute in terms similar to those of "Taliesin and the Spring
of Vision."

> I would awaken eyes
> Time has made unaware
> Of wonders of world-size;
> But when hawk-hovering air
> Of the unsheltered road
> Scours for divinity
> The beggar and the god,
> Men clutch mortality,
> Cling the ruinous,
> Perishing fabric of things,
> To build the grave's dark house,
> Terrified by those wings.

And in a note to that poem, he added the following comment:

> Man, insofar as he is soul, is indestructible; but he
> cannot, while he is in the flesh, endure the lightning
> of poetic genius itself. He cannot confront eternity;
> to him, while he is living in time, it is terror....
> ....
>   The lightning, poetic genius in one of its manifest-
> ations, godhead itself in another, is inaccessible to
> mankind except through a Mediator.[31]

Taliesin, a Promethean figure of man in time, "clutches
mortality" out of such a realization. He aspires to absolute
knowledge, realizes that he cannot sustain it while in the

flesh, and therefore asks to be "baptised," indicating the recognition of his need for a Mediator.

To comprehend fully the implications of Taliesin's Christian acceptance in this poem, it is necessary to refer briefly to several poems from The Lady with the Unicorn (1948) where Watkins makes clear what Christianity offers to man that paganism lacked. In "Zacchaeus in the Leaves," for instance, the biblical figure of the "small-statured man" (first mentioned in "Sycamore," BML, p. 25) who ascended a sycamore tree to view Christ is set against the pagan figure of Pan.

> The myth above the myth,
> Pan above Zacchaeus;
> Zacchaeus climbing,
> Mounted above his youth,
> Alone in time
> Seeking the heavenly death.　(LU, p. 91)

As in Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," the deeper perennial wisdom of Christianity which incorporates history through the Incarnation (the point of intersection in which eternity penetrates time), puts the pagan gods to flight. What they in one sense have prefigured, supplants them because of the coming of a greater power of love. In Watkins' poem, Zacchaeus finally climbs higher than Pan because of his "seeking the heavenly death." That is, his vision of Christ from the pinnacle of the tree inspires him to a more self-sacrificing, altruistic order of love.

In a number of related poems dealing with the figure of Zacchaeus and the image of the sycamore,[32] Watkins seems to have been drawn by the personal element in the story to identify with the "small-statured man." In Watkins' iconography,

the sycamore becomes a kind of tree of life, and its "keys"
or spinning seeds contain the possibility of regeneration.
In "Poet and Goldsmith," a Taliesin poem originally entitled
"Taliesin at Sunset," the poet sings a song which connects the
images of Zacchaeus and the sycamore with the issue of the
transfiguration of nature as it is treated in the Taliesin
poems as a whole.

> The poet sang: 'All ages bud like the sycamore.
> Brown keys spin down to beginning.   There are two
>   natures.
> Blest are the lost, packed hidden within life's door
> Like seeds in the husk.   Yet since a small man climbed
> The crooked trunk, and groped, and sat in the branch,
> The minutiae of earth are changed, and the blackbird's
>   praises
> Are now twofold: they speak and they speak beyond
>   knowledge.
> Even so, these hands have touched the harp of the dead.'

This incredibly compact poem succeeds in drawing together the
themes and images of the two sequences of poems by linking
Taliesin with Zacchaeus.   Zacchaeus' moment of revelation in
the tree is like that of Taliesin in the cave.   Both have to
do with the revelation of an essentially Christological per-
spective which changes "the minutiae of earth."

In "The Song of the Good Samaritan" (LU, p. 95), the
ascendency of the Christian mythos is even clearer.   The clas-
sical "mythologies shrink," in Watkins' phrase, and are sur-
passed by the Samaritan's simple act of human love and compas-
sion.   Again, like the "oracles" in Milton's "Nativity Ode"
they flee before the coming of a higher order of love.

> ....The mythologies shrink
> And the nameless image is healed of its murderous goad.

> Font of the fingers, water where asses drink,
> Winged horses above you scattering, manes of the Norn,
> And the heroic Pegasus, leap into light from the brink.
>
> Swallows quiver, rounding the magical horn
> Of fullness, emptied for John's wild honey. They break
> Light with their wings, and the era of love is born.
>
> He broke the classical falsehood, summoned awake
> A world from dust with the secret worlds of his tears.
> Shut in those heavens he heard the mythologies shake.

In this poem Watkins juxtaposes the "proud horses" of myth,

Pegasus and the Norns or Scandinavian Fates, to the Samaritan's

lowly ass, and the heroic values of classicism to Christian

humility. For Watkins, the heroic virtues of courage, endur-

ance and grandiloquence were incomplete without the addition

of "caritas"--Christian love--the willingness to sacrifice one-

self wholly for an ideal. Thus, he has the humble figure of

the Samaritan break the "classical falsehood" by bending in the

dust to aid a fellow creature. In so doing, the Samaritan is

bearing the wounds as well as sharing the joy of man:

> 'O moment,' he breathed, 'frail as the branch of a tree,
> This act is secret, eluding all fabulous joys.
> The wound I suffer, the joy I am bearing is he....'

The figure of the historical Taliesin would have embodied all

of the classical virtues, but he needs to be "baptised" at the

end of the poem because he has the potential for, but lacks,

such acts of love, mercy and humility.

Watkins' choice of the Samaritan as a figure of service

may have been suggested by this passage from A Vision of W. B.

Yeats, another of Watkins' literary predecessors who is to be

discussed in Chapter V. The Samaritan fits into Yeats' schema

as a representative of a Christian phase of religious expres-

sion:

> ....the Good Samaritan discovers himself in the likeness
> of another, covered with sores and abandoned by thieves
> upon the roadside, and in that other serves himself.[33]

Since A Vision first appeared in 1937 and Watkins' first volume

not until 1941, Watkins could have easily had this strikingly

similar passage in mind, but used it to present his own unique

sense of Christian charity.

Though Watkins subordinates classical mythology in favor

of Christian truth and biblical paradigm in poems like "Song

of the Good Samaritan," I do not wish to suggest as Roland

Mathias does in Triskel One that there is any essential

"dichotomy between mythic inheritance and Christian belief" in

the early poetry,[34] or in Watkins' work as a whole. For even

in the early published volumes, Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and

Other Poems, The Lamp and the Veil, and The Lady with the Uni-

corn, classical allusions and mythical themes are liberally

interspersed and integrated with biblical motifs. "Old Triton

Time" (BML, p. 18), "Atlas on Grass" (BML, p. 56), and the

"Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" itself are obvious examples of his

ability in the early poems to unify earlier mythological with

Christian material. I believe it can be argued that Watkins

is working consciously within the great European, Christian-

humanist tradition as practiced by Dante, the Renaissance

painters and Milton, in which there is no essential dichotomy,

but a hierarchy of values where the poetic images of pagan myth

are taken up and included, indeed, typologically fulfilled in

terms of Christian revelation. Though like Milton, Watkins

subordinates pagan to Christian myth in particular poems (see

for instance "Prime Colours" in BML, p. 16), this subordination

does not constitute a rejection of early myth, but requires its transformation in new poetic contexts. Watkins' poetic effort is essentially synthetic and inclusive, rather than exclusive. From an early sonnet like "Atlas on Grass" (BML, p. 56), where the Greek figure of Atlas discovers that "men are raised by what a myth conceals," to later poems like "Christ and Charon" (CA, p. 57) or "Rhadamanthus and the New Soul" (BOD, p. 50), classical figures move easily in a Christian world. It is probable also that Watkins' long-standing interest in Hölderlin is attributable in part to that poet's ability to harmonize the Christian and the Greek.[35]

Watkins continues to work out a synthesis of the Welsh and Christian traditions in "Taliesin's Voyage" in Affinities (1962). Here he reestablishes the detail of the earlier legend, making reference to Taliesin's birth in a coracle (a small, handwoven wicker basket covered with hide); his relation to Caridwen, who in the original material functions as a kind of "terrible mother," pursuing the child Gwion through various forms in an attempt to destroy him; and his rebirth as the "minstrel," Taliesin.

> The coracle carried me.
> The seawave tossed me.
> Hawk, hound harried me.
> Caridwen lost me.

Both in the original myth and in Watkins' verse Caridwen is an ambiguous figure, associated with nature in both its creative and destructive aspects. She is at one level an inspiring Muse, a maternal figure (originally a mother goddess associated with Rhiannon) and at another a jealous and devouring female.

Taliesin's (and Watkins') attitude toward nature in the poems partakes of the same ambivalence; for he recognizes it on the one hand as fallen and imperfect, and on the other as capable of embodying eternal verities--of revealing the infinite in the particular in the Blakean sense.

In his retelling of the myth, Watkins, speaking directly through the mask of the mature Taliesin, dwells upon the arche-typal implications of the child Taliesin's sea journey or voy-age in darkness and his rebirth or awakening in "dawn" light on "wild Pwlldu." During his long sea voyage to Wales we are told that the "hidden" Taliesin "Raved nor remembered / Earthly things." As in the Platonic notion of the divinely inspired poet, and in the case of the primitive figure of the shaman,[36] Taliesin is associated with "divine mania," and bears the know-ledge of the dark, the hidden and inner wisdom, a kind of wis-dom not gained without suffering. He [Taliesin],

> Raved, nor remembered
> Earthly things,
> But wide-ribbed, slumbered
> Under those wings.

In his slumber (or shamanistic trance), Taliesin is borne by the swallow's wing--"I heard swift, swallow, / Fly through the dark." Here as in the romantic and classical traditions, birds are associated with divine inspiration, with the souls of the dead, and with the poet. Taliesin is carried under the wings of such divine messengers and under the flight of stars, both birds and stars being symbols of his divine mission. The voy-age, like the journey of the shaman through the under and upper worlds, is a durationless moment, a kind of timeless "dream"

from the perspective of the bard:

> The days of my voyage
> When numbered are
> As a glacier's age
> Or a shooting star.
>
> Swift and slow
> In one rope twined
> A sail did throw
> On my dreaming mind.
>
> Time I pursued
> And saw the kill.
> Life was renewed
> Where time lay still.
>
> Sand and the year
> That seemed deranged
> Are filled with grandeur
> For all is changed.

At his birth, Taliesin reenters the world of time and observes the destructive powers, "the kill," that time perpetuates. Yet through his visionary perspective he is able to affirm that even the things of time, "Sand and the year / That seemed deranged / Are filled with grandeur."

Taliesin turns finally to address the raven and the kestrel,[37] a scavenger and a bird of prey capable of representing both the temporal cycles of destruction (the cycle of predator and prey) and higher wisdom. He wishes to learn from them in their higher capacity "the heart of sound," that is, the secret of music (poetry) that is capable of transfiguring the destructive aspects of nature, and raising them into timelessness. The "turning birds," then, become for Taliesin (like Hopkins' windhover and Yeats' falcon in "The Second Coming") symbols of that which circles about the "pivotal point" of the timeless. Taliesin would learn from them the secret music, and reveal to them in exchange his knowledge of the interrelation of time

and eternity. He desires to participate in a reciprocal ex-
change with the creation.

> O raven, kestrel
> Wheeling round,
> Teach your minstrel
> The heart of sound!
>
> I, Taliesin
> Know the cords
> Between that pin
> And the turning birds.

The issue of the poem is how Taliesin, the creative principle
or imagination, is able to transform the seemingly destructive
elements of creation into a vision of "grandeur"--harmony and
beauty.

In the last stanza Taliesin cries for "Destruction's key,"
for like the creative Logos he is identified with both the
creation and destruction of world cycles--the beginning and the
ending of things. Destruction bears the key to a secret, since
ultimately, through the principle of self-sacrifice, it is ca-
pable of leading to the great mystery of rebirth.

> Where have they left
> Destruction's key,
> Hid in what cleft
> Of the crying sea?

Like nature, the sea in Watkins' work is another symbol
capable of holding a dual meaning in its association with gen-
eration and corruption as well as with the infinite--the eter-
nal. Watkins writes of this delicate paradox in his prose.
Here he is speaking of the visual art of Ceri Richards, a Welsh
contemporary:

> Art springs from conflict, and the conflict here is
> between two eternities, that of <u>the sea assimilating
> all things into its movement toward ultimate oblivion</u>

and that of the cathedral embodying man's faith and
mind.... (italics mine)[38]

And in "New Year 1965" he writes:

> Yet sometimes I have seen it [the sea], after a stormy
> night, vast, yet immediate, containing all its contra-
> dictions, all its opposing forces, in a single harmonious
> vision. I never doubted the terror, even the malice
> of the sea's designs; but to see it in a moment of repose
> is mysterious and supremely satisfying.[39]

In the context of the last stanza of the poem, I would suggest
that the sea in its temporal aspect of generation and flux is
"crying" for eternity, which will in one sense be its destroyer
when the things of time are swallowed up in the infinite. The
"winds' hound" and the "mussel's sting" in the previous stanza
are the negative (painful or destroying) elements of creation
which must be raised and transfigured in Taliesin's vision.
The poem, then, reveals the darker aspects of Taliesin, the
suffering and agony his knowledge brings him, and his need to
grapple with the complexities of the created order. Through
his identification with the prey--"harried" by hawk and hound,
as in the original material where Taliesin as a hare is pursued
by Caridwen as greyhound and ultimately swallowed as a grain of
wheat--Taliesin is revealed here as a suffering, Christ-like
figure. As in "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision," his endur-
ance of the limitation of birth and temporality can be seen as
a kind of spiritual death undertaken in order to renew time.

In "Taliesin and the Mockers," the companion poem to
"Taliesin's Voyage" in Affinities, Watkins retains the form of
the "I am" utterance of the voice claiming omnipotence as used
in the original material.

> Before man walked
> I was in these places.
> I was here
> When the mountains were laid.

He makes a deliberate effort to capture the oracular tone and
insistent rhythm used by Guest. The assertive claim of the
poet to have been present "when the mountains were laid" is
reminiscent also of the epic, formulaic pattern of the "boast"
evident in the Welsh sagas. David Jones in In Parenthesis
draws on the same tradition when he has the soldier, "Dai,"
make his claims to omnipresence more ironically in the context
of war:

> I was with Abel when his brother found him, under the
>   green tree.
> I built a shit-house for Artaxerxes.
> I was the spear in Balin's hand
>   that made waste King Pellam's land.[40]

Watkins may also have in mind the biblical use of the "boast"
as evidenced in Job (Chap. 38) where God himself from the
whirlwind challenges Job with a series of formulaic questions
asserting His divine presence at creation--"Where wast thou
when I laid the foundations of the earth....?"

The poem goes on to identify the poet both with animate
and inanimate nature, "the designing of flowers" and "ringing
stones," establishing his presence at the creation of the
world and with the vital powers of life and death. The empha-
sis shifts in stanza six to focus upon the "Lord" of Taliesin,
who is at one level Christ the divine Logos present at creation,
and the vehicle of creation--the mediating Word. In Guest's
translation too we note that Taliesin appeals to such a "Lord"
of heaven in the line, "I will supplicate my Lord that I get

refuge in him,/ a regard I may obtain in his grace; / The Son
of Mary is my trust...."[41] In the original material he claims
to have been in the "Tetragramaton," that is, the hidden and
unpronounceable name of God of Jewish mysticism. Taliesin's
Lord, though at one level Elphin of the Welsh myth, is revealed
in Watkins' poem as the Lord of the heavens, or Christ in his
preincarnate identification with the Creator.

    My Lord prescribed
    The path of the planets.
    His fingers scattered
    The distant stars.

Taliesin, then, is cast in the role of one who retells or
sings creation, beginning and ending, creation and destruction,
the calling forth and naming of living forms. He reenacts
through the musical evocation of his speaking the making of
heaven and earth, birds, mammals, plants, insects and finally
man and woman in the "garden," echoing again a passage from
Guest's translation. Though the following lines from Guest's
poem are comparable in tone, rhythmic structure and content
to those of Watkins, we can see that he emphasizes the timeless
nature of man's original estate:

Guest: Watkins:

The Almighty made,   Last, all labour
Down the Hebron vale,   He bent on dust.
With his plastic hands,   Out of the red dust
    Adam's fair form: Made He Man....

And five hundred years,   He built for him
Void of any help,   His eternal garden,
There he remained and lay   Timeless, moving,
    Without a soul.   And yet in time.

He again did form,   He cast on him
In calm paradise,   Dark veils of sleep.
From a left-side rib,   Out of his side
    Bliss-throbbing Eve.[42]   He took the Female.

Watkins' poem becomes a retelling of the creation of man
and woman in Genesis and in Milton's Paradise Lost; then it
moves through mythic history from the building of Babel's
tower and the rise of Solomon to the birth of the creative
principle in its most immediate form in Taliesin.

I was a lamp
In Solomon's temple;
I, the reed
Of an auguring wind.

What do you seek
In the salmon river,
Caught in the net
What living gold?

What do you seek
In the weir, O Elphin?
You must know
That the sun is mine.

Here Watkins evokes the discovery of Taliesin as recorded in
the Romance where Elphin draws the infant forth from a coracle
and names him Taliesin, "lord of the radiant brow." Taliesin's
name associates him with heavenly light, and establishes him as
a divinely marked "star child." The fact that Elphin is seek-
ing fish in the "salmon river" and catches instead a divine
child, reminds us of the connection between the story of Gwion
Bach and the Irish legend of Finn and the salmon of wisdom
which, as we have seen, Watkins used in "The Salmon." It is
also a reference to the Hanes Taliesin in the Guest translation
where Taliesin asserts, "And it is not known whether my body is
flesh or fish."[43] Finally, we cannot forget that the early
symbol of Christianity was "the fish," and that Christ chose
disciples who were fishermen. The point here is that Elphin
has lifted from the weir more than he bargained for--a living

being ("living gold") that will transform his life, and that

holds the key to the secrets of creation. For Taliesin is

identified not only with "Solomon's lamp," but like Christ with

the life-giving sun itself.

In Defending Ancient Springs, Kathleen Raine connects

Taliesin with what she calls "the other mind" of inspiration,

the traditional repositories of wisdom from the regions of

the dead.[44] The power of prophetic utterance derived from con-

tact with these interior realms is one aspect of the "gift"

that Taliesin brings with him (see stanza 27) and offers to the

living. Like the miraculous head of the Mari in "The Ballad of

the Mari Lwyd" (1941), Taliesin acts as mediator between life

and death, time and timelessness, challenging the temporal

order. Raine has said, "The knowledge of the Mari is

Taliesin's knowledge."[45] By transferring to Taliesin the

prophetic, incantatory and sacred powers of the Mari, Watkins

carries forward and develops the theme of that early ballad,

connecting her powers more closely with those of the poet. In

the Taliesin poems, however, he is able to make the point that

the greatest gift the poet brings is that of divine love, which

must go hand in hand with his knowledge. Taliesin states in

the poem under discussion:

    I have a gift
    For I have nothing.
    I have love
    Which exceeds all treasures.

At this point in the poem the associations of the reborn

bard with the infant Jesus and with the later "mocked Christ"

of the crucifixion become dominant. The hired court musicians

in the Romance mock Taliesin for his failure to conform to the

court system and for his lack of professional training. Here

he clearly represents native inspiration over the artificial

learning of the schools. We are told in the Romance that

>....at that time the bards were in great favor with
>the exalted of the kingdom; and then none performed
>the office of those who are now called heralds [bards],
>unless they were learned men....[46]

Yet in the Romance, Taliesin, who comes from outside the sys-

tem, is able to turn the court bards' mockery back upon them-

selves, and reduce them to repeating mindlessly the undignified

mumblings of the nonsense phrase, "blerum, blerum." In his

poem, Watkins pursues this theme.

>Mock me they will,
>Those hired musicians,
>They at Court
>Who command the schools.
>
>Mock though they do,
>My music stands
>Before and after
>Accusing silence.

Watkins' rejection of the artificial learning of the "hired

musicians" in this context, does not, however, imply that he

rejects the necessity of vast learning and skill in the use of

intricate forms associated with the bardic tradition; for he

continually argues the importance of "tradition" in both poetry

and prose, and practices in intricately structured forms, some

of which we shall explore in Chapter III. Here the point is

that learning without inspiration is valueless. Obliquely per-

haps he is attacking much of the poetry of his day.

Like Christ, then, and like the prophets of the Old

Testament, Taliesin is "mocked" and reviled by the world and by

the false poets and prophets; yet like Christ he overcomes. The overcoming in the poem is again through the gift of poetic utterance, his music being a symbol of the wisdom which stands before and after time. It is again the infusion of a higher order of love into the primitive mythos through the allusions to Christ, that gives the poem its final significance and focus. In the last verses, which diverge in the direction of Christian vision from the original material, Watkins alludes to the healing of the blind man by Christ, and the idea that only the blind can recognize Him, playing on the paradox that the physically blind often have spiritual sight.

> Certain there were
> Who touched, who knew Him.
> Blind men knew
> On the road their God.

The voice of Taliesin, speaking out of his sense of identification with Christ, merges with that of the poet here and throughout the poem. Thus Watkins, speaking through the mask of Taliesin, establishes his own poetic lineage as one who through poetic utterance would incarnate the highest, most sacred wisdom. By setting himself against the pseudo-poetry of the "schools," Watkins' poet also assumes a relatively isolated position.

In one of the later published poems from Fidelities (1968), "Taliesin at Pwlldu," set at a bay near his home on the Gower coast, Watkins moves toward a synthesis of Celtic, Christian and Greek symbolism. Taliesin is gazing upward through the branches of a kind of "Tree of Life" ("the wind-blown tree") toward the "veil of heaven." Nature is like a veil, at once

revealing and concealing the eternal order beyond. Taliesin's
speaking in the first person conveys his desire to capture in
a visionary moment the instant before Daphne is transformed
into Apollo's laurel tree--the moment of metamorphosis where
time is conquered. At this point the leaves speak, declaring
their intuitive wisdom that freedom comes only in service to
an ideal: "In boundless light only the bound are free."
Taliesin, acting in accord with this principle, finds music
flowing through him "as through a shell." His entire being
has become the vehicle of inspiration. We are reminded here
also that Watkins' notion of creative expression demands the
submission of the artist to a form, and that his own poetic
practice led him in the main to reject the free verse experi-
ments of Pound and the early Eliot for the exploration and ren-
ovation of traditional metrical forms.

In the second stanza, he acknowledges the living powers
that dance through himself and nature in the line, "Streams
dance and glitter and the rocks have veins." Then he turns
retrospectively to invoke his own "sea journey" when he
floated (like the infant Moses) in a timeless realm and sur-
veyed the uprising of creation:

> My Master from the rainbow on the sea
> Launched my round bark. Through darkness, trailing hands,
> I drifted. Wave-gnarled images of gods
> Floated upon the whale-backed water-plains,
> I looked; creation rose, upheld by Three.

As we have noted in the earlier poem, "Taliesin and the
Mockers," Taliesin's "Master" is not only Elphin from the leg-
end, but Christ, who in Revelation is shown in John's
vision standing in a rainbow as the fulfillment of the promise

to Noah and the completion of the old covenant, a kind of universal man.

> And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a
> sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the
> throne, in sight like unto an emerald. (Revelation 4:3)

The "Three" who uphold creation are at once the Christian Trinity and the Welsh Triads. For the three who stand about Taliesin in the third stanza in "the secret place within the source of tears," are suggestive of the Welsh "Y Mamau" (or, "the Mothers"), a configuration of three female goddesses.[47] These powers represent Taliesin's Muse--or the "other mind" that inspires his utterance. The "pure stream" which Taliesin touches in the last stanza, like the underground river of "Taliesin in Gower," and the spring of the cave in "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision," represents his source of inspiration--the waters of life which issue pure from paradise to manifest in the natural world.

> Pure stream, by pebbles masked and changing skies,
> I touch you; then I know my native land.

Like Taliesin in "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision" in the cave, he makes contact with his "native land" by the power of touch. The reference to the "avengers" in the final lines recalls the stories of vengeance associated with Arthur in the Arthurian sagas which Guest refers to in her translation,[48] as well as the theme of vengeance in the original tale of Gwion Bach, where Taliesin achieves revenge on the court bards who have persecuted him and imprisoned Elphin, his master.

> Pride cast the pattern from primaeval years,
> The avenger's knives in glacier-driven stone
> Changed by God's peace, transfixed where morning flies.

The point here, however, is not that Taliesin achieves vengeance, but that "God's peace" (conveyed in part through his own transmission of it) "transfixes" or pierces through the primaeval pattern of wrongness cast from "pride." As in the other Taliesin poems, the Christian virtues of love and forgiveness implicit in the new way of seeing, reverse or arrest the "classical falsehood" and the consequences of the Fall.

In summary, by incorporating the Greek mythos into the Celtic and Christian, and by working more inventively with the material from The Mabinogion, Watkins can be seen extending his theme in "Taliesin at Pwlldu." Though he uses a regular iambic pentameter line, his free use of hyphenated words ("whale-backed water-plains") and a strongly alliterated line ("Pride cast the pattern from primaeval years") creates the feeling of an earlier, more alliterative poetic tradition. His use of compound words also suggests the presence of that most considerable Welsh poet in English of the previous generation, G. M. Hopkins, whose influence on Watkins will be considered briefly in Chapter III.

"Sea Chant (Taliesin to Venus)" is the last of the Taliesin poems I shall be taking up here. This poem is particularly important since it reveals a more Dionysian aspect of the Taliesin figure, and shows Watkins using the traditional material in a more inventive and personal way.

The poem is addressed by Taliesin to Venus, who in the poem is associated with the Lorelei ("Venus, Loreley-breasted"), the enchantress of German romanticism and Wagnerian myth who lures sailors to their death on the rocks. Though Taliesin

reveals her in her darker aspects as a "ceaseless mother of change," "hard and hostile to man," he does not reject her as evil, but says that he desires to "preserve" her "Chaste, from shudder and shock." Only Taliesin can preserve her eternal aspects from time, since he alone has realized the truth that darkness must give way to light, corruption to recreation.

> Yet that golden-eyed egret
>   Still as a hawk shall stay,
>   While you proclaim to islands
>   Nothing dark shall endure.
> I have discerned a secret
>   Hid from the arc of day,
>   Locked in the heart of silence,
>   Stronger than death, and pure.

The "secret" he has "discerned" that is "Stronger than death, and pure," is the secret of the regenerative power of Christian love common to the other poems. In the last two stanzas, Taliesin reveals himself mythically as both son and lover, heroic rescuer and preserver of Venus in her maternal and feminine aspects. Unlike the lover-son of the ancient mother-goddess cult which Graves elaborates, he is not slain at the end of the year, but comes to free the Venus figure from these cycles of destruction. Comparing her to Semele in the myth of Dionysus' birth in lightning, he identifies himself as the "lightning born" immortal youth who is capable of delivering her.

> I, with strength from the giver,
>   Kindling coral and horn,
>   Taught by the tides of ages,
>   Take you, at last subdued.
> I am come to deliver
>   You of the white spray born.
>   Do not all faiths and sages
>   End in a child their feud?

The poem, which reveals Taliesin's lineage as a son of
divine parents, also connects him with the Christian mythos--
for like Christ he is both son and savior of his mother. The
birth of the divine child (like the Incarnation which is per-
haps the ultimate paradigm for Watkins) ends the "feud" of the
warring ages and ultimately will initiate an era of peace. The
poem reveals Taliesin in his role of redeemer, not only of
nature with which Venus is identified in the poem ("Patterning
sunbeams serve you, / Doves, and pinks in the rock"), but of
the creative aspects of the feminine. Like Christ in relation
to the church as bride, he enacts the role of heavenly bride-
groom, bringing about a regenerative union of male and female
principles. We note that Venus is described as standing in
"bride-veils." The sexual imagery of the poem (the "subduing"
of the female), can be seen as a metaphor on the natural level
for the creative union of male and female in a higher order of
love by which the destructive sexuality of Venus is transformed.
At another level, as in the poem "The Lady with the Unicorn"
(from the volume by that name), Venus functions as the poet's
(here Taliesin's) Muse, for he acts as her singer in the world.

>   I, the last of your singers,
>   See how the shells you gave
>   Shine where the breaker shatters
>   All that we know of day.

Yet her need for him is as great as his for her, and therefore
the relation between poet and Muse is reciprocal. Out of this
potentially destructive union issues creative energy and ex-
pression. Finally, the poem can be seen on the personal level
as a love poem to the poet's wife presenting the conflict

between the poet as artist and the poet in love.[49]

It is evident from a survey of the above poems that Watkins saw himself poetically not only within the Christian tradition, but within a particular visionary branch of it. Through the mask of Taliesin he was able to trace the genealogy of his own conversion to a larger, more encompassing Christian vision, and to speak in the prophetic mode of an order of perception that would bridge the gap between the temporal and eternal orders. His essential theme of the conquest of time by art could not be better conveyed than through this mediating figure from his own Welsh heritage where native, Christian and Hebraic themes and images already lay commingled. Though he dropped the mask of Taliesin in later poems and wrote more directly of the relation of man and Muse, it is clear that the bardic figure enabled him to make high claims for the poet, and to reaffirm the sacred nature of the poet's task.

CHAPTER II

TIME AND ETERNITY:

THE "MUSIC OF COLOURS" POEMS

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Time and Eternity:

The "Music of Colours" Poems

We have seen how Watkins drew upon a romanticized tradition
of the Welsh bard Taliesin to elaborate his own sense of the
sacred calling of the poet as a mediator between time and eter-
nity. Another related sequence of poems entitled "The Music of
Colours" enabled him to explore through Neoplatonic sources his
sense of what might be called the interdimensionality of expe-
rience, the realization that what we know through the senses is
but a portion of reality; that hidden within the particularity
of this world lie the traces of another.

Like the Taliesin sequence, Watkins' "Music of Colours"
poems enabled him to focus on a network of carefully interwoven
themes and images over a considerable span of time. This par-
ticular sequence began with the publication in 1943 of "Music
of Colours: White Blossom" and its appearance in LU in 1948;[1]
it continued through to "Music of Colours: The Blossom
Scattered" in DB in 1954, and culminated during the poet's
lifetime with "Music of Colours--Dragonfoil and the Furnace of
Colours" in A in 1962. All three "Music of Colours" poems have
been republished in the posthumous US (1978), along with a
fragment of a poem entitled "Music of Colours--The Cave." My
intention here is to explore the three major "Music of Colours"
poems in the order they appeared in the published volumes in
light of Watkins' use of Platonic, Neoplatonic and Christian
concepts and symbols. I shall explore these poems in

considerable detail to show how Watkins establishes a Platonic

dialectic of time and eternity and fuses it with Christian

imagery of death and resurrection. In the process of examining

the "Music of Colours" poems, I shall provide supporting evi-

dence from other poems that treat the time-eternity motif with-

in a Christian-Platonic context in order to establish the con-

sistency of Watkins' philosophical background and poetic ori-

entation. Because of the great beauty of these poems, and be-

cause the ideas and images contained in them inform so much of

Watkins' work, they deserve a fuller treatment than they have

received up to this time.

Watkins' early interest in Platonic myth was mediated

through two Romantic poets: Shelley, the love of his early

youth, and Blake, whose work he read thoroughly in the 1930's,

and whose ideas and imagery continued to exert an influence on

the mature poet. Among the moderns, the poet Yeats became for

Watkins the greatest twentieth-century exemplar of one who was

able to integrate Platonic concepts within an individualistic

poetic universe. Watkins' treatment of Platonic myth is, how-

ever, traditionally and unambiguously Christian as that of

Yeats and Shelley is not. For this reason, Watkins' Platonism

is perhaps closer to that of Vaughan or Milton than to that of

those nearer him in time. In Chapters IV and V, both Watkins'

relation to Yeats and to several of the seventeenth-century

poets will be considered in greater depth.

Although Watkins was not a theological or systematic

thinker, and avoided categories and "isms" of any kind (except

that of Christian metaphysical poet),[2] he borrowed freely from

Platonic and Neoplatonic sources (such as Plato's Timaeus

and Plotinus' Enneads) and used whatever enhanced his own

poetic sense of the mysterious relation between the timeless

and the temporal orders. The constant recurrence throughout

his work of the theme of the destruction of time by the Imag-

ination argues that the dichotomy between time and eternity is

indeed his central poetic concern, the major theme to which his

minor themes adhere. We have seen how in the Taliesin poems

the pre-Christian bard caught between the worlds of paganism

and Christianity attains momentary illumination through the

shattering of "time's glass" in time's "timeless moment" (CA,

p. 20). The problem of how to annihilate time by breaking

through to the timeless, whether in a moment of visionary per-

ception or in a lifetime of love, prayer and spiritual disci-

pline, is all-pervasive from the early to the later work. Wit-

ness the relatively early "The Broken Sea" in LV, for instance,

where Watkins speaks in the conclusion of "annihilating time"

to gain "love's timeless state" (p. 60), and "A Necklace of

Stones" in LU where he informs us that his poetic calling is to

sing "a placeless and a timeless heaven" (p. 86). In a poem

entitled "Dialogue" from the posthumous volume, Fidelities,

Watkins takes a more positive view of time, but only through

the recognition that time itself obeys and is subject to the

"fount" of eternity. There the earth speaks to the soul in the

following terms:

> '....I keep
> An exact account.
> Time flings wide circles, but still they obey one fount.'

In one sense, the Fall for Watkins is more than anything

else a fall into time and a loss of the primal oneness of eter-

nity. In "The Life Thread" (F, p. 42), he writes of the

soul's reluctant entrance into time as a descent.

> With what reluctance,
> What misgiving,
> Torn from the substance
> Of timeless living,
> Parted from night,
> At last you fall
> From the secret waters'
> Circling ball.

Finally, we recall that in his Introduction to Dylan Thomas'

Letters to Vernon Watkins (1957), Watkins reiterates his poetic

stance as that of one who after his early twenties could never

again write a poem "dominated by time."[3] Time as a condition

of limitation and restriction appears again and again as the

great opponent to be either annihilated or transfigured.

Watkins' work shares with most forms of Platonism the

sense of the presence of an invisible and eternal (timeless)

world behind or within the visible and temporal. In poems like

"Foal" (LU), "The Mare" and "The Replica" (CA), he uses an ob-

viously Platonic vocabulary to describe the relation of the two

worlds, borrowing notions of "original," "pattern," "copy" and

"replica" from Platonic sources. "The Replica," for instance,

describes a young foal's relation to its archetypal form in the

heavenly world in Platonic terms.

> Once more the perfect pattern falls asleep
> And in the dark of sleep the replica
> Springs to awareness.

Like earlier Platonists, Watkins is concerned with the

problem of ontology and therefore focuses on where the natural

order stands in relation to the Absolute. He assumes an

ordered, hierarchical universe containing multiple levels of being, each one verging on the next. The realization that nature is not an end term or final reality leads him to the affirmation of nature as both reality (at its own level of being) and symbol or hieroglyph in which the higher or archetypal Reality inheres. Depending on man's perspective, nature may stand in relation to that higher Reality either as an obscuring "veil" or a luminous, transparent reflector. In "The Tributary Seasons," for instance, Watkins describes the self-regenerating seeds of nature as

> ....the year's eternal forms,
> An alphabet whose letters all
> Mark out a sacred festival. (CA, pp. 72-3)

In its transfigured aspect, nature provides him with analogies to the eternal world in which it participates, and when interpreted rightly he considers that nature may lead man back to that transcendent source known as "the One," "the Good," "the Absolute," in Platonic terms, and "God," the more personalized Father, in Hebraic and Christian. Watkins writes of God in both the abstract and the more personal manner, depending upon the emphasis of the particular poem.

We have seen in the last chapter that Watkins continues in his own unique way the Medieval and Renaissance synthesis or assimilation of classical and pagan to Christian ideas, sometimes subordinating myth to Christianity as in "Song of the Good Samaritan" and "Zacchaeus and the Leaves," and sometimes using myth as metaphor foreshadowing or compatible with Christian revelation as in the Taliesin poems. In the poems to be

discussed here, he continues the process of classical-Platonic-Christian synthesis that is characteristic of his work as a whole.

The "Music of Colours" poems enact a seasonal progression. "White Blossom" describes the end of winter and the beginning of spring; "The Blossom Scattered," spring; and "Dragonfoil and the Furnace of Colours," summer. Certainly, in all three poems the ever-changing, cyclic faces of the seasons present a problematic situation to the speaker who laments man's inability to have absolute or even reliable knowledge in the phenomenal world.

"Music of Colours--White Blossom" opens as a meditation on "whiteness" in nature. The poem develops through nine iambic-based stanzas arranged in intricately patterned verse paragraphs of interlaced rhymes and couplets. The strong rhythmic quality of the lines and the dazzling imagery of light and whiteness intensify the mystical, meditative effect. In the first stanza, Watkins juxtaposes the visible whites of nature in the form of "white blossom" and "white shell" to an invisible, unseen whiteness only suggested by music and by the presence of Jesus, "the Nazarene / Walking in the ear."

> White blossom, white, white shell; the Nazarene
> Walking in the ear; white touched by souls
> Who know the music by which white is seen,
> Blinding white, from strings and aureoles,
> Until that is not white, seen at the two poles,
> Nor white the Scythian hills, nor Marlowe's queen.

The poem moves from a positive invocation of white to a sudden negation based on the realization that the whites of nature barely approximate what Watkins calls later in the poem,

"original white" (9.3). In the opening stanza, the shift to

negation occurs in the fifth line--"Until that is not white...."

The white light that flashes from the "strings and aureoles"

of artist's representations of angels, the white snow on the

ancient Scythian hills, and even the mythic whiteness of

"Marlowe's queen," Helen of Troy from Dr. Faustus, only seem

white when set against the unimaginable "music by which white

is seen." Watkins' reference to the Scythian hills is probably

a recollection of Herodotus' description of a miraculous snow-

fall like white feathers recorded in the section from his

Histories on "The Hyperboreans":

> ....my opinion is, that in the countries above Scythia
> it always snows--less, of course, in the summer than
> in the winter-time. Now snow when it falls looks like
> feathers, as every one is aware who has seen it come
> down close to him...and the Scythians...call the snow-
> flakes feathers because, I think, of the likeness which
> they bear to them.[4]

The reference to Christ as "the Nazarene" who walks within man's

inner hearing and within nature establishes early in the poem

the possibility at least of contact with the invisible ground

of whiteness, the primal purity informing all these mythological

and actual whites.

Watkins had referred to Jesus as "the Nazarene" in an

earlier poem to Dylan Thomas, "The Room of Pity" (BML, p. 26),

in the context of Christ's experience of human grief in the

upper room before the crucifixion, and again in "Zacchaeus and

the Leaves" (LU, p. 90). In "White Blossom," "the Nazarene"

(Christ in his more human aspect) is present as the power ca-

pable of transforming darkness (black) into light (white), and

grief into joy. He reenters the poem later (stanza 7) as the

healer of the leper from the gospel incident (Matt. 8:2). The
allusion to the mythical Helen continues the interplay of clas-
sical and Christian imagery that develops throughout the se-
quence. The association of the unseen white with music, and
the assertion that only purified souls can "know the music by
which white is seen" draws in the traditional Aristotelian-
Platonic and Pythagorean idea (present in Dante, Milton and
others) that the world moves to an orderly, harmonious musical
pattern.

In stanza two, Watkins recalls the genesis of the poem.
In an unpublished lecture-reading dated October 1961, "Poetry
and Experience," he wrote that it was suggested,

> in winter by a fall of snow on the sea cliff where I live.
> I walked out on the cliff and found that the foam of the
> sea, which had been brilliantly white the previous day,
> now looked grey.[5]

After the dazzling, celestial imagery of "blinding white, from
strings and aureoles" presented in the opening, the second
stanza is relatively quiet and matter-of-fact, consisting of a
series of end-stopped lines. The end-stopping reinforces the
sense that the poet's thought has been arrested by the sudden
realization that "white is not white":

> The spray looked white until this snowfall.
> Now the foam is grey, the wave is dull.
> Call nothing white again, we were deceived.
> The flood of Noah dies, the rainbow is lived.
> Yet from the deluge of illusions an unknown colour is
>   saved.

The speaker has to acknowledge that "original white" is not to
be found in nature. All human knowledge and perception is rel-
ative and imperfect if the seemingly pure, white foam of the
sea is dull in contrast to the whiter snow. To what, he must

ask, is the snow duller yet? The deceptiveness of the senses

is a Platonic idea, and recalls Plato's argument in The

Republic (Book X) that things in nature are but imperfect

copies or counterfeits of the ultimate realities in the world

of Forms, as well as the notion in The Timaeus that the world

is a copy of a unique, perfect, and eternal model.[6] The realm

of becoming (time) is in Watkins' terms a "deluge of illusions"

(2.5) to man who takes it as ultimate. The biblical reference

to Noah's rainbow of the covenant between God and man, and the

statement that "an unknown colour is saved" out of the flood,

suggests, however, that original white, the "unknown" ground

of all colours, is yet accessible to man through grace.

The early, rather Yeatsian poem, "Prime Colours," from

BML (p. 16) represents Watkins' first effort to relate what he

calls "the first five colours" of myth to the senses and to un-

redeemed nature. The association of the first five colours

with the pagan creeds occurs in "Four Sonnets of Resurrection,"

and also with the creation of time in "The Cave-Drawing."[7]

In "Prime Colours" Watkins subordinates classical myth unequiv-

ocally to Christian vision, contrasting the pride of Pegasus,

"the winged horse of myth" who "Seems now a circus horse paid

to be clever" to the humility of Christ in his "ride from

Bethphage" on the back of an ass as prophesied by Zechariah.

As in the poem under discussion, the image of the rainbow

(stanza 5) appears in conjunction with God's promise that the

colours of the natural order ultimately will be redeemed. In

the last three stanzas, the child who strays into the mountain

is the "he" of the final stanza capable of tracing the five

colours to their source in "light's fountain." Christ is iden-

tified both as he "who wears the mockers' cap" and "the corner-

stone":

>   For when the garments and tree-branches strawed
>   The way, a child into the mountain strayed
>   And on the mountain-path, in heaven's eclipse,
>   He found a swallows' wings, an ass's steps.
>
>   And time stopped still, stopped when an ass went down
>   Slowly from Bethphage to that still town.
>   That ass, that swallow, through the window's gap
>   Meet in his eyes who wears the mockers' cap.
>
>   Born of that mud, innocent light he sees,
>   The cornerstone in crumbling masonries.
>   His washed eyes, marvelling, resurrect the mountain
>   Where love's five colours leap into light's fountain.

The last line suggests that the five colours of nature, myth

and time, when seen through "washed eyes" or regenerated vi-

sion, can be known to emanate from the transcendent ground of

all colours. This poem clearly prepares us for Watkins' sense

of the relation between time's colours and the unknown ground

of potentiality from which all colours break in the "Music of

Colours" sequence.

In stanza three of "White Blossom," Watkins asserts the

central paradox of this and the other "Music of Colours" poems:

death is the necessary basis of spiritual rebirth.

>   White must die black, to be born white again
>   From the womb of sounds, the inscrutable grain,
>   From the crushed, dark fibre, breaking in pain.

The Christian sense of the mystery of regeneration through sac-

rifice and death (the overcoming of time through a submission

to time) foreshadowed by the presence of the Nazarene in stanza

one is particularly strong here. The dark center of potenti-

ality within the seed which must break in pain from the

"crushed, dark fibre...." contains the form of the completed
tree. "Darkness" therefore takes on a positive connotation as
the germinative womb from which light manifests, rather than
being a mere negation of white.

In the fourth stanza, Watkins again attempts to celebrate
the rebirth of nature in spring as a paradigm of the principle
of spiritual rebirth proclaimed in stanza three.

> The bud of the apple is already forming there.
> The cherry-bud, too, is firm, and behind it the pear
> Conspires with the racing cloud. I shall not look.
> The rainbow is diving through the wide-open book
> Past the rustling paper of birch, the sorceries of bark.

But again the poem wavers between affirmation and denial of the
beauty of nature. Lines 2-3 echo Keats' ode of seasonal cele-
bration, "To Autumn," where the sun and the season "conspire"
together "to load and bless / With fruit the vines...." Here,
however, "pear" and "racing cloud" "conspire" to tempt the
poet's eye down to nature. The poet's refusal to look at un-
redeemed nature, however beautiful, at this point (line 3)
implies that he is afraid of the wrong kind of attachment to
it. He turns his mind instead to the "diving" rainbow of prom-
ise and to the consideration of nature as a "wide-open book."
The Medieval concept of nature as "God's book" (found in writ-
ers like Augustine, Bonaventure, the Victorines) enables him to
elude the "sorceries of bark" (nature's bewitching aspect) and
begin to read nature as the tangible script and handiwork of a
Divine Mind. He turns his gaze from apple and cherry bud only
because natural beauty can deceive when cut off from its tran-
scendent source, but is to be celebrated when viewed as part of
the cosmic whole.

The intense, lyrical beauty of stanza five describes April buds "Starrily opening... / Swinging from world to world when starlings sweep." The buds, though "white asleep" (unaware of the transcendent source of their life), swing back and forth between the dimensions of time and eternity. The speaker's recognition that the things of time have true being only as they participate (whether consciously or unconsciously) in the Absolute gives them authenticity for him at their own level. Paradoxically, the denial the poet asks the reader to make (lines 5-6) becomes a kind of reversed affirmation.

> They the buds will not break, not break, until you say
> White is not white again, nor may may.

The idea that one must negate in order to arrive at true knowledge and true speaking is not surprising in this context, since it is a common feature of the Neoplatonic idealism and "negative" strains of Christian mystical theology with which Watkins was familiar.

I wish to pause at this point in discussing the poem to consider how some of the key ideas and images presented thus far are connected to particular passages in The Enneads of Plotinus. This Neoplatonic source was familiar to Watkins, and my reading confirms that it informs the stanzas of the poems which have been so far considered. From the early thirties Watkins owned the six-volume set of Stephen MacKenna's translation of The Enneads (first issued between 1917-30), which he acquired in response to his study of Yeats, who used the same source.[8] The presence of similar concepts and precise verbal echoes of the MacKenna edition argues that Watkins borrowed

freely from it in the composition of his "Music of Colours"
poems. The notion just discussed in stanza five, for instance,
that one can only speak in negative terms of "original white-
ness" parallels Plotinus' idea that nothing can be predicated
truly of the Absolute, and that we can have only relative know-
ledge of things in time. The Absolute cannot be approached
except by entering into a state of mystical union with it in
which knower and known are one, a state completely transcending
time. Time is for Plotinus (as for Watkins) a descent or ema-
nation from Eternity, a state in which man is linked to, yet
separated from, his timeless source which is ultimate Reality.
In "Sea-Music for My Sister Travelling" from LV, Watkins bor-
rows the Neoplatonic concept of creation as an emanation from
and return to the One, here imaged as a primal drop to which
all rivers return. The passage can be seen as a Neoplatonic
version of the myth of creation.

> Swollen rivers run to find their principle in that first
>   drop
> That is not theirs but out of nothing fell,
> Moving to time from nothing: did they find it time would
>   stop. (p. 31)

Watkins' words find an equivalent in Plotinus' "Third Ennead,"
"Seventh Tractate" on "Time and Eternity":

> If, then, the Soul withdrew, sinking itself again into
> its primal unity, Time would disappear.[9]

He demurs from Plotinus, however, by implying throughout his
work that the Absolute, Original White, God himself, has a
personal face, and may be known by man (at least in part)
while in the mortal state. Where he most resembles Plotinus in
these poems is in his firm insistence that only through a kind

of intuitive oneness with the invisible ground of phenomena can phenomena be truly known.

Watkins' clearest borrowings from Plotinus are not his concepts of time and eternity, his assumption that this world is a kind of replica or copy of an Eternal one, or that the universe is musically structured and exists as "one melodic system,"[10] since these ideas can be found in a host of other Neoplatonic sources and originate in Plato himself. The poet most resembles the third century philosopher rather in his use of the phrase, "original white." In the "Sixth Ennead" Plotinus writes,

> If we do predicate Being, it is only as an accidental attribute; just as when we predicate whiteness of a substance, we are not predicating the Absolute Whiteness.[11]

In his "Third Tractate" entitled "On the Kinds of Being" from the same Ennead, Plotinus carries on a prolonged discourse on whiteness as a temporal attribute of Being. He concludes,

> In sum, whiteness has existence because it is bound up with Being and present in it: Being is thus, the source of its existence....
> The Being of the Sensible resembles white in not originating in itself. It must therefore be regarded as dependent for its being upon the Authentic Being, as white for its whiteness upon the Authentic Whiteness which in turn possesses whiteness through participation in that Intellectual Being whose existence is underived. (italics mine)[12]

Both passages are likely to have been important to Watkins in developing his terminology of "original white," and his sense that the time world is derivative from and dependent on an anterior order.

If the references to "Authentic Whiteness" provided the only parallels to Watkins' poem, the importance of Plotinus

could be minimized. Yet we also find in The Enneads a complicated consideration of black or darkness as the ground of being which parallels Watkins' sense that "White must die black, to be born white again." Though this idea can be found in Christian mystical theology, as well as in Hermetic and Jungian thought, it is expressed in Plotinus in terms of the polarity of black and white. Here he writes of the sensible qualities of nature:

> ....the beauty in the germ, and still more, the blackness and whiteness in it, will be included among the Sensible Qualities.[13]

He goes on a few pages later to speak of the relativity of all colours in terms that Watkins could have used. Here black and white are posed as the extreme poles of the intermediaries of colours in the world:

> If we regard the intermediates as blendings of the extremes, we must not posit any contrariety other than that between black and white, but must show that all other colours are combinations of these two....
>   Sight, we may be told, will reveal to us that grey is nearer than black to white.[14]

This passage seems to underlie both Watkins' reference to the white foam which now seems grey in contrast to the snow, and his later reference in the poem to the contrarieties of the black and white swans (stanza 9) which we shall examine when we deal with the remaining stanzas.

After establishing Plotinus as a source, we may return to the poem with a renewed sense of its Neoplatonic cast, recognizing at the same time its conscious deviations from traditional Neoplatonism. In stanza six, we are reminded that natural beauty is fragile, since "white flowers die soonest."

In Plato (see Socrates' speech on beauty in The Symposium) and in Plotinus, the transitory qualities of physical beauty serve as reminders to man that he must ascend the Platonic ladder to the eternal world where substance does not perish.[15] In Watkins' poem, however, the suggestion that death and decay will soon lay the white blossoms waste, that they will "die into that chaste / Bride-bed of the moon," symbol of the mutable and transitory, leads him on instead to embrace the mortal condition, since it is in death itself that we may discover life. Here he develops the paradox of "death into life" of stanza three, but this time through the use of biblical imagery. The "lilies of Solomon" referred to in the Sermon on the Mount which "toil not, neither do they spin" (Matt. 6:28) "sigh" at the prospect of death, yet "make way" for the flowers that will replace them in the cycles of time. The speaker is able to accept their death because he (with the reader) is heir to the secret of incarnation suggested in the image of Christ's "lowly crib near Solomon's dust." The Christ child, "Rocked to the end of majesty," is the descendent and future deliverer of his ancestor Solomon, and hence his typological "end"--his completion and fulfillment. In spite of the "Dark forest" that haunts his crib, he lies in a state of peaceful repose like that of the untoiling white lilies. Likewise, the "tremendous rest" of the "low beast" nearby suggests a state of unconscious expectancy of rebirth.

In stanza seven, the Christian themes and images become even more predominant. The Neoplatonic realization that "White will not be, apart," that is, cannot have true being except

through participation in "original white" is mediated again through the figure of Christ. For Christ's cleansing or "making white" of the leper represents an act in time through which time is conquered. The leper is already white because of his leprosy, but Christ, paradoxically, cleanses him whiter than white. If "original white" has entered time, says Watkins, it is in the presence of this "Nazarene":

> If there is white, or has been white, it must have been
> When His eyes looked down and made the leper clean.
> White will not be, apart, though the trees try
> Spirals of blossom, their green conspiracy.
> She who touched His garment saw no white tree.

The poem brings together the gospel incidents of the healing of the leper and that of "the woman with an issue of blood" (Matt. 9:20-21). The line, "She who touched His garment saw no white tree," is probably a conflation of the above-mentioned incident and that of the healing of the blind man who when his eyes were opened saw "men as trees walking" (Mark 9:24). The point of her not seeing a "white tree" is that the woman's eyes were focused upon "original white" and had no need to look on untransfigured nature.

Watkins' use of the leper figure deserves attention here since it is a recurrent symbol in his work for God's personal love for unredeemed man. Watkins was interested enough in the leper symbol to consider calling his first volume (BML) "Gratitude of a Leper," but was dissuaded from it by Dylan Thomas' friendly derision in a letter (dated May 22, 1941).[16] Nevertheless, Watkins wrote a number of poems which drew on the figure of the leper.[17] The fullest development of the theme occurs in "The Healing of the Leper" in LU (p. 77) and "Hymn (The Leper's

Healing)" in UP (p. 23). An earlier version of the latter

appeared in Outposts, 11 (Autumn 1948). "The Healing of the

Leper" is significant in the context of this discussion because

of its reference to Plotinus. In stanzas three and four of

that poem Watkins writes:

> Plotinus, preaching on heaven's floor,
> Could not give praise like that loud cry
> Bursting the bondage of death's door;
> For we die once; indeed we die.
>
> What Sandro Botticelli found
> Rose from the river where we bathe:
> Music the air, the stream, the ground;
> Music the dove, the rock, the faith.

The leper's "loud cry" recalls the moment in the gospel (Luke

17:15) when the tenth leper of the ten Christ healed "turned

back, and with a loud voice glorified God." Plotinus' "preach-

ing" (abstract philosophy) has its place on "heaven's floor,"

yet is subsumed by the cry of regenerated man. Stanza four is

explained by Watkins' interest in Botticelli's famous fresco

in the Sistine Chapel in Rome (which the poet visited) called

"The Purification of the Leper." In that painting, various

scenes from the story of the Temptation of Christ surround the

central figure of the leper (dressed in white) who is present-

ing himself at the altar to the priest to make his offering of

thanksgiving as detailed in Matt. 8:4. Watkins presents the

great theme of man's purification in Christian-Renaissance art

in contrast to Plotinus' "preaching" in order to suggest here

that abstract systems of thought need to be completed by acts

of human faith and love. Christ's act of love in time reveals

the love of God and enables man to "burst the bondage of

death's door." Furthermore, Watkins' keen interest in the
leper figure may have been stimulated by its presence in an-
cient Welsh poetry. The well-known ninth-century poem, "The
Leper of Aber Cuawg,"[18] dramatizes themes of human illness,
isolation and betrayal. For Watkins, of course, the paradox
of the "despised and rejected" social outcast being transformed
into a symbol of purity gives the image its great Christian
significance.[19]

Watkins moves from a biblical back to a classical motif
in the eighth stanza, here taking up the issue of whether
"Lovers" in the acts of love approximate "original white." In
Plato and Plotinus we recall that human love may lead man up to
the Absolute. Watkins describes the whiteness of Venus and her
doves, and the mythical union of Zeus and Leda in a passage
highly reminiscent of Yeats' "Leda and the Swan." As in Yeats'
poem (the language of which Watkins echoes in "web-footed
Jupiter" and "mastered by the veins of dawn"), there is a cer-
tain ambiguity in the presentation of the ecstatic moment. Are
we "imagining" (8.4) Jove's "Lust," a prefigured annunciation
scene in which Leda represents mortality uniting with divinity,
or both?

> Lovers speak of Venus, and the white doves,
> Jubilant, the white girl, myth's whiteness, Jove's,
> Of Leda, the swan, whitest of his loves.
> Lust imagines him, web-footed Jupiter, great down
> Of thundering light; love's yearning pulls him down
> On the white swan-breast, the magical lawn,
> Involved in plumage, mastered by the veins of dawn.

Lines 4-6 play with the double meaning of the word "down" to
suggest that Jupiter comes in a light that both descends (falls
down) and is like the down of feathers. Line five is also

ambiguous, for the god is either pulled down into the form of the swan to fulfill his great longing, or Leda's yearning pulls him as "down" in the swan's breast, and down is a pun. The ambiguity here helps to reinforce the paradox that both god and maiden are "mastered" by the greater power of love. In "Music of Colours--The Blossom Scattered," Watkins will attempt to resolve the question of the nature of the union of white swan and maiden. Here it is posed as an example of "myth's whiteness," an earthly reflection (or possible distortion) of higher love.

Watkins ends the first poem of the sequence on a quiet note by shifting to a graveyard scene in which the "yew" of mourning reminds him of human limitation and mortality. After the flashes of myth's exuberance in the swan imagery of the previous stanza, this is a sobering return to a contemplative attitude. As in so many of Watkins' poems set in graveyards, the theme of resurrection through death is implicit.[20] For the first time in the poem an "I" speaker emerges to voice directly his central realization that he as a man in the mortal condition lacks "original white."

> In the churchyard the yew is neither green nor black.
> I know nothing of Earth or colour until I know I lack
> Original white, by which the ravishing bird looks wan.
> The mound of dust is nearer, white of mute dust that dies
> In the soundfall's great light, the music in the eyes,
> Utterly secret. I know you, black swan.

It becomes clear that the poem has been a continuing dialectic between the claims of myth and nature's whiteness, and man's more humbling realization of his imperfection, mortality and lack of self-knowledge. Playing with the double meaning of the word "ravishing," Watkins rejects the image of Zeus the swan,

the "ravishing bird" of the previous stanza in favor of the
lessons "dust" and darkness can teach.   Like George Herbert in
"Church-monuments" from The Temple who writes,

> While that my soul repairs to her devotion,
> Here I intombe my flesh, that it betimes
> May take acquaintance of this heap of dust...,[21]

Watkins argues that "The mound of dust is nearer" both to him-
self in time and place, and to "original white" than the whites
of myth and nature.   "Dust" (the reminder of man's mortality)
speaks truly not only because it gives him a more realistic
view of himself in relation to the Absolute (to God), but be-
cause a serious contemplation of death leads back to the pos-
sibility of the soul's rebirth and regeneration in "the sound-
fall's great light."   The final enigmatic, "I know you, black
swan," like many of the poem's earlier phrases, is deliberately
ambivalent.   At one level Watkins is admitting that he can only
truly identify with the dark and imperfect swan, since he is
himself imperfect.   At another, the statement ties to his for-
mer identification with the "dark ground" of whiteness ("the
womb of sounds").   The dark or "black swan" can be seen not
merely as the contrary of white, but as its negative counter-
part, its "Form" in the Platonic sense.   It is dark or black
because it is hidden and unknown to man who looks only on the
outward face of the world.   In identifying with the black swan,
then, Watkins identifies with that hidden and inner realm.
Finally, in declaring that he has knowledge of the black swan,
he proclaims his ability to distinguish between the negation or
underside of white and "original white."   He no longer confuses
the copy with the original.

It is well known that the swan is an important symbol of

the soul for both Shelley and Yeats. Watkins too wrote several

poems which explore the symbol of the swan in the context of

Platonic ideas.[22] In "Swan Narcissus" (F, p. 44), for instance,

he describes the narcissus flower's opening as if it were "like

a swan," and speaks of it "Printing on time its eternal pat-

tern." The fact that Plotinus too employs the image of the

swan in the context of a discussion of "whiteness" argues again

that The Enneads are a source for Watkins' poem. Plotinus asks,

> If the whiteness of the swan, produced by its Reason-
> Principle, is given at its birth, are we to affirm
> Passion of the swan on its passing into being?[23]

In context, the upshot of this rather technical question is

whether attributes (like whiteness) are self-generated or pro-

ceed from an active, causal agent in a higher sphere. The ob-

vious answer in both Plotinus' discussion and in Watkins' poem

is that nothing in time is without relation to its timeless

source.

"Music of Colours: The Blossom Scattered" is a reworking

within a similar formal structure of the ideas and images of

"White Blossom." In this poem, however, Watkins presents the

renewal of "the world's colours" (3.5) in spring to achieve a

more exalted vision of nature. The whites of the phenomenal

world in the form of "clouds," "spray," the white petals of

"the marguerite" and the central image of a white blossoming

tree reveal themselves here as temporal epiphanies of "original

white."

The speaker does not hesitate between denial and affir-

mation of nature as in the previous poem. It is as if he has

been granted the ability to see the things of time within the clear light of heaven, and the old dichotomy between time and eternity momentarily fades. The first stanza combines the familiar images of "whiteness," "light," and "the leper," explored in the previous poem, with others that suggest redemption through death and regeneration. "White of the risen body" alludes to the Christian resurrection, and the "needle's eye" to the gospel saying that "it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Luke 18:25). "The saints" who "teach us" to "adore" the light (1.6) are those in the line of Christian predecessors who have attained glimpses of transfigured nature through a death of self. The mention of them here foreshadows Watkins' use of Saint Francis in stanza six. It is as if the speaker gazes at nature through the "needle's eye" of humility, and beholds the world's glory laid bare. The final lines of the first stanza establish the Christian principle that to relinquish nature's beauty is to have it given back in full; that to lose the self is to regain it. Watkins' statement that "It was the leper's, not the bird's cry / Gave back that glory," suggests that these Christian principles are paradoxical and mysterious, and involve an inversion of our ordinary categories of thought.

In stanza two, Watkins focuses on the "earthy mystery" of death through the image of the great tree with its falling blossoms. Here the particular tree becomes a symbol of the archetypal Tree of Life, "created on the Lord's day."

I cannot sound the nature of that spray
Lifted on wind, the blossoms falling away,
A death, a birth, an earthy mystery,
As though each petal stirring held the whole tree
That grew, created on the Lord's day.
There is no falling now. Yet for time's sake
These blossoms are scattered. They fall. How still
        they are.
Who touches one dead blossom touches every star.

The speaker approaches the interrelation of death and birth as

an unsounded, sacred mystery. The ability of each, petal to

contain the form of the tree suggests that a divine pattern

permeates both the part and the whole; that the part repeats

the whole and vice versa. The final line, "Who touches one

dead blossom touches every star," affirms that microcosm and

macrocosm cohere in one another. This image also links the

natural whites of the earth to the cosmic light of the

stars, earth to heaven. The problem of whether man can know

"original white" while in the world is partially resolved when

the poet experiences the things of time as they participate in

eternity, and learns that the "kingdom of heaven" can be per-

ceived in the things of earth.

The poet continues to consider the mutability of nature

in stanza three. This time, however, the constant changes

through which nature passes as it displays its various colours,

and the tree's cyclical loss and regaining of its blossoms

leave him unperturbed. His confidence rests in the realization

that these changes proceed "Not from time's course, but from

the living Spring." In his Laws (iv, 719), Plato describes the

inspired poet as "a fountain which gives free course to the

rush of its waters."[24] In the gospel of John Jesus describes

himself as the "waters of everlasting life" (John 4:14), and

in Revelation he promises to "give unto him that is athirst of
the fountain of the water of life freely" (Rev. 21:6). Simi-
larly, the "spring" or fountain of waters is a recurrent sym-
bol in Watkins' work for the perennial waters of renewal that
issue from eternity. The knowledge that time flows from an
eternal source or fountainhead gives the repeating cycles new
validity and meaning. Watkins (as poet) attempts to describe
the dazzling brilliance of nature in a series of oxymorons:
"soft thunder," "white as jet," (3.10) and later, "Darkened
with light" (6.2) and "white's bewildering darkness" (6.3).
Again, he turns to the language of mystical experience with its
reliance on paradox, negation and synthesis of opposites to
speak of that which transcends language. Being a poet at the
edge of language rather than the kind of mystic who is forced
to reject words, Watkins undertakes to capture the ineffable,
to incarnate in language the glimpses of eternity available to
man while in time. In such passages as these (as we shall see
in Chapter IV) he reminds us of Milton or Henry Vaughan, ear-
lier religious poets fascinated with white light (cosmological
imagery), Platonism and the Christian paradox of death and re-
birth. Watkins' phrase, "white's bewildering darkness," for
instance, reminds us both of Milton's "darkness visible" in
Paradise Lost (I.63), and Vaughan's "deep but dazzling dark-
ness" found in God described in his poem, "The Night."

> There is in God--some say--
> A deep but dazzling darkness, as men here
> Say it is late and dusky, because they
>   See not all clear.
> Oh for that night, where I in Him
> Might live invisible and dim!

Such imagery may be traced back even further to the sixth-century Pseudo-Dionysius (the Areopagite) who writes in The Mystical Theology of "the divine darkness," the "dazzling obscurity" of the hidden Deity.[25] The idea that man often perceives divine light (God's brightness) as darkness because his vision is humanly limited (fallen) is one with which Watkins would have agreed, and may help us grasp another sense in which the white swan of the earlier poem is perceived by the speaker as "black."

In stanza four, the poet marvels at the way new life proceeds mysteriously from a dark interior source, again exploring the imagery of light's birth from darkness. Here he adds to his nexus of complicated imagery an allusion to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, speaking of the

> White born of bride and bridegroom, when they take
> Love's path through Hades, engendered of dark ground.

Watkins focuses on the love story in the myth when Orpheus attempts to convey his wife back from the underworld. In the act of redeeming his bride Orpheus can be seen as an archetypal figure of the bridegroom, and therefore as a type of Christ. The importance of the Orpheus symbol to Watkins is evident when we recall that he considered Taliesin a kind of Welsh Orpheus. He also may be alluding to the Orpheus myth in "The Betrothal," a love poem from LU where he associates love's regenerative power with a "strict music of all sacred things." The poem opens:

> I must die first, to look into those eyes,
> And yet no lover ever found his bride
> But with that look. (LU, p. 72)

It is as if the Orpheus myth enables the poet to affirm the value of human love as a means of overcoming time. The fact that Orpheus is a musician whose harp enchanted the dead (indeed, a symbol of the indomitableness of poetry itself) is also apposite in the context of a poem about "the music of colours," "light's unspoken sound" (4.9). In "White Blossom" we recall that classical imagery was set in conflict with Christian, but here Watkins seems to be offering the Orpheus story as an example of redemptive love compatible with (and even prefiguring) Christian "agape."

Stanzas five and six return to the myth of Leda and Zeus treated in stanza eight of the previous poem. There we recall Watkins offered the union of mortal and immortal as an image of man's approach to "original white" with a certain ambivalence. Here he seems to be answering Yeats' question put at the end of "Leda and the Swan"--"Did she [Leda] put on his knowledge with his power. / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" Watkins' answer, expressed in a "tour de force" of mystical imagery, is unequivocally affirmative:

> Leda remembers. The rush of wings cast wide.
> Sheer lightning, godhead, descending on the flood.
> Night, the late, hidden waters on the moon's dark side.
> Her virgin secrecy, doomed against time to run.
> Morning. The visitation. All colours hurled in one.
> Struggling with night, with radiance! That smothering
>   Glory cried:
> 'Heavenborn am I. White-plumaged heart, you beat against
>   the sun!'
> All recollection sinking from the dazzled blood.
>
> She woke, and her awakened wings were fire,
> Darkened with light; O blinding white was she
> With white's bewildering darkness.

Leda not only takes on "godhead" in the act of union, but she "remembers," and wakes to find "her awakened wings" are "fire." By expressing the union of god and mortal in the paradoxical language of mystical theology, and by later associating Leda with the holy figure of Saint Francis (another being "Fledged of pure spirit"), we are left to read the sexual union (as in Yeats' poem) as an annunciation, a heavenly "visitation," and therefore as a symbol for the mystical union of God and the soul. Yet Watkins, more unambiguously than Yeats, has turned the "rape of Leda" into a mystical rebirth of the soul. In this poem, Watkins holds both the Orpheus and Leda-Zeus myths within a Christian perspective, rather than setting them in opposition to Christianity. One might add that Watkins' development of Yeats' imagery is more complicated and less emotionally controlled than that of his predecessor. If the poem has one major weakness, it is in its over-reliance on Yeatsian language in these passages.

The final image of Saint Francis represents man in ultimate harmony with nature. Watkins may have chosen the figure of St. Francis because of his famous "Canticle of the Sun" in which all of nature enters into a hymn of praise to the glory of the Creator. The "secret choir" probably represents the birds to whom the saint was said to have preached sermons in the Fioretti, The Little Flowers of St. Francis. That the humble saint of nature was a favorite of Watkins is evidenced by the use he makes of him in poems like "Birds of Joy and Care" (LU, p. 76) and "Though to Please Man" (BW, p. 31).

The final lines of the poem attempt a return to the human situation by suggesting that the presence of the saint guards the bed of "one living," probably the poet's wife.

> I think one living is already there,
> So sound asleep she is, her breath so faint,
> She knows, she welcomes the footsteps of the saint,
> So still, so moving, joy sprung of despair,
> And the two feasts, where light and darkness meet.

To my mind at least, Watkins' attempt to identify his own footsteps with those of the saint, and his rather abrupt descent from the mythic and universal to the personal level of reference end the poem on a weak note. The effort to include the particularity of his own situation here would be commendable had he better prepared the reader for the transition.

The final poem, "Music of Colours--Dragonfoil and the Furnace of Colours," is the most formally coherent and visually detailed of the sequence, moving through a series of elaborate images in which ever-changing nature burgeons with vitality expressive of a transcendent life. Here it is as if the "deus absconditus" or "hidden God" of mystical religion has revealed himself in the world in a blaze of colours. The Platonic Absolutes are suddenly manifest in and through the beauties of nature. The poem moves through three formally unified sections to celebrate summer as the culmination and fulfillment of the seasonal cycle. Paradise is conceived in metaphoric terms as a perpetual summerland.

Watkins employs a regular stanzaic pattern of four heavily-stressed, dactylic lines of four beats per line, each with a strong midline pause. Every stanza ends with a final short line of two strong beats (a dactyl and a trochee).

The poem can be read as Watkins' unique variation on the normally four-line pattern of the traditional Sapphic with its final short "Adonic" line. In its strongly alliterative rhythm, its use of hyphenated words, and its unusual imagery, the poem reminds us of the work of G. M. Hopkins.

As the lecture-notes from his University of Washington teaching reveal, Watkins admired Hopkins throughout and to the end of his poetic career.[26] He would have been drawn to the Victorian Jesuit by their shared Welshness, the energy and originality of Hopkins' language, and his Christian religious orientation.[27] Hopkins' application of Duns Scotus' Medieval notion of "thisness" (or "haecceitas") to his own unique concepts of "instress" and "inscape" may have been in Watkins' mind as he composed "Dragonfoil." The title itself suggests Hopkins' sonnet, "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame," and Watkins even includes references to the "king-fisher" (I.2.2) and the "dragonfly" (III.3.3) in his poem. Hopkins' poem moves from the realization of an "instressed" or actively individuated nature to the incarnational presence of Christ in the world who "plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his...." "Dragonfoil" can certainly be seen as a similar effort on the part of the twentieth-century poet to view the dynamics of nature as unique embodiments (little incarnations) of a universal creative power. In the second section he writes,

> Here now is summer, this perennial wonder
> Of fireborn blossoms, the sudden incarnation
> True for this moment, therefore never dying....

Watkins' poem does not progress dialectically, but moves
by presenting a rich profusion of images drawn from nature
("hot grass," "poppies," "lizards," "rose-blaze," "stream,"
"ocean," and so on) in a variety of shifting contexts. The
"basking snake" mentioned in Section One (I.1.3-4) reappears
in Three (III.2.2); and the "rose-blaze" of One (I.4.3) is re-
peated as the "burnet-rose" of Two (II.1.3) and Three (III.2.3),
and again as a "rose-blaze" in Two (II.3.2). The curious pres-
ence of the snake in a healthfully sensual context indicates
that Watkins is viewing the world as unfallen, and nature as
yet uncontaminated by the presence of evil.

The images of the poem repeat themselves in this circular
movement because Watkins is presenting the world seen as eter-
nity which (in Platonic terms) is a stillness and a circle
(Being) rather than a motion and a progression (becoming). The
central paradox of the poem, then, is that the stillness of
eternity can be perceived in the motions of time. In another
poem (from The Death Bell) where Watkins deals with Platonic
ideas, "The Turning of the Stars," he describes the poised
condition of the mind of the artist (in this case that of
Raphael, the Renaissance painter) as it perceives the world of
time as eternity from a similar conceptual base. There the
artist seeks, "Unrest in calm, calm in unrest."

The central concept of "Dragonfoil" which gives unity to
the seemingly disparate parade of repeating images is that
"original white" light fractures and gives birth (through the
death or sacrifice of its unity) to all the natural colours and
forms of the world. White divides into the "rainbow / Flying

in spray" (I.7.3), or to anticipate the final image of the poem, breaks "from the furnace," the forge of potentiality in God and out of which he creates. Seen from this perspective, nature is a kind of theophany of God, though not ultimately to be confused with him.

The first and second sections of the poem, then, present a world freshly broken from eternity's forge, one which is surprisingly rich and sensual for Watkins. The many references to heat ("hot grass," "fire," "perpetual summer," "flame wind," "nasturtiums / Burning") suggest summer's fulfillment in intensified energy. Here and throughout the poem, Watkins plays off images of heat, fire and burning against those of their opposite, water, and even "snows" (I.2.3) to suggest that the world is a Blakean or Yeatsian union of opposites. Like Hopkins in the poem, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection," Watkins presents nature as a burning fire, kindled from within or from a hidden source. As entries from his notebooks and occasional references in other poems indicate, Watkins (like both Yeats and Hopkins) was interested in the fragments from the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus.[28] In "Poet and Goldsmith" (CA, p. 36), for instance, he echoes Heraclitus' aphorism that mortals and immortals "live each other's death and die each other's life."

> 'True characters do not age in each other's eyes.
> Indeed, we die each moment the life of the other.'

In "Dragonfoil" Watkins consciously calls up the Heraclitean images of the world as a burning fire and of nature as a perpetually moving stream.[29]

> Lizards on dry stone; gipsy-bright nasturtiums
> Burning through round leaves, twining out in torch-buds;
> Even the stream's tongue alters where the rose-blaze
> Hangs in forgetfulness. (I.4)

The references to "poppies" (I.3.5 and II.1.5) in the

poem indicate a high state of spiritual intoxication like that

which Keats describes of the season in his famous ode "To

Autumn" where the figure of Autumn sits "Drows'd with the fume

of poppies." In Watkins' poem the presence of poppies does not

indicate a psychic condition, but a trancelike state (visionary

condition or the Platonic "divine mania" of the Ion and Phae-

drus) in which the poet sees the world as a dream of eternity:

> All is entranced here, mazed amid the wheatfield
> Mustardseed, chicory, sky of the cornflower
> Deepening in sunlight, singing of the reapers,
> Music of colours swaying in the light breeze,
> Flame wind of poppies. (I.3)

The words "entranced" and "mazed" suggest both a trancelike

condition and a state of wonder or amazement as well as the

sleepy confusion of nature who is oblivious to the eternal

sources of her life. Man who perceives the scene is "mazed"

in the sense of being confused (caught in a maze) if he takes

these images for their eternal counterparts. In the Platonic

sense, life is a dream from which the dreamer must eventually

awake. Only if we confuse them with ultimate realities are

the flowers that break from time's forge in the final stanza

rightfully called "deceptive blossoms" (III.6.4).

Watkins continues to develop the images of swan ("Swan

of the lily," (I.5.4)), "rainbow" (I.7.2), and Orpheus and

Eurydice (who are now named explicitly) that we explored in the

previous "Music of Colours" poems. Here Shakespeare's Ophelia

joins Eurydice as a female figure claimed by death and resur-
rected by the power of love's music (poetry). In Section One
the speaker asks a series of questions that attempt to pene-
trate to the generating (causal) ground of phenomena: "Where
were these born then, nurtured of the white light?" (I.2.1)
and "Where is the young Spring, clustered myosotis?" He contin-
ues, addressing first the reader and here the river:

> Speak: what Ophelia lies among your shadows?
> Is it her music, or is it Eurydice
> Gone from your bank, for there a spirit's absence
> Wakens the music that was heard by Orpheus,
> Lost, where the stream glides. (I.5)

The import of this passage is that the absence rather than the
presence of beauty (Eurydice or Ophelia) leads man back to the
hidden, eternal world. It is death that wakens "the music ...
heard by Orpheus." Even in a poem that celebrates the beauty
of the world we are reminded that we praise it not only for its
intrinsic value, but because it hides and leads on to another
beauty.

In Section Two of the poem where Watkins again alludes to
the music "known to Orpheus" (II.2.1), he seems to be either
confusing or consciously conflating the story of Orpheus and
Eurydice with that of the rape of Persephone by Hades and her
descent into the underworld, for he speaks of

> June flowers hiding the footprints of Eurydice
> Seized by the dark king. (II.2.4-5)

Persephone, whom Watkins in "The Field" (BW, p. 14) refers to
as "that white girl, by Pluto's hand delayed," was taken into
the underworld while gathering June flowers. Yet Eurydice,
clearly named here, was killed by a serpent, and could equally

be said to have been "Seized by the dark king." The point,
however, is that only Orpheus ("Leaning above Lethe," i.e.,
"forgetfulness") can redeem beauty, for he alone has access to
its eternal source. The Heraclitean image of the flying stream
(II.4.1) is linked here to the stream in the myth that carried
the singing head of Orpheus to the sea, an enduring symbol of
the power of poetry to overcome death. Watkins returns to the
Platonic notion that the stream of time is but the reflection
of an eternal, more permanent order:

> There the stream flies on to its own beginning,
> Slips through the fresh banks, woods of their escaping,
> Leaving in glory patterns of a lost world,
> Leaves that are shadows of a different order,
> Light, born of white light, broken by the wave's plunge
> Here into colours. (II.4)

The repetition of the phrase, "Ocean, kindler of us, mover and
mother" (I.7.4-5 and II.5.1), serves as a kind of refrain, re-
minding the audience of the "inconstancy of pattern" (II.5.3)
in time. Yet at a higher level the ocean as "mover" is a sym-
bol of an ever enduring generative power akin to Aristotle's
"Prime Mover," a final cause behind phenomena. As in
the Taliesin poems, the ocean is capable of representing either
mutability or eternity depending upon the perspective of the
beholder.

The Platonic concepts and language reach a crescendo in
Section Three where Watkins makes his central point--"All that
is made here hides another making...." (III.3.1). As in
Plato's doctrine of recollection or "anamnesis" described in
the Phaedo, the soul's waking into time entails a forgetfulness
of eternity.

> Waking entranced, we cannot see that other
> Order of colours moving in the white light.
> Time is for us transfigured into colours
> Known and remembered from an earlier summer,
> Or into breakers (III.5.1-2)

The "other / Order of colours" is that of the archetypes, the eternal Forms, and the "other making" can be likened to that of Plato's "Artificer" in The Timaeus who modelled the world on the pattern of its eternal counterpart. In a complementary poem, "Bishopston Stream" (A, p. 71), Watkins speaks in similar terms of an underground or "second stream" hidden behind the tangible one.[30]

> Always against your sound there is a second river
> Speaks, by its silence.

If God is an artificer or "maker" in Watkins' thinking, then man made in his image is inherently creative. Hence the importance of Orpheus as the figure of the poet in the sequence.

I wish to point out a final important passage from The "First Ennead" ("Sixth Tractate," "On Beauty") that seems to have informed Watkins' use of the symbolism of fire (light, heat) and colour in "Dragonfoil" especially. Here Plotinus argues by analogy that colours are a refraction of the Supreme Light in the same way that music is a refraction of the "unheard harmonies." This in essence is the analogy underlying Watkins' poem:

> The beauty of colour is also the outcome of a
> unification: it derives from shape, from the conquest
> of the darkness inherent in Matter by the pouring-in
> of light, the unembodied, which is a Rational-Principle
> and an Ideal-Form.

Hence it is that Fire itself is splendid beyond all material bodies, holding the rank of Ideal-Principle to the other elements, making ever upwards, the subtlest and sprightliest of all bodies, as very near to the un-embodied; itself alone admitting no other, all the others penetrated by it: for they take warmth but this is never cold; it has colour primally; they receive the Form of colour from it: hence the splendour of its light, the splendour that belongs to the Idea. And all that has resisted and is but uncertainly held by its light remains outside of beauty, as not having absorbed the plenitude of the Form of colour.

And harmonies unheard in sound create the harmonies we hear and wake the Soul to the consciousness of beauty, showing it the one essence in another kind: for the measures of our sensible music are not arbitrary but are determined by the Principle whose labour is to dominate Matter and bring pattern into being.[31]

In evaluating Watkins' use of Platonic ideas, it is necessary to realize that he was highly critical of certain aspects of Platonism. "Lightning and the City," a posthumously published poem from Uncollected Poems, for example, rejects Plato's ideal city as described in The Republic and the Laws for the Augustinian "City of God" in which forgiveness rather than justice is the supreme principle. The "he" of the following lines is the Christian existential philosopher, Kierkegaard.

He looked at Plato's city and its wall.
He knew the laws which made that city stand,
And saw within them what would make it fall,
Another city, greater than he planned.

Goodness was not enough. Though Socrates
Pulled all to irony's heroic ground
And put the question Kierkegaard would seize,
The perfect answer had not yet been found.

And in an early version of a short poem later published in F, "The Stayers," Watkins attacks Plato for his rejection of the poet in The Republic (Book X) as a mimetic artist three times removed from ultimate reality.[32] Watkins writes,

> Others migrate to heaven from doubt,
> But earth needs heroes for her own.
> I'd not, like Plato, keep them out,
> But leave them till the rest have flown.[33]

In this humorous, epigrammatic mood, Watkins defends the artist
against the philosopher. Jane McCormick, who knew the poet
personally, commented that he

> ....was fond of remarking that eventually all men, in-
> cluding Plato, would have to become poets before the
> City was complete.[34]

One could argue, however, that Watkins recognizes the more
mystical Plato (whose reason is fully integrated with his poetic
intuitions) as a true poet in his use of myth and in the evocative
power of his symbols. Plato's ideas on the divine madness of
the poet and the archetypal world of forms as expressed in works
like The Timaeus, Ion, Phaedrus, Phaedo and The Republic would
have impressed Watkins both through original sources in Plato
and as filtered through the English poetic tradition by writers
like Spenser, Milton, Shelley and Wordsworth. It is the more
seemingly "rationalistic" Plato who banishes the poet from his
ideal state on moral and logical grounds in Book X of The Republic
that Watkins could not accept. But even in The Republic Plato
accepts poets who sing sacred odes and hymns. Watkins is in
substantial harmony with him on most of his major ideas.

We have seen that Watkins' use of Platonic and Neoplatonic
ideas is complex. He is not a Platonist in the sense that
recognition of the One entails a rejection or devaluation of
the natural order. His is a Platonic cast of mind that looks
beyond the physical world, but is tempered by an incarnational
sense of the possibility of nature redeemed by vision,
and time defeated. William Ralph Inge in The Platonic

Tradition in English Religious Thought and Paul Kristeller in
The Classics and Renaissance Thought have both pointed out
rightly that Platonism has been an integral part of Christian-
ity as a historical religion from its beginnings.[35] Watkins
did not have to forge a synthesis in a historical vacuum, but
stepped easily into an already existing tradition of Christian-
Platonic ideas that can be traced from the early Church fathers,
Clement and Origen, on to theologians and philosophers like
Boethius and Augustine, up to the Renaissance Platonists of the
Florentine school, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola,
and beyond to the Cambridge Platonists in seventeenth-century
England. The Christian-Platonic stream of ideas affected art-
ists as diverse as Dante, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Raphael and
Milton. It is notable that the five artists just mentioned are
present in various contexts throughout Watkins' work. As I
have argued earlier, his juxtapositions of Christian and pagan
imagery find their analogues in Medieval and Renaissance poetry
and painting. In "The Turning of the Stars," Watkins turns to
the world of Renaissance painting for his imagery:

> So love descends: the star which blots out heaven
> Moves in the morning of our making hands.
> Where Raphael's heavens project
> On Mary's dread
> The infant Christ, a halo round His head.... (DB, pp. 24-5)

In evaluating Watkins' use of Plotinus, it is worth remem-
bering that the ideas of the pre-Christian and non-Christian
Neoplatonists were later integrated into the mainstream of
Christian mystical theology. Therefore we are dealing with a
tradition in which synthesis and assimilation is the norm.

In Watkins' work, however, it is vain to look for a consistent and coherently articulated system of ideas. One finds instead, a poet's sensitive selection of usable images and ideas out of which he constructs his own rich tapestry. In "White Blossom" Watkins sets up a dichotomy between time and eternity, nature and the ideal forms of nature which he resolves to a certain extent in "The Blossom Scattered" and "Dragonfoil." In these poems and throughout his work, he seems to equivocate between two perspectives—one which sees nature as a mere replica veiling a more authentic order beyond, and another which views it on a continuum with ultimate reality and as a revelation of eternity. To say that the two perspectives are contradictory is to miss the point, however. For Watkins is not aiming at philosophical consistency, but is presenting with a poet's eye various ways in which the mind can view a complex and multi-dimensional reality. At times he stresses the severance between the two worlds, and at times their ultimate unity.

Like Blake, Watkins is concerned with the defeat of time through the raising of consciousness (by means of the Imagination) to awareness of the eternal in and through time. Nature, as we have seen in the poems, is not a final term, but serves as an agent by which man can see beyond it (or from another perspective, within it) to that "other order of colours." His recognition of time's value approximates that of the later Eliot in the Four Quartets when he writes in "Burnt Norton," "Only through time time is conquered."[36] In Watkins' use of the ecstatic moment, both in these poems and elsewhere, he implies that man is capable of seeing "original white," speaking

of it effectively and grasping the hidden glory behind the appearances of nature.

The "Music of Colours" poems help to answer the question raised in the Introduction--"What kind of religious poet is Watkins?" Philosophically at least, the poems figure forth an eternal order and suggest that the business of the poet or artist who receives glimpses of it in epiphanic moments is to reveal it in his art and so help to build the City of God on earth. By so doing, he is imitating the ultimate Artificer, God. For Watkins, the Christian pattern of death and resurrection is the ultimate and universal paradigm by which man can relate himself to eternity while in time; and the mediation of Christ (the Nazarene of the poems) is the means by which it is possible for man to receive and sustain contact with that which is primal or originally pure in himself and in nature. In the world of Watkins' poems, however, the latter is a matter of direct experience rather than doctrinaire assertion. In the Christian-Platonic poem, "The Replica," Christ (and by implication every infant) becomes the temporal embodiment of the Platonic archetype of heavenly Love:

> Yet to man alone,
> Moving in time, birth gives a timeless movement....

> There shines the one scene worthy of his tears,
> For in that dark the greatest light was born
> Which, if man sees, then time is overthrown.
> And afterwards all acts are qualified
> By knowledge of that interval of glory.
> Music from heaven, the incomparable gift
> Of God to man, in every infant's eyes
> That vision which is ichor to the soul
> Transmitted there by lightning majesty,
> The replica, reborn of Christian love.

The question of how man's relation to God or Christ is worked out in a life of what Eliot in "The Dry Salvages" calls "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action,"[37] will be taken up later in Chapter IV where I shall be examining some of the poems in which Watkins most resembles his seventeenth-century predecessors, the Metaphysicals, Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and Traherne.

CHAPTER III

THE STRICTER MUSE:

POETIC FORM AND THE METAPHYSICAL VISION

Chapter III

The Stricter Muse:

Poetic Form and the Metaphysical Vision

Part I: Poetic Theory

"For it is the 'form' and not 'content' that
is the chief anxiety & responsibility of the
artist on the job." (David Jones, from Letters
to Vernon Watkins, p. 62)

Watkins' poetry has been praised for its technical control

and mastery of a wide variety of verse forms. John Heath-

Stubbs in a 1950 issue of the Poetry Quarterly notes that Wat-

kins preserves "a traditionally poetic manner, which is, at the

same time, never stilted, nor, in the bad sense artificial or

conventional. His verse is always formal, and in general, care-

fully rhymed."[1] James Dickey has written of Watkins' "strict

and compressed" music with its "sense of vast forces being held

just as powerfully in order."[2] T. S. Eliot's early recognition

probably had to do with his appreciation of the formal, hier-

atic and traditional nature of Watkins' verse. And even one of

Watkins' more severe critics in Wales, Roland Mathias, who has

argued that Watkins' considerable facility with language often

allows the music of the line to override the meaning, has

stated that, "Vernon Watkins is, with the probable exception of

T. S. Eliot, the greatest master of form in modern poetry."[3]

Before turning to address the question of particular literary

influences on Watkins' work, I wish to pause in this chapter to

consider what ground exists in the technical range of the poems

for such high critical assessment, and to argue that Watkins'

ideas of poetry as a religious act and of the poet as a divine-
ly inspired craftsman tie closely to his preference for a for-
mal, hieratic and tightly-crafted verse. The intensely meta-
physical basis of his vision (which we have seen expressed in
the "Music of Colours" poems) not only gives unity and coher-
ence to his seemingly diffuse prose comments, but explains why
he chose an intricate, almost liturgical style closer to that
of the seventeenth-century Metaphysicals than to that of most
of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. I wish to
demonstrate here that the formal qualities of his verse so ad-
mired by Eliot and others are not merely a matter of personal
taste, but evolve deductively out of his religious and meta-
physical principles and concerns.

In investigating the relation between form and content in
Watkins' work, it is my intention in the first part of the
chapter to survey some of his statements about the nature and
function of poetry as developed in his scattered prose writings,
and to relate them to his poetic practice. Briefly, these con-
sist of his sense of a creative tension between pattern and
spirit and the way in which the poet writes to a "Muse," the
importance of carefully crafted and revised verse, the neces-
sity of musicality and lofty, sometimes artificial diction, and
his defense of tradition and the poets of the past. In the
second part, I shall be examining Watkins' use of traditional
forms in the poems themselves in light of his own statement in
"The Joy of Creation" that "The miraculous moment of composi-
tion occurs where tradition and innovation meet."[4]

A brief survey of Watkins' work reveals him to be a skilled versifier in the forms of the sonnet (mainly Petrarchan and Shakespearean), the ode, and the traditional ballad.[5] He has written a number of elegies to Dylan Thomas and others, as well as poems in a generally elegiac mode lamenting the loss of childhood or the past. He also tried his hand at classical quantitative measures including Horatian Alcaics (probably derived from his study of Hölderlin), Sapphics, and Greek hexameters, and like his friend Dylan Thomas, has written in French forms like the villanelle (see "Villanelle" in BW, p. 27). He has not only translated long sections of Dante's Divine Comedy in terza rima, but attempted to recreate the form in English in at least six of his own poems. And like his predecessor, Gerard Manley Hopkins, he has also turned to the Welsh tradition to explore the "englynion" (see "Englyn" in F, p. 51), and the possibility of a reflection in English of the complicated assonances and internal rhymes of "cynghanedd," a Welsh term meaning "harmony" used to describe the complex echoing of consonantal and vowel sounds in traditional Welsh poetry. I shall be considering his use of Welsh forms briefly in Part II.

Before proceeding, it is important to look briefly at Watkins' relation to his contemporaries and to some of the poetic movements of his time. From the date of his early appearance in the anthology, The White Horseman (1941), edited by J. F. Hendry and Henry Treece, which associated him fleetingly with the movement known as "the New Apocalypse,"[6] Watkins stood apart from the socio-political writing of the poets of

the thirties like Auden, Spender and C. Day Lewis. The tendency
of that era was to reject a sense of mystery in poetry, to turn
to Freud in psychology, and to advocate a more politically re-
sponsive verse. In contrast, Watkins' poetic development was
to move him closer to poets like W. B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas,
Kathleen Raine, Edwin Muir, Norman MacCaig, George Barker,
David Gascoyne and David Jones who, in the face of what they
perceived as the increasingly materialistic bias of the age,
returned to myth as a source of poetic inspiration, tending to
reject an overtly political verse in favor of a poetry of re-
ligious or heightened symbolic vision. In Chapter V, I shall
be examining more closely the impact of Thomas and Yeats on
Watkins' poetry, two possible exceptions to Watkins' maxim
that, "A true style cannot be learnt from contemporaries."[7]
Yet Watkins' insistent rejection of contemporary influence in
his prose, coupled with the kind of poetry he writes, again
forces us to look beyond the contemporary scene for his deepest
roots. In spite of the ground they share with Watkins, some of
the above-mentioned anti-materialistic and mythic poets can be
called "religious" only in the broadest sense of the term, that
is, in having a generalized sense of poetry as a sacred and
sacralizing act. Watkins, I would argue, is a religious poet
both in the larger sense and in the more traditional, restric-
tive sense of one who is dealing overtly with the presence of a
superhuman reality (God) and man's moral, psychological, prac-
tical and spiritual relation to him.

Watkins' religious-mythological vision stands in clear
contrast to the tougher, more ironic poetry that developed in

the fifties, heralded by anthologies like the New Lines, edited

by Robert Conquest in 1956, and indebted to the criticism of

F. R. Leavis. The poets who emerged from this movement, like

Philip Larkin and William Empson, brought not only a dryer,

more ironic style and sinewy texture to their verse, but a

stricter sense of form, challenging what John Press calls in

"English Verse Since 1945" "inflated rhetoric" and "loose emo-

tional gestures."[8] They rejected a lofty poetic diction and

exalted tone as part of an attenuated Romanticism, and with

these qualities, the sense of the poet as an instrument of

higher (suprarational) powers.

Only inadvertently is Watkins in line with what Press has

called a new "rational conservatism" in verse technique,[9] a

focus generated in the fifties and carried on into the sixties

by critics like Donald Davie in his Purity of Diction in En-

glish Verse (New York: Schocken Books, 1967) and Articulate

Energy, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976) and Harvey Gross in his

Sound and Form in Modern Poetry (Ann Arbor: University of

Michigan Press, 1965). In the latter work, Gross's comment on

the fifties poets at first seems applicable to Watkins:

> ....the poets of the late fifties have shown an almost
> religious devotion to iambic pentameter, intricate
> stanzas, and close formal arrangements.[10]

Yet I would argue again that the strict stylistic formalism

Watkins shares with the fifties poets is no more than coinci-

dental. Not only did he consciously separate himself from the

literary activity of his time by living in relative isolation

on the Gower, and by speaking out against what he saw as the

materialistic trends of much modern criticism (e.g., the "New

Critics"), but the content of his verse is distinct in its spe-
cifically Christian religious orientation. William Empson, for
instance, a student of I. A. Richards and Watkins' contemporary
at Cambridge, also wrought intricate, formal verse, but joined
his tighter measures to an intellectual scepticism and rational
observation alien to Watkins' sensibility as a Christian poet.
We recall that Watkins left Magdalene College at Cambridge in
1925 out of a sense of its hostility (at that time) to the po-
etic mind, its tendency toward a critical rationalism and an
empirical philosophical bias. Watkins' verse, as we have seen
in the "Taliesin" and "Music of Colours" sequences, moves to-
ward the very sort of religious exaltation Empson would reject.
He retains strong links to the Romantic and post-symbolist
traditions, unembarrassedly acknowledging his debt to Blake,
Wordsworth, and among the moderns, Yeats.

Watkins stands as an heir of the Romantics not only in the
sense of being influenced consciously by the ideas, images and
style of particular Romantic poets (Keats, Shelley, Blake, and
so on are frequently mentioned or echoed in his work), but be-
cause he upholds the Romantic sense of the creative Imagination
as the prime faculty by which man perceives and embodies eter-
nal truth, and of the poet as a mediator or legislator of a
hidden Power or powers both within and beyond nature. He
shares nothing, however, with the darker side of Romanticism
which presents the poet as rebel, outlaw or alienated being.
As I have suggested already, the traditional Christian basis
of his vision with its roots in the mystical side of Platonic
and Neoplatonic ideas makes him more at home in the company of

the seventeenth-century Metaphysicals than with many of his contemporaries. His roots reach through Romanticism, both English and continental, back to an earlier religious poetry.

Watkins, then, defies labels. He is a complex mixture of the prophetic and incantatory and the rationalist, conservative poetic strains. He is that rare and difficult-to-categorize combination of a modern poet who unites the prophetic voice with a strict, almost neoclassical sense of restraint and decorum in the use of traditional verse forms. In the occasional poems and poems of religious recognition and statement he is not above being didactic in the best sense of the word. In his best poems he is a happy mixture of prophet ("vates") and craftsman ("poietēs" or maker). As Watkins puts it himself in one of his Blakean aphorisms, "Cold craftsmanship is the best container of fire."[11]

In drawing from Watkins' prose, it is important to be aware that he never collected his random and occasional critical remarks into a coherent body of poetic theory. Yet a unity and coherence do exist in the materials at hand which reveal a consistency in his ideas on the nature of poetry and the poet.

If we set his poetry and prose side by side, it becomes obvious that Watkins is not only developing similar ideas and images in both, but that he echoes himself in the very language. For instance, he later repeats a remark from the 1947 radio broadcast, "Written to An Instrument," "a poem is shaped by belief," in the intricately rhymed "Woodpecker and Lyre-Bird" from The Death Bell (1954) where he writes:

> This lyre-bird holds to man
>   The covenant caught in a leaf,
>   All space, all distance treasured
>   By the architectural wing.
>   Lost art's unsearchable span,
>   The poem is shaped by belief:
>   If the song is justly measured
>   The dead may be heard to sing.   (DB, p. 49)

The instances of verbal interplay between poetry and prose could be multiplied, and McCormick has noted the significant ones in her unpublished edition of Watkins' prose.[12]

A recurrent theme in both poetry and prose is that of the necessity in the creative process of a tension between what is given, the "luck" as he calls it, or those "gifts of instant and unalterable truth which a poet cannot predict, and for whose coming he must wait,"[13] and that which is crafted or shaped by the poet. In using the term "luck," Watkins is borrowing a phrase he acquired in his 1938 interview with Yeats which that poet used to signify (in Watkins' terms) "the unpredictable word, the unpredictable correction."[14] In "The Joy of Creation" (1964), Watkins writes that both form and luck are essential:

> It is impossible to pay too much attention to form,
> which is the vehicle of communication; but form must
> wait upon luck to make it live.[15]

When he was young, Watkins had believed for a time (during his early enthusiasm for Shelley) that creativity was a spontaneous and unchecked flow. "In my teens," he writes, "I distrusted in composition what did not come rapidly, and I looked on revision as an impediment to the stream."[16] But in maturity he came more and more to insist on what he called "the second pressure in poetry." In an article by that title, while

insisting upon the unpredictable element of inspiration, he
writes of his continued belief in the necessity of careful re-
vision. Watkins himself was a perfectionist in technical mat-
ters, and is commonly said to have destroyed or discarded be-
tween fifty to one hundred drafts in the process of revising a
single poem. Kathleen Raine points out that "he left unpub-
lished as many poems as he ever passed for publication. Like
David Jones it was his habit to keep poems and to work them
over at long intervals until he was satisfied that they were
right."[17] In "The Second Pressure in Poetry" he writes:

> I no longer associate art with the natural man. Meta-
> physically I have taken sides. I am interested only in
> poetry of the second pressure. True spontaneity, true
> art, seems to me to come, more often than not, long
> after the poem's first conception; it is more power-
> ful for being delayed and the purer for having been
> tried in the furnace of contraries. The poem cannot
> live until it has been willing to die; it cannot fly
> like the phoenix until it has been consumed by its own
> flames. Everything seems to me shallow that is not re-
> lated to an inner experience which changed the man.
> There is always, in any serious poet, a moment of
> change, a pivotal crisis in time that renews him.[18]

I quote this passage at length because here Watkins connects
the process of refinement through which a poem passes in the
shaping hands of the poet with the spiritual renewal of the
man. The aesthetic and the metaphysical or religious princi-
ples are presented as inseparable.

In the letter to Michael Hamburger cited below, Watkins
clarifies his sense of the relation between the aesthetic and
the religious or metaphysical ideals, arguing that the metaphys-
ical sense is primary and inclusive. His critique of the
times is that it fails to make this distinction:

> I have seen excellent numbers of the New Statesman; it
> is just that their attitude to poetry often seems false
> to me....The weakness of that attitude is that aesthetic
> ideas are applied to metaphysical truth whereas in true
> poetry metaphysical truth transfigures the aesthetic
> ideas. (italics mine)[19]

The spiritual principle of death leading to rebirth in the

earlier passage from "The Second Pressure" applies to the poem,

which must die of its first spontaneously generated life to be

reborn "like the phoenix" after passing through a Blakean

"furnace of contraries." We have seen how Watkins explored the

"pivotal crisis in time" in "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision"

(1959), but here it becomes clear that the moment of renewal of

the inner man is also a renewal of his art.

In "Written to An Instrument" Watkins explains why his own

sense of aesthetic discipline leads him to prefer stricter

forms. Again he couches the argument in terms of a spiritual

dialogue between freedom and obedience. Though he does utilize

the looser rhythms of "free verse" in his rhapsodic, longer

lyric from The Lamp and the Veil, "Sea-Music for My Sister

Travelling," and elsewhere in his work, it is true that even

in these poems one can discern the presence of a metrical or

stress-governed base that provides a norm for the poet's de-

viations from it. In the main, his poems are carefully rhymed

and structured both in the unit of the line and in the stanza.

In the above-mentioned talk he writes:

> There are certain kinds of poetry in which the spontan-
> eous method of composition...is better than any other.
> It is a question of intensity, and of freedom. You can,
> if you are a poet, write in free forms and leave the
> imagination in chains; or you may, by a pure accident,
> produce the exhilaration peculiar to great poetry.
> Where this happens it will be found, on closer examina-
> tion, that the passage has a strict form: it was a

strict accident in the flow of freedom. This persuades
me that the freedom offered to a poet is not offered on
easy terms; a lyric poet must refuse rhetoric, and be
attentive to the possibility of freedom within the re-
straint of the poem, a freedom much greater and more
rewarding to the imagination than any other. The lyric
poet who neglects the instrument has chosen an easier
freedom because he could not wait for a freedom more in-
tense, more difficult to obtain. (italics mine)[20]

In refusing "rhetoric" here, Watkins is not rejecting lofty or

dramatic expression, but pointing to the danger of its abuse

where the theme does not demand it. In "For the Reading of

Poems at Greg-y-nog" he defends the right use of rhetoric in

Milton:

Milton is more rhetorical, but that is because his theme
usually demands rhetoric. Even he, perhaps the most in-
verted and Latinized of the great English poets, can
produce, at any moment, the unforgettable direct line
of living speech, but he is afraid of nothing, being
such a complete master of form.[21]

The traditional sense of the positive tension generated

when the poet accepts the restraint offered by a form does not

imply for Watkins that the poet impose an arbitrary form on the

shape of his experience, but that he forge the appropriate form

through which the "given" content and the form can be expressed

as an indissoluble unity. For he goes on in "Written to an

Instrument" to point out that,

Poetry is a struggle between spirit and pattern. That
is why a poem dominated by a pattern is bound to be un-
satisfactory. To my ear, at least, the demands of the
instrument are shallow in relation to pattern, but pro-
found in relation to cadence.[22]

The distinction between "pattern" and "cadence" needs to be

explored through an investigation of the poems, but I would

suggest here that cadence for Watkins is the natural rhythm

of the prosody (its musical rise and fall), and the pattern

is the metrical base against which the rhythm of the line plays,
creating tensions, resolutions and counterpointings. Watkins'
practice also confirms that he is in some poems less concerned
with a consistent pattern of syllabic feet per line or sylla-
bles per foot, than with a more stress-based rhythm. We shall
see how his rhythms operate in some of the poems to be investi-
gated in the second section of this chapter.

Throughout his criticism, Watkins balances against each
other the values of inspiration and labour, spirit and pattern,
insisting upon their active interplay. In these passages he
emphasizes first one and then the other factor:

> However laborious the evidence of a poem's making, com-
> position is always a swift, a lightning thing. The vi-
> tal leap that connects one part of a poem to another is
> only partly shadowed in the drafts. Research belongs
> to time, but reperception belongs to the source of the
> poem, which may be defined as time's timeless moment,
> the imagination looking forward from that arrested mo-
> ment.[23]

> Composition is spontaneous, but true spontaneity in po-
> etry is nearly always a delayed thing. It is the check,
> the correction, the transfigured statement, that makes
> the poem unforgettable.[24]

It is Watkins' metaphysical assumption that the poet receives
from a source beyond himself. Yet poetry is an act in time and
involves the clothing or embodiment in the sequentialness of
language of that which is timeless. Thought (and wisdom it-
self) is spiritual, but words and sounds are psychophysical.
So if the poet is to bring "time's timeless moment" into ex-
pression, he must have one foot in each world. Watkins' aes-
thetic theory hinges on the ancient paradox that the poet must
be both a vessel of spontaneous flow, and an artificer. He
must be both actively creative and passively receptive if his

words are to stand in relation to the Word (Logos) of God.

In a short poem dedicated to Kathleen Raine from Uncol-
lected Poems, Watkins captures in gnomic statement (using
rhymed tetrameter couplets) the above sense of paradox. The
Blakean concepts and phrasing pay tribute not only to Raine's
work on Blake, but to Blake as a poet of the Imagination. The
artist or craftsman hammering at his forge is an allusion to
Blake's figure of Los, the divine blacksmith:

> The artist's patient hammering
> Labours for a sudden thing.
>
> Out of all the massing storms'
> Clash of intellectual forms,
>
> Intuition's lightning reads
> That confusion in the clouds.
>
> Unity is always more
> Than all the different parts it wore:
>
> None so intellectual
> As the simplest truth of all.
>
> Labour measures out the gap
> From lightning to the thunderclap.
>
> Less than time, too quick for tears,
> Equals Blake's six thousand years. (UP, p. 9)

The Blakean cycle of an age (six thousand years) is caught and
subsumed in the lightning flash of poetic inspiration; for the
instant of poetic creation is timeless. Yet without the la-
bour that precedes and follows it, the poet implies, that in-
stant would be wasted.

In another selection from that same volume, "Excess Lug-
gage," Watkins takes up the idea of the union of "luck and la-
bour" discussed in his prose. I quote only a portion of the
poem, noting how the strict iambic pentameter lines arranged

in rhymed quatrains help to reinforce the sense of energy under control. In the opening line, the alliteration and the regularity of the meter reinforce the consciousness of time's "ticking" motion. But in the second line, through a breaking of the rhythm with the caesura after "hindrance," and its resumption in the next line, the sense of inspiration breaking through the artifice of time is conveyed in the management of the prosody. In this poem there are a large proportion of end-stopped lines, unusual for Watkins who is fond of the fluidity of enjambement elsewhere in his verse. This end-stopping technique again creates the effect of the poem regulating the inspired flow:

> Luck after labour made the poem tick.
> Time was at last no hindrance: it came through.
> No other could expound why it was true
> And he himself could not explain the trick.
>
> A certain ease beyond the reach of skill,
> Taught by the will, yet teaching it, remained.
> With less contrivance something more was gained:
> The planet circled when the top stood still. (UP, p. 16)

As in the prose statements on luck and labour, the argument turns on a series of paradoxes--here conveyed in images like that of the circling planet which is motionless at its top. Yet the essential paradox lies in the fact that Watkins is writing a poem about shedding the "excess luggage" of rhetorical contrivance in order to reach what Pope in the "Essay on Criticism" called "a grace beyond the reach of art," while using all the resources of his technical skill to do so. The spareness and simplicity of the form, and the preference for monosyllabic words and a plainer diction than Watkins normally

employs, reveal the poet managing a style quite distinct from the complicated measures and dazzling verbal play of many of his early poems. The plainness and directness in tone nicely reinforce the theme of poetry shedding its "excess luggage."

Yet even in the poems where Watkins aims at directness and simplicity there is often a strong sense of the poem as artifice through the controlling metrical structure. Though he writes in the idiom of his time, there is no embarrassment in using lofty poetic diction or writing in a language that is consciously poetic if the subject matter calls for it. Unlike many of his contemporaries who tried to incorporate a more colloquial diction, Watkins is rarely colloquial except in the ballads and in some of the later poems. He has no desire to bring the language of poetry nearer the marketplace. He makes this point clear in his prose where he writes,

> Natural speech is a corrective of artificial poetic
> diction, but form is itself artificial, and unless
> the artificial demands of form are satisfied in a
> poem, its impulsive life will not be held in a last-
> ing form.[25]

Like Coleridge, he carries on the Romantics' interest in the dialogue between the "free life and the confining form."[26] In "For the Reading of Poems at Greg-y-nog," he continues to use the word "artificial" in a positive sense:

> Poetry that is divorced from speech, and by speech I
> mean the speech-idiom of to-day, runs a great risk of
> being artificial, and therefore losing its power to
> move. Even so, if his theme demands it, a poet must
> take this risk. Poetry is, after all, artificial in
> structure; it is artifice, and the poet who believes
> only in the order of natural speech will neglect that
> other compelling order, the order of imaginative empha-
> sis.[27]

Or as he puts it in an aphorism,

> Natural speech may be excellent, but who will remember
> it unless it is allied to something artificial, to a
> particular order of music?[28]

His argument here is similar to that of Eliot in his essay,

"The Music of Poetry," where that poet explores the analogies

between music and poetry.   Eliot writes:

> My purpose here is to insist that a 'musical poem' is
> a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a mu-
> sical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words
> which compose it, and that these two patterns are in-
> dissoluble and one.[29]

Watkins too had a strong sense of the musicality of poet-

ry, one which enabled him to explore in his verse a music of

sound as well as a music of imagery and meaning, the repetition

and counterpointing of themes in the larger structure of the

poem.   His strength, however, seems to lie in the perfection of

the short lyric, for he made only a few efforts, most of them

relatively early in his career, to experiment with larger

structures--namely, "The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" and its se-

quel, (written later in his career) "The Ballad of the Outer

Dark," the three long poems from The Lamp and the Veil (1945)

and the early Yeatsian verse play, The Influences, completed in

1947 and published posthumously in 1976.   He writes of lyric

poetry as follows:

> I believe that lyric poetry is closer to music than to
> prose, and that it should be read as exactly as a musi-
> cal score.   I also believe that it is always a gift,
> the reward of tenacity and of the minutest attention,
> and that unless it comes out of exaltation or moves
> toward it, it is not worth writing.[30]

> I am a lyric poet. I also believe that the sound pat-
> tern of lyric poetry is more clearly related to music
> than to prose. Do not misunderstand me. Some of the
> purest lines in poetry are colloquial speech, that is
> to say, they would not be at all out of place in
> prose; but the dominant pattern of any form that is
> lyrical is totally different, and this is, even mathe-
> matically, closer to music than to prose.[31]

In speaking here of sound patterns and mathematical structures,

we can be sure that Watkins has in mind an analogy between

music and the minutiae of metrical patterns, syllable count and

so on; and that to read his poetry as he would have it heard

requires a sensitivity to its aural properties, as well as con-

siderable awareness of the rules of traditional English pros-

ody. In his edition of Dylan Thomas' Letters to Vernon Wat-

kins, he distinguishes his own aural method of composition from

the method of Thomas, which tends toward the tactile and

visual:

> Dylan worked upon a symmetrical abstract with tactile
> delicacy; out of a lump of texture or nest of phrases
> he created music; testing everything by physical feel-
> ing, working from the concrete image outwards. I
> worked from music and cadence toward the density of
> physical shape. (italics mine)[32]

Like Yeats, with whom he identified in this regard, Watkins

composed with emphasis on the sounds of words and clusters of

words. In his concern with the rhythms and balance of the

musical phrase he sometimes admittedly let his "ear" determine

the rightness of the idea or image. Some critics have chal-

lenged him for a tendency (at least in the early work) toward

obscurity in syntax and a general diffuseness caused by his

willingness to sacrifice syntax and meaning to sound.[33] Yet

in the best of his poems he rises above this limitation and

achieves that clear union of sound and sense which is his

poetic ideal. In excerpts from his lecture notes used at Swansea College, he has written from the standpoint of that union in which "An error of sound in verse will always be an error of meaning, a blurring of vision, or a confusion of thought."[34]

Watkins averred frequently that prior to or in the act of composition a musical phrase, word, rhythm, or, indeed, the entire conception of the poem would be "given" as if dictated from an "other mind." In a film made by the BBC on Watkins, Under a Bright Heaven (1967), the poet explained to the interviewer that he presupposed inspiration to be God-given, as Milton did, and preferred, also like Milton, to call the experience of "the whole imagination listening," the Muse.[35] On that occasion, he spoke somewhat playfully of the Muse as a female having "no tact," sending her vision at "the wrong time" when "the poet is exhausted." Yet Watkins' playfulness conceals a serious sense of the Muse as the most appropriate symbol for the poet's experience of otherness, one he develops both in his prose and in a series of poems about the dialogue between poet and Muse from Affinities. These poems include "Rewards of the Fountain," "Demands of the Poet," "Demands of the Muse," and "Muse, Poet and Fountain." In "Poets on Poetry" (1960), he speaks of the Muse's seeming indifference to the poet's condition in time:

> A poet, overhearing a conversation out of time, must be his time's interpreter; but how can the Muse know this, whose eyes are fixed on what is eternally fresh and continually beginning?[36]

In <u>Affinities</u> (1962), he explores his relation to the Muse as a
condition of service, one which allows him no compromise with
"the world." I reproduce the poem, "Rewards of the Fountain"
here in its entirety:

> Let the world offer what it will,
> Its bargains I refuse.
> Those it rewards are greedy still,
> I serve a stricter Muse.
>
> She bears no treasure but the sands,
> No bounty but the sea's.
> The fountain falls on empty hands.
> She only gives to these.
>
> The living water sings through her
> Whose eyes are fixed on stone.
> My strength is from the sepulchre
> Where time is overthrown.
>
> If once I labour to possess
> A gift that is not hers,
> The more I gain in time, the less
> I triumph in the verse.

This small, hymn-like poem to a Christian muse telescopes many
of Watkins' central preoccupations--his sense of the overthrow
of time, the dedication to his craft and the otherness of po-
etic inspiration. It then unites them with his favorite
images of the fountain, the living waters, the stone and the
sands. It is a deeply Christian poem in its renunciation of
the world and emptying of the self for an ideal of service,
and in the allusion to Christ's bursting through the "sepul-
chre" of death in the third stanza. Yet the primary issue
of the poem is that of the artist's dedication to his craft;
for it is only through his service to a demanding Muse that
he may "triumph in the verse." As in the prose passage dis-
cussed earlier, aesthetic dedication is a religious act, and

poetry a form of spiritual discovery. In a ballad stanza of

alternating, rhymed, tetrameter lines (i.e. "fourteeners"),

a structure often used in hymns, Watkins is able to speak di-

rectly and confidently to the reader of the sacred nature of

his determined choice. In its uncompromising tone, it bears

parallels to some of Herbert's poems of choice between God

and the world, poetry as mere artifice and poetry as religious

act, particularly the "Jordan" poems (I and II) from The Temple

where Herbert addresses the issue of "crossing over" between

one way of writing and another.

"Demands of the Poet" and "Demands of the Muse" are com-

panion poems establishing a dialogue between poet and Muse.

In the former, the poet speaks to the Muse, and in the latter

she responds to him. I shall focus on "Demands of the Muse"

as the more interesting of the two because of the intricacy of

its form. For here the poet rejects end-rhyme in favor of a

repetition of key words at the end of each line which offers

the effect, rather than the essence of rhyme. In stanza one,

which stands as a kind of proem or introductory stanza, Wat-

kins establishes the theme of the reciprocal relation of man

and Muse, the human and the divine. The Muse speaks here and

throughout the poem:

> I call up words that he may write them down.
> My falling into labour gives him birth.
> My sorrows are not sorrows till he weeps.
> I learn from him as much as he from me
> Who is my chosen and my tool in time.

In the subsequent stanzas (2-7) the key end words--"another,"

"me," "words," "him," and "he" are interwoven throughout to

create a sestina-like pattern. I quote stanzas two, three and

four to make my point:

> I am dumb: my burden is not like another.   a
> My lineaments are hid from him who knows me.   b
> Great is my Earth with undelivered words.   c
> It is my dead, my dead, that sing to him   d
> The ancient moment; and their voice is he.   e
>
> Born into time of love's perceptions, he   e
> Is not of time. The acts of time to him   d
> Are marginal. From the first hour he knows me   b
> Until the last, he shall divine my words.   c
> In his own solitude he hears another.   a
>
> I make demands of him more than another.   a
> He sets himself a labour built of words   c
> Which, through my lips, brings sudden joy to him.   d
> He has the illusion that at last he knows me.   b
> When the toil ends, my confidant is he.   e
>   (italics mine)

The traditional sestina as used by Dante, Sidney ("Ye Goatherd Gods"), Swinburne and others is a complicated troubadour verse form composed of six unrhymed stanzas of six lines each, followed by an envoy of three lines with end words repeating throughout in a regular pattern. T. S. Eliot uses a variation of it in The Four Quartets ("The Dry Salvages," II). If we consider the opening stanza as a proem or introductory statement of theme, Watkins' poem contains the requisite six stanzas, but employs only five lines in each and omits the envoy. As in the traditional sestina, a recurrent pattern of end words assumes the function of rhyme. Again, Watkins deviates from the paradigm by developing an irregular rather than a regular pattern in the use of end words. He achieves the effect of unity, however, by constructing a circular structure in which the last word of each stanza is repeated as the last word in the first line of the next, and by having the final word of the last stanza ("another") return the reader to the last word

of the first line of the second stanza (also "another"). This
kind of experimental irregularity within the form creates the
effect of unity within variety, order within seeming disorder,
which is the subject of the poem. The juxtaposing of "another"
and "me," "him" and "me" reinforces the sense of the poem as an
interplay of self and other--poet and Muse. The battle between
them is presented as a creative tension between spirit and
pattern. It is the Muse who brings the apparent disorder of
the poet into order, and he who provides her with that which is
to be shaped. Like the reciprocal relation of poet and Muse,
the order of the poem appears random and jumbled, but is not.
This reinforces the sense in which the Muse herself seems ca-
pricious, but is working for the poet's good. In his use of
end words, Watkins reenacts brilliantly the conflict between
spontaneity and form which is the theme of the poem, and a
central issue in much of his prose. In the words of the Muse
that end the poem,

> ....It is by conflict that he knows me
> And serves me in my way and not another. (A, p. 22)

The final issue to be taken up from Watkins' prose is
that of the poet as a defender and conveyer of "tradition,"
here defined in Watkins' sense of it as the continuous well-
spring or repository of timeless poetic truth preserved and
transmitted from age to age and mediated through age-old and
universal symbols. We may recall that in Hesiod's Theogony
the function of the nine Muses was less to create something
original, than to preserve what went before, and Watkins'
attitude is conservative in that sense. Related to his

concept of the poet as preserver, and his upholding of the

supremacy of the poetic masters as a standard of excellence,

is his sense of the poet's active relationship with the poets

of the past. In "Poets on Poetry" he states, "Write for the

dead, if you will not disappoint the living," and further on

in that same piece, "A true style cannot be learnt from contem-

poraries."[37] For Watkins, the works of the great dead poets

have entered a realm of timelessness. In "The Joy of Creation"

he writes that,

> Wherever intuitive truth is manifested, though the
> work be hundreds or thousands of years old, eternity
> is present, and the dead artist who made it is re-
> vealed as our contemporary.[38]

The implication of the contemporaneity or "eternal presence"

of the past is that the poet must write both to the "living

and the dead." As Watkins explains of this twofold perspec-

tive:

> Those who read or hear a poem should remember that a
> good poem has two audiences; it is addressed to the
> living and the dead at the same time. If a poet dis-
> misses the living he becomes morbid; if he dismisses
> the dead he ceases to be a prophet.[39]

This theme is echoed in two small, complementary poems

from The Lady with the Unicorn, "Fidelity to the Dead" and

"Fidelity to the Living." In these rhymed, hexameter stanzas,

Watkins takes up in turn each side of the question, arguing

that the poet must wrong neither the "tenuous life" of the

living, nor the immortal life of the "unfortunate dead" (LU,

p. 40). In the poem, "Affinities" (A, p. 19), the theme of the

defense of tradition is conjoined with Watkins' idea of the

poet's relation to the dead. The poem stands as a challenge to

the critics. As in "Tradition," which we examined earlier, it employs tightly rhymed couplets to reinforce a slightly satiric tone:

> In every smith whose work I come across
> Tradition is the ore, fashion the dross....
>
> 'His work is new. Why, then, his name encumber
> With ancient poets?' He is of their number.
>
> Complain against the dead, but do not sue.
> They never read you, much less injured you....

In a more exalted lyric, "Art and the Ravens," Watkins sets up the poet as a defender of tradition. As in the other bird poems in The Death Bell ("The Dead Shag," "The Heron," "Woodpecker and Lyre-bird"), birds enact symbolically the role of the artist. Here the poet's admiration for a pair of ravens protecting their nest ("Love's brood") leads him to explore the analogy between nature and art, the ravens and the true artist who defends a vital tradition:

> O dark, interior flame,
> O spring Elijah struck:
> Obscurity is fame;
> Glory and praise are luck.
>
> Nothing can live so wild
> As those ambitious wings
> Majestic, for love's child
> Defending ancient springs.
> Drifting in light, they stall.
> Wind's conflict keeps them true.
> Sunbeam and breaker's fall
> Confound them. They cut through. (DB, p. 59)

In many ways, Watkins' sense of the poet's relation to the past ties him closely to T. S. Eliot, who writes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent,"

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning
> alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appre-
> ciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.
> You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for

contrast and comparison, among the dead.[40]

And we note that Watkins dedicates a poem to Eliot, "Ode to

T. S. Eliot," in Affinities (1962). That volume, which pays

tribute to some of the dead poets in Watkins' personal pantheon

(Charles Williams, T. S. Eliot, Hölderlin, Heine, Keats, Brown-

ing and others), was criticized at the time of its publication

for what has been called Watkins' "romantic cult of poets," and

for what was seen as a self-conscious indebtedness to the

past.[41] Harold Bloom has written in his The Anxiety of Influ-

ence (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973) of the various de-

fensive postures the aspiring poet in each new generation may

take toward his great poetic precursors. With an apparent ab-

sence of such anxiety, Watkins boldly opens himself to "the

dead," running the risk of being overwhelmed out of a strong

sense that relation to the past is integral to a wholeness of

vision. Here and throughout his verse he establishes his

"affinities" with a poetic line in which he sees himself and

his poetry having a place, believing that one does not write in

a historical vacuum. Therefore, this sense of the past that

some interpret as poetic weakness may be seen from another per-

spective as poetic strength. The question again is whether he

is able to integrate the past effectively into his own poetic

outlook. "The Childhood of Hölderlin" (A, p. 57), "Sweden-

borg's Skull" (CA, p. 60) and "Blake" (LU, p. 88) are only a

few examples of poems which (in the opinion of this writer at

least) begin as conscious payments of poetic debt, but, through

the transforming power of the poet's imagination, end as suc-

cessful achievements in their own right.

Part II: Poetic Practice

"The miraculous moment of composition occurs
where tradition and innovation meet." (Vernon
Watkins, from "The Joy of Creation")

Any discussion of the formal qualities of Watkins' craft
needs to take account of his skill with the sonnet. Not only
are there over sixty sonnets scattered among the published
poems, but in them he develops many of his central themes. The
two sonnets which I wish to consider here, "Affirmation" in
The Breaking of the Wave and "Sonnet (The prose purveyors of
doubt)" in Fidelities, explore what Gwen Watkins has called
Watkins' sense of the "need for lyric poetry to be exalted
against the scepticism of the critics."[1] They not only demon-
strate Watkins' technical mastery of the form, but show him
carrying on in his poetry some of the ideas expressed in his
criticism.

"Affirmation," the first of the sonnets in the posthumous
edition, The Breaking of the Wave (1979), is a traditional
Petrarchan sonnet, rhyming abbaabba cdcddc, with a definite
stanza break between the octave and the sestet. Watkins seems
to prefer the Petrarchan form by his frequent use of it, but
employs the Shakespearean model in a number of poems. Often,
however, he creates his own variations on the standard form.
"May you love leaves," in the volume under discussion, for in-
stance, uses to advantage the snap of the final Elizabethan
couplet, but employs an atypical rhyme scheme in the quatrains
(aabb, ccdd, eeff). In that particular poem, Watkins adds ana-
pestic feet to the standard iambic line ("Dancing in the light,

in the shade where light is stilled"), and ends the poem with a line in which the iambic rhythm almost breaks down entirely to enhance the sense of joy arriving in a moment of repose--in the retarding of temporal movement:

> Joy will surround you, which you thought had fled,
> In safety, in silence, in the steps of the dead.

The ability to work freely in variations on the iambic line is also evident in "Affirmation," where the poet employs inverted feet, spondees, and a free substitution of trisyllabic feet. The rhythm is appropriately rougher in the octave, where he is addressing the sceptical critic and upbraiding him for his loss of faith (vision) and for a consequent loss of style and technical control:

> Out sceptic, betrayed by your own style:
> No faith and loose measures go hand in hand.
> Call grandeur untrue, but truth is grand,
> And truth no man can alter, no, nor defile.
> Sprung from infinite sorrow breaks the smile
> Of grace, altering the path ambition planned,
> Whose joy, given, must unforgettably stand,
> Relaxed order, charm, for none to revile.

The tensions between rhythm and metrical paradigm are particularly evident in the first two lines where Watkins connects the "loss of faith" to "loose measures." The second line is relatively prosaic, as if to imitate the prosaic style of the sceptic. But in the parts of the octave where he is affirming the sacred nature of truth, the tone becomes exalted and the rhythmic norm is partially restored ("And truth, no man can alter, no, nor defile.").

In the sestet, when the voice turns from challenging the sceptic to a more positive and personal affirmation of the order of "love," the iambic rhythm reasserts itself clearly

("Learn then of love shine from the truth men shun."). The
inverted first and third feet (trochees) place the stress on
the verbs "learn" and "strive," giving a surging energy to the
line. It becomes clear by the second line that the poet is no
longer addressing the sceptic, but the "soul," which is encour-
aged to build its "city" and honour its first estate in which
wisdom and innocence are one. The poem has moved mainly up to
this point by means of abstract statement, speaking of "faith,"
"truth," and "grace" without the reinforcement of concrete
images. But in the last three lines the poet presents the
essential joy of the creative act (an idea which he discusses
in "The Joy of Creation")[2] through the image of "weir waters"
falling, turning as the earth rotates to make a kind of eter-
nally beginning music:

>   Learn then of love, shine from the truth men shun.
>   Build, soul, your city, honour the state
>   Innocence gave to wisdom, there made one.
>   Joy singing governs all we create
>   As weir waters, feeling the earth rotate,
>   Amass, falling, a music always begun.

The falling of the waters is echoed in the falling rhythm (on
the words "falling" and "music") of the last lines where the
poet recreates the music of creation in the challenging and
resolution of the poem's intricate rhythms. The strong under-
pinning of vowels in "Amass, falling, a music" also helps to
reinforce the sense of musicality in the final lines.

In "Sonnet (The prose purveyors of doubt)," Watkins
attacks what he sees to be the false poets ("the dismantlers
of / Ecstasy") of his day who have rejected "strict numbers"
and returned art to "discord" and "chaos" in a "revolution of

anti-love." Like the sceptic in "Affirmation," the "prose purveyors of doubt" represent those who in rejecting a transmutation of meaning through rhythmic and musical structures, betray poetry at its source. He establishes the ground of his attack in the octave:

> The prose purveyors of doubt, the dismantlers of
> Ecstasy, who traffic without a god
> In broken metre, would have their Pegasus shod
> With discord, not strict numbers. At love they scoff,
> And then, in the revolution of anti-love,
> Unsheathe chaos, the death of the period,
> While a new Sibyl, shrieking above her tripod,
> Proclaims transformation, treachery, trough. (F, p. 55)

As in "Affirmation," the vigorous deviation of the lines from the iambic norm, the double caesuras and run over lines, create the sense of a breaking down of form. The complaint against "broken metre" registers in the irregularity of the lines.

The interesting aspect of Watkins' thought in this poem is that in the sestet he ties the obedience to stricter measures to his own sense of ontology. That is, the poem rests on the notion that poetry is meant to repeat the orderly motions of nature and the cosmos. To break with tradition in this sense is to fail to be in harmony with the very nature of things, the orderly progressions and rhythms of creation--the breaking of the waves and the divine proportions of the fixed stars. Both life and art are defined in terms of mathematical and fixed proportions:

> Yet even the disenchanted, disordered fret
> For lost order. Breakers recall rhyme,
> Anchors weighed, and divine proportions set.
> As hawk hovers, as compass needle in time
> Flies unswerving, steadied, where the stars climb,
> Fixed laws hallow what none can forget.

Watkins argues that even those who doubt yearn unconsciously

for "lost order." "Fixed laws hallow what none can forget"

because the memorable rhythms of earth constantly echo those

of an eternal, metaphysical order. Watkins laments the loss

of order both in man's relation to the cosmos and in his art,

which is out of harmony with cosmic law. Here, the integral

relation between Watkins' metaphysical ideals and the kind of

poetry he has chosen is explicit.

In some notes made from his lectures by a student in his

class at the University of Washington and later published in

the Anglo-Welsh Review, Watkins makes a similar connection be-

tween regular meter and the regularity of the stellar pattern:

> We are living in a time when there is a breaking away
> from regular metre. We have always lived in a time
> when there was a breaking away from regular metre. I'm
> a great believer in regularity. Halley's comet is reg-
> ular. Every seventy-two years it comes around, I
> think. Some poets are destined to write in strict
> form. When a thing is irregular, it must be made up
> for by genius. I don't think anyone does good free
> verse who has not mastered the strict. Marianne Moore
> throws over conventional metre and puts in syllabic
> stress and is absolutely wonderful, but no one else can
> do it like that.[3]

One can see from this informal statement that Watkins is not

dogmatic about the use of traditional forms for others, but

that his sense of the regularity of the rhythms of the cosmos

leads him to argue the need of a decided rhythmical base and

a knowledge of metrical principles. In "Affirmation," Watkins

is building a rationale for his own poetic practice. Like

Hardy, Bridges, Yeats, Muir and Ransom, he establishes himself

as a modern poet writing predominantly in traditional meters.

Watkins by no means limits the subject of his sonnets to

questions of poetic theory and practice. For his sonnets encompass a wide range of themes from that of love (see "The Dove" and "The Silence of Love" in BW) to treatments of his central metaphysical and religious preoccupations (see "The Yew Tree" in LU). "Cwmrhydyceirw Quarry" (F, p. 79) is a double sonnet for Dylan Thomas in the elegiac mode, while "Cwmrhydyceirw Elegiacs" (pronounced Coom-rhee-der-kyroo) is an unrhymed sonnet. "Three Sonnets for Charles Williams" are fourteen-line poems, but the first and third of the sequence are written in seven-beat lines and hexameters respectively. "The Pulse and the Shade" (BOD, p. 38) is a sequence of seven sonnets addressed to the Savior ("Master of all our styles") meditating on the nature of life and death, time and eternity. And "Sonnet (Muscular man)" is a fourteen-line poem in iambic trimeter on the integrity and dedication of the artist (BOD, p. 20).

Before moving on to a discussion of Watkins and traditional Welsh poetry, a few words need to be said about his ballads, odes and elegies. Watkins' own description of his ballads is quite accurate:

> The ballad form is, of course, as old as poetry itself, and one of the laws attaching to it seems to be that it must be hammered and beaten and knocked into shape until it is as hard and anonymous as a pebble on the shore.
> My own ballads have a great deal in common with those of the tradition. They are all rhythmical and intended to be read aloud; and in some I use a refrain. They are not in any sense private poems. Yet here the likeness ends. These ballads are elemental and they belong to myth, but they do not belong to history. In these it is not the narrative but the metaphysical situation that counts, and the symbols surrounding the situation.[4]

Watkins' long-standing interest in the ballad represents an
effort to carry on the Romantic tradition of raising the prim-
itive, public and oral aspects of the form into the realm of
literary and mythic retelling, an effort begun by Wordsworth
and Coleridge in the Lyrical Ballads. Watkins would have been
aware not only of the older, "anonymous" ballad tradition, but
of the late eighteenth century and pre-Romantic tradition of
the ballad as popularized by the work of James MacPherson the
"Ossian" poet, whose partly-fabricated edition of Gaelic poems,
Fragments of Ancient Poetry (1760), along with the publication
in 1765 of Thomas Percy's Reliques of English Poetry, initi-
ated a new interest in the literary potential of the poetry of
the native strain. There is also a strong popular ballad tra-
dition within Welsh poetry that flourished from the fifteenth
to the eighteenth century with which Watkins would have been
familiar. From the earlier discussion of Watkins' sources for
the Taliesin poems in Chapter I, we recall that although Iolo
Morganwg's editions of early Welsh poetry (like "The Triads of
Britain") were later found to be spurious, they nonetheless
exerted an important influence on men's concept of the early
poetry and of the figure of the bard. All of these elements
would have nourished Watkins' sense of the ballad as both
"elemental" and "mythic."

The above remark on his concern with the "metaphysical
situation" as opposed to the narrative is certainly true of
Watkins' earliest and most well-known ballad, "The Ballad of
the Mari Lwyd." There the Mari ("grey or pale mare") is
associated both with the terror of the pagan mysteries and with

the sanctity of the Christian sacrament. Symbolically, she represents the "profane thing made holy" whose supernatural presence is capable of uniting the living and the dead in the timeless moment between the old year and the new. Here Watkins raises into the realm of myth the local Welsh custom of peasants bearing a mare's head (or surrogate thereof) from house to house at midnight of the New Year. In The Death Bell, Watkins includes eight ballads, many of which demonstrate the formal characteristics of the traditional ballad. For example, he employs insistent repetition in the "Ballad of the Rough Sea" and the traditional four-line alternating tetrameter and trimeter stanzas in "The Ballad of Culver's Hole" to achieve his haunting effects. It is worth noting that many of his ballads take place near or on the sea, and move from a concrete situation or incident to a philosophical perspective on the interwoven powers of life and death and man's relation to the supernatural. In most of them, the poet attains through conscious art that quality of impersonality and objectivity that the ballad tradition demands by speaking through the mask of a dramatic "persona." In the "Ballad of the Trial of Sodom," Watkins shows himself capable of integrating biblical paradigms within the British ballad tradition. The inclusion of biblical themes is also a notable feature of some of the eighteenth-century Welsh ballads.[5]

Watkins' few but memorable odes are not always clearly categorizable as Pindaric or Horatian, but stand as formal, ceremonious poems on a variety of subjects. "Ode" (CA, p. 11) proceeds in four-line, controlled stanzas of a loosely iambic

pentameter measure (alternating with tetrameter and trimeter lines) to deal reflectively with the subject of war through the occasion of a royal coronation. The public nature of the event allows Watkins to speak in an objective and self-confident tone. In "Ode to Justice" (BOD, p. 47), he uses the same tight quatrains to reflect on the nature of divine justice. The poem is reminiscent of Wordsworth's Horatian "Ode to Duty" in that it carries on into the twentieth century the classical celebration of a personified abstraction, defining her here as a liberating and forgiving, rather than a restrictive power:

> She is more patient, suffers her neglect
> Easily, glad to be assigned the lowest
> Place in any surroundings,
> Lifting her prayer, the fountain none can reject.

"Ode at the Spring Equinox," in contrast, is a more Pindaric poem of longer sixteen-line stanzas, but without the triadic structure of the Pindaric ode. It celebrates the seasonal changes in a heightened, Wordsworthian manner that recalls the "Immortality Ode."

> I watch and feel the pulse of turning Earth
> Now, in the forespring time,
> And mark that power sublime
> Which makes the passing moment worth
> All unformed years lacking this present form.   (CA, p. 98)

Yet like the more Horatian odes, it is a formal and reflective meditation, in this case dwelling on man's potentially destructive-creative relation to nature. "Ode to T. S. Eliot" and "Ode to Nijinski" from Affinities are formal tributes to artists (a poet and a dancer) with whom the poet identifies; and "Ode to Swansea" (A, p. 27) is an apostrophe honouring the

Welsh town near Watkins' home that nourished its artists

("Here is the loitering marvel / Feeding artists with all they

know."). In most of his odes, Watkins preserves either the

serious and philosophical quality of the traditional Horatian

ode, or the occasional and celebratory nature of the Pindaric.

More often, he combines the Horatian sense of quiet restraint

and reflectiveness with the Pindaric sense of exalted celebra-

tion. In general, in his odes Watkins achieves a more public

and objective voice than in his more personal lyrics. A final

line of inquiry that might prove fruitful would be that of the

influence of Hölderlin's odes on Watkins. For his translations

of Hölderlin, and the poems dedicated to him prove Watkins re-

sponsive to the mysterious, unrhymed odes of the German, Roman-

tic poet.[6]

The subject of Watkins' elegies has been treated by Gwen

Watkins in her published monograph, Vernon Watkins: Poet of the

Elegiac Muse, and in her more recent Portrait of a Friend

(Llandysul, Dyfed: Gomer Press, 1983), a study of the complex-

ity of Watkins' personal relation to Thomas. In the former

she points out that of the "three hundred poems collected in

his books...over one hundred are either formal elegies, or

considerations of death as a main or subsidiary theme."[7] She

notes that there are eleven elegies on the death of Dylan

Thomas in which Watkins attempts to give meaning to the past

and to explore his own sense of loss at that poet's death. I

shall be exploring some of the elegies for Thomas in Chapter V

where I intend to examine their friendship in greater depth.

Watkins himself saw his relation to Thomas as a sort of

Coleridgian-Wordsworthian configuration of minds. In a lecture
given at Swansea College (1966), though not referring to
Thomas directly, he expresses his sense of the mutually enrich-
ing friendship possible between poets:

> If we look back through the centuries of our poetry
> we shall find many examples of two poets innately and
> fundamentally different in idiom and style, but often
> bound by friendship and a common theme, whose work
> has been strengthened, not by competition, but by the
> assurance and expectation of works from a contemporary
> talent.[8]

Though there are numerous models from the English elegiac
tradition upon which Watkins could have drawn, like Milton's
Lycidas, Shelley's Adonais, and Tennyson's In Memoriam, it is
also evident that there is a strong elegiac tradition within
ancient Welsh poetry which he would have known through his
early exposure to the Welsh sagas. The laments for Dylan
Thomas, Alan Lewis, W. H. Davies and others can be seen to have
a place in the bardic tradition of the eulogy for the dead hero
or poet. Thomas Parry writes in his History of Welsh Litera-
ture that the burden of the "gogynfeirdd" (early poets tied to
the princely courts) "is praise of the princes and elegies on
them when they die."[9]

Gwen Watkins has asserted that Watkins' mourning for
Thomas was deep and abiding, and the poems bear her out. She
argues in her essay that his elegies are serene, controlled and
ultimately affirmative in the sense that in them even the
"bereavement of time" cannot "deprive life of meaning."[10] She
also suggests that Watkins' elegies tend to dwell upon the past
rather than to look forward to a future life, and therefore
have much in common with the pagan Welsh elegiac tradition with

its absence of Christian consolation. My own sense is that
these poems, though emphasizing bereavement, reside within the
context of his poems as a whole where life is viewed as a
"divine comedy" rather than a tragedy. As Watkins puts it in
"Ode"--"Joy is woven true on a tragic base." In the elegies
the sense of Christian consolation is implicit, rather than
explicit; for here he is able to contain the early Welsh sense
of lament and eulogy within the framework of a Christian vi-
sion in which personal immortality is latently, though not al-
ways actively, present. In "Birth and Morning" (CA, pp. 50-52),
for instance, where Watkins celebrates the birth of his own
child and simultaneously laments the death of Thomas, whose
name the child will bear, he makes reference to the rigid buds
"expecting Easter," and a woodpecker's cry "resurrecting the
dark," as if to suggest the possibility of regeneration. And
in "The Exacting Ghost" (CA, p. 43), he enacts a confrontation
between himself and the ghost of Thomas in a dream to indicate
the actuality of the dead man's continued life beyond the
grave. We shall examine this poem more closely in the section
dealing with the influence of Thomas. In the late poem,
"Fidelities," written in terza rima, he speaks with assurance
of the ability of man (and the poet) to survive death. This
poem stands as one of the many statements of affirmation that
qualify the elegiac sense of irredeemable loss:[11]

> A certain cadence underlies the plot;
> However fatally the thread is spun,
> The dying man can rise above his lot. (F, p. 72)

And he is even more explicit in "Great Night's Returning" (CA,
p. 102) where he concludes:

> Now the soul knows the fire that first composed it
> Sinks not with time but is renewed hereafter.
> Death cannot steal the light which love has kindled
> Nor the years change it.

Poems like the above not only modify his sense of lament in the elegies, but remind the reader that one of Watkins' recurrent themes is the fruitful interaction between the living and the dead. His Christian-Platonic sense of man's ability to enter a timeless condition (which was explored in the "Music of Colours" poems) is surely relevant here in approaching his complex attitude toward death and immortality in the poems as a whole.

Let us turn, then, from the elegies to Watkins' use of traditional Welsh poetry. Watkins explained his own sense of his Welshness in "Replies to the Wales Questionnaire," when in response to the question, "Do you consider yourself an Anglo-Welsh writer?", he answered,

> No. I am a Welshman, and an English poet. Wales is my native country, and English the native country of my imagination. I would be Anglo-Welsh only if I could write also in Welsh....I wish I could; but even then, English being the first language I learnt would remain my first language as a poet.[12]

Basically, Watkins saw himself as a Welsh-born poet working within the English poetic tradition. Though his mythic and cultural affinities and his sense of nature were shaped by his immediate setting, especially the Gower coast where he spent most of his life, he strove for universality in his poetry, and refused to be identified with the Anglo-Welsh movement. His research into the continental European tradition, and his work in the translation of French, German and Italian poets (Heine, Hölderlin, Rilke, Válèry, Dante and so on as mentioned

earlier) made him feel at home in a broader context of conti-
nental European poetic forms and ideas. In other words, Wat-
kins is not narrowly nationalistic; yet is decidedly a Welsh-
man in his keen interest in Welsh myth, language and ancient
Welsh verse forms. We have seen his knowledge of Welsh myth
expressed in his use of a native folk custom in "The Ballad of
the Mari Lwyd," and in his choice of the Taliesin figure to
present his central poetic concerns. As Jane McCormick points
out, he retained enough of his early interest in the Welsh lan-
guage through his father's interest in it as "a translator of
some accomplishment," to "provide a glossary for Welsh words
used by David Jones in his "Tutelar of the Place."[13]

As for Watkins' use of the Welsh tradition, there seem to
be basically two lines of critical thought. The first is that
of Kathleen Raine, Dora Polk and others who emphasize his
Welshness, arguing as Raine does that his perfectionism of
verse and his intricate use of rhymes, assonance and allitera-
tion spring both from conscious and unconscious hereditary
links to his bardic heritage. Raine writes in "Vernon Watkins:
Poet of Tradition," that "the initiatory knowledge of the poet
came first...by way of vital memory of the Welsh bardic tra-
dition."[14] The second perspective is that of Leslie Norris,
Louis Martz and others who tend to minimize the bardic aspect
and see Watkins working primarily within the English poetic
tradition. Leslie Norris points out, for instance, that Wat-
kins rarely attempts to imitate Welsh verse forms, and that
when he does, as in the short, four-line poem, "Englyn" (F,
p. 51), he is relatively unsuccessful, and even "incorrect in

the application of the strict rules of the form."[15] The englyn

is a widely used Welsh verse form which employs cynghanedd as

defined earlier in the chapter. Another place where Watkins

approximates Welsh forms is in "Triads" (F, p. 102) where he

imitates the three-line stanzas of a Welsh form popular in the

tenth to the twelfth centuries. There is also evidence of

"some rudimentary cynghanedd" in "The Sure Aimer" (F, p. 36),[16]

a poem addressed to Marianne Moore. "Cynghanedd," as we recall,

is a strict system of complicated alliteration, internal rhyme,

and the echoing of vowel sounds. Though established in the

ninth century, it reached its perfection in the fourteenth.

It has been defined as "the device whereby words of more than

one syllable alliterate when all their consonants except the

final ones are the same, and in the same order, the accent

falling on corresponding syllables in each word; e.g., búllock

and béllow can be used, but not búllock and belów."[17] In Wat-

kins' "Englyn" (F, p. 51), "broken" and "taken," for instance,

suggest cynghanedd, though the first consonants in each word

differ.

Though Watkins' experimentation with Welsh verse forms

and his use of Welsh myth is undeniably important, my own view

is closer to that of Martz, Norris and those who see him as

well within the English poetic tradition. As noted earlier,

not only was he given an English education, being sent to Rep-

ton and to Cambridge (to be trained in modern languages), but

he grew up at a time in history when the educated Welsh were

interested in integrating themselves within the English culture.

Later in life, he mostly ignored the Welsh national movement.

His blood is Welsh, and there is probably a true sense in which
a Welsh bardic temperament "runs in his veins," yet his great
literary models, Dante, Milton, the Metaphysicals and the Ro-
mantics, are mostly English and continental. His own defini-
tion of himself as "a Welshman, and an English Poet" is proba-
bly as close as we can get to the truth of the matter.

Let us examine, however, some of Watkins' links to his
Welsh heritage. It is true that he made only a few attempts
to apply the Welsh metrical rules to English, but it can be
argued that where he employs complex patterns of alliteration,
internal rhyme, assonance, and compound words, he is engaged
in an attempt to approximate in English the aural quality of
the Welsh "cynghanedd." Like his admired predecessor, Hopkins,
whose work he was studying and teaching at the time of his
death, and whose poetry exerted an influence on him in his use
of compound words, dense and fluid verbal play, and looser,
stress-based rhythms, Watkins can be said to capture a genuine
Welshness in many of his poems. These long, sonorous lines
from "Rhossili," for example, utilize some of the above-
mentioned techniques:

> Coiled sand, gold mountains, grass-tufted dunes, unending,
>   rising, descending,
> And the cat-spotted, wind-crafty tide, spitting serpent-
>   white tongues drawn slack.... (LU, p. 45)

It is also arguable that Watkins' technical perfectionism
has much in common with that of the bardic schools. As Raine
states,

> Perfectionism of verse has been the heritage of Welsh-
> born poets down to Vernon Watkins' generation, perhaps
> the last inheritors.[18]

The early poets of the learned schools associated with the courts, the Gogynfeirdd ("Rather Early Poets") of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were organized into professional guilds, and were responsible for passing on a body of traditional material. Their poetry was known both for its intricacy and precision, and for its adherence to a strict set of rules. Anthony Conran describes some of the general characteristics of early Welsh poetry as follows:

> Welsh poetry is usually highly decorative, full of images strung together, and glittering with phrases which these rules [the strict metrical codes] gather together, as it were into an organized whole.[19]

Much of Watkins' verse, like the passage from "Rhossili," is certainly highly ornate in this sense, and adheres to strict metrical and other poetic conventions. Watkins shares with the court poets a sense of the poet as a highly trained and expert technician. His love of the past and reliance upon tradition, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, are also characteristic of the Gogynfeirdd.[20]

Though in the "classical period" (from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries) poets were often members of a learned order, there is also the parallel, more popular tradition of the wandering minstrels and rhymsters (cerddors), who represent a more spontaneous order of bard. The later "township poets" of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries would also have been appreciated by Watkins for their celebration of the natural landscape.[21] Finally, as suggested earlier, Watkins would have been exposed to the more Romantic notion of the bard as a kind of priest or "seer" through late eighteenth-century revivers of

the classical tradition like Iolo Morganwg. We recall that in the Taliesin poems, Taliesin was chosen partly because he stood as one who challenged the artificiality of the court system with a more divinely inspired, spontaneous order of music, and that Lady Charlotte Guest as Watkins' primary source for the story drew from these later eighteenth and nineteenth-century sources.

We have noted in dealing with the elegies that the older poets limited themselves to a few basic themes, mainly those of eulogy and praise. It is true that Watkins also works with a restricted number of ideas, themes and poetic images, and that a large proportion of his poems fall within the tradition of eulogy and praise. Yet unlike the early bards who praised or lamented a particular prince or leader, Watkins extends his praise to the whole domain of nature. Certainly his sense of art as painstaking artifice and his recurrence to a few time-less themes do not arise exclusively out of his Welshness, but they can be seen to bear a relationship to the Welsh tradition that is more than coincidental.

In a long letter to Watkins dated April 11, 1962, David Jones addresses this vital issue of what he calls, "the diffi-culties of one writer of Welsh affinity whose language is En-glish."[22] Though we do not have Watkins' reply, the intensity of Jones' interest implies that the issue was one he and Watkins shared. In the letter, Jones discusses the complexity of the problem for the Welsh writer who may not speak the Welsh lan-guage himself, but is faced with communicating to an English-speaking audience who has no knowledge of the figures of Welsh

myth "an anterior tradition" which is part of his blood and
with which he shares a cultural affinity. He identifies what
he sees as the "Welsh strains" in the English genius (present
in poets like Vaughan, Herbert, Milton, Smart, Hopkins and so
on), and then goes on to compliment Watkins for capturing in
the "Mari Lwyd" an "authentic Welshness."[23] Comparing and con-
trasting himself and Watkins to Hopkins, who studied Welsh met-
rics and knew the language, he establishes them as modern poets
for whom the land, culture and mythological "deposits" of Wales
are important and must be integrated into the work. In the
poem, "Pledges to Darkness," Part Two, "Egyptian Burial--Resur-
rection in Wales" (DB, p. 21), we can see Watkins carrying on
in his own terms the effort of consolidating his sense of place
within a broader cultural context. In that poem, the Egyptian
goddess, Nefertiti, awakes to second birth and a realization of
the power of the Christian resurrection in his native Wales.

In his essay, "The Myth of Arthur," from Epoch and Artist,
Jones presents a description of the Celtic genius that is rele-
vant to Watkins' poetry:

> The folk tradition of the insular Celts seems to present
> to the mind a half-aquatic world....[I]t introduces a
> feeling of transparency and interpenetration of one
> element with another, of transposition and metamor-
> phosis.[24]

Kathleen Raine, citing this passage, argues that,

> Both Dylan Thomas and Vernon Watkins share this delicate,
> intricate and dazzling web of intermingled elements.[25]

It is in the poems where Watkins most resembles Hopkins (and
Dylan Thomas) that this dazzling sense of the intricate and
intangible can be identified. We have seen evidence of Watkins'

verbal facility in conveying such a feeling in the "Music of

Colours" poems where his theme is the way the natural world

reflects an anterior metaphysical dimension. The sense of the

world as a union of interpenetrating spheres is also observable

in "Swallows Over the Weser," where Watkins creates a Hopkins-

esque texture in the use of alliteration, consonance, assonance

and in the substitution of adverbs for adjectives:

```
         //              //            //              //
    Watching their wings in the sunlight, || their wings that
            //              //
       transfix the bright aether,
       //      //        //            //            //
    Diamondly flying, is lovely. || Low diving, they skim where
           //
       the branches
       //          //          //
    Of sycamore darken the river.... (LU, p. 35)
```

The use of consonants (note the "l" sound in the third line)

and the complicated assonance approximate the effect of cyn-

ghanedd. Watkins breaks up the long hexameter line by his

placement of the caesura, and creates a stress-based isocronic

pattern in which approximately three strong beats fall on

either side of the medial pause. I have placed double stress

marks where the heavy beats would fall if the poem were read

aloud. Though the poem can be scanned as heavily dactylic, it

can also be read as an example of a poem in which Watkins is

moving toward a looser, stress-based rhythm.

I think it would be vain to search through Watkins' work

for pure examples of cynghanedd and other Welsh metrical de-

vices, but I believe it can be assumed that his sensitivity to

the rhythmic, aural and highly formal qualities of Welsh poetry

(as received in translation) contributed significantly to his

poetic development. In his somewhat diffuse, imagistically

rich and musical poems like "Sea-Music for My Sister Travel-

ling" (LV), he evokes the Welsh feeling of transformation and

metamorphosis that Jones so aptly describes in "The Myth of

Arthur." And it is obvious that in his choice of themes and

mythological motifs he is working consciously with his Welsh

heritage.

When we consider that Watkins has explored both the Welsh

"triad" and "englyn" as well as classical quantitative meters,

we begin to get a sense of his extraordinary technical range.

In Sound and Form in Modern Poetry, Harvey Gross discusses how

prosodists like Gabriel Harvey, Robert Bridges and others (e.g.

Arthur Hugh Clough) have attempted to "discover a quantitative

base for English meter."[26] Gross has pointed out the diffi-

culties (if not the impossibility) of translating the long and

short syllables (i.e. the fixed quantities) of Greek and Latin

into the English convention based on accented and unaccented

syllables. Watkins avoids the problem by reworking classical

meters in terms of a strong-stress or syllabic-stress structure.

In scanning one of Watkins' Sapphic stanzas from "Ophelia," for

instance, Gross observes that the poet sustains the eleven and

five-syllable structure of the traditional Sapphic, but employs

a strong-stress pattern.[27] Gross scans the stanza as follows:

```
     //           //            //           //
   Stunned in the stone light, || laid among the lilies,
     //           //            //           //
   Still in the green wave, || graven in the reed-bed,
     //                         //           //
   Lip-read by clouds || in the language of the shallows,
     //           //
   Lie there, reflected.
```

Watkins' epigram to Uncollected Poems is also a Sapphic stanza

which tends to fall into a trochaic and dactylic accentual

pattern. Yet it too could be read as heavily stressed, with

two to three beats on either side of the caesura:

```
 //        /      //         //        /       //
Evening, father of us, ‖ preternatural starlight,
  //             //           //         //
Beginning of wonder, ‖ fingers of darkness,
//          //              //        //
Hold us, heal us, ‖ and send us praising
//        //
Out on our journey.
```

I would agree with Gross in his conclusion that "the best use

of the classical meters has been in adapting them to the stress-

based prosody of English, not in trying, as Bridges tried, to

write an artificial language which could accommodate the me-

ters."[28] It can be argued that Watkins' success in his Sapphics

is tied to his ability to make this kind of adaptation.

The poem, "Thames Forest" (first version dated from 1933),

from Watkins' first published volume (BML, p. 49), is a good

example of his ability to adapt the Sapphic stanza to a strong-

stress meter:

```
  //          //     /        //                //
Years are di|vine rings; ‖ moments are im|mortal.
      //           //              //          //
The months are|saplings, ‖ centuries are|oakenshaws
    //            //              //               //
Lightfoot the | soul goes. ‖ Im|pressive is the | shadow
 //            //    /
Cast by those | time-groves.
```

Darkness of the sycamore flies across the river.
From a pattern of foliage see the spirit struggling
Through meshes like memories, woven of their terror,
Wondering, emerging....
....
Light on the wet ground, lighter on the leafmould
Dances that energy, rising in the sunbeam.
Black flies the shadow, asking of the dead leaf
Garment for burial....
....
Light is a great pool. Look, the clouds are flying.
Of all forms living, man alone deliberate
Scrawls on a leaf the impression of his going.
These leaves are numbered.

Gross points out that a falling meter (dactylic-spondaic) gov-
erns the rhythm, yet that the meter is "counterpointed against
a four-stress alliterative pattern."[29] As in his hexameters
from "Swallows Over the Weser," the heavy beats fall on either
side of the caesura, creating the rhythmic sense of the old
alliterative measures. Internal rhyme and slant rhyme (i.e.,
rings, saplings, lines 1 and 2), alliteration and the compound-
ing and coining of words (lightfoot, time-groves, leafmould)
are used effectively throughout. Roland Mathias has noticed in
this poem that compared to those of the traditional Sapphic
stanza (normally arranged, trochee, spondee, dactyl, trochee,
trochee), Watkins' predominantly dactylic lines acquire a
greater "movement and urgency."[30] Both Mathias and Heath-Stubbs
have recognized that Watkins is "experimenting" with the Sapphic
stanza in this poem. In a poem where the central image is that
of the shuttle of eternity weaving the threads of time, such a
smooth and deliberate rhythm seems particularly appropriate to
the content. The theme of light playing against darkness,
spirit with pattern, is again complemented by the choice of
form. The poem concludes with the image of the loom:

    Easily time, and quickly, can forsake him,
    Leave, in a moment, intricate the shuttles
    Idle, the still thread, while the mighty loom works
    Suns ever turning.

Watkins' interest in the Sapphic and Alcaic stanzas
emerged out of a love of Greek poetry and through his transla-
tions and study of Hölderlin. Though he read Greek poetry
mostly in translation, he did know some Greek firsthand.[31]
John Heath-Stubbs and Ian Hilton have both pointed out that

Watkins' translations of Hölderlin's Sapphics and Alcaics lead

him into a liking for the form.[32]   In Michael Hamburger's Pre-

face to his own translation of Hölderlin, which Watkins had

read, he writes of the German poet's use of Horatian Alcaics in

his odes:

> It is the Alcaic form that invites naturalization in
> English--by which I do not mean self-conscious exercises
> in the grand manner like Tennyson's Milton--and more
> than one contemporary English poet has already shown
> that it is quite as amenable to English speech rhythms
> as the long-established only too familiar iambic.[33]

Like the Sapphic, the Horatian Alcaic is a four-line

stanza, but it generally consists of two eleven-syllable, one

nine-syllable, and a final decasyllabic line.[34]   In one of Wat-

kins' Alcaic-like poems, "The Return of Spring" (LU, p. 41),

the exact syllabic count of the ideal model is only approxi-

mated.   In the first stanza, for instance, there are twelve and

thirteen syllables respectively in lines one and two, twelve in

line three, and eight in the final line:

> The Spring returns. Green valleys, the sparkling meadows
> Crowd gold, under larks, wry-rooted, the gorse, deep-
>   scented.
> Lovely it is to live, to turn the eyes seaward,
> To laugh with waves that outlive us.

In effect, Watkins is translating the Alcaic into an accentual

pattern of three lines of five stresses, followed by a final

line of three consisting of an iamb and two amphibrachs (To

laugh / with waves that / outlive us). The trochaic-dactylic

rhythm of the traditional Alcaic is virtually eliminated. In

the final stanza, the double pauses in the second and third

lines reinforce the sense of the brook faltering. The poem

then resumes its flow in the fourth line where the strong,

regular rhythm is restored:

> What first I feared as a rite I love as a sacrament.
> The Spring returns. I look. There is no dissembling.
> The brook falters, runs on. I divine those meanings,
> Listening to tongues that are silent. (<u>LU</u>, p. 42)

This is a particularly beautiful poem in its subtly-changing rhythms and complex patterns of imagery, typical of Watkins' use of the form.

Harvey Gross has analyzed Watkins' mastery of classical hexameters in "Cantata for the Waking of Lazarus" (<u>DB</u>, p. 63), showing how he uses the caesura to break up the monotony of the line in the early stanzas. Line three, for instance, contains three definite pauses:

> Lazarus, || four days dead, || alone in the shadow ||
>   sleeping....

But in the final section, where the poem bursts into a prayer to "the Redeemer," Watkins creates an ecstatic, "trance-like and ceremonious" rhythm by placing the caesura only after the sixth syllable, as in the classical paradigm:[35]

> Come, O Redeemer, come; come down, and make Earth new.
>
> Love, newly born, come down: for you the fountain playing
> Leaps into light, then spills, and fills the basin's brim.
>   (<u>DB</u>, p. 64)

In "Foal," however, Watkins uses the hexameter line more loosely, varying the poem with shorter lines, and avoiding the dactylic rhythm of the paradigm:

> See him [the foal] break that circle, stooping to drink,
>   to suck
> His mother, vaulted with a beautiful hero's back
> Arched under the singing mane.... (<u>LU</u>, p. 43)

In the following lines from the same poem, Watkins moves almost to a free verse measure; yet we remain conscious of the recur-

rence of the six-beat line. He achieves the effect of parallel-
ism in the repetition of the phrase, "In the darkness":

> But perhaps
> In the darkness under the tufted thyme and downtrodden
>   winds,
> In the darkness under the violet's roots, in the dark-
>   ness of the pitcher's music,
> In the uttermost darkness of a vase
> There is still the print of fingers, the shadow of waters.
> And under the dry, curled parchment of the soil there
>   is always a little foal
> Asleep.

A close survey of Watkins' verse forms has shown him to be
a more varied poet than is usually assumed. He is capable of
ranging from the fluid, rhapsodic style of the early poems, to
a simpler, sparer, more epigrammatic style in many of the poems
in Fidelities, his last volume. It is impossible to date his
poems by the order of their appearance in the published volumes
because Watkins sometimes withheld early work and published it
years later. Yet it has been noted by those who have had access
to the dated drafts that he moves toward what McCormick has
called a "simpler, more direct, and more assertive" style in
the later poems.[36] Leslie Norris, who has conducted a thorough
study of the progression of Watkins' work through the published
volumes, concludes similarly that in Fidelities he achieves a
"substantial development in directness of communication, in
careful observation, in the relating of single images to the
whole of the poem and to each other."[37] It is certain that
Watkins can be seen extending his style and range up to the
time of his death.

Too often, however, particular poems or volumes of poems
have been attacked by critics who have no sense of the shape

and development of his work as a whole. And Watkins' canon,
more than that of many modern poets, needs to be read whole
because of the interrelationship of its themes and images, an
aspect of his work noted in the discussion of the Taliesin and
"Music of Colours" poems. Watkins' work has been criticized
for what has been seen as a "monotony of rhythm," style and
vocabulary, for the presence of strong echoes of other poets,
and for a tendency to use weak and commonplace phrases.[38]
While such critiques may be entirely valid in specific instan-
ces, they miss the point in their main thrust by failing to
recognize Watkins' poetic orientation, his self-determined lim-
its. As suggested earlier, what have been seen as his weak-
nesses may be interpreted as poetic strengths when one recog-
nizes that his uniqueness as a poet lies in his conscious self-
restriction to a few basic themes and the development of them
through a complex network of cross-references and linked sym-
bols. His seemingly "worn-out metaphors," like that of the
fountain, the light, the Muse or the stream, are chosen deliber-
ately for their perennial and archetypal value. What has been
seen as a monotony of rhythm issues from a conscious sense of
poetry as musical artifice; although a careful look at the com-
plexity of Watkins' rhythms in many of the poems should lead to
a quite different conclusion. The strong echoes of earlier
poets arise from Watkins' sense of the poet as an inheritor of a
received tradition, a contemporary of the "dead." His choice of
vocabulary, which some have found commonplace or archaic, stems
from his being the sort of poet who is interested in purifying
and refining an existing poetic diction, rather than in creating

a new idiom or reforging the language at its base.[39] The ex-
alted tone and impersonal quality of many of the poems, cou-
pled with a relative absence of realistic detail drawn from the
temporal sphere, comes out of a conscious exclusion of the mun-
dane from a poetry of timeless vision. In order to explain the
recurrence of a few linked symbols in his work he once wrote:

> Repetition may be a reinforcement of the individual will,
> even a statement of faith, and that is sacred. Unless
> there is a constant and a recurrence, there is no depth
> in the matrix.[40]

We have seen that Watkins' individuality lies in how he
reworks the traditions of English poetry, and that his varia-
tions on the received forms are masterful and subtle. We have
seen him consciously incorporating Welsh material within his
work as an English poet born in Wales. How successful he is in
achieving his poetic ideals in his practice and how valid those
ideals are poetically are questions for the reader to determine
for himself, but Watkins' poetry must be read on its own terms.
Michael Hamburger, Watkins' friend and a translator of the Ger-
man poet Hölderlin, defines those terms well when he states:

> The variety of his work lies in its extraordinary range
> of forms and metres, by no means always traditional, yet
> always mastered and made his own by an infallible ear.
> His range of themes and imagery was circumscribed by the
> constancy of his allegiances, as his musical range was
> not; and this has to do with anti-realistic, anti-rational
> premisses hardly reconcilable with many phenomena of the
> modern world. Yet, until poetry itself becomes obsolete,
> or this earth uninhabitable, Vernon's natural and human
> archetypes will be accessible to a few readers at least.[41]

CHAPTER IV

WATKINS AND THE METAPHYSICALS

Chapter IV

Watkins and the Metaphysicals

Part I: Watkins, Donne and Herbert

"Religious poetry is sealed up like the eyes
of Lazarus by a refusal to be raised except
by the true God." (Watkins, from "Poets and
Poetry," 1960)

It becomes apparent from even a brief acquaintance with
Watkins' poetry and prose that belief and aesthetics are not in
his mind divorced. We have seen that out of an instinct for
their inherent unity he creates a lyrical poetry of intense
metaphysical concern; that he is "metaphysical" not merely in
the restricted, historic sense of writing in the tradition of a
defined group of earlier poets, but in the larger more compre-
hensive one of reflecting a philosophical outlook that assumes
the existence of a transcendent order of being. To him, the
writer of Job, Shakespeare, Milton and Yeats were "metaphysical
poets" in this extended and generic sense because of the pres-
ence in their work of a mythic or visionary world view--in
short, of the timeless perspective he so consistently sought.
Nonetheless, specific poets commonly classified as "seventeenth-
century Metaphysicals" seem to have attracted him strongly and
to have had a significant impact on his work. In this chapter,
I wish to explore in Part I the presences of John Donne and
George Herbert, and in Part II those of Henry Vaughan and Thomas
Traherne. I shall be considering the use Watkins makes of their
poetry throughout his work in a further effort to address the
question: what kind of a metaphysical poet is Watkins?

Kathleen Raine, Louis Martz, Leslie Norris, Roland Mathias and almost all the notable critics who have written on Watkins have perceived a temperamental affinity between him and the English Metaphysicals. In The Anglo-Welsh Review Raine speaks of a

> modern return to a poetry like that of the English Meta-
> physicals, especially Herbert and Vaughan, whose roots
> were also Welsh...,[1]

and lauds him for being like the

> earlier metaphysical poets who by choice withdrew from
> the world to seek for wisdom in depth rather than in
> extent.[2]

The testimony of Louis Martz (1) and Roland Mathias (2) is con-sistent with Raine's:

> (1) Yet here is one of the first religious poets of our
> century: religious in a frank, disarming way....
> ....
> Aside from Hopkins and Eliot we have not seen religious
> poetry like this since the seventeenth century; and in-
> deed the poetical ancestor of this poetry is Henry
> Vaughan, whose meditative vision also found these flash-
> ings in the landscape of Wales.[3]

> (2) Vernon Watkins was, as he would have wished to be,
> one of the very few twentieth century representatives
> of the great metaphysical tradition in English poetry.[4]

In spite of these perceptive remarks, no one has yet conducted a thorough study of the poems to support the argument that Wat-kins is an heir of these poets, or attempted to explore his efforts to integrate the English metaphysical tradition within the outlook of a twentieth-century man. My attempt to do so will begin with a general description of the ground Watkins and the forenamed Metaphysicals seem to share.

As already suggested in Chapter II, it is with Vaughan and Traherne especially that Watkins shares a mystical, Platonic

cast of mind that looks through this world to another, and an extreme sensitivity to a transcendent and inwardly discovered order of being. Like T. S. Eliot, who wrote in "The Metaphysical Poets" of a "dissociation of sensibility" that he believed to have set in after the seventeenth century,[5] Watkins too would have found admirable in these earlier religious poets a theological ground of certitude that enabled them to relate mind and feeling, sensuality and spirit in a meaningful and coherent manner. I hope to demonstrate in this chapter that Vaughan and Traherne, though not named explicitly, are much stronger presences in Watkins' work as a whole than either Donne or Herbert. They permeate individual poems more through a similarity of poetic themes and symbols than through verbal echoes and direct references. They resemble Watkins in the essentially mystical and individual quality of their Christian vision. The likeness is too fundamental to be a matter of literary influence alone, but of sensibility--a distinct temperamental and spiritual closeness.

Watkins' Christian mysticism (which he can be seen to share with Vaughan and Traherne) expressed itself in a suspicion of systems of any kind, including Neoplatonism when dogmatically ossified. He was disinclined to create an elaborate structure of ideas and poetic symbols like Yeats in A Vision or Blake in the "Prophetic Books." Therefore, he chose instead to rest within the fecundity of a received heritage of Judeo-Christian (biblical) and classical symbolism and myth, illustrated for him in its fulness in poets like Dante and Milton, and to focus upon his own unique expression of the illuminated

moment as it gives meaning to time. As we have seen in his use of Taliesin, his forays into the Celtic world of the native tradition added depth to this rich matrix of traditional material.

When speaking of Watkins' poetic individualism, I do not mean to imply that he rejected institutional or historical Christianity; for like so many of the English Metaphysicals, he was a regular communicant in the Anglican church. His transference from the faith of his Congregationalist parents to Anglicanism occurred when he went to public school at Repton at the age of fourteen (1920), and he continued to attend the small Anglican church near his home on the Pennard cliffs on Gower throughout his life. From early childhood he considered himself a Christian, and after the previously-mentioned "revolution of sensibility" of his early twenties, a "Christian poet." The point is that the institutional side of Christianity--particularly the liturgy and the doctrines of Atonement and Redemption--are not central to his religious vision as expressed in the poetry, and only enter occasionally when fused with his direct and individual experience. The liturgy and church rituals are less important to his poetry than they are to Eliot in "Ash-Wednesday," for example, or David Jones in The Anathemata (1952). In this sense he is less like Herbert, who orders The Temple around the liturgy of the church, and again, more like Vaughan, who, though equally steeped in church tradition, speaks at his most memorable when capturing the individual's inward recognition of "the world of light" in a synthesis of traditional and more esoteric symbolism.

In some of the occasional poems on baptism and christening
like "A Christening Remembered" (LU, p. 87) and "For a First
Birthday" (BW, p. 22), Watkins does borrow sacramental imagery
from the church ritual, and he often incorporates eucharistic
themes and symbols indirectly as in "Bread and the Stars" (CA,
p. 79). He has several reflective-meditative poems on the
Crucifixion including "Good Friday" (CA, p. 100) and "Deposi-
tion (for Ceri Richards)" (F, p. 73), as well as numerous poems
on the theme of resurrection. Yet even in these poems, he is
not doctrinaire in the sense that the poetry exists to expound
the doctrine, or that the doctrine intrudes on the experience
out of which the poem evolved. I have suggested that in his
concern with man's relation to the timeless through the media-
tion of a Christ who willingly entered time, he is concerned
with the implications of the Incarnation and expresses an in-
carnational view of nature as an embodiment of the spiritual
world in many poems. Here again he is close to Vaughan and
Traherne who are also interested in nature viewed sacramentally,
but always assume that the whole of reality cannot be limited
to experience of the natural order.

Because Watkins tends to read back from nature to her
eternal forms, he insisted on defining himself as a Christian
"metaphysical" poet as opposed to a nature poet, and wrote a
few months before his death:

> A metaphysical poet, cannot write without being involved
> in belief, and his belief is tested by every contact with
> life, and renewed every day.[6]

Though Watkins never clearly defines "belief" in his prose, his
poetry reveals his fidelity to the basic Christian theme of

man's Fall and regeneration, and an assuredness regarding his
spiritual origin and end. As the above passage indicates,
faith (or "belief") for Watkins was more than an intellectual
and emotional acceptance of his Judeo-Christian heritage and
an aesthetic utilization of its symbols and mythic paradigms,
but involved for him the integration of the entire being--the
activation of the moral self and will, as well as the intellect
and imagination. The sense of integrity, of spiritual, moral
and intellectual wholeness that informs his work as an unspoken
ideal, gives it the tone of uncompromising fervor we have noted
in "Rewards of the Fountain" (see Chapter III) that links him
with these seventeenth-century poets of spiritual vocation and
commitment.

The Welshness of the Vaughans (Thomas and Henry) and the
part-Welshness of Herbert, as well as Traherne's connection
with the borderlands of Wales in Hereford, must have appealed
to Watkins with his strong sense of place. Like Henry Vaughan
the Silurist, who celebrates the river Usk in his verse,[7] Wat-
kins identified himself intensely with "one place," and re-
mained loyal to that place throughout his life, making poetry
out of the dialogue between his inward and spiritual self and
the local environment. In the poem "The Death Bell," in a con-
text of religious exploration similar to that of the later
Donne, and of Herbert and Vaughan, he writes from this sense of
loyalty:

> I that was born in Wales
> Cherish heaven's dust in scales
> Which may at dusk be seen
> On every village green

Where Tawe, Taff or Wye
Through fields and woods goes by.... (DB, p. 108)

And in Affinities he states, "Let each whose soul is in one

place / Still to that place be true" (A, p. 32). We have noted

in Chapter III that David Jones, in a letter to Watkins dated

April 11, 1962, indicates their mutual interest in the metaphys-

ical poets of "Welsh affinity":

> One thing that I find interesting, but hardly ever re-
> ferred to is that the 'English Metaphysicals' of the
> 17th Cent. were so very largely of the Welsh borderlands.[8]

That Watkins also found these poets engaging is evidenced

by their recurrent presence throughout his work from the early

to the late poems. The poets Donne and Herbert are actually

named, as well as quoted, echoed and imitated in the poems.

Donne appears as early as BML where in "Discoveries" Watkins

invokes him among his pantheon of poetic heroes—Blake, Milton,

Yeats, Heraclitus, Rilke and Keats—as a poet of a celestial

and unified vision:

> Donne sees those stars, yet will not let them lie:
> We're tapers too, and at our own cost die. (BML, p. 65)

By incorporating a line from Donne's "The Canonization" into

his poem, Watkins alludes to their shared sense of human regen-

eration through love and a death of self, and invokes a vision

of the Ptolemaic system of "stars" (stanza 2) that objectifies

his belief in a divinely ordered universe.   Also, in "The

Immortal in Nature" (CA, p. 53) he alludes to Donne's "The Sun

Rising" where the lovers of the poem constitute a spiritual

world unto themselves, a microcosm of the whole:

> I tell my soul: Although they be withdrawn
> Meditate on those lovers. Think of Donne
> Who could contract all ages to one day,

Knowing they were but copies of that one;
The first being true, then none can pass away.

And in "The Breaking of the Wave" (BW, p. 40) he refers to "The

exalted vision Donne or Dante drew" which time cannot destroy.

In "A True Picture Restored" (A, p. 29), an elegiac poem about

Dylan Thomas, Watkins names Milton and Herbert as two of his

and Thomas' shared sources:

Nearer the pulse than other themes
His [Thomas's] deathborn claims are pressed.
Fired first by Milton, then the dreams
Of Herbert's holy breast....

Among the seventeenth-century poets, Milton and Crashaw

are also present in Watkins' verse, though I do not propose to

make more than passing reference to them here. Milton is in-

voked often because he, more than any other figure of the

seventeenth century, represented to Watkins a complete mastery

of poetic form, and because he stood for him as a poet who had

realized on a grand scale a valid vision of man's relation to

God. Watkins praised him in his prose at a time when it was

unpopular to do so. In an "Address to the Poetry Society of

Great Britain," May 7, 1966, he states: "It is ludicrous for

a poet like Milton to be discountenanced when he is so complete

a master of form."[9] Crashaw's influence, on the other hand, is

not abiding, though Watkins does echo his phrase, "Eternity shut

in a span," from "In the Holy Nativity of Our Lord God" in his

own "all heaven in a span" from "Revisited Waters":

Yet nothing we knew in that rock of a soul that would
    climb,
Of a Christ that would save us, contracting all heaven
    in a span. (A, p. 98)

Aside from an interest in the Magdalene figure, shared by Her-

bert and Vaughan as well, and demonstrated in "The Sinner" (LU, p. 58), "Quem Quaeritis?" and "Five Poems of Magdalenian Darkness" (A, pp. 84 & 86), Watkins has little in common with Crashaw, and certainly displays few of his baroque verbal extravagances, his sensuous continental imagery of divine love, and his penchant for far-fetched metaphors like tears as "Portable and compendious oceans" in "Saint Mary Magdalene; or, the Weeper."

In "The Poet's Voice" (1947) when Watkins wrote, "I would give a great many poems that are found in most anthologies for the two which Donne wrote in his deathbed,"[10] he probably had in mind Donne's Divine Poems, "Hymn to God, my God, in my Sickness" and "A Hymn to God the Father."[11] Evidence from the poems would suggest that Watkins' emphasis on religious themes led him to admire the later "Dean Donne" of the sermons and the "Holy Sonnets" much more than the early cynical lover of Songs and Sonnets. There is little in Watkins' generally mellifluous voice and evenly lyrical tone to suggest that he derived much from Donne's brand of "wit"--the sinewy style, the ingenious and difficult conceits, or the tough, argumentative structures that characterize this seventeenth-century predecessor in both the early love poems and the later religious verse. What Watkins drew from Donne was not a style, but the confirmation of a vision. It is in the themes and imagery of specific poems that we must look to discover Donne's presence.

"The Return of Spring" from LU is one of the first poems in the published volumes to refer to Donne directly. It names Donne, alludes briefly to Herbert, and recaptures in Watkins'

own style a Vaughanesque attitude toward nature. The poem

presents the speaker walking in the woods in the transitional

time between winter and spring. He finds himself "resisting

that green dominion" of spring in a passionate consideration of

"the thing more sacred"--that is, the underlying presence of

death in "the death-touching script" that contains the possibil-

ity of regeneration. Like Donne of the sermons and meditations,

he continually looks on death and sacrifice as the prelude to

spiritual life.[12] Watkins writes in stanzas six and seven in

terms of nature as a "tome," a volume or a book:

> Diamonds of light, emeralds of leaves, green jewels:
> For me the unnoticed, death-touching script is more
>   passionate.
> Cover the tome with dust; there dwells the redeemer,
> Deathlessly known by the voice-fall.
>
> O Spring, the box of colours, blue sky, green trees!
> Has the brook ears? Donne has delivered his sermon.
> Not easily you beguile the pulse, the footprint
> Vaulted with intimate music. (LU, pp. 41-42)

Donne's "sermon" (7.2) is linked significantly here with the

receiving ears of nature, and in this regard the poem is per-

haps Romantic in the Wordsworthian sense by attempting to

establish a vital communion between nature and man. Yet in its

movement from spring viewed as a repeating "rite" signifying

time's domination to spring viewed as a "sacrament" signifying

the "redeemer's rebirth" through a submission to time, the poem

dramatizes the speaker's change of perception in a manner that

is closer to much seventeenth-century religious verse. The poet

continues to address spring in stanzas nine and ten:

> O returning child, not knowing why you were born,
> Not understanding world's beauty the dead sustain,
> The sharpness of colour, the clearness of water are yours;
> The love there shadowed you know not.

> What first I feared as a rite I love as a sacrament.
> The Spring returns. I look. There is no dissembling.
> The brook falters, runs on. I divine those meanings,
> Listening to tongues that are silent. (LU, p. 42)

In its vision of spring as a "sacrament" the poem is reminiscent of some of Vaughan's poems from Silex Scintillans (1650 and 1655). One could point to "Regeneration," "I walked the other day," "The Bird," or "The Water-fall." In "Regeneration" the landscape of spring is much more allegorically and symbolically complex; yet Vaughan's poem deals with the same theme that Watkins handles, and in a similar way:

> A ward, and still in bonds, one day
>   I stole abroad,
> It was high-spring, and all the way
>   Primrosed and hung with shade;
>   Yet, it was frost within,
>   And surly winds
>   Blasted my infant buds, and sin
>   Like clouds eclipsed my mind.[13]

Like the speaker in Watkins' poem, Vaughan "resists" the outer dominion of spring because of the winter within his soul, coming to reunite inner and outer landscapes through the shift in spiritual awareness that occurs at the end of the poem when he realizes that the "rushing wind" that speaks within him is the Spirit of God that "blows where it will" of John's gospel, telling him he must be "born again."[14] Likewise, "The Return of Spring" concludes with the speaker turning from nature's visual language to listen to "tongues that are silent"--the invisible voices that speak inwardly to the soul. The movement of both poems is progressively inward. Both speakers come to realize the necessity of a mystical death and rebirth--Watkins' by seeking the "redeemer" in the "death-touching script" of nature and Vaughan's by crying out to Christ in the last couplet, "Let me

die before my death!"

Stanza seven with its reference to spring as a "box of colours" is an obvious allusion to Herbert's little emblematic poem, "Vertue." Watkins' poem is also similar to Herbert's in its dramatic use of line lengths. In both poems the fourth line of each stanza is shorter and more emphatic:

> Sweet spring, full of sweet dayes and roses,
> A box where sweets compacted lie;
> My musick shows ye have your closes,
>   And all must die.
>
> Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
> Like season'd timber, never gives;
> But though the whole world turns to coal,
>   Then chiefly lives.[15]

Like spring in Herbert's poem, Watkins' season is ignorant of its own origin or encroaching death (stanza 9) and of the spiritual principles which sustain it in a larger order of love: "not knowing why you were born, / Not understanding world's beauty the dead sustain...." Yet like Herbert in the last stanza of "Vertue," Watkins' speaker may "divine those meanings" spoken by the tongues of the dead, and rise above the continual deaths of nature. Herbert concentrates on the contrast between mortal nature and the immortal soul of man, however; while Watkins celebrates spring as a sacrament or symbol of eternal regeneration. In both poems the underlying message is that though spring itself dies cyclically, the soul of man that perceives it as part of an eternal order is deathless. The above poem, therefore, though making explicit reference to Donne, can be seen to demonstrate a composite of seventeenth-century influences and parallels.

Other early poems from LU that are indebted to Donne are "Green Names, Green Moss," and "The Burial." The former poem

plays with the image of the richly sounding bell that becomes

the central symbol of "The Death Bell," the title poem of the

volume by that name. The earliest reference to the bell in the

context of death, however, occurs in "Sea-Music" where Watkins

writes of "the dying bell" that "Breaks through sound's infinite

waves" (LV, p. 31). "Green Names, Green Moss" moves in swing-

ing, alternately rhyming, trimeter lines to sing a paean as-

serting the immortality of the individual soul. The tolling

bell of Donne's "Meditation XVII" that calls each man to death

becomes in Watkins' poem, however, a call to a higher quality

of life. In the second half of the poem he apostrophizes the

bell which he described in the first long stanza:

> Swing, life-leaping bell;
> Strike, in the mourning trees.
> No ravisher can tell
> Their secret histories;
> Not one can you reclaim,
> But side-track their loss
> Until the last, loved name
> Is covered with moss.
> Yet every moment must,
> Each turn of head or hand,
> Though disfigured by dust,
> Incorruptibly stand;
> If they are nothing now
> Then they were nothing then.   (LU, pp. 68-69)

The symbol of the bell, which he is to develop further in DB,

is drawn from Donne's famous meditation, but the tone of chal-

lenging affirmation suggests Donne's sonnet, "Death Be Not

Proud." In the elegiac "A Wreath for Alun Lewis," Watkins is

even more explicit about the ultimate freeing of the soul from

death when he writes, "Death himself must deliver the souls he

bound / Unchanged and true, though the winds and the waters mock"

(CA, p. 35).

In CA he speaks in the same voice of assurance of the over-

coming of death in "Call It All Names, But Do Not Call It Rest."
Here in eight-line, iambic pentameter stanzas reminiscent of
Donne's measure in the Holy Sonnets, he expresses his own mys-
tical realization that death is a kind of activity rather than
a repose, the active counterpart of what we commonly experience
as life. Though Watkins' strong sense of the reality of a realm
of the dead has pre-Christian undertones, and may suggest the
Celtic underworld, there is also in the mystical side of Chris-
tianity a belief in the "communion of saints" which is capable
of incorporating his sense of the active presence of the dead.
The formal and dramatic opening reminds us of Donne's great
sonnet to death:

> Go, death, give ground, for none of yours is here.
> Weep with no sound, figures around a well.
> Here gales knock down the chestnuts year on year,
> And block with leaves the entry to the temple.
> There the inscription no man's eyes can spell,
> Archaic, in the forgotten character.
> Sleeps near the nymph the font that christened her,
> A shell unfastening to the vanished marvel. (CA, p. 26)

The appearance of the classical and romantic "nymph" by the
Christian baptismal font elaborates Watkins' sense of the essen-
tial unity of Greek and Christian mythopoetic imagery. The poem
goes on to describe the nymph's tomb as a sacred place where the
seasons offer their homage of "fruit and leaves." The final
stanza, in language that owes something to Dylan Thomas in
phrases such as, "time, being stony, has no tongue to tell" (rem-
iniscent of "And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb" from "The
force that through the green fuse drives the flower"), asserts
in a more consciously Christian context than any of Thomas' poems
the sense that the nymph's sickness unto death is but a "last
oracle" of her regeneration:

Here where through trees death's voice, all-severing
    blows,
Hung with stone tongues, the language of farewell,
Great doors are opened which no hand can close
And wise heaven flies into the bud's cold cell.
So is her sickness her last oracle
Where from its falling we may seed the rose
And her new joy from her remembered sorrows
Which time, being stony, has no tongue to tell.
                                    (CA, pp. 26-27)

It becomes obvious that the poem is an elegy for a girl whom

Watkins has transformed into the mythic figure of a nymph.

Like Donne in "The Anniversaries," who turns the occasion of the

death of Elizabeth Drury into a meditation on the death and re-

generation of the world, Watkins' elegy (on a much smaller scale)

uses the occasion of a girl's death in an elaborate and figura-

tive manner to explore a similar theme. His is a more personal

poem in the sense that it is concerned with the death of the

individual rather than "the death of the world," but in both

poems the child (Watkins' nymph and Donne's "Shee") takes on a

symbolic function as a figure of regeneration.

Watkins' sonnet, "The Burial," in LU is an example of one

of a series of sonnets that suggests Donne, Herbert, and even

Milton in theme and imagery. Like his seventeenth-century pre-

decessors, he often uses the sonnet as a vehicle for religious

or contemplative verse. Again, the opening imperative encourages

the reader to look on death as an entrance into spiritual life.

Watkins seems to delight in this enormous paradox. As in so

many seventeenth-century philosophical-meditative poems, the

graveside consideration of death ends in a realization of the

archetypal death of Christ, whose presence is suggested here in

the imagery:

Go to that place where men can look no more

> At what on earth shone brightest. As this wave
> Leaps to great light, then, scattering, seeks the shore,
> So your fame rose, that sinks into this grave.
> Go where dissemblers can no more deprave
> The dazzling love, nor knock that hidden door
> Closed on the shrouded body the womb gave,
> Dark as Christ's hem, as no dark looked before.
>   (LU, p. 71)

In the sestet the tone shifts again to an affirmation of rebirth

through the natural images of the "seed" and the "chrysalis."

> Yet must the buried shine, if any shines:
> So sleeps the seed; so shrinks in rigid fold
> The chrysalis, and hides its patterns old:
> We touch, but cannot see its waking lines.
> Honour this dust. The presence God refines
> Even here is sunk, whose promised flesh is gold.
>   (LU, p. 71)

The hope for the individual, carried forward in the Hermetic and

alchemical image of gold refined by God, lies in the way each

soul repeats the pattern set forth in Christ's death and resur-

rection. I would argue that this sonnet, along with "The

Conception" and "The Betrothal" (LU, pp. 70-72), shows Watkins

exploring for his own time and in his own voice one of his cen-

tral themes--the Christian mystery of resurrection out of death.

The affirmative, meditative and formal mode exemplified in some

of the more serene of Donne's Divine Poems and some of Herbert's

sonnets seems to have provided him with a traditional model for

this kind of writing.

Another poem in CA, "Good Friday," though very different

from Donne's "Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward," falls within

the mode of the traditional meditation on the cross. As in the

threefold Ignatian meditative structure Louis Martz elaborates

in his The Poetry of Meditation (Yale Univ. Press, 1954; second

edition, 1962), the speaker moves from a visual reconstruction of

the scene of the crucifixion, through an analysis of the meaning

of that event, to a personal colloquy in which the soul addresses

Christ directly. Unlike Donne's "Goodfriday, 1613," Watkins'

poem does not struggle intensely with the sense of the soul's

unworthiness before God. Yet it does focus on the implications

of Christ's suffering on the cross both for man and for nature

in a way similar to that of Donne when he speaks of "Lieutenant

Nature" shrinking at the "spectacle of too much weight...."

Watkins turns this around, however, by writing of nature bene-

fiting from Christ's sacrifice:

> Now let the geography of lands
> Learn from these hands,
> And from these feet the unresting seas
> Take, from unfathomed grief, their ease. (CA, p. 101)

Certainly Watkins' image of Christ's nailed "hands which hold up

heaven" (stanza 7) has the same kind of dramatic power as Donne's

"Could I behold those hands which span the Poles...." (line 21).

Herbert's "Goodfriday" poem employs a verse form similar in

structure to the one Watkins uses in his poem, though in tone and

energy of syntax the two poems are quite different. Rather than

the impassioned, direct address to Christ of Herbert's "O my chief

good," Watkins' poem begins with a subdued description of a

winter landscape, only later rising to more fervent expression:

Watkins:	After the winter solstice came	4
	Ice and low flame,	2
	The cockerel step by which the light	4
	Shortened the sleep of earth and night.	4

Herbert:	O my chief good,	2
	How shall I measure out thy bloud?	4
	How shall I count what thee befell,	4
	And each grief tell?[16]	2

Both poems repeat a consistent pattern of four and two-feet lines

throughout, and both dwell on how man's sinfulness requires God's

grace. Watkins' poem, however, focuses in a manner characteristic

of him on the overcoming of time through individual perception.
Here he fuses the sacramental imagery of "crushed wine" and the
"sacred root" or vine, suggesting the sacrifice of Christ, the
"Vine of Israel" and "root of Jesse," with the description of
the natural landscape as the speaker awaits the "feast" of
Easter:

> But now light grows where rays decline.
> Now the crushed wine
> Transfigures all, leaf, blossom, fruit,
> By reference to the sacred root.
>
> Day must die here that day may break.
> Time must forsake
> Time, and this moment be preferred
> To any copy, light or word. (CA, p. 100)

He plays like the Metaphysicals with the common paradoxes of
light coming out of darkness, sunrise out of sunset, and goes on
to suggest that in time's forsaking of itself ("Time must forsake/
Time") lies its ultimate regeneration. In the next four stanzas,
through the images of "nails of darkness driven / Into these
hands which hold up heaven" and the "mountain skull," suggesting
Golgotha, where according to esoteric tradition Adam's skull was
buried, Watkins argues that the mystery of Christ's death is the
essential key to life. By sacrificing himself to time (the
present and particular moments) as the necessary arena in which
man proves himself by such acts of love as Christ's, the speaker
is prepared at the close of the poem to invoke the "Easter star":

> Come, Easter, come: I was afraid
> Your star had strayed.
> It was behind our darkest fears
> Which could not see their God for tears. (CA, p. 101)

"Easter" can be seen here as a transfigured epithet for Christ
himself, whose star is Venus, the evening and morning luminary.
Watkins' final apostrophe, then, has some of the personal and

emotional impact of Donne's "Restore thine image, so much, by thy grace, / That thou may'st know me, and I'll turne my face ...."[17] Though rather a set piece, the poem shows Watkins working with the traditional imagery of death and resurrection that is central to his vision in both The Death Bell and in Cypress and Acacia, the volume from which this poem derives.

The classical symbols of the cypress of mourning and the acacia of regeneration gave Watkins an organizational theme for the volume by that name. Cirlot's A Dictionary of Symbols informs us that the acacia, sacred to the Egyptians in Hermetic doctrine, symbolizes the testament of Hiram that "one must know how to die in order to live again in eternity."[18] In Hebrew tradition, the acacia constitutes the sacred wood of the tabernacle, and in Mediterranean countries it represents life, immortality and Platonic love. Its red and white flowers denote pairs like life and death, death and rebirth. It occurs especially in Romanesque Christian art as suggestive of the soul and immortality. According to J. C. Cooper, one tradition has it that Christ's crown of thorns was made of the sacred wood of the acacia or thorn tree.[19] By joining the Greek symbol of the cypress with the Hebraic and Hermetic one of the acacia Watkins designates his own sense of the union of opposites so important to his work as a whole. In a poem on his visit to the graves of Keats, Shelley and Trelawny, "In the Protestant Cemetary, Rome," he again writes of those opposites:

> The cypress and acacia trees
> Take root again where first they grew,
> The place where contraries are true. (CA, p. 95)

Yet it was in the tradition of the earlier metaphysical poets of

the seventeenth century that he found a Christian expression of this essential and universal mystery that must have greatly nourished his own poetic vision. Like the Vaughans, he was capable of fusing more esoteric and recondite symbols with his orthodox Christianity.

The volume The Death Bell (1954) is both in its title and thematic concern (centering on the above-mentioned sense of the mystery of death and life) a kind of tribute to Donne. Like Dylan Thomas' "Do not go gentle into that good night," it was occasioned by the death of the poet's father. The elegiac title poem opens with an epigram from "Meditation XVII," "It tolls for thee," which reveals that Watkins will be exploring his own sense of the essential interdependency of mankind. It is interesting to note that Traherne also used the symbol of the soul as a bell in the poem, "Bells," which Watkins could have known.[20] Watkins' volume opens with a Donne-like poem of spiritual conflict and tension. "The Strangled Prayer" is one of the few poems of intense self-contradiction and struggle in Watkins' canon. Though I can detect no direct verbal echoes of Donne in this poem, the sense of the speaker being overwhelmed by his own capacity for sin, that is, "lust," and his urgent need for a powerful Deity to rescue him from himself reminds us of Donne in poems like "Holy Sonnets Nos. 1, 2 and 5." In the sonnet beginning, "As due by many titles I resign...," Donne asks God to wrestle with the devil for his soul:

    Except Thou rise and for thine owne work fight,
    Oh I shall soone despaire, when I doe see
    That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not chuse me.
    And Satan hates mee, yet is loth to lose mee.[21]

Compare the general tone to the conclusion of Watkins' poem

where the poet is kneeling on the floor of his room:

> My great prayer is crossed
> By all the travelling beasts. My proud loins lust.
> Snatch up, untwist me, twelve-tongued Pentecost,
> For nature makes me mortal in her bed. (DB, p. 15)

The contest here is partly with sin (the poet's "lust"), but

ultimately with his mortal condition--the fact that nature

makes him "mortal in her bed." The "travelling beasts" of the

zodiac "cross" in the sense of confounding and contradicting the

higher intentions of the time-bound speaker who has longings for

a timeless condition. Watkins puns on the word "cross" (cruci-

fix) to suggest also that the zodiacal powers make the sign of

the cross over him as he prays. The poem develops the conflict

between man and the cosmos by juxtaposing celestial imagery--

"the stars," the zodiac, "the Pleiades and the Plough"--against

the more sensual images of vegetation ("strange creepers"),

"insects," and animals ("beasts" or beast-like men). The

"shades of ancestors," ghosts of primitive, "desirous" men who

"dance...leap," and "gratify the moon" (symbol of generation),

haunt the memory of the child of the poem, an earlier and more

innocent form of the speaker himself (stanza 1), who asks God

to free him from time, mortality and the human condition. The

dramatic presentation of the soul in dialogue with God is char-

acteristic not only of Donne, but also of Herbert in The Temple

who has a number of poems of spiritual conflict like "The Col-

lar" and "Aaron." In "Affliction (I)" he speaks in punning

terms similar to those of Watkins of God "cross-biasing" him;

and in "Affliction (IV)" he pleads with God to "dissolve the

knot" that ties him to sin. In "Love (II)" he speaks like

Watkins of the "usurping lust" that keeps him from the true spiritual life. In Herbert, however, the struggle is often with his calling as a priest and is quickly resolved by the poet's deeper and more fundamental response to God's overwhelming love. In Watkins' poem the conflict of the private individual (as opposed to the priest) with God remains unresolved.

In "Time's Deathbed" the problem of mortality as conveyed in "The Strangled Prayer" is partly mitigated through the poet's realization that a surrender to time through love can reverse and transform time. The mysterious presence or "shade" that speaks in the seventh stanza, "Possess new time, possess / New time, or nothingness," leads the poet to the paradoxical realization that in surrender lies a kind of victory. Herbert develops a similar paradox in his poem, "Time," where he argues that time serves eternity's purpose as "an usher to convey our souls / Beyond the utmost starres and poles."[22] In a way it is a restatement of the old Renaissance theme of Spenser's "Mutability Cantos" where the goddess "Mutability" and "Nature" herself are seen to work to the furtherance of God's decrees. Watkins writes in stanzas ten and eleven of how a surrender to God can nullify the ill-effects of time:

> Then, when all thoughts were summed
> And the small flies had hummed
> Around the passive bone,
> I gave so great a groan
> That time was dumbed.
>
> Deeper and far more tender
> That groan to my life-lender
> Floated, than songs of praise,
> For the firm pulse of days
> Was locked in my surrender. (DB, p. 17)

The almost grotesque image of flies humming around the "passive

bone" of the corpse suggests Donne's death imagery in poems
like "The Funeral" or "The Relique" where he writes of men
finding in his grave, "a bracelet of bright haire about the
bone."[23] In theme, Watkins has returned to the traditional
sense of Christian resignation that Milton expresses at the end
of the sonnet, "When I Consider How My Light is Spent," or Donne
in "Hymn to God, My God, in my Sickness," or Herbert in "Sion"
and "Love (III)." The poet's "groan" in stanza ten may, in
fact, be an echo of Herbert's "Sion" where he argues that human
"groans" of self-resignation are spiritually efficacious: "But
groans are quick, and full of wings, / And all their motions up-
ward be...."[24] It becomes obvious by the end of the poem that
the mysterious "Near One" who speaks is Christ (or a human being
representing Christ's love) who asks the soul to lie down in the
grave and await the opening of an eternal dimension, a "fourth
wall" of time:

> Once more the Near One spoke:
> 'Lie still. Your fist then broke
> The hour-glass that has cursed
> Man from the first
> With superstition's cloak.
>
> Time built your room three-walled
> Where Fear, a nursling, crawled,
> But at the fourth wall I
> Bring the starred sky
> And the scented world.' (DB, p. 18)

We recall also that the symbol of the hourglass as a reminder of
man's short lifespan was used frequently in the seventeenth cen-
tury, and in a particularly memorable fashion in several of
Donne's sermons (see Sermon V, folio of 1660).[25] It was said
that "Dean Donne" preached with an hourglass beside him on the
pulpit. In Watkins' poem the hourglass breaks to symbolize the

shattering of time.

Before turning to the title poem of <u>The Death Bell</u>, it should be noted that Watkins' "Epithalamion" for Michael Hamburger in the same volume is partly indebted to Donne's "Epithalamion on the Lady Elizabeth, and Count Palatine Being Married on St. Valentine's Day."[26] Like Donne's marriage song, Watkins' poem not only invokes St. Valentine, but is arranged in Donne-like, rhymed, open couplets. Watkins writes,

> Tonight is glory, when Saint Valentine
> Shall tread out thoughts and crush his grapes to wine.
> <div align="right">(<u>DB</u>, p. 52)</div>

In the fifth stanza, he borrows Donne's favored image of the "phoenix" (see "The Canonization" on the lovers as "The Phoenix Riddle") as a symbol for the self-regenerative love of the married couple. In every way this is a traditional epithalamion setting forth the union of the marriage partners as a pattern of universal concord. The sacred union is expressed in terms of a reconstruction of Eden:

> Far back, the sacred pattern still is found,
> Two lovers walking on the verdant ground
> Through avenues of suffering.... (<u>DB</u>, p. 53)

The union of lover and beloved, by reenacting the "sacred pattern," makes possible in Watkins' mind at least, a temporary defeat of time. Like Perseus who loosed Andromeda from the rock (invoked in stanza 12), the lover by uniting with his bride overcomes the "dragon," time:

> Now plunges his heroic spear
> Through the subdued, devouring year,
> And time the dragon falls to his control. (<u>DB</u>, p. 54)

This rather formal and hieratic poem on the theme of the sacred marriage surely belongs with Watkins' other important poem on

this theme, "The Lady with the Unicorn" (see Chapter V), the

title piece from his earlier collection where he meditates on

the Medieval tapestries from the Musée de Cluny in Paris.

In a note to the title poem of The Death Bell, Watkins re-

interprets Donne's symbol of the tolling bell in his own meta-

phorically complex and original terms. Though the poem is

marred by the presence of some private symbolism (that of "the

nightingale" and the "bull" in "Part II") which is clear only

by virtue of the note, the note itself does help to enrich and

inform the poem. Like Donne's prose in "Meditation XVII," Wat-

kins' language is rhythmical and metaphorically powerful. I

cite the final paragraph to illustrate the complexity of his

symbols:

> The bell itself is more than an instrument. It is in-
> volved with all for whom it has tolled, and its reso-
> nance has the power to beckon everyone whom its sound
> has touched. Before it rises, it must sink to its
> full weight at the end of the rope, and lie there, as
> the dead body must, under a single thread, expecting
> resurrection. The harmony within the bell, and within
> the dead body, is musically controlled, and depends
> upon the mercy and judgment of heavenly scales for its
> peace. These scales are discernible everywhere in na-
> ture, but they may be discerned only by the intuition,
> not by the reason. They reveal that unredeemed man,
> through acquisitiveness, wills his own perdition, but
> that redeemed man, falling through time deliberately,
> is raised by loss. Whether in Eden or on the banks of
> the four Welsh rivers named in the poem, the resurrec-
> tion of the body is assured, not by the instinct of
> self-preservation, but by the moment of loss, of the
> whole man's recurrent willingness to lose himself to an
> act of love. (DB, pp. 111-12) (italics mine)

The poem itself moves through a series of short, open, trimeter

couplets with a slightly Yeatsian swing (which imitates the

swinging of the bell) to develop the theme that was so essential

to Watkins' Christian vision--the sense that Christianity as

exemplified in the life of the Christ of the gospels was rooted

in an absolutely selfless love.[27]   The resolution of the spiri-

tual dilemma embodied in "The Strangled Prayer" lay in what he

saw as the "completeness" of Christian love:

> The pathos of pre-Christian love lies in its incomplete-
> ness, the prophetic nature of pre-Christian death in its
> reticence. (DB, p. 111)

In the poem he expresses his sense of the resolution of the

problem of human mortality as follows:

> Man in his mortal state
> Can bear the heavy weight
> Of earth and heaven and hell
> Compounded in a bell
> If he discern the glory
> Of John's deep-thundered story
> By which a thorn-crowned head
> Sinking, to raise the dead,
> Has pulled unbounded space
> Down, by the weight of grace....   (DB, p. 106)

Expressed in conventional theological terms of a redemption

through grace, and an "imitation of Christ," Watkins' poem

transforms the bell into a symbol of man swinging back and

forth between the polarities of mortality and resurrection,

earth and heaven, despair and hope. As Kathleen Raine points

out, in one sense the poem is a "return to the theme of the Mari

Lwyd of the two worlds of the dead and the living";[28] but this

time I would suggest that Watkins develops that theme in more

explicitly Christian terms. Not only does he echo Donne's "Hymn

to God, My God" in lines such as these--

> Yet now the bell falls dumb.
> Already he is come
> Into that other room
> So near his first home..., (DB, p. 109)[29]

but he takes on the full implications of Donne's paradox that,

        As West and East
    In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,
    So death doth touch the Resurrection.[30]

For Watkins believed that each man could reenact in himself

spiritually the death and resurrection of Christ. Though cer-

tainly in theme and governing symbolism the poem reminds us of

Donne, in its detailed use of biblical incidents, its comprehen-

sion of classical myth, and its mystical imagery of dark, light

and fire it is perhaps closer to some of the more cosmological

poems of Vaughan, as the imagery of light in the following pas-

sage demonstrates:

        The hour when such men die
        Translates the galaxy
        And keeps, where stars abound,
        The selfsame holy ground
        Reclaimed from ancient rocks,
        Preserved by paradox
        Through time and whirling space,
        Lost Eden's latter place. (DB, p. 107)

Herbert's influence has already been considered in several

of the Donne-like poems that demonstrate a composite influence

from the seventeenth century. Watkins first read Herbert in his

youth at Repton, and then reread him, probably in the thirties,

encouraged by Thomas' appreciation of that poet.[31] Thomas him-

self experimented with Herbert's use of the "shape poem" in

"Vision and Prayer" and followed Herbert in the development of

intricate stanzaic patterns and an integration of biblical imag-

ery. Watkins may also have been impressed by Eliot's references

to the "little Gidding" community to which Herbert belonged in

the fourth section of The Four Quartets (1944). Though not gen-

erally liturgical or dogmatic like Herbert, as suggested earlier,

Watkins does share with the Parson of Bemerton some important

characteristics, especially in his more devotional and hymn-
like poems. These include: similar thematic concerns, the use
of intricate poetic structures and a wide variety of forms and
treatments, the sense of poetry as prayer or colloquy with a
personal God, the frequent parabolic use of biblical material,
and an often quiet, even-tempered disposition that results,
after a brief struggle, in a tone of joyous acceptance. I would
say that Watkins' main debt to Herbert derives from the lyrics
of The Temple (1633) rather than from Herbert's prose, A Priest
to the Temple (1652), or the didactic "The Church-Porch" which
serves as an introduction to and preparation for the lyrics.

In the early "A Prayer Against Time" from BML, Watkins
opens with a direct apostrophe to God characteristic of Herbert
in so many poems from The Temple. Yet Watkins seldom achieves
(or aims for) Herbert's relaxed, conversational tone as demon-
strated in "Man" where he begins, "My God, I heard this day...."
Watkins' tone is just as direct, but definitely vatic, prophetic
and incantatory:

> God, let me not know grief
> Where time is uppermost,
> Not though it handle me
> More wretchedly than all.... (BML, p. 38)

The issue of Watkins' poem is that of his dedication to his
poetic craft. Yet where Herbert sometimes expresses a conflict
between his art and his vocation as a priest, or deals with the
choice between secular and sacred verse, or the problem of writ-
ing from the wrong motives, as in the "Jordan" poems (I and II),
for Watkins the dedication to God and to his art are inseparable,
and there can be no conflict. He concludes the poem, therefore,

in lines of Yeatsian tone, but Christian content that celebrate

his craft as a means of overcoming both time and death. Like

Herbert, Watkins can be seen to restrict himself wholeheartedly

to variations on a single theme--the religious one of eternity's

continual penetration of time:[32]

> I have been luckier than
> All others in one thing,
> Devoted secret time
> To one love, one alone;
> Found then that dying man
> Exulting in new rhyme:
> The river standing,
> All but miracle gone.   (BML, p. 38)

Other poems that approach the condition of prayer as Her-

bert defines it in "Prayer (I)" when he calls it "the soul in

paraphrase," are "Dust in the Balance" (CA), "The Interval" (A)

and "Sonnet: The Expectation" (BOD). As the title suggests,

"The Interval" presents the time of aesthetic and spiritual

drought between the completion of one poem and the beginning of

the next. Watkins justifies this pause in the phrase, "Nature

needs waste," as a necessary time of lying fallow in preparation

for a new seeding of inspiration. Here he defines poetry clear-

ly as an act of prayer--a creative act in time that joins man to

God. The soul must await the word of inspiration passively, but

the moment of receiving is active:

> This new being finished and the next unknown,
> I must wait long to find the words I need.
> Verse tests the very marrow in the bone,
> Yet man, being once engaged by song, is freed:
> The act itself is prayer, deliberate in its speed.
>   (A, p. 14)

By joining the apparent opposites of deliberation and speed,

Watkins suggests the nature of the timeless moment in which both

prayer and creation occur.

"Dust in the Balance" and "Sonnet: The Expectation" are both religious sonnets suggesting Herbert's use of the form, except that Watkins prefers the Petrarchan, and Herbert the Shakespearean paradigm. The title of the former was probably drawn from Traherne's use of the phrase in <u>Centuries of Medita-</u><u>tion</u> (I.19) where he writes:

> Your Understanding comprehends the World like the Dust of a Ballance, measures Heaven with a Span and esteems a thousand Yeers but one Day.[33]

"Dust in the Balance" begins with the traditional complaint of the spirit against the flesh which is but "dust":

> Why should pure spirit in ribs of bone be trussed,
> Why should clear vision pine in jails of eyes,
> Why mortal ears divine immortal skies
> And heaven interpret to the listening dust?...,

but resolves itself in the sestet with the image of the soul as a "lute" played on by the fingers of God:

> Come down, sweet cadence, come; I grieve alone.
> By this closed world all distances fulfil.
> Hearing those abstract senses mock the bone,
> My soul is like a lute when it is still,
> That played when mockers tore His cloak apart
> Who gave them all, but not His beating heart. (<u>CA</u>, p. 13)[34]

We know that Herbert played the lute, and that several of his poems, including "Easter" and "The Temper (I)," present this symbol in a similar context to suggest that man's soul may be offered up as an instrument on which God plays. "The Temper," for example, reads,

> Yet take thy way; for sure thy way is best:
>   Stretch or contract me, thy poore debter:
>   This is but tuning of my breast,
>   To make the musick better.[35]

"Sonnet: The Expectation" is one of Watkins' most explic-itly devotional sonnets in which the soul utters its plea in

conventional terms of grace and salvation, playing with the mystical image of the "wounds of love." It is one of Watkins' few doctrinal expressions of the theme of Redemption:

> Here, Lord, I lie: have mercy on my soul.
> My wounds from time were more than time could heal.
> Grace had I none, nor health, till I could feel
> Those old wounds die, and your wounds mine control.
> Then I was fresh and washed, as in a bowl.
> I closed my eyes, that you might break the seal,
> Then clearly saw the ransom you reveal,
> Richer than all the treasures which I stole.   (BOD, p. 46)

Like so many of Herbert's reflections on redemption in which man's reluctant acceptance of God is set against God's active courtship of man, the poem expresses the soul's overwhelming sense of gratitude, accompanied by a desire to return God's gift through a complete resignation of self. Like Herbert, he places himself in a dramatic situation where he enters into an intimate colloquy with Christ. Watkins builds on the image of the soul as a "treasure-vault." We are reminded of the kind of symbolism Herbert uses in "Man" when he describes the soul as a "cabinet" of riches, and a "Palace" or "stately habitation" built by God, and intended for God's use. Watkins continues,

> Take from this vault whatever wealth is more
> Than just suffices to be blest and bless.
> Like the grown child the ungrateful city bore,
> Rebuked for faults and clothed in his distress,
> If I give all, that gift you can restore,
> And I must always grieve if I give less.   (BOD, p. 46)

In tone and theme this poem resembles Herbert's "The Reprisall" where he enlarges on the question of how man can ever repay God for his incommensurable gift of sacrificial love: "I have consider'd it and finde / There is no dealing with thy mighty passion....[36] Even in its use of the image of the wounds of love the two poems are similar, for Herbert writes, "And yet thy

wounds still my attempts defie...." Watkins' posthumously pub-
lished, "The Debt," also presents the theme of how God's love
outgoes man's in the style of some of Herbert's simpler songs
of praise. Here the poet's gaze fixes on the sacred river as a
symbol of the permanent within the transient. The symbols of
cup and thorn suggest the Passion:

> There though my gaze is set
> I yet can never know
> Why, of so great a debt
> So much is left to owe.
>
> Tell me, cup and thorn
> Who can provide enough
> To lighten what was borne
> In that foresuffered love?
>
> Though all day I toiled
> I never could supply
> This that no fault has spoiled
> Where naked it flows by. (UP, p. 28)

In his integration of biblical paradigms, Watkins resem-
bles Herbert, as well as Vaughan, who followed Herbert in the
tradition of the typological and allegorical use of scripture.
Watkins' figure of Adam, for instance, in "Ironies of the Self"
(A, p. 16), "A Bell Unrung" (A, p. 36), "Angelo's Adam" (A, p.
65) and "Adam" (BOD, p. 23) can be read as a "type" of shadowy
prefiguration of Christ, of redeemed man, or of the artist. In
"Adam" he is at one level a figure of the uncompromising artist
who is determined to build a "paradise within" in spite of the
corrupt and fallen world around him:

> When Adam found a leaf, and God called out:
> 'Who told thee thou wast naked?' he began
> To build that heaven from which God cast him out
> With all the effort of a conscious man. (BOD, p. 23)

Watkins' treatment of the Magdalene as a figure of redeemed
humanity is also similar to that of Herbert and Vaughan. His

earliest reference to her occurs in "The Room of Pity," a poem
to Thomas in which he imagines her response to the event of the
crucifixion:

> But Mary, Mary Magdalen, and they
> Whom sorrow chose, who never shall be old,
> Marvelled the world could shake so, and still stay....
> <div align="right">(<u>BML</u>, p. 26)</div>

His sonnet, "The Sinner," stands in the same line as Donne's
"To the Lady Magdalen Herbert: Or St. Mary Magdalen," Herbert's
"Marie Magdalene" and Vaughan's "St. Mary Magdalene" as a medi-
tation on a gospel event. It is noteworthy that Herbert also
has a poem entitled "The Sinner" on the theme of the soul's need
for divine forgiveness.[37] Watkins' Magdalene poem is like Her-
bert's "Marie Magdalene" in several respects. It employs the
third person to describe the incident of Mary wiping Christ's
feet with her tears and anointing his head with oil as a symbol-
ic preparation for his burial as recounted in the gospels.[38]
Both poems identify the unknown woman with the box of ointment
with the woman taken in adultery in the gospel of John and dwell
on the paradox drawn from Jesus' parable on the Two Debtors
(Luke 7:41-43) that the greatest "sinner" (in men's eyes) is
the greatest saint because of her capacity to love in response
to God's forgiveness. Herbert concludes with the paradox of
how her act simultaneously cleanses both Christ's feet and her
own soul, and plays with the notion of Atonement: "Dear soul,
she knew who did vouchsafe and deigne / To bear her filth...."[39]
Watkins' less doctrinal poem centers on the pharisaical attitude
of her "accuser" who in the gospel is repelled by her spilling
of the "costly ointment." The somewhat ambiguous syntax of the
sestet raises the question of what led Simon the Pharisee (or

Judas in some versions) to judge her act of love an impropriety

and a waste. Through the images of the locked tomb of Christ

and the closed creative womb, Watkins challenges the power of

evil that would deny love:

> O, seeing her spikenard, to whom much was forgiven,
> Spilt from love's box, anointing the limbs for heaven,
> What horror repels her accuser? Who rears that stone
> Shaped in the fountain of her magnanimous womb,
> To disfigure her love-name and shut the mouth of the tomb,
> For whom the unnumbered candles cannot atone? (LU, p. 58)

Like his predecessors, Watkins conflates the incident of the

raising of stones against the woman taken in adultery with the

story of the woman with the box of spikenard.

Though arranged in tetrameter couplets rather than the

form of the sonnet like Watkins' poem, Vaughan's "St. Mary Mag-

dalene," addressed to the saint, is similar to Watkins' "The

Sinner" in the way it develops the symbols of both her tears

and "love's box." Vaughan's and Watkins' treatment of the bro-

ken box of spikenard is more mystical than that of Herbert by

using it as a symbol of the continual breaking open or sacrifice

of self. Vaughan writes:

> Why is this rich, this pistic nard
> Spilt, and the box quite broke and marred?[40]

As in Watkins' "The Sinner," the issue of Vaughan's Magdalene

poem is that Mary, the seeming "sinner," is more pure than the

accusing Pharisee. Vaughan here compares the Pharisee to a

leper in need of cleansing:

> This woman (say'st thou) is a sinner:
> And sate there none such at thy dinner?
> Go leper, go; wash till thy flesh
> Comes like a child's, spotless and fresh;
> He is leprous, that still paints:
> Who saint themselves, they are no saints.[41]

The conclusion of Vaughan's poem, though not important to

"The Sinner," may have had an impression on Watkins because of its inclusion of the leper symbol which was so central to him in other poems (see Chapter II). We are told in the gospel of Luke (Chap. 7:36-39) that a woman who was "a sinner" anointed Jesus at the home of a certain pharisee. But Matthew and Mark state that the man with whom Jesus dined on this occasion was "Simon the leper" (Matt. 26:6 & Mark 14:3). Vaughan is obviously working from the latter version here.

In a later grouping by Watkins on the Magdalene, "Five Poems of Magdalenian Darkness," where the variety of forms from section to section suggests Herbert's mastery of technique, the leper is mentioned in conjunction with the Magdalene as in Vaughan's poem. Throughout the poem the Magdalene speaks in the first person. It is as if the mask of the lamenting woman allowed Watkins to explore in his own terms the psychology of human suffering. Watkins' other great poem on this theme is "Niobe" (DB, p. 31), which draws on the classical Niobe figure from Dante's Purgatorio (XII, 37). The following hymn-like excerpt from section two of "Five Poems," entitled "The Stair," shows Watkins juxtaposing the figure of the cleansed leper against that of the Magdalene, whose praises are greater because of her greater grief:

> Bitter my life has been, not sweet,
> Yet grief has made me strong.
> Was ever vision more complete
> Or hope more plainly hung
> Than when with tears I washed his feet
> Whose body paid for wrong?
>
> Darkness, compel that hour to stay
> Whose pledge is in the tomb.
> The leper's praises die away.
> How silent is the room.
> All is remembered from the day,
> And still death will not come. (A, p. 86)

His choice of the dramatic monologue to explore the questioning

mind of the aged and dying Mary gives the poem its great

intensity. Herbert also uses a similar technique in "The

Sacrifice" where Christ speaks directly to the reader of his

great "grief"--"Was ever grief like mine?" Louis Martz in

his The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press,

1962), has described how Robert Southwell's prose work,

Marie Magdalens Funeral Tears (seeing eight editions between

1591-1636) introduced into England the continental "literature

of tears." Laments of the Magdalene and meditations on her

life presenting her as the "pattern of the perfect lover"

were later utilized richly by poets like Herbert and Vaughan.[42]

Here Watkins is developing in his own way the traditional

seventeenth-century lament of the Magdalene.

Watkins' Magdalene poems, then, are closer in spirit

to the Magdalene poem of Vaughan than to Herbert's more

verbally compact exploration of divine grace in "Marie

Magdalene." Not only does Watkins include the figure of the

leper like Vaughan, but like him he focuses intense dramatic

interest on Mary herself as a figure of heroic love. Like

so many of the short, evocative, richly-layered titles of

Herbert and Vaughan, the title of "The Sinner" is chosen

deliberately for its double-edge, being both a description

of Mary in the world's eyes and a denunciation of her accuser

as the actual "sinner."

A final thought to conclude this section is that Watkins'

delicate imagery and evenly fluid, exalted and frequently

vatic style do not allow him the kind of controlled emotional

effects Herbert achieves through the mixture of a plain diction

and a concrete, homely vocabulary with more abstract and

sublime concepts and language. Though often lacking Herbert's

concreteness, Watkins is concerned with the mysteries of

sin and love within a unifying vision of God's relation to

man. Like him, he is a relatively learned poet whose short,

lyrical utterances demonstrate only an apparent simplicity,

and whose learning, though deep, is not self-consciously

displayed at the surface level of the poems. It remains

to consider Watkins' relation to Vaughan and Traherne who

followed Donne and Herbert in time, and in the chain of

literary influence.[43]

Part II: Watkins, Vaughan and Traherne

"So piecing this Life with the life of Heaven,
and seeing it as one with all Eternity. a Part
of it, a Life within it. Strangely and Stupen-
dously Blessed in its Place and Season."
(Traherne, "The Fourth Century," 93)

One could point to many ways in which Vaughan and Watkins

demonstrate the same kind of religious and poetic sensibility,

sharing as they do a Welsh regionalism, as well as a comparable

ground of philosophic and theological ideas. We have noted that

this ground consists largely of a synthesis of Platonism, Neo-

platonism and the Bible with more recondite, mystical (or Her-

metic) symbols. The most striking parallel of all, however,

lies in the way both poets are fascinated by what the Welsh have

called "the world of white light." We have explored Watkins'

symbolism of whiteness in the "Music of Colours" poems, but it

is important to realize that such references to whiteness and

light as we find there are almost ubiquitous in his work. The

word "gwyn" in Welsh means "white," "holy," or "light," and

"gwynfyd" has been used to describe paradise, or "the white

world."[1] Both poets reach after this "white world" through a

brilliantly luminous, poetic imagery in an effort to capture mo-

ments of direct mystical revelation given (however briefly) to

the individual. In Watkins as in Vaughan, this passionate striv-

ing after eternity may reflect itself in a certain unevenness of

style which suggests the difficulty for the poet of sustaining

the intensity of the illuminated moment.

In the section that follows, I wish to pursue the all-

pervasive, Vaughanesque imagery of celestial light and whiteness

through a number of Watkins' poems, as well as the related theme
of the two worlds of time and eternity. I shall be touching
also on several poems that parallel Vaughan's use of nature and
his concept of childhood as a state of paradisal innocence--a
notion also centrally important to Traherne. I believe it can
be argued that just as Vaughan and Traherne turned inward to
seek individual illumination at a time when ancient institutions
were in a state of collapse, so Watkins as a twentieth-century
poet responded similarly (in however indirect a manner) to the
decay of credible religious structures and the dominance of a
materialistic outlook. In The Paradise Within, Louis Martz
comments on the impact of the seventeenth-century Platonic re-
vival (led by the Cambridge Platonists) on the minds of the
poets Vaughan and Traherne, who revitalized Platonic and Augus-
tinian notions of direct, individual illumination--the presence
of the "inner light." His description of these poets' Augustin-
ian concern with the mind's relation to time could apply equally
well to Watkins:

> Augustine shows how the mind can transcend the oppres-
> sive transcience of time and act as an image of God's
> timeless mind, in which all things have their simul-
> taneous existence.[2]

Vaughan, Traherne and Watkins all share the theme of the
two worlds of time and eternity, the "white" or "light" realm,
separated as it were by a thin veil, wall, or "film." Traherne
writes, for instance, of this "twofoldness" in "Shadows in the
Water," where all that keeps the speaker from that parallel uni-
verse is a "thin skin":

> I plainly saw...
> A new Antipodes,

Whom, tho they were so plainly seen,
A Film kept off that stood between....
....
       ....below the purling Stream
       Som unknown Joys there be
       Laid up in Store for me;
To which I shall, when that thin Skin
Is broken, be admitted in.[3]

In Watkins, the thinness of the partition is evident in "Ballad

of the Mari Lwyd" where the dead stand just outside the door of

the living, and in the Taliesin poems and The Death Bell where

eternity breaks through from the other side of "time's glass."

In his Centuries of Meditation Traherne suggests that God

reveals himself in time at three levels of knowing: directly

and intuitively within the soul, in the divine Word of scrip-

ture or "The Book," and in the world or Book of Nature.[4] Like

him, Watkins also relies partly on intuition and grace, that

is, God speaking within the self, "The Nazarene / Walking in

the ear"; partly on biblical and ecclesiastical tradition, the

Word, biblical parable and paradigm; and partly on the word of

God revealed in the Book of Nature, the sacred script of divine

hieroglyphics of which he speaks in "Digging the Past" (F, p.

84) where he writes of coming, "To read such hieroglyphs as

give the void a name." In his use of the latter, as suggested

earlier, he is close to the Platonism of Vaughan and Traherne

who so often utilize nature as a shadowy type, allegory or sym-

bol of the eternal. Vaughan, for instance, speaks of nature in

"The Retreat" in a way similar to that of Watkins in the last

two poems of the "Music of Colours" sequence already discussed:

       When on some gilded cloud, or flower
       My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
       And in those weaker glories spy
       Some shadows of eternity.[5]

And in "I walked the other day" he writes:

> Grant I may so
> Thy steps track here below,
>
> That in these masques and shadows I may see
> Thy sacred way....[6]

Both Vaughan and Watkins believed that though nature speaks only in what Vaughan calls "broken hieroglyphics" (see "Vanity of Spirit"), she speaks intelligibly to man of God.

Like the "Private Ejaculations" (see the subtitles to The Temple and Silex Scintillans, 1655) of Herbert and Vaughan, many of Watkins' poems are personal, prayer-like utterances to God or Christ, and many are traditional meditations or explorations of biblical incidents. We have noted earlier (in Chapter I) that he develops the Zacchaeus figure in a number of poems, but it is important to realize the frequency and originality of his use of biblical paradigms. The good thief, the leper, Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, Simeon, the Roman centurian of the gospels, the Good Samaritan, Paul, Stephen, and of course, the figure of Christ himself appear prominently in numerous and shifting contexts. Old Testament figures include Ruth and Naomi in "Ruth's Lament for Naomi," Elijah in "Testimony," Abraham in "Ballad of the Trial of Sodom," Adam in "Adam," Zechariah in "Prime Colours," and Samson in "The Measure Moves," "Samson" and others.

The concentrated otherworldly preoccupation of Vaughan, Traherne and Watkins seems to have corresponded with lives of relative isolation and obscurity. After a time at Oxford, a brief study in law and mild participation in the English Civil War, for instance, Vaughan (a Royalist) returned to Breconshire

to take up the quieter occupation of a country doctor. His reading of Herbert's The Temple led to a Christian conversion and a wholehearted dedication to religious verse. Traherne, whose works were not discovered until the late nineteenth century (1896; published, 1903) spent most of his life after leaving Oxford as an obscure Anglican rector at Credenhill in Herefordshire, and later as a private chaplain to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, lord keeper of the great seal. Likewise, we recall that Watkins left Cambridge in 1926 (after less than a year), because he found it aesthetically and spiritually disappointing, took up the relatively mundane job of cashier at Lloyd's Bank, and underwent a significant spiritual regeneration that transformed his poetry.

Though not a direct response to war, Vaughan's and Watkins' retreat into rural seclusion and exclusive focus on timeless themes can be seen in the context of a war-torn society. Vaughan retired to Breconshire after the English Civil War, while Watkins' long career in the bank was interrupted by a five-year interlude (1940-1945) in the R.A.F. Intelligence. Though not by any means a "war poet" in the sense that Wilfred Owen was, Watkins greatly admired Owen and wrote a long essay on him (circa 1936) originally entitled "The Poetry of Wilfred Owen."[7] Watkins too abhorred the violence and waste of war and rejected as mistaken the idea of "art for art's sake," speaking in his prose of the danger of "the betrayal of Life by Art."[8] He himself addressed the issue of war directly in several poems, "Sea-Music," "The Broken Sea" (IV) and "Unveiling the Statue" (LU, p. 53). Yet ultimately, Watkins avoided topical

references and direct political comment out of a belief that
the best way to respond to chaos is by affirming the religious
value of true art and its essential relationship to life lived
in time.

Vaughan's "Thalia Rediviva," a Virgilian sequence of pas-
toral poems named after the Muse of comedy, reflects his choice
of the country over the city. Similarly, Watkins' decision to
remain on Gower enabled him to direct his attention to the vi-
sion of a natural landscape fraught with higher significance.
Like Vaughan (as opposed to Herbert), his landscapes, though
symbolic, are distinctive and realistically conceived. Wat-
kins' greatest debt to Vaughan did not come through "Olar Is-
canus" or the Virgilian pastorals, however, but from his read-
ing of Silex Scintillans (the "fiery flint" or stone struck by
God from man's stony heart). It can be established with cer-
tainty that he owned a personal copy of Vaughan's well-known
religious lyrics.[9] Yet there are further parallels to be
drawn between the two poets when considering the lesser-known
Vaughan of the elegies, Latin translations and meditative
prose. Like Vaughan, Watkins gave his continued attention to
translations of the classical poets, and like him he also wrote
a number of poems in the elegiac mode, as noted in Chapter III.
Watkins' philosophical prose pieces, though fragmentary, share
with Vaughan's devotional prose, "The Mount of Olives, or
Solitary Devotions" (1652), a strong sense of the need to with-
draw from the world in order to develop the inward and spiri-
tual self. This kind of deliberate withdrawal to achieve in-
tensity is reflected in both poetry, prose and life-style.[10]

Many critics have noted that Vaughan's poems often begin strongly, but trail off into the less intense or the prosaic as the original impetus dissipates. This is also a character- istic of some of Watkins' more visionary efforts. The long lyrics from LV, "Yeats in Dublin," "Sea-Music for My Sister Travelling" and "The Broken Sea" are full of passages of vigor- ous lyrical beauty within the context of some less successful writing. "Sea-Music," for instance, has been criticised for syntactical obscurity and a tendency to ramble.[11] Like Vaughan, Watkins has been seen as a poet of intense beginnings, brill- iant passages and memorable phrases. For he quite consciously pursues what he calls in "Bread and the Stars," "Wisdom...hid in crumbs," rather than coherent architectural structures. Yet I would qualify the above critique by suggesting that he overcomes the tendency toward diffuseness and verbal obscurity in the later poems, which are generally tighter, more condensed and refined efforts. I hope to be able to illustrate this point through example in the next chapter. I would add here that just as Vaughan was spiritually and stylistically influ- enced in a dramatic way by his predecessor Herbert, but man- aged to alter all of Herbert's he borrowed through his unique individuality, so Watkins was deeply influenced by Yeats' style and themes, but emerges with a distinctly individual vision and voice.

Some of the earliest passages from Watkins' poetry de- scribing the celestial world of whiteness occur in "Sea-Music" and "The Broken Sea" from LV. Earlier examples can be found in the "Mari Lwyd" where the Mari is associated both with the

stars and with whiteness. The ballad opens: "Mari Lwyd, Horse of Frost, Star-horse, and White Horse of the Sea, is carried to us" (BML, p. 69). "Sea-Music," Watkins' imaginary recreation of his sister Dorothy's wartime sea-journey, flashes with images of prolific sea-life (white pearls, Yeatsian dolphins, mythic narwhales and the biblical Leviathan). In some ways it represents Watkins' effort to explore a moment of spiritual crisis at sea like that of the Franciscan nuns in Hopkins' "Wreck of the Deutchland," one of Watkins' favorite poems.[12] Breathlessly long sentences and complex internal and end-rhymes mark this as a virtuoso technical achievement among the early poems. Lines like, "But the crust breaks in Christ's original radium" (p. 30), are both startlingly fresh and traditionally eucharistic. The poem culminates in a grand invocation to light:

> Signs of the heavens, the Zodiac,
> Flood of the crystalline, white, unending Way
> Ascending through colossal night
> From breath abandoned which believes
> The last blown seashell cast up on the bay:
> Come down, I say,
> Deluge of light, and drown the words' inflection,
> Rush through the luminous coiled, vermilion chambers,
> And ruin all the mind remembers;
> Come down, great Resurrection,
> Swing up the clarion,
> Wake all the dead. (LU, pp. 33-34)

As in Vaughan's well-known poem, "The World," mortality comes face to face with eternity imagined in the Dantesque vision of a Ptolemaic universe of crystalline spheres or rings. Watkins' "crystalline, white, unending Way" is much like Vaughan's "Ring of pure and endless light." And Watkins' poem, like "The World," is Platonic in its desire to transcend mortal

memory in the pure light of eternity, or to "ruin all the mind remembers." The primary difference in the movement of the two poems is that Vaughan, after considering the various "estates" or conditions of spiritual darkness represented by the emblematic Petrarchan "lover," the "darksome states-man," and the "fearful miser," longs to be rapt as Christ's "Bride" into the "Ring" or spheres of eternity that drive time; whereas in Watkins' poem the speaker asks to be inundated with light from above in an apocalyptic deluge. In other words, Vaughan presents the soul's longing to ascend or be taken up into heaven, while Watkins asks heaven ("the great Resurrection") to descend into time like the New Jerusalem or bride of Revelation 21. In both poems, the Platonic-Christian imagery of light and whiteness is central. Perhaps the ascent into light and the descent of light can be seen ultimately as reciprocal and complementary motions viewed from different perspectives, and amounting equally to a changed awareness.

In "The Broken Sea," a poem about the birth of Watkins' godchild to his friend Francis Dafau-Labeyrie in Paris during the war,[13] Watkins writes of white light in the context of the belief that every birth is a divine birth. Here, heavenly light streams from the Christlike infant born in time:

A cradle in darkness, white.
It must be heavenly. Light
Must stream from it, that white sheet
A pavilion of wonder....

The nocturnal flight of the breath, and the ear as still
As a listening shell
Lost in the crystalline heaven.... (LV, pp. 37-38)

Watkins, Vaughan and Traherne all share the Platonic sense

that the soul retains a shadowy recollection of eternity when

it first descends into time, conjoined with the Christian no-

tion derived from the gospels that the child is particularly

close to God.[14] As Vaughan expresses it in "The Retreat,"

"Happy those early days! when I / Shined in my Angel-infancy

...,"[15] and Traherne in "The Third Century" (1): "Certainly

Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and Curious Apprehensions

of the World, than I when I was a child."[16] At the close of

"The Broken Sea" the child wakes to time to find that she has

lost the whole and intuitive memory of eternity: "You wake,

and great recollection trembles away" (LV, p. 61). Yet her

loss is tempered by the poet's realization that time is a di-

mension in which that knowledge can be "recollected" in the

Platonic sense.

The Death Bell and Cypress and Acacia contain several

poems which develop the light and star imagery of the

previously-noted passages from LV. In "The Turning of the

Stars" (DB, p. 23), Watkins views the great galactic "disc of

light" (stanza 5) from the perspectives of Ptolemy, Copernicus

and modern astronomers, incorporating Dante and Raphael as

representatives of artists who achieved a unified vision from

their time and place. He concludes with a description of the

modern "mathematic" heavens that suggests the old sense of the

numinous and holy yet survives. Again, we are reminded of

Vaughan's "Ring" of eternity by Watkins' "wheel of air":

> I see the wide world sink, and rise again,
> Hung in pure night, ablaze
> With million worlds united in a look
> Where boundless glory astounds the eye of the brain.
>
> Verse is a part of silence. I have known
> Always that declamation is impure.
> This language best fits prayer,
> The crystal night
> Teeming with worlds in mathematic height.
> Prodigious darkness guards its undertone,
> And though the wheel of air,
> Seems to leave nothing earthly to endure,
> The likeness, not the original, is gone. (DB, p. 25)

The modern fear of a vast and possibly indifferent cosmos, and

the vision of the world as only one of a "million worlds," no

longer the center of the universe as in the old Ptolemaic view,

leaves the poet relatively undismayed. For he suggests in the

closing lines, through the Platonic concept of original and

copy, that the "earthly" world, however dwarfed by infinitude,

endures in a timeless dimension. The corollary of this is

that a prayer-like poetry capable of expressing awe and rever-

ence is the best counterpart to the silences of such a cosmos.

Watkins' brief reference to "the fountain" earlier (stanza

8) is important as one of many such allusions throughout his

work.[17] As I have noted elsewhere, the fountain represents

both the continuous wellspring of art and the interior sources

of man's (and nature's) psychic and spiritual life:

> Leaves cover up the well.
> And buds begin
> To break, and hide the fountain's origin.
> Spring behind Spring, star behind star, unseen,
> Revolve in seed and shell. (DB, p. 25)

The Platonic symbol of the poet as a living fountain of inspi-

ration, ultimately derived from Plato's Laws IV, 719, was used

by both Vaughan and Traherne in similar contexts. Vaughan's

"Regeneration" presents a fountain in a symbolic spice garden like the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs. It is the "earthly paradise" of man's lost innocence to which the poet arrives in his allegorical pilgrimage. There he finds a "little fountain" full of bright and dark stones, representing the souls of men in their various conditions of enlightenment and ignorance, wakefulness and sleep:

> Only a little fountain lent
>   Some use for ears,
> And on the dumb shades language spent
>   The music of her tears....[18]

At the end of "The Timber," Vaughan speaks of the "chaste fountains" of eternal life that "flow not till we die";[19] and in "The Dwelling Place" of the "happy, secret fountain," that might have lodged Christ in his sojourn on earth:

> What happy, secret fountain,
> Fair shade, or mountain,
> Whose undiscovered virgin glory
> Boasts it this day, though not in story,
> Was then thy dwelling?[20]

The upshot of "The Dwelling-Place" is that Christ himself, that living fountain, now dwells interiorly in the heart of man.

Traherne speaks of "Lov" as the "fountain...not Known," a "fountain of Delights" which is "plainly shewn" to the child.[21] And in "The Second Century" (41), he states that, "Lov in the Fountain, and Lov in the Stream are both the same,"[22] developing an Augustinian Trinitarian concept of the three aspects of God as "Lov begetting, a Lov begotten, and a Lov Proceeding."[23] The implication is that God is present both as interior wellspring or source, as outer manifestation or stream, and as mediating and sustaining agent--a vital power

at all levels of life and consciousness.

Though not as theologically complex, Watkins' "Child of
the Fountain" combines the symbolism of the "stars" with that
of "the fountain," and identifies the child clearly with the
infant Christ:

> Child of the fountain falling late
> From spent October through the gust
> And frosty spears of Herod's hate,
> Protected by the turtle's wing....   (BW, p. 23)

The poem concludes:

> O, how sweet upon our lips
> Fall these drops, in time's eclipse,
> Child of the fountain falling late
> And image of the moving stars.   (BW, p. 23)

His phrase "time's eclipse" here may be an indirect echo of
Traherne, who writes in "The Third Century" (7) of the child's
loss of timelessness as an eclipse of light:

> The first Light which shined in my Infancy in its
> Primitive and Innocent Clarity was totally ecclypsed....[24]

It is notable that Watkins often focuses on the man-made
fountain within a cultivated garden or city as in the early
"The Fountain" or in "Peace in the Welsh Hills." The use of
the fountain in this context indicates a concern with the world
of art and artifact as a symbol for the holy city or "New Jeru-
salem" which must be begun to be built in time. The imagina-
tive power of "Peace in the Welsh Hills" lies in its ability to
shift back and forth between a pastoral landscape in Wales and
the poet's remembrance of an Italian fountain in an Umbrian
town:

> To live entwined in pastoral loveliness
> May rest the eyes, throw pictures on the mind,
> But most we need a metaphor of stone
> Such as those painters had whose mountain-cities

Cast long, low shadows on the Umbrian hills.
There, in some courtyard on the cobbled stone,
A fountain plays, and through a cherub's mouth
Ages are linked by water in the sunlight.

All of good faith that fountain may recall,
Woman, musician, boy, or else a scholar
Reading a Latin book. They seem distinct,
And yet are one, because tranquillity
Affirms the Judgment. So, in these Welsh hills,
I marvel, waking from a dream of stone,
That such a peace surrounds me, while the city
For which all long has never yet been built. (CA, p. 31)

Just as for Vaughan and Traherne, the image of the fountain,

both as natural spring and man-made artifact, appears again and

again in a theological or mystical context in Watkins' poetry,

carrying with it all of its associated information.

"Before a Birth" (CA, p. 48) is a more personal lyric to

the poet's wife. Yet like "The Turning of the Stars" it ad-

dresses the question of how human events can have any signifi-

cance when set in the context of the vast astronomical spaces.

For Watkins, hope lies in the recognition that both earthly and

heavenly motions obey a single law:

Hear the finger of God, that has fixed the pole of the
     heavens.
There the Pleiades spin, and Orion, that great hunter.
Stars silver the night, where Hercules moves with Arc-
     turus.
Spawning systems amaze: they respond to an ordered
     music.
Ultimate distance vibrates, close to that intimate string.
                                        (CA, p. 48)

In "The Constellation," Vaughan writes in terms similar to those

of Watkins of the ordered motions of the stars. Both poets

employ astrological symbolism:

Fair, ordered lights (whose motion without noise
     Resembles those true joys
Whose spring is on that hill where you do grow
     And we here taste sometimes below,)

> With what exact obedience do you move
>   Now beneath, and now above,
> And in your vast progressions overlook
>   The darkest night, and closest nook!25

In stanza three of Watkins' poem, the poet reminds his pregnant
wife that "the stars of infinite distance" have need of earth;
that man and cosmos are linked indissolubly because of what
Thomas and Henry Vaughan would have called in more Hermetic
language, the "doctrine of mystical correspondences" between
the world "above" and the world "below." Here Watkins speaks
of the correspondence of "time to the timeless":

> Love, your measure is full: the stars of infinite
>   distance,
> Needing the shade of a bird to knit our time to the
>   timeless,
> Fell to-night through the dusk.

The poet has witnessed the falling of the stars, and thus can
speak to his wife of the mystery of eternity's entrance into
time--which is also the mystery of birth. For every birth is a
descent of a timeless soul into time. His wife's fruitfulness,
then, becomes a smaller repetition of the fruitfulness of the
"spawning systems," both stars and mortals moving in response
to "an ordered music." Her carrying and nourishing of new life
is sacred, even sacramental; for her body is compared in the
final lines to the "earthenware jug" which bears the water that
Jesus transformed into wine at the wedding at Cana in the gos-
pel of John:

> Late I can hear one walk, a step, and a fruitful silence.
> Touch, finger of Wine, this well of crystalline water
> And this earthenware jug, that knows the language of
>   silence;
> Touch, for darkness is near, that brings your glory to
>   bed. (CA, pp. 48-49)

In "A Christening Remembered" (LU, p. 87), Watkins speaks

similarly of his wife's pregnant body as "a pitcher doomed to wine." Here in "Before a Birth," he is relatively successful in descending from the cosmological imagery with which the poem opens to the human situation of its close.

"The Forge of the Solstice" (CA, p. 68) alludes to three artists and personal friends of Watkins, David Jones (stanza 1), Ceri Richards, painter and musician (stanza 2), and the painter and friend of Dylan Thomas, Alfred Janes (stanza 3) as representatives of "the artificer" or artist who is a mediator of eternal wisdom. The final stanza combines the astral event of the changing of the equinoxes with the Blakean notion of the artist as a smith working at a fiery forge at the ground of creation. The idea of "bend[ing] the solstice like a bow" suggests the defeat (or from another point of view the regeneration) of time by art:

        Love gives their art a body in which thought
        Draws, not from time but wisdom, till it bend
        The solstice like a bow, and bring time round
        White with young stars, quick from the forge they have
            found. (CA, p. 69)

Watkins uses the word "quick" in its older sense of "living" as Vaughan does in "Quickness": But life is, what none can express, / A quickness, which my God hath kissed.[26] The reference to "white...young stars" again reminds us of Vaughan's imagery in poems like "The World," "The Constellation" and "They are all gone into the world of light!"

"Bread and the Stars" is one of Watkins' most serenely moving and evocative poems. It is Vaughanesque for its incorporation of Christian religious symbolism in the context of a

celestial starscape, in its quietly ecstatic opening and in

its presentation in theological terms of the dialectic of

time and eternity. The poem begins with a view of the stars

in a wintry landscape:

> How clear the stars to-night,
> All the bright heaven how still!
> Under dense groves of white
> This glistening sheet displays
> A frost of spellbound streams.
> All is at rest. I gaze
> Out of the paths and beams
> Of night's unresting mill. (CA, p. 79)

Watkins takes up the mythic Icelandic, Norse and Medieval sym-

bol of time as the gigantic starry millwheel of the heavens,

grinding out the seasons, days and hours of the creation. In

Hamlet's Mill, Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend

point out that Amlodhi, a figure from Icelandic and Norse myth,

was the original owner of the "fabled mill" which "ground out

peace and plenty" in good times and salt in bad. They argue

in the above work on the transmission of human knowledge

through myth that the mill imagery stands for "an astronomical

process, the secular shifting of the sun through the signs of

the zodiac which determines world-ages."[27] The precise imagery

of the poem suggests that Watkins also may have been aware of

the esoteric Medieval tradition of Christ as the cosmic mill

of heaven grinding out the sacramental bread and wine. An

iconographic representation of the "Mystical Mill" is on dis-

play at Vézelay (Basilique de Madeleine) in Burgundy. St.

Ambrose, basing himself on John 12:24 and 6:33, and describing

Christ as a grain figure, may be the ultimate source for this

icon.[28] It is obvious that Watkins here combines the ancient

and universal symbol of the cosmic mill with the pre-Christian

and Christian symbols of the sacred bread and wine of the com-

munal meal, and places them in the context of a cosmic

starscape.

Celestial "white" takes on a sinister aspect in the next

stanza, connoting frost, winter and death as in the "Ballad of

the Mari Lwyd" where the pale Mari is associated both with

death and life, horror and sanctity. As Watkins writes in

stanza two:

> So deadly white this frost
> It kills both bird and mouse
> Hid where the swedes are tossed
> Into an iron barn.
> Owls upon vermin feast.

Here the destructive aspects of white frost are brought to-

gether with the predatory side of nature. Watkins proceeds in

the next stanza to speak of those who died as souls who have

reunited with "the inane" in the sense of the "infinite spaces"

of the heavens. These "dead" are now part of the "white mill-

stream" of the milky way:

> Nothing now comes between
> The inane and this hard crust
> Close to the roots of men
> As shrouds are to their dead.
> How precious now the loss
> Of souls whose printless tread
> Where many footprints cross
> Takes the whole night on trust.
>
> How full the clustered sky!
> Beyond the uncounted crop
> Of stars I still descry
> Where the white millstream runs
> Glittering in ghostly race
> New multitudes of suns,
> While here galactic space
> Hangs, like a frozen drop. (CA, pp. 78-80)

Faced with the overwhelming endlessness of the frozen heavens, Watkins states that the human faculties are numbed at man's apparent insignificance.

> The same unerring will
> That called conception forth
> Now bids the bloodstream freeze.

In his direct confrontation of the possibility of the meaninglessness of human endeavor, Watkins is particularly a man of his time here. Yet the poem's approach to resolution lies in a traditional vision of man placed within the confines of time under the guidance and control of a beneficent power. The turning point of the poem comes in stanza six when the poet begins to accept man's earthbound limitation as necessary to his sustenance and growth:

> Yet men to Earth are bound,
> To heats from which they grew.
> They sift the stars who pound
> The corn with leavening yeast
> Till the whole bread is made;
> And plenty crowns their feast,
> Wine from a cellar's shade
> Preserving all that's true.

The imagery is sacramental, having both pre-Christian and Christian eucharistic overtones. We discover that the cosmic mill grinds out the staples of man's spiritual need--his "daily bread" and "wine." The biblical symbols of corn, leavening yeast and bread are drawn principally from Christ's parables of the kingdom, and the bread and wine from the event of the "last supper." Watkins unites the metaphor of the mill with his Christian symbolism by arguing that those who accept their place on earth by participating in the pounding out of corn and making of bread find that they also "sift the stars,"

that is, have relationship to and comprehension of the larger

order, since microcosm and macrocosm are ultimately related.

In the BBC film, Under a Bright Heaven, Watkins commented that

in "Bread and the Stars" he wished to convey the way in which

the "words of the Christian gospel outweigh all that is specu-

lative," and to suggest that those words give man assurance

when looking out into the vast spaces that he is "not insig-

nificant."[29] I have hinted earlier that Watkins views time

from two, noncontradictory perspectives: as an enemy to be

defeated, a condition of restriction leading to death; and as

a chastener, refiner and processor of souls. From the latter

viewpoint time is the necessary condition by which eternity can

be mediated and known. In this poem the second view prevails.

The reference to "the elect" in stanza seven reminds me

of Vaughan's chosen "bride" who is wed to Christ in the "Ring"

of eternity in "The World," which concludes: "This ring the

bride-groom did for none provide / But for his bride."[30] Wat-

kins writes:

>   None need look far for proof
>   That passion bears the sky.
>   The elect, beneath time's roof
>   Dropping from steadfast eyes
>   The plummet of their peace,
>   Hold to each man that dies
>   A measure of increase,
>   A cup to judge life by. (CA, p. 80)

I do not believe that Vaughan's language, any more than Watkins'

is meant to imply a predeterministic view of salvation in the

cruder sense. Just as the bride in Vaughan's poem rises into

the "ring" because of her active choice of "true light" over

"dark night" (stanza 4), so Watkins' speaker defines the

"elect, beneath time's roof" as those who have actively chosen

to receive the freely given bread and cup, which they now give

just as freely to "each man that dies." He draws forth the

universal meaning of the communion feast as God's spiritual

provision for man's immediate need in time and place:

> Bread of dear life, and cup
> Or glass made dull by breath,
> Those spinning worlds far up
> Whose fiery swarms recede,
> All cannot match the weight
> Of your immediate need,
> Brought on a man-fired plate
> To break his fast to death.   (CA, p. 81)

With a play of words on "crust" similar to that of Vaughan on

the word "Ring" in "The World" (indicating both the ring of

light and the marriage ring of the bride), Watkins reveals in

the last stanza that the wintry "hard crust" of frost is meta-

phorically identical with the "crust" of sacramental bread.

The speaker turns finally from the vast and solitary heavens

which his finitude cannot ingest to the more immediate reality

of the "crust" of frost (representing the sacramental bread)

placed before him:

> Clear night, great distances,
> Faith, like a pestle, drums
> Your baffling silences.
> Hard though the wintry crust,
> What truth has man but loaves?
> Bread will compel man's trust,
> And not the starry groves:
> Wisdom is hid in crumbs.   (CA, p. 81)

By turning back to time, Watkins is not rejecting the idea that

man has a place in the cosmic order, but arguing that he must

direct his attention to earth and his situation in the immediate

environment before he can ascend to the "baffling silences" of

the stars. For Watkins, the symbols of the Christian

eucharistic feast provided a means of reaffirming the value of time.

Some of Watkins' poems of grief for the dead (including Thomas) are strikingly like Vaughan's elegiac lyrics mourning the death of his brother William, "Joy of my life! while left me here," "Silence, and stealth of days!" and "I walked the other day to spend my hour." Watkins' "Gravestones" (LU, p. 73), for instance, identifies a flower (the sunflower of the last stanza) with the life of "the dead" in the same way Vaughan does in "I walked." Vaughan's speaker digs around the roots in the soil where a "gallant flower" (identified with his late brother) once flourished, seeking in nature for an appropriate emblem of the departed. Ultimately, he turns away from the "masques and shadows" of nature to seek his brother's living soul "above" in God. The poem concludes:

> And from this care, where dreams and sorrows reign
>   Lead me above
> Where light, joy, leisure, and true comforts move
>   Without all pain,
> There, hid in thee, show me his life again
>   At whose dumb urn
> Thus all the year I mourn.[31]

Watkins' poem not only employs a similar verse form of iambic pentameter lines alternating with shorter iambic lines of two and three feet, and similar imagery of rooted plants and light, but traces the ascent of the dead from nature to their transcendent home. At the end of the poem he speaks of the souls of the "meek" who are "blest" as follows:

> Yet they have lover's ends,
> Lose to hold fast, as violets root in frost.
> With stronger hands
> I see them rise through all that they have lost.

I take a sunflower down,
With light's first faith persuaded and entwined.
Break, buried dawn,
For the dead live, and I am of their kind.   (LU, pp. 73-74)

Both poems reveal an intense identification with the dead, and

dwell on the close relationship between the two realms of life

and death.

I wish to look finally at some ways in which Watkins' use

of nature lends itself to comparison with that of Vaughan. In

"Birds of Joy and Care," one of his many bird poems, he uses the

way larks, ptarmigans, and plovers will sacrifice themselves to

guard their young as a metaphor for Christian love. He also

develops this theme in "Art and the Ravens" (DB, p. 57) and

"Means of Protection" (F, p. 60). The title of the poem may be

an echo of a line from Vaughan's "The Timber" where that poet

speaks approvingly of the man who has abandoned "vain joys and

vain cares" (stanza 8). Watkins' poem, like another by Vaughan,

"The Bird," exploits some of the possible analogies between the

spiritual, human and natural orders. In both "Birds of Joy and

Care" and "The Bird," for instance, the "birds of joy" represent

that part of the created order which freely celebrates God.

Watkins contrasts the birds to men whose songs all too often

"Follow the fashion's guise." We may recall that in Vaughan's

"And do they so?", the seventeenth-century poet also laments

man's failure to match the creatures and sentient natural things

in praise:

I would I were a stone, or tree,
    Or flower by pedigree,
Or some poor high-way herb, or spring
    To flow, or bird to sing![32]

In "Man," he compares the "birds like watchful clocks" which
are in innate and instinctual harmony with the Creator to
"restless and irregular" man, who is so made that he can find
no rest in the world until he returns to his "Maker." The fig-
ure of St. Francis in Watkins' poem serves to draw forth this
same sense that man's essential business is to realign himself
with God. St. Francis speaks at the poem's close:

> ....'O Christ, hear me:
> Your angels in the cloud
> Take from this tree
> The harp they play that gives these wings their symmetry.
>
> Pledge with your heavenly ring
> These birds, by faith made wise,
> That though the songs men sing
> Follow the fashion's guise,
> They still may cleave to heaven, and sing with praising
>   eyes.' (LU, p. 76)

The saint prays to Christ that the birds may continue to be liv-
ing symbols of that which man's art and life should be--a spon-
taneous and freely given act of praise. He asks that they may
continue to make what the Medievals called the "naturalis musica
mundi."

"The Tributary Seasons" (CA, p. 70) is one of Watkins'
many seasonal celebrations, moving from autumn to winter and
summer, and then back again to autumn to make a complete
circle.[33] The section on summer as "That Eden state of lasting
time...." when men heap their "tributes, bread and wine...."
concludes with a passage reminiscent of some of Vaughan's
more Hermetic statements. "Time's keys" here (as we may recall
through association with the Zacchaeus poems) are the floating
seeds of the sycamore tree--the "keys" or seeds that unlock the
"year's eternal forms." Like Vaughan, Watkins is a mystical

poet in his endless fascination with the hidden and inner life

of things:

> At last late leaves bright-coloured bring,
> Turning time's keys,
> Those fruits foreshadowed by the Spring.
> Acorns and nuts restore their trees.
> *As certain jewels have the power*
> *To magnetize and guide the hour,*
> So seeds before our eyes are strewn
> Fast hidden in the pod's cocoon. (CA, p. 72) (italics
>   mine)

And like his predecessor, he approaches the mystery of growth

from within the seed through the Hermetic image of magnetic

stones or jewels that "magnetize and guide the hour" from with-

in. We may recall that Vaughan uses the symbol of the lode-

stone or magnet similarly in "Cock-Crowing" to suggest that the

bird, a Christian emblem of resurrection, carries within it-

self a "seed" or alchemical "grain" of light that draws its

being to the "Father of lights" (see James 1:17) like a magnet

to dense metal:

> Father of lights! what sunny seed,
> What glance of day hast thou confined
> Into this bird? To all the breed
> This busy ray thou hast assigned;
>   Their magnetism works all night,
>   And dreams of Paradise and light.[34]

And Traherne too takes up the symbol of the magnet in "The

First Century" (2) where love is that power which draws man to

God like iron to a lodestone.

A final symbol from nature used both by Vaughan and Watkins

is that of the waterfall, illustrated here by Vaughan's "The

Water-fall" and Watkins' "Waterfalls" (A, p. 11). Both poets

are intrigued with the mystical element of water, whether in the

form of natural spring, fountain, fall or sea. Watkins' poem

is about a return to a scene of early childhood, and concen-

trates on an exact presentation of remembered detail:

> Always in that valley in Wales I hear the noise
>   Of waters falling.
>   There is a clump of trees
>   We climbed for nuts; and high in the trees the boys
>   Lost in the rookery's cries
>   Would cross, and branches cracking under their
>   knees
>
> Would break, and make in the winter wood new gaps.
>   (A, p. 11)

Vaughan's poem, on the other hand, develops a consciously theo-

logical distinction between water viewed as a symbol of human

transience, and water signifying the "Fountains of Life," the

eternal wellsprings in Christ. He writes:

> As this loud brook's incessant fall
> In streaming rings restagnates all,
> Which reach by course the bank, and then
> Are no more seen, just so pass men.
> O my invisible estate,
> My glorious liberty, still late!
> Thou art the channel my soul seeks,
> Not this with cataracts and creeks.[35]

Vaughan ends by choosing the spiritual over the natural water-

fall, while Watkins sets up no such dichotomy. Yet he does

associate the memory of "waters falling" with the inevitable

passing of time in a way similar to that of Vaughan. The poem

succeeds in creating an intense nostalgia for what seems irre-

coverably lost.

In "The Replica," however, Watkins establishes the water-

fall clearly as a symbol not only of transience and loss, but

of that in nature which is self-sacrificing and self-renewing,

and hence emblematic of the Christian life. In stanza two, he

uses the waterfall to develop his by now familiar argument that

things in time are "replicas" or patterns of the eternal world.

He uses the foal, as in the other "mare and foal" poems, as
"the perfect pattern" of foalness in stanza one, and reborn man
as the replica of Christ in stanza three. The waterfall be-
comes, paradoxically, a replica of both man's transience and
his timelessness, a symbol of change within an abiding unity:

> Such is the waterfall; and though we watch it
> Falling from rock to rock and always changing,
> Cast to a whirlpool, pent by rock, pursuing
> A reckless path, headlong in radiant mist
> Leaping within the roar of its own chains,
> We know it lives by being consumed, we know
> Its voice is new and ancient, and its force
> Flies from a single impulse that believes,
> Nothing is vain, though all is cast for sorrow.
> There hangs the image of our life, there flies
> The image of our transience. (CA, pp. 87-88)

Vaughan too uses his "water-fall" in a similarly complex way
when he suggests that water runs not merely to its death, but
back to its source in God. From this perspective water becomes
a "useful element and clear" (line 23) like the "Fountains of
Life" that go with the Lamb of John's Revelation. He writes:

> Dear stream! dear bank, where often I
> Have sat, and pleased my pensive eye,
> Why, since each drop of thy quick store
> Runs thither, whence it flowed before,
> Should poor souls fear a shade or night,
> Who came (sure) from a sea of light?[36]

For both poets, waterfalls are what Vaughan calls, "mystical
deep streams! / Such as dull man can never find / Unless the
spirit lead his mind...."[37]

Traherne, a poet also obsessed with the whiteness of inno-
cence, springing fountains of everlasting life, and white
light, is perhaps closest to Watkins among the seventeenth-
century religious poets in the essential clarity and simplicity
of his vision. Watkins would have identified with him as a

spokesman of the nonpriestly, personal mystical tradition, as
the son of a Hereford shoemaker who remained uninfluential dur-
ing his lifetime, and as a theocentric poet in search of the
infinite, the absolute within the soul of man. Watkins also
shares with Traherne many of the Platonic and Neoplatonic
sources mentioned earlier. Traherne's sources include Plato,
Plotinus, Hermes Trismegistus, Augustine, Ficino, Pico and the
Cambridge Platonists.[38] Both textual and external evidence
indicate not only that Traherne was familiar with the works of
contemporary Platonists like Whichcote, Smith, Culverwel, Cud-
worth and More, but that he kept notebooks on Ficino and incor-
porated ideas from Pico's Oratio de Dignitate Hominis into "The
Fourth Century" of his Centuries of Meditations.[39] I would
argue that Watkins most clearly approaches Traherne in his use
of an abstract, intangible vocabulary with many references to
eternity, light, the mind, the soul and so on, and in his sense
of childhood as a state of original wholeness and purity. In
the pages that remain, I shall be demonstrating these likenesses
by looking at some of Watkins' poems on childhood and on his
version of what Traherne calls the "kingly" or "royal estate"
of man.

One of Watkins' poems from LU, "First Joy," takes up the
theme of the essential joy of childhood in a way similar to
that of Traherne in the Centuries and poems. Watkins' use
of the child as a symbol of innocence and perfection can be
traced throughout his work.[40] He refers specifically to Tra-
herne being with Wordsworth one of the great spokesmen for the
sanctity of childhood in his Foreword to The Golden Age

and Dream Days by Kenneth Grahame.[41] In setting up textual

comparisons between Watkins and Traherne, I shall be drawing

mainly from Traherne's Centuries, which it is certain that Wat-

kins knew,[42] though he would have encountered the poems also

through H. J. S. Grierson's well-known Oxford Book of Seven-

teenth Century Verse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934). Grier-

son's pioneer anthology, Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the

Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), caused

quite a stir when it appeared, being recognized as important

by Yeats and inspiring Eliot's important essay, "The Metaphysi-

cal Poets" in Selected Essays, 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt

Brace, 1932).

The title of Watkins' poem, "First Joy," suggests an im-

portant passage in Traherne from "The Third Century" (2) where

he describes the "first light" of infancy as follows:

> All appeared New, and Strange at the first, inexpress-
> ibly rare, and Delightfull, and Beautifull. I was a
> little Stranger which at my Entrance into the World
> was Saluted and Surrounded with innumerable Joys.
> My knowledge was Divine. I knew by Intuition those
> things which since my Apostasie, I Collected again,
> by the Highest Reason.[43]

He goes on in that meditation (which so much resembles Words-

worth's "Immortality Ode") to emphasize how the "Estate of

Innocence," man's lost Eden, is a condition of spontaneous

praise:

> I saw all in the Peace of Eden; Heaven and Earth did
> sing my Creators Praises and could not make more Melody
> to Adam, then to me. All Time was Eternity, and a Per-
> petual Sabbath. Is it not Strange, that an Infant
> should be Heir of the World, and see those Mysteries
> which the Books of the Learned never unfold?[44]

The above passages contain most of Traherne's central ideas on

childhood: the intuitiveness of original perception, the Pla-

tonic notion of the soul's recollection of eternity, and the

sense of man's eventual loss of Eden through an "apostasie" or

falling away of the soul in adulthood. In 3.7 we recall that

he describes this apostasy as an eclipse of the light. Though

Watkins would have found many of these ideas expressed with

equal power in the Romantic poets Wordsworth and Blake, it is

certain that he appreciated them here especially in their ear-

lier, more consciously theological context. In Watkins' poem,

"First Joy," the poet "recollects" childhood as a state where

time is eternity and a state of perpetual praise, a condition

where death is inconceivable:

> First joy through eye and limb
> Shoots upward. Groundroots drive
> Through shadow and crust a sheath.
> I praise God with my breath
> As hares leap, fishes swim,
> And bees bring honey to the hive.
> ....
>
> On the sands, children pick
> Bright shells, who stopping, know
> Nothing of Earth's white dead;
> They run with graceful thread
> Of light, and are made quick
> By earlier streams that sweetlier flow.   (LU, p. 13)

Watkins follows those "earlier streams" back to his grand-

father's house in Carmarthen in "Returning to Goleufryn," one

of his few directly autobiographical poems. The poem (pub-

lished in 1948) bears thematic and imagistic similarities to

Thomas' "Fern Hill" (published in 1946 in Deaths and Entrances)

in its dreamlike recollection of childhood on an idyllic farm

associated with Eden, though it is uncertain which poem was

written first:

> Returning to my grandfather's house, after this exile
> From the coracle-river, long left with a coin to be good,
> Returning with husks of those venturing ears for food
> To lovely Carmarthen, I touch and remember the turnstile
> Of this death-bound river....
> ....
> ....It is Goleufryn, the house on the hill;
> And picking a child's path in a turn of the Towy I meet
>   the prodigal town. (LU, p. 15)

"Goleufryn" is Welsh for "Hill of Light." The word "prodigal"

is a transferred epithet, suggesting the prodigality of the

speaker himself, who like the prodigal son of the parable (Luke

15), sat among the "husks" with swine (line 3) before returning

to his father's house. Watkins has returned "after this exile

/ From the coracle-river" to view again the paradisal world of

his youth. Biblical references to the house "shut, like a book

of the Psalms" and a "salmon" which "has swallowed the tribute-

money" (2.7) given to Peter in the gospel, reinforce the poet's

sense of the holy associated with the place, and also remind us

of Thomas' use of biblical imagery in "Fern Hill." The substi-

tution of verbal forms for adjectives as in "venturing ears"

also suggests Thomas' kind of word play, though both poets were

capable of this sort of verbal inventiveness. In Watkins' poem,

more than in Thomas', however, the poet appears as a wistful

outsider, shut out from bliss through what Traherne would call

his "apostasie." In all three poets, Watkins, Thomas and Tra-

herne, this defection is brought about not so much by "original

sin" as by the inevitability of growing up, that is, by time,

and the corrupting influence of the adult world, Traherne's

"outward Bondage of Opinion and Custom" (3.8). Watkins as the

returning prodigal realizes that Goleufryn itself, though still

retaining its childhood associations, is subject to corruption

and decay:

> Yet now I am lost, lost in the water-wound looms
> Where brief, square windows break on a garden's decay.
> Gold butter is shining, the tablecloth speckled with
>   crumbs.
> The kettle throbs. In the calender harvest is shown,
> Standing in sheaves.

The reference to the harvest "Standing in sheaves," like Tra-

herne's remark on his childhood vision of the corn as "Orient

and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever

sown" (3.3),[45] recalls the biblical metaphor of the harvest of

souls in the gospels and suggests a timeless fulfillment. The

clarity of Watkins' paradisal vision here is similar to that of

Traherne, along with his sense of the difficulty of sustaining

it into adulthood. In the last lines he states that he would

not renounce the experiences and people ("souls") he has known

in time, to regain his earlier innocence. The implication is

clearly the Blakean one that a person cannot regain "Innocence"

without passing through "Experience." He asks,

> Which way would I do you wrong?
> Low, crumbling doorway of the infirm to the mansions of
>   evening,
> And poor, shrunken furrow where the potatoes are sown,
> I shall not unnumber one soul I have stood with and known
> To regain your stars struck by horses, your sons of God
>   breaking in song. (LU, p. 16)

The poem "Serena," celebrating the birth of Watkins' son

Tristan, presents infancy as a state of spiritual wholeness.

Like Traherne, he associates childhood with light--the primal

light of the Logos that "shines in darkness" of the opening of

John's gospel:

> The cradle stirs.
> There life, there innocence, there the miracle shines.

> Old, he is old:
> Life's earliest word, the first. Light has created him
> Out of inscrutable deeps. (CA, p. 45)

The infant, ensconced safely in "calm," sails across the myth-
ical waters of chaos into time like a miniature Noah:[46]

> The source of time
> Still binds the flying galaxies to rock.
> Nothing shall change
> The diamond fixed between vine-masted Noah
> And the first deluge drop.
>
> He will be calm
> In the first calm that glittered before knowledge.
> Nothing shall change
> The Primum Mobile's effectual music
> Planted within the breast.
>
> He will be calm,
> Not through a reason known to man, nor favour,
> But through that gift
> The first Cause left, printing upon his forehead
> The word "Serena". (CA, pp. 46-47)

The reference to "vine-masted Noah" is traditionally typologi-
cal, being both an allusion to Noah, keeper of vines in the Old
Testament, and Christ, the true vine of Israel, hung from a
mast-like vine or tree--the cross. The imprint of the "First
Cause" in the forehead of the child indicates that each soul
is a primordial being whose mind and soul mirror the eternal.
Watkins, like Traherne, develops his Platonic ideas in a Chris-
tian context. He suggests here that the Aristotelian
and Medieval "Primum Mobile" or "first moved" that generates
the music of the spheres dwells inwardly in the "breast" of the
child. This sense that each soul is a world, a sphere or a
replication of eternity is one of Traherne's most powerful and
all-pervasive themes. He writes in "The Second Century" (23),
for instance, that,

Man is made in the Image of God, and therefore is a
Mirror and Representativ of Him.[47]

And he speaks in the poem "Innocence" of how the soul is "A

little Adam in a Sphere."[48]   Similarly, Watkins' notion in

"Serena" that the pure image of God planted within the soul is

paradise is central to his religious vision. It determines his

belief that the image of God in man's consciousness is his most

innate and fundamental "Idea" in both the Jungian and Platonic

sense. In "For a Christening" (CA, p. 84), Watkins uses tra-

herne's image of the soul as sphere as expressed in "The Second

Century" (80) where he writes:

> ....my Soul is an Infinite Sphere in a Centre...
> God hath made your Spirit a Centre in Eternity Compre-
> hending all....[49]

The idea of the soul as sphere can be traced to Platonic and

Neoplatonic sources (see Keith Critchlow's The Soul as Sphere

and Androgyne, Golgonooza Press, 1980) and has been a part of

Christian mysticism throughout the centuries. Setting the above

passage against the fifth stanza of Watkins' poem where he

describes the christening of a child, the parallel is obvious in

both concept and symbol chosen:

> Worshippers here,
> We are come to see that prism [the sun's]
> Take fire, where Christ's own tear
> In your baptism
> Consecrates, first each drop, then all the sphere.
>   (CA, p. 84)

In "Earth-Dress" (BML, p. 45) and "The Immortal in Nature"

(CA, p. 53), Watkins develops his sense of what Traherne calls

"the Royal Estate" of man--the idea (derived in part from the

book of Revelation) that man at his innermost centre is en-

throned with God in divine majesty. In "The Fourth Century"

(71-72) Traherne writes, "To sit in the Throne of God is to inhabit Eternity."[50] This lost image of man as king or prince at the centre of creation, Traherne argues, has been hidden from man by his "apostasie"; yet it is possible for him to recover it. In "Thanksgivings for the Body," for example, he describes the soul's "Regent Life....That makes our centre equal to the Heavens,"[51] and in "The First Century" he promises to unfold the sense in which man can discover himself as "heir of the world."[52] In "The Second Century" (92), he develops the theme that man's interior being opens out into timelessness, marvelling at "the unsearchable Extent and illimited Greatness of each soul."[53] And he writes in "The Third Century" (46) that his "Study of Felicity" has enabled him to regain the "kingly life" of eternity while still in time:

> So that through His [God's] blessing I liv a free and
> a Kingly Life, as if the World were turned again into
> Eden, or much more, as it is this Day.[54]

Watkins uses a similar notion in "Earth-Dress," relating it to Blake's concept of spiritual or "fourfold man" (1.10). Here, like Traherne, he associates regenerated man with symbols of royalty and kingship:

> But the spirit is loyal
> To what, before time stood,
> Was single and royal,
> Alone in multitude. (BML, p. 45)

Traherne also emphasizes the singleness of the soul in its pristine state, and the solitariness it must endure in quest of perfection when he writes in "The Fourth Century" (13):

> A man that studies Happiness must sit alone like a
> Sparrow upon the house Top, and like a Pelican in the
> Wilderness.[55]

Again in "The Immortal in Nature" Watkins speaks like Traherne
of nature's royal estate; for with his predecessor he believes
that nature, like man, has a timeless core encompassed by eter-
nity:

> Where time is not, all nature is undone,
> For nature grows in grandeur of decay.
> These royal colours that the leaves put on
> Mark the year living in his kingly way;
> Yet, when he dies, not he but time is gone.   (CA, p. 53)

I would argue, in fact, that it is in Watkins' constant recur-
rence to the idea of a timeless paradise--partly attainable in
and through time--that he most resembles this most mystical of
the seventeenth-century poets discussed.

In summary, I wish to suggest that Watkins is not only a
metaphysical poet, but a theological one in the sense that his
imagination expresses itself within the symbols and paradigms
of a traditionally theistic, Christological view of the world.
By his own definition in his prose, he sets up "theological"
poetry (like that found in the book of Job) as his ideal:

> Poetry is really closer to theology [than to philosophy].
> The Book of Job is full of theology, and it is full of
> contradictions, the clash of imagination with greater
> imagination, the journey of integrity through the dark
> night of the soul, the equating of arrogance and humil-
> ity, the reconciliation of opposites through the un-
> known dimensions of forgiveness and love. This is po-
> etry.[56]

He is arguing here that poetry (which is akin to theology in
its use of myth and symbol) is distinct from philosophy in
its full-bodied expression of the complexities of life, the
Yeatsian "clash of opposites," and in its full inclusion of the
human condition with all its contradictions and paradoxes. He
is speaking of a theology of universal poetic symbols within a

meaningful context of belief, rather than a theology based on

purely rational structures.

Though poems like "The Strangled Prayer" and "Dust in the

Balance" address the issue explored in Job of man's spiritual

dilemma, and though Watkins was deeply moved by the struggles

of the Christian existentialist, Kierkegaard, more often his

poems move toward the moment of release from tension and con-

flict when the soul, almost unexpectedly, enters on the borders

of paradise. In terms of the above-cited statement on poetic

theology, Watkins' deepest concern is with what he calls "the

unknown dimensions of forgiveness and love." He stands as one

of the few modern poets concerned with "conversing with Para-

dise" in any authentic sense. When speaking of religious

authenticity here I mean that Watkins' Christian symbols are

not merely arbitrary counters of his imagination, but reflect

his deepest grasp of the very structure of the world. Rosemond

Tuve, in her study of Herbert distinguishes Herbert's use of

religious symbols from that of many of the moderns:

> Not only acceptance of universal meaningfulness but
> systematic correspondences between meanings--these are
> basic assumptions regarding the nature of reality which
> underlie all writing or other arts in the symbolical
> mode....
>   Nevertheless, although there are many such patterns
> of symbols, it is necessary to believe whatever set
> belongs to us. One desperate modern substitute for
> belief--investigating and comparing the various sets
> of meaningful symbols, and then dressing ourselves up
> with a set we find "interesting"--is just another form
> of the descriptive, critical, rationalistic approach
> to what is real.[57]

Watkins "believes in" his symbols, that is, in the realities to

which they refer, in the manner of a Herbert or a Vaughan or

Traherne, and is unlike those among the modern writers who

do not. His relation to the older writers, then, is not merely a matter of literary influence, but a sharing of a similar religious outlook which attracted him naturally to the kind of meditative structures, biblical symbols and theological insights with which they felt at home.

"Christ and Charon" is a fine example of a religious sonnet on the theme of the soul's release and entry into paradise that shows Watkins handling Christian, Dantesque symbolism and Greek myth in his own unique way. Through the Christ figure or Christian soul who is the speaker of the poem, Watkins captures the moment of transfiguration in which terror opens out into sanctity. The phrase "mutual forgiveness" (line 7) is one used frequently by Blake in the "Prophetic Books" to indicate a condition of human freedom and spiritual attainment.[58] The landscape is Dantesque (see Inferno, Canto III) and ultimately Virgilian (Aeneid, Book VI), but the tone is that of a seventeenth-century meditation on the overwhelming and unexpected gift of divine grace. I cite the poem in its entirety to illustrate Watkins working with traditional material in a fresh manner:

> After more terrors than the sea has waves
> Where vultures black beyond redemption stood
> Circling the boatman for his tithe of blood
> Guiding to Hell his boat's eternal slaves,
> I left that nightmare shore, and woke to naves
> Of daybreak; there men walked in brotherhood,
> Mutual forgiveness, love; their speech was good,
> Being governed by the music of their graves.
>
> Then death's rank odour changed to scented balm,
> The sweat of horror to a holy gum,
> Fierce lamentations to that living psalm;
> There stood a cradle where time's waves were dumb
> Above which angels sighed: 'Your life is come';
> And every sigh a ship destined to calm. (CA, p. 57)

Leslie Norris detects verbal echoes of F. T. Prince's poem,

"Campanella," in "Christ and Charon."[59] Yet he is forced to

point out that, though similar in theme, the two poems differ

radically in their conclusions. Watkins' speaker turns to the

"cradle" of Bethlehem (an image of man's spiritual rebirth) for

resolution, while Prince's hero retreats into self-irony and

doubt concerning his momentary hope for "abject government re-

born in brotherhood."[60]

It is clear that Watkins' theological ground lends his

work a spirit of achieved serenity and "calm." Yet unlike Her-

bert, who spoke out of the role of priest to a well-defined

Christian flock in a Christian age (see the poems "Aaron" and

"The Collar" from The Temple as well as A Priest to the Temple,

or the Country Parson), Watkins as a twentieth-century poet,

faced the problem shared by Eliot, Jones and others of the ab-

sence of a cohesive Christian community and the lack of a

shared basis of belief in his audience. In spite of this limi-

tation, we have seen that he writes purely devotional poems in

relative isolation.

I would argue also that he succeeds in producing religious

poetry in the broader sense Eliot uses in "Religion and Litera-

ture" when he distinguishes between religious verse of a re-

stricted subject matter that is self-consciously devotional,

and poetry that is unconsciously religious because it treats

"the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit."[61]

He writes:

> What I want is a literature which should be unconsciously,
> rather than deliberately and defiantly Christian.[62]

In many of Watkins' best religious poems, traditionally

Christian symbols are so infused with his experience that one
is not immediately conscious of a "religious" or sacramental
outlook. This is evident in an early poem, "The Mother and
Child" (BML, p. 64) where the "Madonna and child" theme remains
implicit in the imagery of the natural relation between the
poet's wife and his infant. An implicitly religious outlook is
present in a later elegiac poem for Thomas, "The Snow Curlew"
(F, p. 59), where a sacramental attitude toward nature is con-
veyed indirectly through the presentation and juxtaposition of
images--the white "manuscript of snow," the curlew's cry, and
the poet's effort to light a fire on the beach. The poem is
about times of spiritual and artistic aridity, but resonates
with the potentiality of renewal through its subtle handling
of imagery and tone. "The Mare," from CA, ostensibly a poem
describing a pregnant mare asleep on the grass, conveys a sense
of the fragility and holiness of unborn life, the beauty of
created things. The horse image carries with it here its an-
cient Celtic, mythical undertones to become a symbol of the
feminine, creative principle:

> Her body [the mare's] is utterly given to the light,
>   surrendered in perfect abandon
> To the heaven above her shadow, still as her first-born
>   day.
> Softly the wind runs over her....
>
> Do not pass her too close. It is easy to break the circle
> And lose that indolent fullness rounded under the ray
> Falling on light-eared grasses your footstep must not
>   yet wake.
> It is easy to darken the sun of her unborn foal at play.
>
> (CA, p. 24)

The imagery of light and circularity (in the full horizon, the
mare's full belly, and the imaginary circle drawn around her

by the speaker) conveys a sense of the condition of perfect,
but precariously maintained wholeness in which the mare re-
sides. Without straining for symbolic effect, the poem creates
a sense of an unfallen, paradisal condition.

Though basically a poet of affirmative vision, Watkins'
sense of spiritual alienation from the majority of his contem-
poraries may explain why he was so concerned to construct out
of tradition and the poetry of the past a sense of a timeless
community of poets. In turning to the more religious and mys-
tical of the seventeenth-century poets for support, affirmation
and inspiration, I would argue that he is not merely backward-
looking, or "traditional" in the pejorative sense. Eliot pin-
points the way in which the desire for tradition can be poet-
ically damaging in After Strange Gods when he writes that one
of the dangers is,

> to associate tradition with the immovable; to think of
> it as something hostile to all change; to aim to return
> to some previous condition which we imagine as having
> been capable of preservation in perpetuity, instead of
> aiming to stimulate the life which produced that condi-
> tion in its time.[63]

That Watkins seizes the vital aspects of the past to remake
them in terms of the present in many of his prayer-like and
meditative poems has been partially demonstrated in this chap-
ter. Like Vaughan and Traherne especially, he restricts the
range, but not the depth of poetry, integrating his poetic in-
fluences into his own unique vision. As in "Christ and Charon,"
he utilizes the Christian tradition in an individual manner and
speaks in a poetic idiom that is decidedly of his own time.
A passage from Part Two of "Orbits," ("The Revolution of the

Heart") should suffice to demonstrate his ability to unite

the past (Rome at the time of the third -century Christian per-

secutions described in Part One, "The Colosseum and the Outer

Spaces") and the present, the ancient and the modern:

> Is there a heart in space? Is heaven's wide span
> Kindly disposed to man,
> Massing new satellites on the dynamic slope
> Of his far-travelling hope,
> Who sees their return, like planets, vouchsafed by
> Orbits in the star-sown sky? (F, p. 94)

The resolution of this question, which occurs in the recogni-

tion that "in Christ is the orbit of love," is reached only

after a serious consideration of the "outer darkness" of physi-

cal space, and of man (like his satellites) as an "outcast

prodigal son" lost in a seemingly meaningless void. Through a

modern reclamation of the old symbolism of microcosm and macro-

cosm, Watkins is able to affirm that the outer and inner revo-

lutions, the outer and inner spaces are part of one vast mo-

tion. Like Donne, who struggled with the challenge of the

"new science" in "The Anniversaries" (particularly in "An Anatomie

of the World"), Watkins attempts to come to terms with the new

technology of his age in a religious context. As Raine argues in

"Intuition's Lightning":

> In mood, often even (as in The Death Bell) in his 'meta-
> physical' imagery, Vernon Watkins calls to mind Vaughan
> or Herbert or Traherne; but the scope of his vision belongs
> peculiarly to his own time, with the cosmology of Teilard
> de Chardin and the poetry of St. John Perse.[64]

Raine's comment is particularly apt in relation to "Orbits"

where Watkins incorporates the technology of his day, the imagery

of modern satellites, into an older cosmology of a meaningful

and purposeful universe. He concludes:

> What may the wandering mind
> Of true substance in outer darkness find?
> In Christ is the orbit of love. Where a candle throws
> Light on woman or man, or a babe's repose,

> True man re-enters his path, where monuments quiver,
> Back through his ancient bonds, for bonds to deliver.
>
> Orbits: the secret marking of shell or urn
> Speaks of the heart's return. (F, p. 95)

That his themes and symbols are timeless and exclude much of the conflict and uncertainty characteristic of the modern age can be seen as a monitor of Watkins' spiritual maturity. Without making a saint of the man (as Walton attempted to do in his Life of Herbert), one can argue it is to his credit in an age that revelled in full exposure of the subliminal self, the fractured ego, that Watkins upheld a poetry and a poetics of spiritual idealism. As Thomas expressed it in a letter to Watkins dated April 20, 1936, Watkins' simplicity is not that of naivety, but of a hard-won innocence:

> But you are--even if only momentarily--the one happy
> person I know, the one who, contrary to facts and, in
> a certain way, to circumstances, seems to be almost
> entirely uncomplicated: not, either, the uncomplication
> of a beginning person, but that of a person who has
> worked through all beginnings and finds himself a new
> beginning in the middle....[65]

I would suggest, finally, that the relative absence of deep-rooted conflict in his work is less an indication of a flight from reality, than the result of a conscious choice to produce a modern poetry of praise that mirrors the highest levels of the self. No more than Traherne with his "Pelagian" sense of man's inherent purity and the original sinlessness of the soul, can Watkins justly be indicted for a failure to plumb the darker reaches of the psyche.[66] In the poem, "Belief and Praise," he makes his choice of an affirmative vision clear. I cite only the first two stanzas, though the poem goes on to develop his theme of praise through the biblical story of the

journey of the wise men to the scene of the nativity. In its

treatment of this theme, the poem stands in clear contrast to

Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" with its emphasis on the am-

bivalence and uncertainty of the speaker (the Magus) and his

failure to interpret the significance of the event of the Incar-

nation. Watkins writes:

> Who but a fool believes
> Despair gives strength?
> Look at that wall:
> The hanging light of leaves
> Knows better than they all
> Who cry against the length
> Of life, or mock its fall.
>
> A tree will testify
> Whose ripeness gives
> The fruit life raised
> Through storm-disfigured sky.
> Belief is not erased.
> The man who praises lives,
> Although he dies unpraised. (F, p. 75)

CHAPTER V

WATKINS AS TWENTIETH-CENTURY METAPHYSICAL POET

Chapter V

Watkins as Twentieth-Century Metaphysical Poet

Part I: The Example of Yeats

Watkins' love of the great classical, romantic and reli-
gious poetic traditions of the past, and his intense identifi-
cation with earlier poets lead him on several occasions to deny
the influence of living contemporaries.   In "Context," a re-
sponse to a questionnaire put out by London Magazine (February
1962), for instance, he writes:

> I suppose every writer, in applauding another's work,
> undergoes a modulation of sensibility, but I cannot
> see how any poet whose roots are deep can be fundamen-
> tally influenced by a living contemporary.   I never
> think a true style can be learnt from contemporaries.[1]

He was to restate this theme in poetry, prose and conversation,
insisting upon the need of the true artist to ignore "fashion"
and pursue his own timeless vision in relation to that of the
great poets of the past.   We have seen how his search for a
unified Christian outlook ties him more directly to the seven-
teenth-century Metaphysical poets than to those among his con-
temporaries who rejected either a Christian or a traditional
metaphysical perspective.   While it is true that Watkins was
little affected by modern movements and critical schools, and
pursued in relative isolation the themes that were to obsess
him from the "other Mind," or his timeless "Muse," surely he
exaggerates when he denies unequivocally the influence of con-
temporary minds.

W. B. Yeats among the moderns of the previous generation,
whom Watkins first read in 1931, had a profound effect on the

style and many of the thematic patterns of the younger poet's work. I shall be arguing that it took him years to break free of obvious Yeatsian mannerisms.[2] Next to Yeats, I would suggest that Dylan Thomas is the second most important example of a living contemporary whose personality and poetic idiom had a powerful impact on Watkins from his first encounter with him in 1935. These two poetic presences, coming approximately at the same time in Watkins' life four to eight years after his departure from Cambridge and his establishment at the bank in Swansea, were to remain with him throughout his life. I intend in this chapter to focus on the presences of Yeats (Part I) and Thomas (Part II) in Watkins' work in an effort to demonstrate that the influence of Yeats was the more abiding of the two on Watkins' style. I shall be arguing that though Thomas and Yeats helped him forge a style, he emerges (roughly from the publication of The Death Bell, 1954) with a voice and a vision that are decidedly individual, earning himself a unique place among the moderns.

Though I shall be narrowing my discussion to the influence of Thomas and Yeats, Watkins also felt repercussions from the work of T. S. Eliot, identifying especially with the Eliot of the later Four Quartets whose theme, like Watkins', was that of the timeless moment in time within a context of orthodox Christian belief. It is also significant that Watkins' seven volumes of verse were published by Faber and Faber at Eliot's instigation. Eliot must have recognized in this younger Welsh contemporary a voice of substantial poetic promise--both technically and in depth of content. The literary path of the

early Eliot as a displaced American seeking roots in British

and European tradition is clearly distinct from that of Watkins,

who more resembles Yeats in his interest in the mythological and

Celtic traditions of his native land and in fidelity to the

place of his birth. I can detect few direct verbal echoes of

Eliot or textual evidence of a stylistic influence on Watkins,

whose more fluid, lyrical voice separates him from the new, less

formal way of writing initiated by the more satiric Eliot of

"Prufrock" and The Waste Land. Watkins himself writes of

Eliot's influence on the age in a short elegiac commentary (Jan.

10, 1965) as "liberating and constricting at the same time":

> Eliot had broken up the formal rhythm and rhyme of regu-
> lar stanzas for the sake of a new music corresponding
> more closely to the movement of life. He substituted
> an often irregular line of his own, its cadence de-
> pending on speech rhythms and the demands of his sub-
> ject. He accepted everyday life as material for po-
> etry; he banished artificial poetic diction, and tested
> a poem by one thing only: "Is it genuine?"[3]

Though Watkins could admire Eliot's use of freer verse forms

and the genuineness of his voice, this less artificial style was

not amenable to his own particular genius--which (more like that

of the early Yeats) expressed itself in a strict and intricate

rhythmical (often incantatory) cadence. Like the Yeats of the

Byzantium poems, he believed that art should create a world of

artifice in contrast to the reality of "everyday life." Yet

Eliot's sense of eternity's penetration of time (past, present

and future) through the Incarnation in The Four Quartets, and

his idea of the poet's need for a continuous historical and

literary tradition as described in "Tradition and the Individual

Talent" appealed strongly to Watkins who wrote of Eliot in that

same commentary:

> I think his [Eliot's] influence will always be immediate
> and not retrospective, and that is the mark of a great
> poet. Critics think in terms of decades, poets in terms
> of centuries. I believe that in whatever century Eliot's
> work will be accessible, his influence will be immediate,
> and its effect profound.[4]

Watkins' "Ode to T. S. Eliot" in Affinities respectfully ac-

knowledges his literary debt and the debt of the age:

> Who can better teach how little is visible
> Save in the eye of God?
> Tentatively you struggled,
> Mapping out slowly the land we know. (A, p. 39)

Though the scope of this chapter does not permit an invest-

igation of other twentieth-century figures who may have been

important to Watkins, it should be noted that he shares with

another contemporary, the Scottish poet Edwin Muir (1887-1959),

a concern with the relation of time and eternity, a love of

mythic themes, an interest in Platonism and a respect for the

German poet Hölderlin. Just as Watkins was actively engaged in

his translations of continental poetry, so Muir translated

Kafka's The Castle and The Trial. Though Watkins refers to Ezra

Pound's remark that poets are "the antennae of the race,"[5] he

is not close to Pound in subject matter or style. He remained

unaffected alike by the "vers libre" and imagist movements and

by Pound's use of larger "open-forms" as in The Cantos. Yet he

was quick to acknowledge the genius of those who wrote in a

style and idiom different from his own. Watkins' prose comments

indicate that he admired the work of Auden and the American

poets, Marianne Moore, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Lowell and

Theodore Roethke.[6] In spite of his sense of his own isolation,

his work was well received both in Britain and in America, particularly at the end of his life, being praised in the States by Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell and others.[7] Therefore the illusion Watkins helped to create of his complete detachment from the contemporary scene is erroneous and needs to be amended by the proposed investigation of the centrally important influences of Yeats and Thomas--poets who affected so many writing between the "forties" and the "sixties."

Though Watkins limited his reading to the Romantics (particularly Blake and Shelley) and earlier poets in his early twenties, he began reading Yeats in 1931 when he picked up a copy of The Tower (1928) in a local shop.[8] In a lecture on modern poetry at University College, Swansea, 1966, he indicates his high estimation of Yeats dating from that time:

> When I met Dylan Thomas [i.e. 1935] I had for nine or ten years been so deeply absorbed in certain poets who were dead that I did not pay much attention to the living ones. There was, however, one living exception. This was W. B. Yeats, whom I regarded then and still regard as the greatest lyric poet of our age.[9]

After his initial discovery of Yeats, Watkins bought all of his books and read him intensively, appreciating especially the poems written after Yeats' fiftieth year.[10] The whole of Yeats' canon was extant before Watkins published his first volume of verse in 1941; therefore we can expect to find evidence of Yeats' influence in many of the poems from the published volumes.

Watkins saw in the older poet the epitome of the "self-renewing" artist, and found Yeats' later more austere and intensely chiselled style to have a dramatic impact on his own

sense of what great poetry should be like. In an address to

the Poetry Society of Great Britain, May 7, 1966, he writes

that Yeats' poetry

> became purer and fresher as he renewed himself to the
> very week of his death, "moving" as he said, "Like
> Swedenborg's angels, toward the dayspring of their
> youth."[11]

He is here, in fact, echoing Yeats' own words from "The Bounty

of Sweden" in Autobiographies:

> I am old and rheumatic, and nothing to look at, but my
> Muse is young. I am even persuaded that she is like
> those Angels in Swedenborg's vision, and moves perpetu-
> ally "towards the day-spring of her youth."[12]

Watkins spoke with authority on the subject of Yeats in several

articles and two longer essays.[13] The major essay, "W. B.

Yeats--The Religious Poet," read publically in 1948 and first

printed in French in 1953,[14] moves out of a deep identification

with his Irish hero. Watkins had, in fact, visited Yeats in

the spring of 1938 in his Riverside home near Dublin with his

friend Francis Dufau-Labeyrie, and was received graciously by

the seventy-three year old poet and his wife. He made a tran-

script of the interview which has been published in the Spring

1977 issue of Poetry Wales.[15] Out of these notes came Watkins'

long poem, "Yeats in Dublin," published later in LV (1945). It

is, like Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," an elegiac tribute

to Yeats and attempts to capture in stately Yeatsian sonorities

(interspersed with taut colloquialisms) the dignity and wisdom

of the aged poet. Watkins' use of Yeats' six-line ballad

stanza with its short, three and four-beat lines is deliber-

ately imitative of poems like "Sixteen Dead Men" or "The Rose

Tree."[16] The poem tends to be merely descriptive of the actual

encounter, and is weakened by its too literal reconstruction of

the conversation. Watkins here puts in Yeats' mouth a state-

ment on "luck" that, as we noted in Chapter III, was to become

his own catch-phrase for the essential element of the unexpected

that arrives as a "reward of tenacity":[17]

> There must always be a quality
> Of nonchalance in the work.
> The intellect is impotent
> Labouring in the dark,
> For a poem is always
> A piece of luck. (LU, p. 8)

This quality of apparent nonchalance was the element of Yeats'

later style that Watkins particularly admired and attempted to

emulate.

In the pages that follow, I propose to examine some impor-

tant parallels between Watkins and Yeats, focusing on their

fascination with Celtic myth, their shared literary sources,

their development as complex "symbolist" poets, their similar-

ities of style, and their sense of the consolation of great art.

I shall be looking at some of Watkins' poems that stand as

self-conscious tributes to Yeats, as well as poems where Watkins

merely borrows Yeatsian rhetoric, rhythms or vocabulary, or

takes up a Yeatsian stance, theme or point of view. Finally, I

shall be attempting to examine some of Watkins' poems which,

though indebted to Yeats in style, content or both, reveal him

disagreeing with or even challenging his position. In many of

these poems, I believe Watkins succeeds in successfully incor-

porating Yeats' influence into his own individual style and

vision.

Like the early Yeats of The Celtic Twilight (1893) or the

Yeats who contributed so vigorously to Ireland's Celtic reviv-
al, Watkins too, though apolitical, was concerned with finding
in his native land a mythology and a landscape for his poetry.
This need is most evident in the early dramatic poem, "Ballad
of the Mari Lwyd," where we recall that he revives an ancient
Welsh folk custom in order to bring together the Yeatsian antin-
omies of the worlds of the dead and the living. We have seen
that the Celtic interest is obvious also in the Taliesin poems
where he revitalizes the heroic figure of the sixth-century
bard. In his prose, he speaks of the Mari Lwyd custom as a
"reconciliation of contraries," exploring in his own terms the
search for what Yeats called "Unity of Being," the complete in-
tegration of "history, religion, aesthetic and practical
life":[18]

> ....it seemed to me that the old custom assumed terrify-
> ing proportions, for not only drunken and holy people,
> but the dead themselves, seemed to have come to the
> house. This, too, was a kind of reconciliation of con-
> traries, an eternal moment of contradictions, and my
> "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" began to take shape.[19]

Like Yeats also, he maintained an interest in the folk ballad
and ballad techniques throughout his career.

Watkins' sense of "the Muse" as an otherness, evident in
poems like the previously-discussed "Demands of the Muse" (see
Chapter III), is close to Yeats' notion of the "Daimon" or anti-
thetical self who spurs the poet to song and strengthens him
through opposition. Watkins describes this opposition in the
voice of his Muse:

> Yet, though a school invoke me, it is he
> I choose, for opposition gives those words
> Their strength.... (A, p. 22)

For Watkins, however, the Muse is more unambiguously "other,"
more Miltonic, and not merely a hidden aspect of the self as
Yeats suggests in Autobiographies when he writes: "I believed
that this enigmatic sentence came from my own Daimon, my own
buried self...," or further from that same volume,

> I know now that revelation is from the self...that ge-
> nius is a crisis that joins that buried self for cer-
> tain moments to our trivial daily mind.[20]

As Kathleen Raine has pointed out, Watkins' approach to tradi-
tion is less historical and intellectual than that of Eliot, who
sometimes seems to suggest that it can be acquired through
learning, and closer to Yeats' idea of tradition as a few in-
tensely conceived heroic themes and vital symbols contained
within a "Great Memory" or repository of consciousness tran-
scending the mind of a single individual.[21]   Yeats defines tra-
ditional art in Autobiographies as follows:

> Supreme art is a traditional statement of certain heroic
> and religious truths, passed on from age to age, modi-
> fied by individual genius, but never abandoned.[22]

Yet Yeats, Watkins and the later Eliot of the Four Quartets
are all concerned with the illuminated moment which gives man
access to the universal consciousness as Watkins describes it
in the Taliesin poems when Taliesin receives the three drops of
inspiration, and which Yeats portrays in "Vacillation" as a
sudden blazing of the body like that of the mythical tree of the
Mabinogion alluded to in part II of the same poem:

> While on the shop and street I gazed
> My body of a sudden blazed;
> And twenty minutes more or less
> It seemed, so great my happiness,
> That I was blessèd and could bless.[23]

This recurrent longing in Yeats for moments of transcendence as they emerge out of the violent oppositions between self and soul leads Watkins to designate him a "religious poet." He argues in "W. B. Yeats--The Religious Poet" that Yeats was religious because he never resigned the struggle for "Unity of Being," and because "religious conflict" lay at the heart of all his late work.[24] In "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," Watkins suggests that Yeats never fully renounces the way of the "saint," nor fully resolves the early conflict between St. Patrick and the heroic Oisin of The Wanderings of Oisin (1888) which emerges metamorphosed in Ribh of Supernatural Songs.[25] He implies in the former essay on Yeats, "the religious poet," that the Christian option was never ultimately rejected in spite of Yeats' respectful dismissal of Von Hügel, the representative of the Christian mystic, at the conclusion of "Vacillation." Watkins writes:

> Paradoxically Yeats brings a pagan strength to the poems which deal directly with Christianity, and he brings Christianity to his poems of pagan theme. "Wisdom," "The Mother of God," "A Prayer for My Son," and "Veronica's Napkin" are not only devotional poems but also dialogues between Self and Soul. For Yeats is a poet of religious conflict in all the late work.[26]

Watkins had a tendency to make Christian heroes of all the poets he most deeply admired, and it is unlikely that Yeats would have described his later poems as "devotional" in the Christian sense. Yet it is obvious that Watkins identified strongly with Yeats in his religious struggle and admired his lifelong effort to resolve the antinomies of self and soul, saint and swordsman.

Yeats often explored the conflict or dialogue of self and soul by uniting the worlds of Homeric Greek myth with Celtic

myth and legend--Usna and Troy--and juxtaposing these against
images of Christian sanctity. Watkins' union of Celtic and
Christian motifs in the Taliesin poems follows the Yeatsian
precedent. In Watkins' poems, however, the heroic values are
usually superseded by Christian "caritas" and a new synthesis
of hero and saint emerges. In poems like "Niobe," "Pledges to
Darkness" (DB) and "The Muse of Homer" (BW) we can see Watkins
uniting Celtic with classical and European (in the former case
Egyptian) myth in a way similar to that of Yeats who, as Watkins
points out in his essay on his later poems, cherished "a vision
of the union of all myths...."[27] "The Muse of Homer" is a typ-
ically Yeatsian sonnet on the heroic suffering of the Greeks.
In the poem "Niobe," Watkins identifies a rock on the Welsh
seacoast with the sorrows of the weeping mother figure of clas-
sical tradition. The poem's twin epigraphs invoke both Dante's
Niobe in The Divine Comedy (Purg. XII, 37) and the biblical
"Rachel weeping for her children" (Matt. 2:18) to draw atten-
tion to the universality of the motif. In his choice of Niobe,
Watkins may be recalling Yeats' comparison of her in A Vision
to a civilization in decline:

> A civilization is a struggle to keep self-control, and
> in this it is like some great tragic person, some Niobe
> who must display an almost superhuman will or the cry
> will not touch our sympathy.[28]

"Pledges to Darkness" (including "Nefertiti" and "Egyptian
Burial--Resurrection in Wales") represents Watkins' effort to
unite Egyptian and Welsh myth. The use of "mummy" imagery in
this poem, "The Mummy" (BML), and "Time's Deathbed" (DB) may
owe something to Yeats' references to the Egyptian dead in poems

like "Byzantium" or "All Soul's Night." In the latter he

writes:

> Such thought--such thought have I that hold it tight
> Till meditation master all its parts...,
> ....
> I need no other thing,
> Wound in mind's wandering
> As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound.[29]

"The Mummy," written in 1940, is, in fact, a disguised elegy to

Yeats.[30] In this early poem, the Yeatsian rhetoric overpowers

Watkins' characteristically more delicate rhythms and phrasing.

His overuse of a familiar Yeatsian construction ("what...what")

at its close, to my mind at least, weakens the poem in spite of

the superb last line:[31]

> What shudder of music unfulfilled vibrates?
> What draws to a dust-grain's fall most distant stars?
> In the last taper's light what shadow meditates?
> What single, athletic shape never cast on wall or vase?
>
> What shudder of birth and death? What shakes me most?
> Job his Maker answering, the stricken exclaiming 'Rejoice!'
> Gripping late in the shifting moment giant Earth, making
>   Earth a ghost,
> Who heard a great friends' death without a change of voice.
>   (BML, pp. 41-2)

Though "Pledges to Darkness" includes some slightly Yeatsian

magniloquence in lines like, "In death she knows, fine things

are finely made," the style and treatment by this time (1954)

are Watkins' own. Here he transforms the image of the mummified

body of Nefertiti into a pre-Christian symbol of sacrifice:

> Yet now she whispers close: 'Dispense
> No precious ointment here; my body has cast all.
> Here, if the taper burn intense,
> It may instruct your eyes
> To seek that holiest treasure laid
> A Syrian widow once let fall.
> This contrite darkness never has betrayed
> Love's perfect secret whose disguise
> Sleeps in my lettered pall.' (DB, p. 22)

Watkins imagines the buried dead of the pagan world waking in a Christian Wales. Nefertiti's death points to the archetypal death and resurrection of Christ which is potentially that of each individual. Her whispered prayer is that her death may direct others to "that holiest treasure"--the coin dropped by the "Syrian widow" of the gospels who gave all her living for love (Mark 12:42-43). Like Yeats, Watkins is concerned to unite heterogeneous mythologies with those of his native land, but in his poems heroic values are more clearly subordinated to the theme of Christian sacrifice.

Although Watkins uses his mythological backgrounds in a manner different from Yeats, it is clear that he derived a number of his important philosophical and literary sources from him. We have noted already that Watkins read Plotinus in the MacKenna translation because it was one of Yeats' major entrances into Neoplatonic thought;[32] and it is probable that Watkins' references to Heraclitus in "Poet and Goldsmith" (CA) and Von Hügel of The Mystical Element in Religion in "Discoveries" (BML) are due to Yeats. In "Discoveries," for instance, a poem which echoes Yeats' title for a book of criticism (Discoveries, 1907) and uses a two-line stanza similar to that of Yeats in "A Nativity" or "The Four Ages of Man,"[33] Watkins writes:

'Solice, in flight,' old Heraclitus cries,
Light changing to Von Hügel's butterflies. (BML, p. 65)

In that same poem (cited below), Watkins includes Blake among his heroes. We may recall that he borrows Blakean symbols in the Taliesin poems to present his concept of the ideal poet-prophet:

Blake, on the world alighting, holds the skies,
And all the stars shine down through human eyes.
                                        (<u>BML</u>, p. 65)

Blake, Shelley and Dante were important to Watkins long be-

fore he read Yeats; yet it is certain he was delighted to have

his personal literary tastes confirmed by the older poet he so

much admired. During the time Watkins experienced the mental

collapse of his early twenties (1927) referred to in the bio-

graphical sketch, and was confined briefly in a nursing home in

Derby, he is said to have been so deeply immersed in Blake that

he kept "the other patients awake at night by his endless reci-

tation" of him.[34] Blakean ideas, symbols and direct references

to the English visionary poet continued to appear in the work

of his maturity, and his widow has confirmed in conversation

that he was still reading and studying Blake's "Prophetic Books"

toward the end of his life. We recall that Yeats did an immense

study of Blake's prophetic symbols with Edwin Ellis in his early

years, and that the Blakean idea of contending opposites within

the self, the Blakean notion of the Imagination as divine, and

the Blakean use of symbols helped him to develop his own con-

cepts of a symbolical poetry.[35]

What Watkins particularly sought in Blake that was less

central to Yeats was a concept of the ideal Christian mystical

poet and a more mystical and experiential image of Christ than

that of the Church; for Watkins often focused on Blakean ideas

of forgiveness, innocence and the eternalness or "fourfoldness"

of man in his redeemed state,[36] attempting to place them in the

context of his own religious ideas and experiences. In "Re-

visited Waters," for instance, an occasional poem written for

the Quartercentenary of Repton School, the public school he

attended in his youth in Derbyshire, Watkins writes at the con-

clusion of the poem of the moment in which man confronts the

Satanic powers within himself. The reference to "friend dying

for friend" is an allusion to Blake's Jerusalem where Jesus

(a form of Los) gives himself to redeem Albion:[37]

> Then at last man encountered himself, his Accuser and end.
> He saw his own Hell and the labouring lusts that destroy,
> And Jerusalem showed him the pastures where friend dies
>   for friend,
> And the end of all labours is joy. (A, p. 98)

Watkins' fine sonnet, "Blake," also reveals him exploring in his

own terms Blake's visionary conception of "Jesus the Imagina-

tion":

> Blake was immortal. When his eyes were bent
> On mortal forms he knew that Earth was heaven.
> The stones of law were love's negations graven,
> And Christ was each forgiving lineament. (LU, p. 88)

In the sestet he uses the image of the two thieves at the cruci-

fixion as a dramatization of the imaginative choice between

good and evil, time informed by eternity or negating it:

> 'Now is undying' was Blake's eternal theme.
> He knew that thief who mocked Christ, and despaired,
> And that good thief who looked for Paradise;
> He knew the evil and the noble dream,
> The eternal heaven that breaks on love declared.
>   (LU, p. 88)

Watkins was not only attracted to Blake because of his idea

of the putting off of self in mutual forgiveness, but, like

Yeats, because of his notion that spiritual growth occurs

through challenge and opposition, or in Blake's words: "opposi-

tion is true friendship"; "Without contraries is no progres-

sion."[38] Yeats writes of the value of such opposition in the

form of the "unknown communicators" in A Vision:

It was part of their [the spirits'] purpose to affirm
that all the gains of man come from conflict with the
opposite of true being.[39]

From this observation he was to develop his doctrine of the

"mask," which involves the dramatic projection of all the

everyday self is not; or as he puts it in <u>Autobiographies</u>:

I think that all happiness depends on the energy to
assume the mask of some other self....[40]

In Watkins' "Buried Light," a much more Yeatsian poem in style

than "Revisited Waters," the Blakean-Yeatsian contraries are

present in the form of falcon and dove:

All hunting opposites I praise.
I praise the falcon and the dove.
Night's intense darkness gives to days
True pictures of regenerate love....
....
Sons of true sacrifice are there.
Rivers and hills are in their hands.
The highest petal the winds bear
Has mocked the Serpent's swaddling-bands. (<u>CA</u>, p. 82)

Though this is an elegy for Dylan Thomas, the four-line tetra-

meter stanza form and the phrasing of the last line quoted sug-

gest Blake's "Infant Sorrow" in <u>Songs of Experience</u>;[41] yet we

are also reminded of Yeats in the rhythm of the tetrameters, the

syntax and diction ("mocked") and the bold rhetorical stance

("I praise"). Here Watkins takes up Yeats' Blakean idea as

developed in "The Dialogue of Self and Soul," "Ego Dominus Tuus,"

"Vacillation," and "The Man and the Echo" that Unity of Being

emerges out of the clash of contending contraries--primary and

antithetical man, self and soul, swan and dove. As Yeats puts

it in <u>A Vision</u>:

I had never read Hegel, but my mind had been full of
Blake from boyhood up and I saw the world as a conflict--
Spectre and Emanation--and could distinguish between a
contrary and a negation.[42]

The main difference between Watkins and Yeats with regard to their fascination with the clash of opposites is that Watkins sought a union of the contraries in religious synthesis, while Yeats tended to sustain a scepticism that enabled him to waver continually between the poles of pagan defiance and Christian resignation. The "tragic joy" of the Last Poems represents Yeats' final approach toward a resolution of the tensions within the self through an acceptance of conflict as the basis of life. Yet his position there is still a great distance from Watkins' more traditionally Christian sense of religious affirmation and commitment, in spite of Watkins' protestations to the contrary.

Watkins like Yeats invokes Blake frequently, not merely for his ideas and symbols, but because he represents to both the prophetic poet mediating his visions of Eternity to man. In the opening of the early long poem, "The Broken Sea," Watkins makes the fundamental ground of his affinity with Blake clear. Again he uses a Yeatsian three-beat rhymed measure such as we find in Yeats' "The Cat and the Moon." It is characteristic of him to borrow a Yeatsian cadence in his poems about Blake:

> And calm above disasters
> In the confused wake
> Of pitiless history
> I see the visions of Blake
> In their self-bridled power.
> Upon the regenerate sea
> Among the great Masters
> He measured the passing hour. (LV, p. 35)

Blake, like Yeats and all Watkins' great models, was heroic in his eyes because of his ability to conquer time through the visionary powers of imaginative art. In Ideas of Good and Evil,

Yeats makes clear--in terms that Watkins would have accepted--
his sense that Blake, with his complex symbolic imagination,
was an appropriate model for the twentieth-century poet.
Yeats, in fact, saw him as an early "symbolist" poet,[43] evoca-
tive and suggestive in his tightly-woven universe of intercon-
nected symbols relating to a hidden order of reality. Though
Watkins would not have wanted to make a religion of art or to
deny the relevance of the historical Jesus to Blake's "Jesus
the Imagination" as Yeats seemed to do in the early writings
when he was most under the pre-Raphaelite sway,[44] he would have
agreed with him that for Blake and for the true poet,

> the imaginative arts were...the greatest of Divine rev-
> elations, and that the sympathy with all living things,
> sinful and righteous alike, which the imaginative arts
> awaken, is that forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ.[45]

We can see, then, that Watkins was not only drawn to many
of the same figures named by Yeats in Autobiographies, A Vision
and the poems and essays, but that he is like him in his need to
invoke such a pantheon of literary and artistic heroes, and to
build his art out of response and opposition to those who
stirred his imagination.

Three of Watkins' poems, "Lover and Girl" (LU), "Angel and
Man" (CA), and "Dialogue" (F), for instance, reveal him handling
his Blakean contraries in a manner both similar to and distinct
from that of Yeats. His dialogues often express two poles of
consciousness in order to arrive at a synthesis in which the
claims of soul are seen as more comprehensive than those of self.
In Yeats' "Dialogue of Self and Soul" and "Vacillation," on the
other hand, Self holds the ascendency. Here in the "Dialogue"

Self has the final word:

> When such as I cast out remorse
> So great a sweetness flows into the breast
> We must laugh and we must sing,
> We are blest by everything,
> Everything we look upon is blest.[46]

Watkins' "Angel and Man," though written in a decidedly Yeatsian

conversational style, is closer in content to some seventeenth-

century dialogues like Herbert's "Dialogue" or Vaughan's

"Death: A Dialogue" where God or eternity confronts the finite

soul. In the following passage from Watkins' poem, though the

Man's doubts are viable, and though he too speaks the final

word, the Angel speaks from a higher level, having a greater

knowledge of the reality of life beyond the grave. Here, the

Man responds to the Angel's insistence that his Yeatsian moment

of "annunciation" has come:

> Man: Do not look at me, for I am ill,
> I would believe you, but I cannot.
> Too much is hidden.
> I hear your speech, but when your speech has
>   faded
> It is the earth that counts, where these men
>   lived.
> All these the eyelid buried,
> These the rough earth hides,
> Where are they, then?
>
> Angel: They are gone to the root of the tree.
> Just as the red sun went behind the hill,
> They pierced the shadows of imagined rest.
>
> Man: If sighs are ended they should wake now, too.
>
> Angel: They do wake, though your ears are not attuned
> To those sunk voices which the ground trans-
>   figures.
> They are like lightning, or the time in sleep
> Circling the earth from which the slow leaf
>   breaks.
> They do wake, in the murmur of the leaves.
>   (CA, pp. 58-59)

The Man's acceptance of his human limitation before spiritual

forces more powerful than he can grasp, and his desire to abide

within the confines of a known earthly reality parallels

Taliesin's statement in "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision"

from this same volume:

> ....Omniscience is not for man.
> Christen me, therefore, that my acts in the dark may be
>   just,
> And adapt my partial vision to the limitation of time.
> <div align="right">(<u>CA</u>, p. 21)</div>

The Man's final statement, however, is not a rejection of the

wisdom of the Angel, which he recognizes as transcending his

own, but an acceptance of man's relative condition in time--his

appropriate and justified fear or awe before the Absolute to

which he is but a spark or embryo in "solitary dark":

> I accept this for my portion. Grief was theirs,
> And grief, their lot, is likely to be mine.
> Yet in the last, most solitary dark
> There lives an equilibrium in the soul
> Depending on forgiveness. Grant me this,
> And I shall hold truth fast without remorse
> Under the turning stars. (<u>CA</u>, p. 59)

Like Yeats' Self of "The Dialogue of Self and Soul," Watkins'

Man casts out "remorse." The Yeatsian selfhood, however, con-

quers by actively celebrating the upheavals and impurities of

the temporal cycles even in "the frog-spawn of a blind man's

ditch," while Watkins' humanity or Man finds a quieter "equi-

librium of the soul" in "forgiveness." He is asking, in effect,

to be held within time in a state of grace as in the related

poem "Bread and the Stars" (see Chapter IV) which also explores

man's condition "under the turning stars."

Watkins wrote an early masque over the period 1935-1947

entitled <u>The Influences</u> which reveals him exploring the Yeatsian

form of the short, symbolic, lyrical drama. A yet unpublished

version of the play was produced in 1939 by Thomas Taig at the

Swansea Little Theatre, and a final version, a script for radio

completed in 1947, has been published by Bran's Head Press

(1977). Again, the theme of this early play is the Yeatsian-

Blakean one of the union of contraries--this time enacted

through the symbolic figures of a girl (a dancer) and an old man,

representing respectively the poles of youth and age, joy

(action) and reflection, folly and wisdom, or as Watkins writes

in the Prologue, "the life beyond time" and "the moment of

time."[47] Its simplicity of staging suggesting the Japanese Noh

drama, its use of (two) musicians, and the opening stage busi-

ness of the folding and unfolding of a black cloth are pure

pastiche of Yeats.[48] Watkins borrows devices used in plays like

At the Hawk's Well, Calvary and Purgatory. Even his figures

of the dance and dancer, which he uses elsewhere in "Touch with

Your Fingers" (CA) and "The Dancer in the Leaves" (BOD), sug-

gest Yeats' symbolic use of the dance in both the plays, and in

poems like "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" and "Sweet

Dancer." Though the play is too strongly imitative of Yeats

to display Watkins at his best, it does reveal again his close

concern with the problem of uniting antithetical poles of

being, a problem he was to address more clearly in his own voice

in "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd." There the contraries are repre-

sented by the inmates of the house, or the living, and the party

of singers bearing the Mari, or the dead. In The Influences as

in the "Ballad," Watkins is concerned with what he calls in a

note to the ballad, "the profane and sacred moment impossible to

realize while the clock-hands divide the Living from the Dead"
(BML, p. 55). In both the play and the poem the moment of po-
tential union and transformation is fleeting. The old man
achieves it only at the moment of death, and the "living" of
the ballad fail to achieve it at all by refusing to admit the
"holy Mari" to their feast. Therefore, Watkins' concern with
man's relation to the timeless moment is vital to him consis-
tently whether or not he clothes his antinomies in Yeatsian
form. Except for this brief excursion into the theatre, his
use of the longer dramatic poem in the "Ballad of the Mari
Lwyd" and its sequel the "Ballad of the Outer Dark," and his
experiments with the three long lyrics from LV, Watkins re-
mained almost exclusively a master of the short lyric poem. To
my mind, his experiments with longer forms are interesting, and
help reveal the complexity of his vision, but are ultimately
less successful than the condensed lyrics where his naturally
lighter and more fluent patterns find their most mature expres-
sion. The fact that he did experiment with other forms, how-
ever, demonstrates that he was a more varied poet than is usu-
ally assumed.

Watkins' concentration on a few intense images, like that
of dancer and aged man in The Influences, has shown him to be,
like Yeats, a poet in search of what Brian Keeble has called,
"a lyrical expression of symbolical content."[49] Because of
Yeats' early identification with Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites,
his love of symbolist drama and his appreciation of the French
poets Mallarmé, Verlaine and Valéry, he has been classified as a
post-symbolist poet. I believe the use of that label can be a

valid way of approaching his early work in particular. Yet it
is important to realize that Yeats developed as a poet by
steeping himself in Celtic, Neoplatonic, Christian, occult and
Indian sources, thus working from a deeper philosophical base
than that of the symbolists who were concerned primarily with
the evocation of symbols in a more private or subjective con-
text. In his mature work dating from the time of Responsibil-
ities (1914), and in late poems like "News for the Delphic
Oracle" and "The Circus Animal's Desertion," he was capable of
a severely ambivalent attitude toward his own earlier symbols
and mythic apparatus. After such questioning, he would often
return to them with renewed vigour and insight as in "Cuchulain
Comforted." I wish to designate him a symbolist poet, however,
in the sense that in the whole of his canon he works and re-
works his metaphors with such intensity and precision that they
become heightened symbols. He distinguishes such symbols from
metaphors in the early essay, "The Symbolism of Poetry":

> ....metaphors are not profound enough to be moving,
> when they are not symbols, and when they are symbols
> they are the most perfect, because the most subtle,
> outside of pure sound....[50]

Such universal symbols used to invoke complex intermixtures of
ideas and emotions are mysterious, and their use corresponds to
a view of the world that assumes mystery at its very heart.

I wish to argue that in the above sense alone Watkins is,
like Yeats, a symbolical poet, though he shared with him a
knowledge of the French symbolist movement. In his case, a
related nexus of key images concerned with the overthrow of
time is used symbolically.[51] Like the work of Yeats, Watkins'

poems must be read whole if one is to appreciate the full mean-
ing of each one individually. In Yeats, the symbols of swan,
Helen of Troy, the dome and tower, and so on, recur in ever-new
contexts, and one must assume the presence of cross-referencing
from poem to poem. In Watkins, where this is also the case, we
have already seen how the sycamore (representing longevity, fer-
tility, immortality) and Zacchaeus, images of white flowers and
white light, the fountain, the stream and the sea reappear in
poem after poem, gaining richness when read in the context of
the whole of his work. Though he does not invent his symbols
like Blake, Watkins assumes that they are in Blake's words, "a
Representation of what Eternally Exists Really and Unchange-
ably."[52] As Yeats expresses it in his essay on Blake's illus-
trations to Dante when distinguishing between allegory and
vision,

> A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some
> invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual
> flame; while allegory is one of many possible represen-
> tations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle,
> and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one
> is a revelation, the other an amusement.[53]

Again, the inherent religiosity of Watkins' vision led him to
choose symbols that were revelatory in this sense; and it was
this use of symbol in Yeats that caused him to declare Yeats a
religious poet.

The impact of Yeats' later style was revolutionary on Wat-
kins' own in helping him to move like Yeats from a highly Ro-
mantic, image-laden verse to a more austere, tight and refined
mode of expression. When he speaks in the essay, "The Poetry
of W. B. Yeats," of how Yeats' Muse freed the Irish poet from

"that early affectation, that artificiality of poetic dic-
tion,"[54] one feels that Watkins is speaking simultaneously of

his own struggle to achieve a more contemporary idiom. As Gwen

Watkins has stated in a note,

> ....the fact that music could be made out of bare and
> ordinary language--'the tongue of the common people'--
> was a revolution in style for him as great as the 'dolce
> stil nuova' of Dante, and this was necessary to complete
> the 'revolution of sensibility' which VW refers to as
> taking place in his 21st year. Until his style caught
> up with his feelings the real poet couldn't begin to
> develop, and this was what Yeats did for him.[55]

Watkins' initial identification with Yeats was increased

when he found that they both believed in the value of a strong

formal structure and a strict musicality. Leslie Norris has

noticed that the incantatory style common to both is based on a

similar sensitivity to sound and rhythm. He points out that in

his early verse Watkins handles some of Yeats' personal rhythms

awkwardly, as in "Portrait of a Friend" (BML) where he borrows

the short Yeatsian line of three accented syllables and three

or four unaccented as used in "Easter 1916" and "The Fisher-

man."[56] Watkins must have been pleased to discover not only

that Yeats composed aurally (with emphasis on sound) as he did,

but that their habits of revision were almost identical. In

"New Year 1965," Watkins describes Yeats' method of composition:

> First of all he would make a prose draft, and then move
> it into a lyrical shape, until slowly, sometimes chanting
> the lines all through the night, he had arrived at the
> purest form of his thought, its most direct and muscular
> expression. At last the whole poem would come together
> in a moment, like a click of a box, as he once described
> it.[57]

Watkins was to speak frequently of the problem of "resolving a

poem," that is, of how to discover through such a process as

Yeats calls "sedentary toil" (see "Ego Dominus Tuus") its final form.[58]

Many of Watkins' tributes to Yeats, like the earlier-mentioned "Yeats in Dublin," seem to suffer from a too obvious emulation of his master. "Yeats' Tower," "In Memory of Elizabeth Corbet Yeats" (BML) and "The Last Poems of Yeats" (BML) are notable examples of Watkins in a self-consciously Yeatsian mood. In "Yeats' Tower," Watkins borrows a Yeatsian ballad refrain, "O under grass, O under grass, the secret"; in "In Memory of Elizabeth Corbet Yeats" he uses a typically Yeatsian epitaph such as the Irish poet employs in "Swift's Epitaph"; and in "The Last Poems of Yeats," he uses stanzas of two-line epigrammatic couplets to rehearse some of Yeats' major themes and symbols, concluding with the symbol of the swan to represent the union of contraries:

> Even as I read those letters there
> Two white swans are meeting in air;
>
> Two white swans are beating their wings
> Terrified, lost in flight, he [Yeats] sings. (BW, p. 37)

Though it is a legitimate practice to honour a poet by writing in his style, many of these poems fail to be more than set pieces. The early "Yeats' Tower" is exceptional, however, in that in spite of its Yeatsian diction and phrasing, the content is Watkins' own. The image of the "marguerite" whose "doom that never comes, comes soon," foreshadows his use of ephemeral blossoms in the "Music of Colours" sequence. Blossoms are also conjoined here, as in the later poems, with the "Dead saints" who have crossed from life to death. Here the "snow-white blood" has blown from the wind stirred beneath the touch of the "finger

of God" of the first two stanzas. Nowhere in Yeats do we find

such an explicit statement of God's direct intervention in the

natural world:

> Surely from this [the wind] the snow-white blood is blown;
> Gold marguerite's doom that never comes, comes soon.
> Dead saints, white clouds, they stop not near the shrine
> But cross the skeleton harp, the unplucked bone:
> O under grass, O under grass, the secret.   (BML, p. 27)

Like many of Watkins' early poems written during the time he was

in close association with Thomas, this one suffers from a cer-

tain obscurity or deliberate ambiguity of syntax (unclear or

multiple referents, obscure appositive phrases), yet it shows

Watkins beginning to explore the unique imaginative landscape

which was to haunt him in later poems.

A much later Yeatsian poem from Fidelities, "Earth and

Fire" (F, p. 12), reveals Watkins working in the more condensed,

tighter style of his own later lyrics where the presence of

Yeats has become well-integrated. The rhythm is Watkins' own

variation of Yeats' short four and three-beat lines. The sym-

bol of fire (stanza 1), the idea of the blessedness of "the

moment" (see Yeats' "Vacillation IV"), and the notion of an

exaltation "uniting death and birth" (stanza 3) could be traced

to some of Yeats' poems where he expresses his ideal of a "cold

and passionate" verse (see "The Fisherman"). I quote the poem

in its entirety to illustrate the point that Watkins has here

adapted elements of Yeats' later style, particularly the heroic

attitude, to express his own unique vision of the soul fixed on

God:

All do not seek the exalted fire;
All do not let the moment bless.
And yet, what so rewards desire,
So nourishes? Confess:
He's wrong who toils for less.

Measure the ground and weigh its yield,
Changing the crops while seasons turn.
Yet who can say a barren field
Where the dry brambles burn
Brings not the best return?

Then the fine breath of wintry air
Answers the crisp and stubborn earth.
Without the exaltation there
Uniting death and birth,
What is a man's song worth?

Earth's natural order brings a wealth
Of promise, bounty, and regret.
Through changes he alone has health
And writes off all the debt
Whose heart on heaven is set. (F, p. 12)

The poem concerns the poet's decision to strive for the highest

level of poetic expression--that which embodies religious ec-

stasy. In its celebration of "Earth's natural order" and use

of the metaphor of the barren field Watkins' poem is distinct

from anything Yeats wrote. There is in the whole of Watkins, in

fact, what seems to me a less violent opposition than we find

in Yeats between the ideal and the natural orders, the dome and

tower and the "fury and the mire of human veins" of "Byzan-

tium."[59] Though Watkins distinguishes clearly between the

"exalted fire" of heaven and the claims of "the crisp and stub-

born earth," he does not shift back and forth between a choice

of first one and then the other as Yeats tends to do in the

dialogue poems. Nor does he set up a dichotomy between perfec-

tion of the life and perfection of the work as Yeats does in

"The Choice." In the final stanza, in fact, the implication is

clear that by simultaneously setting his heart on heaven and

adjusting himself to the "wealth / Of promise, bounty, and regret" provided by "Earth's natural order" he is best equipped to recover what Yeats called Unity of Being, or at least a state of spiritual and aesthetic health. At a second level, the poem establishes the necessary union of inspiration ("the exalted fire") and toil (the preparing and planting of the "stubborn earth") in the production of the poem. Like many of Yeats' later poems (i.e. "High Talk," "The Circus Animal's Desertion" and "Under Ben Bulben") it stands as a self-conscious exploration of the poet's craft. Unlike Yeats, Watkins does not constantly revive and satirize his own earlier interpretation of myth, dramatizing the various aspects of himself, but he is concerned to analyse the human versus divine elements involved in the creative process. The central question both he and Yeats raise is this: "What is the nature of the creative act?"

"Earth and Fire" is a particularly fine example of the later Watkins at his best and an excellent summation of his exalted ideal of poetry. The theme that the poet should strive uncompromisingly for the "exalted fire" of divine inspiration is reinforced nicely by the heightened but sometimes natural or colloquial diction (i.e. What is a man's song worth?), the use of rhetorical question and vatic reply to suggest an interior dialogue. The opposing elements of fire and earth are played off and reunited by the "fine breath of wintry air" in stanza three, representing man's breathing or "aspiration" (in the etymological sense) toward God. The paradoxes that the burned and "barren field" of the heart tested by adversity yields to heaven "the best return," and that by setting the heart on

heaven one gains earth as well, proceed from the basic Christian principle articulated elsewhere in Watkins' verse that to lose the self is to gain it.

Another central theme Watkins shares with Yeats is that of the consolation offered by great art. Like Yeats, he was interested in what he recognized in "The Joy of Creation" as "the links between poetry, music, and the visual arts."[60] In the following excerpts from that essay, he writes mainly of the visual arts:

> A picture, like any work of art, is an interpretation of life. Life is a miracle, and art becomes a miracle when it is a perfect refraction of life....
> ....
>   What happened when, after Michelangelo's labours, the doors of the Sistine Chapel were opened? Was anyone among those who entered able to seize more than a fraction of the imaginative power displayed?
> ....
>   ....A supreme work of art is able to persuade us that it has existed forever, and that it is we, who believed in the fugitive nature of time, who were deceived.[61]

The reference to immortal works of art as "miracle" providing man with an escape from time recalls the use Yeats makes of the Ravenna and Sicilian mosaics in "Sailing to Byzantium," the lapis carving by Callimachus in "Lapis Lazuli" and the marble sculptures and ivory carvings of Phidias in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and "The Statues," to cite only a few examples. In a letter to The Listener (Jan. 22, 1948), Watkins speaks of how Byzantium is for Yeats "a recurrent symbol of vision."[62] There he argues that Yeats' symbols of art serve a purgative function in the poem "Byzantium":

> In this poem ["Byzantium"] Yeats again examines the soul's relation to works of art; he finds that architect and goldsmith have set up miracles of workmanship

to stand in mockery of "all that man is"....
        ....[F]or the works of art, the cathedral dome,
the mosaic pavement and the golden bird, continue to
have a power of purgation over all "blood-begotten
spirits" who come near them.[63]

And he adds that in "Lapis Lazuli," one of his favorite poems,

Yeats, with a subtlety he never excelled, recalls that
ancient miracle, the joy underlying suffering, the in-
violable joy of creation, artists as world-builders
triumphing over suffering and death.[64]

The recurrent statement that art is "miracle" capable of de-

feating time may be an echo of Yeats' comment in A Vision that

the "round bird-like eyes of Byzantine sculpture" seemed to be

"staring at miracle."[65] The Yeatsian image of the golden bird

gazing into past, present and future (viewing prophetically

"what is past, or passing, or to come" as in Blake's "Hear the

Voice of the Bard! / Who Present, Past, & Future, sees" from

Songs of Experience) became for Watkins a powerful symbol of the

artist as "world-builder triumphing over suffering and death."

In his own work, Watkins was to utilize the "ut pictura

poesis" tradition in a like manner. Michelangelo's Adam, or

"the Sistine wonder," as Watkins calls it in "Epithalamion"

(DB), is referred to in "The Immortal in Nature" (CA), "Angelo's

Adam" (A) and "Resting Places" (F). We recall that Yeats pic-

tures Michelangelo's hand moving "to and fro" across the Sistine

roof at the end of "Long-legged Fly." In Watkins' sonnet, "An-

gelo's Adam," the figure of Adam appears as a Yeatsian sculp-

tured image of masculine energy:

Design upon this image holds the vast
Will of the sculptor no desire could speak.
There the strict outline overcame the weak
Before the face could hold the radiance cast
And let that finger gather all the Past,
Revealing at a stroke in light oblique

> In muscular strength of neck and curve of cheek
> The harmony of line for which all fast. (A, p. 65)

In the sestet, the Michelangelo sculpture is compared to the

more natural image of the kestrel in flight. Even in the use

of the kestrel hawk, Watkins' poem suggests Yeats' use of birds

of prey in "The Second Coming" (i.e. the falcon) or At the

Hawk's Well:

> Exuberantly the kestrel rides the storm
> Motionless, carved in air. It is the form
> Speaking against the false forms it cast out
> Whose fixed proportions still return with grace.
> Athletic genius has no room for doubt
> And laughs at all designs to take its place. (A, p. 65)

A later poem, "Resting Places," hails in a single breath the

artist and the scientist--Michelangelo and Galileo:

> Adam lies fast in Rome:
> The moment's magnitude brought near to man.
>
> He drew that body's praise,
> Gazing on God. What centuries have since
>
> Turned from those eyes to wage
> Ageless, destructive war, all worth made cheap.
>
> Hushed in a single nave,
> Grave Angelo and Galileo sleep. (F, p. 68)

For Watkins, art which draws "body's praise" is an inherently

religious act made possible by "gazing on God," and is abso-

lutely opposed to the insanity of "ageless, destructive war."

Here Watkins makes one of his few, but potent, directly politi-

cal comments. The Renaissance painter and sculptor, "Grave

Angelo" (with a pun on "grave"), is joined to his antithesis,

the scientist and philosopher, Galileo, whose confirmation that

the earth circled the sun was to issue in a new view of the cos-

mos. Watkins is suggesting here Blake's idea that "Beneath the

bottom of the Graves...Contrarieties are equally true."[66]

Other poems by Watkins based on works of art are the pre-
viously analysed "The Healing of the Leper" (LU) inspired by
Botticelli's painting by that name, "The Cave-Drawing" (LU) by
the caves of Lascaux, "The Lady with the Unicorn" (LU) by the
French unicorn tapestries, and "Deposition" (F) by Ceri Rich-
ards' painting of the crucifixion.[67] Perhaps the most memor-
able of these is "The Lady with the Unicorn," an almost Medi-
eval meditation on the famous sixteenth-century tapestries from
the Musée de Cluny in Paris. In a letter to The Listener (Jan.
20, 1949), Watkins notes that the tapestries were ordered by
Jean Chabannes-Vandenesse in honour of his fiancée for their
marriage. He writes:

> In my poem I have tried to interpret the sense of har-
> mony, valid for all ages, which these tapestries gave
> me when I saw them for the first time at the Paris Ex-
> hibition of Tapestry in 1946.[68]

Yeats' use of the unicorn in association with an eternity of
vital energies in The Unicorn from the Stars and as a symbol of
strength, chastity and creative power in The Player Queen may
have also contributed to Watkins' fascination with this mytho-
logical beast. In "The Lady with the Unicorn" he explores the
abovementioned "sense of harmony valid for all ages" through
the marriage metaphor, playing on the idea that the six tapes-
tries represent the marriage of the five senses with a sixth or
spiritual sense through divine love. Each of the first five
stanzas describes one of the tapestries as it relates to one of
the five senses. Working very exactly with the rich, heraldic
iconography of the tapestries, he explores the senses of sight
(stanza 1), sound or music (stanza 2), smell (stanza 3), touch

(stanza 4), taste (stanza 5) and a higher sense unifying the five (stanzas 6, 7 and 8). The opposition of the heraldic lion and "chaste unicorn" (representing the two aspects of Christ) culminates in the synthesis or marriage union of the opposites of lover and beloved in a higher love in the last two stanzas. The "sovereign balm" referred to is spiritual love. As the lover's gaze unites him with the beloved, so, Watkins suggests, life unites with art for the observer in the contemplation of the tapestries. In this poem, Watkins is at his most deliberately "artificial" in style and structure in order to create a courtly, Medieval atmosphere. To enhance this atmosphere he borrows a stanzaic form used by Milton in his proem to the "Nativity Ode." Here he varies the rhyme scheme of the rhyme royal of Chaucer (ababbcc) and finishes it with a final Alexandrine:

O sovereign balm to heal all mortal illness:	a
Long let him look, and still he will find stillness,	a
Her one betrothed, who sees her museful face.	b
This lady, with her flowers and hounds,	c
Woven in light, in air, in wooded grounds,	c
Transmits a glory wrought about her face,	b
Caught in a sacred bond within the encircling space.	b

Let him look softly, with some seventh sense
Breaking that circle's hushed magnificence,
And see what universe her love controls,
Moving with hushed, divine intent
Through the five senses to their sacrament
Whose Eden turns between two silent poles,
Creating with pure speed that harmony of souls. (LU, p. 103)

Though comparable to Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" in its theme that "the artifice of eternity" can draw man out of time, the poem's emblematic imagery, elevated diction, high seriousness of tone, and Miltonic form suggest Milton rather than Yeats, and

the Miltonic conception of art as that which translates between time and eternity--man and God--that which refers beyond itself to a transcendent source.

In Yeats, the timelessness of art sometimes seems to be offered as a substitute for religion--aesthetic replacing religious feeling. He writes in Ideas of Good and Evil, for instance, that,

> The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things.[69]

In Autobiographies, he describes how for him and his generation "historical Christianity had dwindled to a box of toys."[70] Responding to what he saw as the failure of traditional religious institutions he wrote, again in Autobiographies, of how he channelled his own intense religious feeling into a world of art or "poetic tradition":

> I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition.[71]

For Watkins, as for Eliot who challenged Yeats on this matter in After Strange Gods,[72] the substitution of historical religion by a religion of art was never really possible. Though Yeats repudiated his early aestheticism in his later work, and even describes in Autobiographies some fleeting moments when he experienced a feeling of Christian surrender,[73] it is fair to say that he was, though a supernaturalist, not a Christian in any real sense. In his own prose, Watkins clearly refuses to make an idol of art, and, though ranking it as man's "most exhilarating" and "searching, activity," subordinates it to the

principle of charity:

> I am not saying that the need or ability to create art
> is the highest and most indispensable gift of man:
> charity is clearly that. But I do say that art is man's
> most exhilarating, as well as his most searching, activ-
> ity.[74]

Yeats would not necessarily set art above acts of charity

(love), but there does run through his work a strong sense of a

dichotomy between what he calls "Hodos Chameliontos" or the

"winding path of the serpent" which the artist, "sanctity's

scapegrace brother," treads,[75] and the "straight-shooting path

of the saint."[76] In many of his later poems he chooses the for-

mer path out of a sense that a search for perfection of the life

destroys the wellsprings of art by denying the complexities of

lived experience; that to become a Christian in either the or-

thodox or mystical sense is to deny the senses and emotions,

that is, the passionate, virile, full-bodied humanity in which

art is grounded. For him, to take the Christian path of surren-

der to a personal Deity would be clearly to renounce experience

and commit a kind of aesthetic suicide. In "Anima Hominis"

from Per Amica Silentia Lunae he writes,

> the saint has turned away, and because he renounced
> Experience itself, he will wear his mask as he finds it.[77]

The way of the Christian saint and the way of the Platonic mys-

tical philosopher who seeks union with the One are equally dan-

gerous to the artist for the later Yeats, who writes in A Vis-

ion:

> Yet even the truth into which Plato dies is a form of
> death, for when he separates the Eternal Ideas from
> Nature and shows them self-sustained he prepares the
> Christian desert and the Stoic suicide.[78]

These sorts of observations led him to satirize Plato, Plotinus and Pythagoras in some of his middle and later work, writing vehemently in "The Tower":

> I mock Plotinus' thought
> And cry in Plato's teeth,
> Death and life were not
> Till man made up the whole,
> Made lock, stock and barrel
> Out of his bitter soul....[79]

Watkins challenges Yeats on the point that acceptance of Christ or Christianity entails a rejection of experience in "The Parthenon," a poem that exalts the friezes on the Parthenon in the Yeatsian sense that art proclaims the heroic nature of man:

> The Parthenon, the pride of man,
> The Muse of Homer and the Fates,
> The marbles of Athenian dawn,
> Reject them: they return in Yeats.
>
> The impassive heroes match the force
> And calm of his daemonic verse.
> Into the stone he drives his horse
> That time nor death deters.
>
> He swears, the Muses most exult
> In the hard clash of steel on steel.
> When conflict ends the words are dulled,
> No pleasure in the song they feel. (F, p. 14)

In his celebration of Yeats' heroic attitude, Watkins may be recalling the Irish poet's remark in A Vision on the "primary phases" of Greek art:

> Those riders upon the Parthenon had all the world's
> power in their moving bodies, and in a movement that
> seemed, so were the hearts of man and beast set upon it,
> that of a dance.[80]

In the fourth stanza (lines 3 and 4), however, Watkins breaks with Yeats on the issue of the necessary separation of martyr (saint) and hero (artist):

> And rightly from the grave he [Yeats] draws
> The athletic pulse of deathless art.

> Why, then, must passion break those laws,
> The martyr and the hero part? (F, p. 14)

Watkins' poem gathers together the heroic images of "strong

men" of "bronze" and "iron," and shows them to be awaiting their

completion in Christ, the ultimate "prince" or hero whose "love

controls" original sin, that is, "Time's error, and the primal

fault":

> Forever, when those horsemen move,
> In souls of Earth's divided sons
> The cadence of enduring love
> Is destined to subdue the bronze.
>
> Though strong men laugh at human kind,
> Though bronze endure and iron ring,
> The metaphysics of the mind
> Are secret, and a harder thing.
>
> And bones of unregenerate souls
> Laid by the sword in their cold vault
> Fast for a prince whose love controls
> Time's error, and the primal fault.
>
> Still, where those ancient heroes fought,
> Proud horses rear their heads in stone;
> And still the bridles horsemen caught
> Move in the marble, and are gone. (F, pp. 14-15)

The poem rests finally on the paradox that self-sacrifice

is the highest form of heroism. By implying that art can be

based on self-resignation as well as self-conflict, it is a

clear response to Yeats' stance in "Vacillation" where "Heart,"

in contrast to "Soul," embraces "original sin" (asking, "What

theme had Homer but original sin?") as a more favorable creative

ground than Christian sanctity. There Yeats writes:

> I--though heart
>   might find relief
> Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief
> What seems most welcome in the tomb--play a predestined
>   part.
> Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.
> The lion and the honeycomb, what has Scripture said?
> So get you gone, Von Hügel, though with blessings on
>   your head.[81]

In the earlier "Song of the Good Samaritan" (LU), we observed

in Chapter I that Watkins rejected Greek heroism (the "heroic

Pegasus") in favor of Christian charity (the Samaritan's deed).

In this later poem, however, he seems more capable of integrat-

ing the heroic attitude into his Christian position by arguing

that love itself is heroic. It is as if by this time he has

found a more satisfactory reconciliation of what he calls in

"To Hölderlin," "the Christian and the Greek" (A, p. 48). The

last stanza of "The Parthenon" is a tribute to the unknown art-

ist who was able to capture in stone the magnificence of the

"Proud horses," and a partial concession to Yeats' notion that

"the Muses most exult / In the hard clash of steel on steel,"

that is, in the realm of human conflict. The effort of the

poem, however, is to raise that conflict into the realm of the

hard and secret "metaphysics of the mind." It would seem to me

that Yeats' opposition enabled Watkins to develop a tougher-

minded, more comprehensive Christianity, one which would incor-

porate heroic values within a Christian context.

In the poem "Semele" (F) also, we can see Watkins reinter-

preting, modifying and challenging Yeats' position in "Leda and

the Swan" by using Semele (a Leda figure) as a symbol of femi-

nine (maternal), self-sacrificing love comparable to the Chris-

tian "agape" love Paul describes in Phil. 2:8 when he speaks of

Christ's "humbling" of himself (his self-emptying or kenosis).

In Yeats' poem dealing with the visitation of a mortal woman

(Leda) by a god (Zeus) the encounter represents the union of

opposites at the beginning of an age that initiates a new his-

torical cycle. Leda is passive, "mastered by the brute blood

of the air." In contrast, Watkins' Semele, though doomed to the god's fiery embrace for asking to see him in his glory, stands heroic in her disinterested love for Dionysus, the son who will survive her when reborn from Zeus' thigh. Watkins ignores the element of passionate union and concentrates on Semele's other-centered love for her son--a love similar to that of Mary for Christ. Like Yeats in his play, The Resurrection (1931), Watkins associates Christ and Dionysus; for the vine imagery is implicitly sacramental, suggesting the wine cult of Dionysus, but foreshadowing the "half divine" child, Christ, who was also called "the Vine." Whereas Yeats narrates the encounter objectively from outside, Watkins focuses on the woman's maternal feelings, having her speak directly in the first person:

> I, killed by lightning, loved the vine,
> My unborn child, being half divine,
> Mingling a twofold fire shall make
> The crushed wine glitter for my sake
> Who never saw him. May he know
> The soil of Greece where vine-leaves grow,
> And may my shade in this true place
> Protect him from his father's face.
> Infant of one he cannot see,
> May he be saved from following me. (F, p. 20)

In spite of Watkins' disagreements with Yeats on the issue of a conflict between Christian self-abnegation and creative expression, what he does share clearly with him is the sense that artists are what Shelley in his Defense of Poetry called "the unacknowledged legislators of the world."[82] In "The Forge of the Solstice," he invokes three Welsh painters, David Jones, Ceri Richards and Alfred Janes as "artificers" who redeem time. In "The Turning of the Stars" (DB), he names Raphael and

Perugino just as Yeats does Michelangelo in "An Acre of Grass"
or "Her Vision in a Wood."[83] Like Yeats, who wrote of the
"Quattrocento finger" that "fashioned" the image of Leda in
"Among School Children," or who alludes to Poussin's "Marriage
of Peleus and Thetis" in "News for the Delphic Oracle," Watkins
was particularly drawn to the great master painters of the Re-
naissance. He admired them for their ability to transform cre-
ative acts into acts of joyous self-surrender.

As noted earlier, many of Watkins' poems using birds to
represent the visionary artist owe much to Yeats for whom the
symbols of dove and hawk, swan and heron were emblems of cre-
ative contraries—dove and hawk representing primary states;
swan and heron antithetical. "The Coots" and "The Peacocks"
(LU), "The Dead Shag," "Art and the Ravens" and "The Heron"
(DB), "The Crane" (A), "Eyes of an Eagle" (F), "Dusk Tide" and
"Night and the Swan" (BOD) are only a few examples. While Wat-
kins' bird poems on the whole reveal more exact powers of nat-
ural observation than those of Yeats, they often enact the
Yeatsian battle of contraries. In "The Crane," the male bird
"stares into miracle" as he performs the ecstatic dance which
his natural or earthly counterpart, the female crane, cannot
(or will not) comprehend:

> Drawn by the opposite
> Of solitude at her side,
> She eludes the startled fit
> Delusion has deified,
> The exalted, staring eyes
> Fixed on remotest space.
> Against their abstraction she supplies
> A movement in time and place. (A, p. 26)

A similar dialectic of opposites between male and female birds

is played out earlier in "The Peacocks" (LU) where the masculine

power displayed in the male bird becomes a symbol of the artist

possessed by the Muse or spiritual power. With his considerable

sensitivity to the Christian iconographic tradition, Watkins is

likely to have known that the peacock was a symbol of the incor-

ruptible soul in Christian art.[84] In this poem, the female pea-

cock's "lack of interest" or seeming indifference to the male's

fan-tailed display of beauty and power represents the fear of

the earthbound, materialistic mind before divinity--the uncom-

prehending response of the everyday world to the divinely pos-

sessed artist:

> Her lord [the male peacock], who hates her gift of sense,
> Puts on new glory where she goes.
> Her lack of interest makes him tense,
> Until at last a splendour flows
> Down the divine, contracting plumes,
> And there, while she unearth's a pod,
> His hurricane of light consumes
> All but the terror of her god. (LU, p. 28)

The obvious use of sexual imagery to express spiritual ecstasy,

and the sense that the contraries of abstract thought and sense

need each other for completion makes this an expression in Wat-

kins' own style of some very Yeatsian themes.

In "The Heron," probably the most Yeatsian of Watkins'

bird poems, he takes up a symbol Yeats uses in Calvary, The

Herne's Egg and several of his poems. In "Yeats in Dublin,"

Watkins, in fact, compares Yeats himself to a great heron:

> Then as the heron
> Rises from the stream,
> He raised from the haunted chair
> His tall, proud frame
> In that dazzling background
> Of heroic dream. (LV, p. 17)

"The Heron" takes up the same image and applies it to the

"time-killing" artist in general. Watkins also may be remember-
ing Thomas' use of the heron in "Poem in October" when he speaks
of the "heron / Priested-shore," or in "Over Sir John's Hill"
when he describes the "holy stalking heron / In the river Towy."
For in "A True Picture Restored" (A, p. 29) and the uncollected
"Elegy for the Latest Dead" (Botteghe Oscure, X, 1954), two
elegies for Thomas, Watkins clearly associates the heron,
"Transfixed...with holiest eye," with his friend. Here in "The
Heron" the mind of the bird, like that of Yeats' "Long-legged
Fly," "moves upon silence." Its undistracted, motionless fixity
on eternity makes it oblivious to changes induced by time:

> The cloud-backed heron will not move:
> He stares into the stream.
> He stands unfaltering with the gulls
> And oyster-catchers scream.
> He does not hear, he cannot see
> The great white horses of the sea,
> But fixes eyes on stillness
> Below their flying team. (DB, p. 46)

Finally, increasingly exact powers of observation charac-
terize the work of Watkins' maturity. The following passages
from "Poet and Goldsmith" and "The Guest" demonstrate his abil-
ity to present nature objectively by describing the behavior of
birds with great accuracy:

> He [Taliesin] was now alone. The lovers had wandered
>   across
> The field. About him the air fell sweet with singing.
> Very close to his eyes a bird was carrying moss.
> It gathered a wisp of straw, pecked, and looked up,
> And flew to a secret nest. He watched the bough
> Tremble. Now it was still. There was dew on the field.
> Petals began to close. The roots of the elms
> Held his wonder: 'Be warned: about you are symbols.'
>   (CA, p. 36)

> The cliff's crossed paths lay silvered with slug tracks
> Where webs of hanging raindrops caught the sun.
> A thrush with snail cocked sideways like an axe

> Knocked with quick beak to crack it on a stone....
>
> There, halfway down the cliff, in fallen flight
> I came on plumage, tufted claws, wide wings,
> A white owl dead, feeding fritillary light
> Into those roots from which the heather springs.
>
> (F, p. 26)

Less often in Yeats do we find the same kind of faithfulness to a natural landscape or focusing of insight through consideration of animal behavior as demonstrated here when Watkins describes the activity of a bird "carrying moss," the exact turn of a thrush's head as it cracks a snail on a stone. Masterfully the repetition of the hard "c" and "k" sounds ("Knocked with quick beak to crack it on a stone") creates an almost onomatopoeic effect. In Yeats, natural images abound, but they are less detailed and individualized, more fused with his mythological symbolism. Concerned more intensely with the dramatic projection of the self upon the world, he was never in danger of being called a mere "nature poet" as Watkins was by critics who failed to perceive the symbolic quality of his descriptions of nature.

A final area where Watkins seems to be following a precedent set by Yeats is in his series of poems dealing with children. Poems like "A Prayer" and "The Caryatids (for Rhiannon asleep)" (DB), "Precision of the Wheel (to my son)" (A), and "For a First Birthday" (BW) are obviously indebted to Yeats' "A Prayer for My Daughter," "A Prayer for My Son" and "Among School Children." As might be expected, however, Watkins' prayer-like addresses to Christ and his prayerful words spoken to sleeping children are much more specifically in the Christian devotional mode, and read more like seventeenth-century

religious meditations. In "A Prayer," for instance, Watkins asks like Yeats in "A Prayer for My Daughter" for certain blessings or gifts that will equip the child to face the "coming age." Yeats' desire is that his daughter shall be "learned" in "courtesy," and enter at last as a bride into "a house / Where all's accustomed, ceremonious"--that she achieve equanimity of soul and inner balance. The ideal he establishes is that of the country manor houses (like his friend Lady Gregory's at Coole) where a continuity of traditional humanistic values survives. Watkins' hope, in contrast, is that his sleeping son might in adulthood avoid desire for the praise of the world by seeking uncompromisingly the "uncounted praise" that belongs to the courageous Christian. Both poets wish that their offspring might rise above what Yeats calls "intellectual hatred" and Watkins, contentious "argument," but Watkins' poem alone points toward resolution in Christ, the "bridegroom" of the following lines:

> I pray that he may have
> Recourse in argument
> After the falling wave
> To what remains unspent,
> That he may stoop and dare
> To gather for his own
> In that loud, hostile air
> One word's deliberate throne,
> I mean uncounted praise,
> The bridegroom's calm return
> For which all nights and days
> In speculation burn. (DB, p. 40)

Watkins asks further that his son may meet the tests of time with unwavering faith and enter at last his "Christ-appointed house." In "The Precision of the Wheel," Watkins' references to the "wheel of prayer" of the turning year, and his own

wheeling mind which twelve years ago at his son's birth "Had

run upon a coil," suggest Yeats' symbol of winding gyres. Like

Yeats' mind in "Among School Children," Watkins' moves back and

forth between memories of art (the unicorn tapestries and his

earlier poem on them) and the present situation, that is, his

son's twelfth birthday:

> Your birthday; and, that night,
> I stopped, to bind
> What I had come to write.
> That month my mind
> Had run upon a coil
> Where light newborn
> Revealed in weaver's toil
> Lady and unicorn. (A, p. 12)

Finally, Watkins' "For a First Birthday" is like Yeats' "A

Prayer for My Son" in its request for Christ's protection for a

young child. Yet it is the least Yeatsian of Watkins' poems on

children in language and tone, being written for a baptism and

containing notions of personal redemption and eternal life:

> Lay, gentle Christ, Your hands upon this child,
> And let her stature, this first year fulfilled,
> Spring from the font made pure by darkest tears,
> Since the deep love the woman bears
> Quickens her life already, gives her grace
> As if all light were born again
> And the first love the Virgin bore to men
> Entered her eyes and streamed forth from her face....
> ....
> Clouded indeed are eyes that dream
> Our souls have not been purchased by His love.
>   (BW, p. 22)

We have seen that Watkins' affinities with Yeats are both

stylistic and thematic. Though overpowered by him in the early

BML, he later comes to handle Yeats' characteristic themes and

symbols with his own uniquely Christian emphasis. I would sug-

gest further that Watkins' mind is not as intellectual and sys-

tematizing as that of Yeats; that his vision is less worldly and

full-bodied--more strictly delimited or concentrated on his
Christian themes. In essence, his work lacks the strong vein of
scepticism that runs throughout that of Yeats, and with it the
dramatic quality of imagination that enacts first one side and
then the other of an ongoing debate between self and soul. Many
of Yeats' quarrels with Christianity were quarrels with the
historical Church--particularly the late Victorian church which
he believed to have put too much emphasis on belief and moral-
ity, rather than on the essential experiences of the soul.
Since Watkins, though orthodox in his religious practice, saw
himself as a more mystical, Blakean Christian in the sense that
Blake's Jesus represents Imaginative power at its height, he did
not feel that he and Yeats differed radically on the essential
metaphysical questions. Where he does depart from Yeats is not
in Yeats' struggles with the historical church, but, as I sug-
gested earlier, in his notion that the Christian mystical way
involves a dichotomization of flesh and spirit, self and soul,
and ends in a negation of the passions on which art is based.
Watkins believed, in contrast, that to affirm Christ is to
affirm both body and soul, flesh and spirit, and to move toward
the very "Unity of Being" Yeats sought. In "Though to Please
Man" Watkins makes a summary statement of the inadequacy of the
heroic or tragic attitude without a sense of "grace" or a re-
ceptivity to the love of God to complement it. Perhaps Watkins'
use of a Yeatsian rhetorical style and tone of defiance here in
a poem refuting Yeats is a quiet irony on his part. Whether or
not intended as a response to Yeats, the poem establishes
clearly the distinctness of his position and of his poetic

sensibility:

> Though to please man I might
> Affect a scornful air
> Setting against the night
> Strong emblems of despair,
> I am too much in debt
> To that strong love which cried:
> Lay your life down, and set
> No store by scorn or pride.
> For what were all men's praise
> Or worldly recompense
> If in the coming days
> A dropped voice, more intense
> Than any other said:
> I too had solitude
> And felt, being clothed and fed,
> Nothing but gratitude?
> How can I fail to see
> That living fountain spill
> In equal harmony
> Over Assissi's hill
> And here, wherever feet
> Walk with considerate pace,
> No intellect complete
> Lacking the hand of grace?   (BW, p. 31)

Part II: The Friendship with Thomas

No two poets could have been greater temperamental oppo-
sites than Vernon Watkins and Dylan Thomas from their first mu-
tual encounter on Pennard in 1935. Watkins was introverted,
self-effacing, Cambridge-educated, proficient at three lan-
guages, and tenaciously Christian; Thomas was extroverted, dra-
matic, less well-educated and basically agnostic. Watkins was
living in relative isolation on Gower working steadily at
Lloyd's bank in Swansea, while Thomas was already catapulting
between Wales and his frantic pub life in London. Yet they be-
came close friends immediately and developed a personal and lit-
erary relationship that was to last until the time of Thomas'
death in 1953. These two essentially different sorts of poets
were drawn together by their shared Welsh backgrounds, their
mutual opposition to the sociological and political writing of
the thirties, and by a common sensitivity to language and con-
cern for meticulous craftsmanship in their verse. The purpose
of this section is to explore some aspects of this unique lit-
erary configuration in an effort to demonstrate that though the
friendship was important to both poets, and especially to Wat-
kins who carefully nurtured Thomas' memory in his elegies after
his death, the resemblance between them as poets in both tech-
nique and content is only superficial.

Watkins first met Thomas early in 1935 shortly after the
publication of Eighteen Poems (1934) when he was twenty-nine
and Thomas twenty-one. In his Introduction to Thomas' Letters
to Vernon Watkins (1957), Watkins describes their first meeting:

> He was slight, shorter than I had expected, shy, rather
> flushed and eager in manner, deep-voiced, restless, hu-
> morous, with large, wondering, yet acutely intelligent
> eyes, gold curls, snub nose, and the face of a cherub.
> I quickly realized when we went for a walk on the cliffs
> that this cherub took nothing for granted. In thought
> and words he was anarchic, challenging, with the certain-
> ty of that instinct which knows its own freshly discovered
> truth.[1]

Soon after this initial encounter the two young poets began to

meet together regularly to discuss details of composition and

revision of their work. They quickly discovered that they

shared a similar dedication to the technicalities of the craft,

but that their methods of composition were distinct:

> We had immediately a very deep affinity, though his style
> and method of composition were completely different from
> mine, he working outward from a colloquial core of tex-
> ture, I working towards the concrete from a musical or
> articulated source.[2]

Both poets, coincidentally, had attended first the Mirador

School in Swansea, and then the Swansea Grammar School where

Dylan's father had taught, and both came from middle-class

backgrounds; Watkins' father was a banker and Thomas' a school-

master. Unlike most of their parent's generation, neither of

the young Welsh poets spoke Welsh, and both considered them-

selves to be working well within the English poetic tradition--

"English poets in Wales." Besides similar early educational

and social environments, they soon discovered they shared like

tastes in poetry--each having developed individually an appre-

ciation of Donne, Herbert, Blake, Keats, Hopkins and Yeats.[3]

Thomas was less learned than Watkins, more haphazard in his

reading, and less apt to use his sources imitatively.[4] Through

subsequent contact they encouraged and broadened each other's

literary interests. Thomas, for instance, kindled in Watkins

a deeper respect for Herbert, and Watkins introduced Thomas to the German poet, Rilke (1875-1926), as well as many of the French symbolists. Both poets possessed a strong sense of external form in poetry and were fastidious in technical matters. Techniques like cynghanedd or approximations thereof, syllable counting, use of compound words, alliterative forms, biblical allusions and paradoxical constructions are common to both. In addition, they shared a number of important thematic concerns. Thomas, as much as Watkins, is obsessed with the problem of time, posing it in terms of a descent or fall out of timeless perception into a corrupt or decaying world where life and death are inextricably united. Both have a strong sense of nostalgia for childhood and an interest in how the child views the world. Their equally important differences in methods of approach to the "Fall," and the close interrelation of life and death were to emerge more clearly as their work matured.

Watkins' edition of the Letters to Vernon Watkins (1957), the main source of information about this unusual friendship, reveals that theirs was a mutually beneficial exchange. The letters extend from 1936 to 1952, though many have been lost, along with Watkins' side of the correspondence. The period of Watkins' and Thomas' most intense personal contact occurred between 1935 and 1936 when they were meeting at least two or three times a week at each other's residences either in Swansea or in nearby Pennard. In March of 1936, however, Dylan returned to London and married Caitlan Thomas in July of 1937. From this time (April 1936), the literary correspondence evidenced by Thomas' published Letters began and continued, becoming somewhat

sporadic during the time of Watkins' stint in the R.A.F. from 1941-44, and diminishing greatly after the war. Yet it unfolds a developing personal and literary relationship that was to have a significant impact on both poets, and a profound one on Watkins.

The correspondence reveals that Watkins and Thomas were equally committed to perfectionism in verse or what Thomas called the "subtle craft"; for the letters center primarily on issues of compositional detail, the minutiae of stanza, line, phrase and word. There is much evidence from the letters to argue that Thomas admired Watkins' considerable technical facility, and it has even been suggested on the basis of changes in Thomas' work after Eighteen Poems that Watkins may have influenced him in the direction of greater formal precision, the use of more complex rhythms, longer sentences and more intricate stanza forms.[5] Since we lack Watkins' side of the correspondence, and because Thomas was so individual a writer, it is difficult to estimate the extent of Watkins' influence beyond actual changes he suggested that were ultimately used in the final versions of some of the poems. The phrase "cloud-sopped hands" in "After the Funeral," for instance, is due to Watkins.[6] Watkins also eventually convinced Thomas to use titles and inspired him to experiment with ballads, working closely with him on the revisions of "The Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait."[7] He helped with the revisions of Twenty-Five Poems (1936), culled from Thomas' early Swansea notebooks,[8] and typed the poems for The Map of Love (1939) as they were ready.

Before he met Thomas, Watkins had himself shunned publication as too self-seeking an endeavor, and had published only a single poem, "True Lovers," in The London Mercury (May 1929). Thomas broke down this rather stubborn resistance by encouraging him to publish "Old Triton Time" and "Griefs of the Sea" in the first number of Wales (1937). Subsequently, more of Watkins' poems appeared in The Welsh Review, Life and Letters, Today, Horizon and The Listener, and his public career was firmly established.[9]

In spite of obvious differences in temperament, Thomas seemed to respect Watkins not only as the older poet by eight years, but for his broader English and Cambridge education, his more international cultural exposure, and his precise knowledge of modern European languages (French, German, Italian). Though Watkins left Cambridge after only a year, and of his own volition, he had been academically successful both there and at Repton, and retained throughout his life a scholarly, well-stocked, well-disciplined mind. As noted earlier, his translations of Hölderlin, Heine and others were competent and well-received by critics and reviewers.[10] Thomas, on the other hand, though brilliantly precocious, left school early to pursue his career as a poet, and (some say) lived to regret his lack of more formal education.[11]

Thomas, the "anarchic cherub," however, challenged Watkins' more literary mind with his startlingly fresh and original poetic idiom. Watkins wrote later of Thomas that, "he showed me what was fresh in my work and what was stale and derived from other poets."[12] Always it was the vigour and energy of Thomas'

style that Watkins remarked on in his prose about him. In

Thomas' obituary he wrote:

> It was at once realized by discerning readers, among
> whom Edith Sitwell was one of the first, that this poet
> had created an idiom; that he had disturbed the roots
> of our language in an organic way and given it a new
> vitality.[13]

Though there are poems where Watkins seems to have absorbed

features of Thomas' highly individual idiom, it is not in these

poems, I would argue, that Watkins is at his best. Thomas' as-

tute editing, however, encouraged him to move away from vague-

ness and abstraction, and to avoid the weakly adjectival line,

the commonplace phrase or expression. In his critique of Wat-

kins' early poem, "Mana," in a letter of October 25, 1937, for

instance, Thomas writes:

> And one other line I think is bad: "Laid in the long
> grey shadow of our weeping thought." This, to me, has
> far too many weak words. They are weak alone, & weaker
> when added together....[14]

And in a letter of March 21, 1938, he speaks similarly of an

early draft of "Call It All Names":

> There is something very unsatisfactory, though, about
> "All mists, all thoughts" which seems—using the vagu-
> est words—to lack a central strength. All the words
> are lovely, but they seem so chosen, not struck out.
> I can see the sensitive picking of words, but none of
> the strong, inevitable pulling that makes a poem an
> event, a happening, an action perhaps, not a still-life
> or an experience put down, placed, regulated; the intro-
> duction of mist, legend, time's weir, grief's bell, &
> such things as "which held, but knew not her," the whole
> of the 13th line, "all griefs that we suppose", seem to
> me "literary," not living. They seem, as indeed the
> whole poem seems, to come out of nostalgia of litera-
> ture....[15]

Though Watkins often proved more resistant to criticism than

Thomas,[16] the alterations in the final drafts of some of the

poems discussed with him indicate that he heeded Thomas' advice,

and gradually began to free his language of what was dead or unnaturally derivative. He never repudiated what critics have called his "cult of dead poets," but he did attempt to forge a more individual and contemporary idiom.

Even though it is clear from the letters that the two poets were approaching poetry from different perspectives, and that the criticism of one is not necessarily applicable to the work of the other, it is certain that Watkins derived needed support from a fellow poet at a critical time in his life. The friendship brought him in contact with a group of Thomas' friends, the composer Tom Warner, the painter Alfred Janes, and the writers John Prichard and Richard Hughes.[17] It gave the isolated and previously unpublished Watkins confidence and the sense of belonging to an intellectual community which he lacked since his days at Repton.

The letters also reveal several areas of contention between the two young poets. Though he forgave him later, Watkins was offended when Thomas took the liberty of changing several lines of "Griefs of the Sea" before its publication without his permission. Watkins informs us in his Introduction to the Letters that afterwards he entered the shop in Swansea where the issues were stocked and changed back every copy by hand.[18] Thomas, who was freer with his unfinished drafts, resented Watkins' reluctance to share his work until he considered it finished. Thomas complains in the letters also that Watkins' criticisms of his work were sometimes misdirected. In a letter dated May or June 1939 he writes:

> I think you are liable, in your criticisms of me, to
> underrate the value--or, rather, the integrity, the

wholeness--of what I am saying or trying to make clear
that I am saying, and often to suggest alterations or
amendments for purely musical motives.[19]

In spite of these sources of near conflict, Thomas continued to

commend Watkins publicly and to read his work in radio broad-

casts. And in spite of Thomas' constant dunning of Watkins for

small sums of money and (the final blow) his failure to turn up

at Watkins' wedding, Watkins continued to defend Thomas as one

of the truly "religious" poets of the age, reading many of his

poems as religious statements.

In the Introduction to the Letters, he argued that Thomas

was religious in the broadest sense by refusing (like himself)

to write a poem "dominated by time":

My own themes were really closer to his...we were both
religious poets, and neither of us had any aptitude for
political reform.[20]

Recalling how (when Thomas was still living) he was once chal-

lenged on the contradiction between his sense of debt to Thomas

and his contention that "a poet cannot learn a true style from

a contemporary," Watkins responded by saying that "Dylan Thomas

is an ancient poet. He happens to be alive."[21] I shall be ex-

amining Watkins' view of Thomas as a religious poet at a later

point in the chapter. At this stage I wish to suggest that the

mutual influence of the two poets fades after Watkins' LU and

Thomas' Map of Love, that is after the period of their most

intense communication. Thomas' presence in Watkins' work in

style and content is most evident in BML (1941), LV (1945), and

LU (1948). Though Watkins' influence on Thomas is less obvious,

and less important, we are most likely to find it in Twenty-Five

Poems (1936) and The Map of Love (1949). I shall proceed by

examining several of the Dylanesque poems from Watkins' first three volumes, and then move on to show how Thomas appears as a symbolic figure of the poet in the later elegies.

Many of the poems from BML (1941) show Watkins under the sway of Thomas' personal style and idiom. The sonnet, "The Dead Words," with phrases like, "So flies love's meteor from her shroud of winds," is a clear example of Watkins' indebtedness to Thomas' "Alter-wise by owl-light" sequence of sonnets.[22] Watkins seems to affect in the early work (sometimes unsuccessfully) the verbal density, the accumulation of meaning through word play, and the joining of disparate images in contexts of paradox characteristic of the early Thomas. Leslie Norris has shown, in fact, through internal evidence and on the basis of the dates of the drafts, that most of the poems in BML were written after Watkins had met Thomas in 1935.[23] Even T. S. Eliot was quick to note in his comments on the dust jacket of Watkins' first book "a racial quality which gives it [Watkins' style] something in common with that of Dylan Thomas."[24] It is probable that some of the early similarities between the two poets can be accounted for not merely by influence, but by their common Welsh backgrounds and cultural experience.

"Portrait of a Friend" is a set piece written in response to Thomas' suggestion in a letter of February 7, 1938 that Watkins write a poem on the back of a photo Thomas sent him in the mail.[25] Thomas was pleased by the resulting effort and read it on several occasions to friends.[26] The poem opens,

> He has sent me this
> Late and early page
> Caught in the emphasis

Of last night's cartonnage,
Crumpled in the post,
Bringing to lamplight
Breath's abatement,
Over-and under-statement,
Mute as a mummy's pamphlet
Long cherished by a ghost.   (BML, p. 36)

The reference to Thomas as "this cracked prophet" suggests the
notion that genius is allied to madness, but is also a play on
words, since the photo arrived with a literal crack down the
middle.   In the third stanza, Watkins describes Dylan's Blash-
ford residence:

Trusting a creaking house,
His roof is ruinous,
So mortal. A real wind
Beats on this house of sand
Two tides like ages buffet.
The superhuman, crowned
Saints must enter this drowned
Tide-race of the mind
To guess or understand
The face of this cracked prophet,
Which from its patient pall
I slowly take,
Drop the envelope,
Compel his disturbing shape,
And write these words on a wall
Maybe for a third man's sake. (BML, pp. 36-37)

This is an early example of a poem (Feb. 1938) where Thomas as
central subject allows Watkins to expostulate on the flawed and
mortal yet divine role of the poet or artist.   There are pos-
sible traces of Thomas' imagery in phrases like "tide-race of
the mind," and verbal echoes from The Map of Love.   Watkins'
phrase,

....a worldly brothel
That a sinner's tongue may toll
And call the place Bethel..., (BML, p. 36)

is certainly an allusion to Thomas' "It is the sinner's dust-
tongued bell."[27]   Thomas is present in BML, then, not merely as

a stylistic influence, but as a symbolical figure of the artist in time.

Watkins' "Elegy on the Heroine of Childhood (in Memory of Pearl White)" (BML, p. 14) takes up Thomas' famous passion for films and employs his frequently used six-line stanza as in "I see the boys of summer" and "Before I knocked."[28] In this early poem, Watkins, who shows little later interest in the cinema, attempts to recreate the flurry and excitement of children transfixed by Hollywood's imaginary world of heroes and heroines. It is uncharacteristic of him also to draw upon realistic scenes of contemporary life:

> From penny rows, when we began to spell,
> We watched you [Pearl White], at the time when Arras
>   fell,
> Saw you, as in a death-ray seen,
> Ride the real fear on a propped screen,
> Where, through revolting brass, and darkness' bands,
> Gaping, we groped with unawakened hands. (BML, p. 14)

The heavily alliterated lines, hyphenated words, rush of concrete images and use of original adjectives like "thumbscrewed" are again characteristic of Thomas:

> From school's spiked railings, glass-topped, cat-walked
>   walls,
> From albums strewn, the street's strange funerals,
> We run to join the queue's coiled peel
> Tapering, storming the Bastille,
> Tumbling, with collars torn and scattered ties,
> To thumbscrewed terror and the sea of eyes. (BML, p. 15)

In spite of the persistence of such devices, Watkins' language seldom displays the same kind of verbal obscurity found in Thomas' early work. In his Introduction to the Letters, in fact, Watkins speaks of how he tried to discourage Thomas from publishing some poems he considered impenetrable:

> I tried to persuade Dylan to leave two of the poems
> out of the new book of Twenty-five....The other poems
> all seemed packed with meaning, but for me these two
> poems presented a face of unwarrantable obscurity.[29]

The two poems, "Now, Say Nay" and "How Soon the Servant Sun,"
were, of course, retained by Dylan, who responded to the possible
severity of critics by saying, "Give them a bone"; but at least
Watkins had registered his complaint against the kind of verbal
compression demonstrated in those poems. The imagistic movement
of Watkins' "Elegy of Childhood," in contrast, is logical, and
the narrative sequence clear. Most of Watkins' poems are acces-
sible to the general reader; whereas many of Thomas' early
poems unfold through a juxtaposition and union of disparate
images related by verbal association that makes comprehension
difficult. Ralph Maud notes in his critical study, Entrances to
Dylan Thomas' Poetry, that,

> This breeding and contradicting process is essentially
> fanciful and undisciplined; its only logic is that of
> association of ideas.[30]

He is referring to Thomas' own description of his method in a
letter to Henry Treece recorded in Treece's Dylan Thomas: "Dog
Among the Fairies":

> 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 oth-
> er 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 destruc-
> tion, 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 de-
> structive and constructive at the same time.[31]

Maud argues that many of Thomas' most seemingly opaque early
poems are comprehensible when read in light of his dialectic of

association. He argues perceptively that Thomas' word play,
dislocations of meaning, and disruption of normal narrative
structure are related directly to his view of the world as a
"war of conflicting forces"--that the disparate images reinforce
the theme of a basic polarity in the self and in the world.[32]
In spite of occasional obscurities of syntax, the relative ab-
sence of this kind of difficulty in Watkins through the mainten-
ance of logical narrative and imagistic structures argues that
he takes a more traditionally mimetic view of poetry. He is not
concerned to destroy in order to rebuild meaning like Thomas,
but to mirror the timeless unity and elegance of a world built
on unshakeable, universal principles. I would argue, then, that
in these early poems, he is merely utilizing verbal skills and
poetic devices sharpened by association with Thomas to reflect
his own more traditionally Christian view of the world. He is
concerned with the way the inner self relates to an objective
metaphysical order, and less focused on the subjective (visceral
and psychic) processes within the self.

In Watkins' second collection, LV (1945), Thomas again ap-
pears as a figure of the modern artist--this time, the "anar-
chic" poet with his "iconoclastic frown." Though his use of
this image indicates that Watkins must have recognized the dif-
ferences between his traditionally religious and Thomas' more
radically questioning orientation, he believed that Thomas was
a true poet, and that the function of the true poet is to chal-
lenge the narrowness of social convention. Watkins assumed that
the timeless vision of the artist, like that of Blake, was in-
evitably disturbing to ordinary sensibility. In the long lyric,

"The Broken Sea," a poem in honour of the birth of a friend's (Francis Dufau-Labeyrie's) child in wartime Paris, he recalls his own childhood in Swansea. He again invokes the cinema actress Pearl White (who was a kind of Venus to the adolescent poet), several of his artist friends including Alfred Janes, "the painter of limbo," and finally Thomas himself, "the extravagant hero of night":

> I mourn that moment alive
> Near the glow-lamped Eumenides' house, overlooking
>   the ships in flight,
> Where Pearl White focussed our childhood, near the
>   foot of Cwmdonkin Drive,
> To a figment of crime stampeding in the posters'
>   wind-blown blight.
>
> I regret the broken Past, its prompt and punctilious
>   cares,
> All the villainies of the fire-and-brimstone town.
> I miss the painter of limbo at the top of the fragrant
>   stairs,
> The extravagant hero of night, his iconoclastic frown.
>   (LV, p. 44)

Using what John Heath-Stubbs has called an "elemental, obsessive, subliminal imagery characteristic of his friend and fellow Welshman Mr. Dylan Thomas...."[33] Watkins' "The Broken Sea" from LV is as close in style to a Thomas poem as anything Watkins wrote. We have seen in Chapter IV that certain passages from this poem approach a Vaughanesque sense of eternity by using a traditional mystical symbolism of light. I would argue that the poem thus departs from Thomas' early work by the greater metaphysical depth of its symbols. As already suggested, Thomas' early poems, in contrast, often focus on the biological (even prenatal) and psychological processes within the self--the sexual awakening ("Before I knocked"), the battle

between the sexes ("I make this in a warring absence"), and the

painful realization of death's interrelation with life ("The

force that through the green fuse drives the flower"). Though

both poets see life as a flux of forces, in Watkins' early work

it is clear that those forces issue ultimately from a transcen-

dent and unified ground.

Both poets may use religious symbols and biblical allusions

freely, but only Watkins places them in their traditional reli-

gious context. As Kathleen Raine points out,

> ....if Dylan Thomas surpassed his friend in dazzling
> richness and the fulness of the flow of life in his
> work, Vernon Watkins has the greater metaphysical
> sense.[34]

> ....all along Vernon Watkins has adhered to his symbols
> with a more conscious dedication to their sacred and
> traditional content.[35]

These assertions can be illustrated by a passage from "Sea-

Music" where the dazzling flow of images may suggest Thomas, but

the symbols are held in a context of Christian belief in the

efficacy of the eucharist. The "ark of the covenant" and the

"grail" symbols both retain their traditional associations with

Christian death and resurrection, and the bell imagery fore-

shadows the use Watkins is to make of it in The Death Bell.

The effort is to universalize the primal death and resurrection

experience of the self:

> Who knows so well as I
> There are deep sea-bells. Zig-zag swordfish daggering
> Rip the plumed exultation of the whale
> Whose thousand years are drowned in that blood-spring
> Falling through darkness, falling from a wing
> To the sea-troughs, ark of the covenant, lowering of
>   the grail
> To the mad navel of the million-fated sky. (LV, p. 25)

Elements of Thomas' style and many of his persistent themes continue to appear in LU (1948), Watkins' third Faber volume. By this time, however, Watkins has begun to develop the complexity of his own vision in poems like "Music of Colours--White Blossom," "Foal" and "Zaccheus in the Leaves." In "Returning to Goleufryn" from this volume, as already noted in Chapter IV, Watkins explores the nostalgia for childhood he feels on returning to his maternal grandfather's farm in Carmarthenshire in a manner similar to that of Thomas in "Fern Hill" (published in Deaths and Entrances, 1946). Yet his view of childhood here is distinct in that the adult speaker is more clearly outside Eden, more decidedly in exile from original innocence:

> Yet now I am lost, lost in the water-wound looms
> Where brief, square windows break on a garden's decay.
> <div align="right">(LU, p. 16)</div>

Though a less successful poem than "Fern Hill" in verbal energy and in creating the freshness and spontaneity of childhood, it is again more implicitly theological, more concerned with personal guilt and adult moral responsibility:

> ....Yet I alone
> By the light in the sunflower deepening, here stand, my
>   eyes cast down
> To the footsprint of accusations.... (LU, p. 15)

Norris points out that Thomas may have had Watkins' "Returning to Goleufryn" in his mind when he composed "Over Sir John's Hill" years later, since he takes up Watkins' image of the river Towy and echoes his phrase "in a turn of the Towy" in his own "in the tear of the Towy."[36] This as well as other verbal parallels argues that Watkins continued to influence Thomas,

as well as the other way around, though not to the same extent. The fact that both poets wrote a number of important poems for or about children may indicate not only the presence of mutual influence, but argue that as fathers of young children they both shared a common area of experience.[37]

"Llewelyn's Chariot" (LU, p. 21) along with several poems Watkins omitted from the published volumes, "Poems for Llewelyn" (Life and Letters, March 24, 1940) and "Llewelyn's Spoon" (Wales 3, No. 3, October 1943), are written consciously and explicitly with Thomas in mind. "Llewelyn's Chariot" concerns the infancy of Dylan's first son. Thomas too wrote several poems about Llewelyn (when he was yet in the womb) including "A saint about to fall" and "If my head hurt a hair's foot." "This Side of the Truth (for Llewelyn)" (published July 1, 1945) is another poem by Thomas about Llewelyn at the age of six. "Llewelyn's Chariot" shows Watkins in an unusually whimsical mood that returns in the later poem to his own son, "Poem for Conrad" in Fidelities. In the later poem he adopts the child's-eye view by speaking through the persona of the child. Here he speaks to him as a sympathetic, adult observer. The poem begins with an image of the child as solar hero (compared to Jason and Ramses) within his own small cosmos of toys. The original Llewelyn the Great was a Welsh chieftain who died in 1240, and his grandson, Prince Llewelyn the Last, was the final of the great Welsh princes to suffer defeat by the English (under Edward I) in 1282.[38] As hero or literally "man of deeds" in his own sphere, the child's microcosm takes on mock epic proportions:

> Sun of all suns, seed of dandelion seeds,
> Sprung from the stem of delight and the starry course,
> High at the helm of night, in the van of deeds,
> A one-wheeled carriage you drive and a headless horse.
>   (LU, p. 21)

Watkins' poem, in contrast to Thomas' later "This Side of the Truth," for instance, conveys a more assured sense that because the child is made in the image of his "Maker," God protects him in his innocence:

> Your Maker makes you his glory, you grasp and push
> Through bars the bugle, the mirror, the string of beads,
> The doll and the wooden men; with a mighty wish
> You ride the brunt of creation's galloping beds.
>   (LU, p. 21)

In the final stanza, however, as in so many of Thomas' poems, Watkins dwells on the way in which the timeless state of youth is threatened by death, the "hearse" that lurks in the shadows:

> Ramses, trumpet and chariot, all you outrun
> Grasping your cage where grief is banished for good,
> Created nothing, timeless, perpetual one
> Dropped from light-years to crawl under legs of wood,
> Star-seed, breath-downed, dropped from the topmost sun
> To the toppling house near the shed that shadows a
>   hearse,
> From whirling, luminous night, to sleep here alone
> In the darkness a great light leaves, where a feather
>   stirs. (LU, p. 21)

The poem is reminiscent of Thomas in its use of Hopkins-style compound words as much as in its sense that death is interwoven with life from the moment the child is "dropped from the topmost sun." As in "Fern Hill," only the introspective adult looking back on childhood recognizes that the "great light" retreats as the child matures. The Platonic ramifications of birth as a descent and a forgetting of eternity are more strongly and consciously present in Watkins' poem.

Another theme used by both Thomas and Watkins with some

success is that of the ravages of war, the despoiling of innocence through human violence. Watkins' "The Spoils of War," also from <u>LU</u>, is similar in subject matter to Thomas' "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" and "Ceremony After a Fire Raid." It is an account of a woman's death during a wartime air raid in Swansea. Thomas' "Refusal to Mourn" is more rhetorically effective in the way it convinces the reader of the paradox that a refusal to mourn can itself become a great elegiac statement. Though its tone is less heroic, Watkins' poem focuses on the moment of the young woman's death, and the repercussions to her motherless infant:

> She sprang, luminous on a wish, to the trivial
> Tread of her gallows-drop, reaching for a cushion for
>   her child in the shelter to sleep on,
> Crossed her own tombstone, then all the stars ran in
> And the world shot back like a ball.... (<u>LU</u>, p. 51)

Again, though Watkins uses his own profusion of images less innovatively than Thomas, the narrative movement is clear and the religious implications less ambiguous. The woman's dying becomes not only a symbol of man's injustice to man, but of her capacity for a Christlike forgiveness:

> Wounded to the death of Earth, she forgives those
>   restless ones.
> Divorced from her darling, O at last no ropes are rung.
> Look on her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.
>   (<u>LU</u>, p. 52)

By the time of <u>DB</u> (1954), published the year after Thomas' death, the obvious technical impact of Thomas has vanished, and Watkins seems to be working toward a new, more austere and reflective style. Here, after allowing a six-year interval from the publication of <u>LU</u>, he succeeds in pulling away from the verbal density and obscurity of some of the early work. Like

the style of the later Yeats, Watkins' new bareness and sim-
plicity has been seen by some as a restriction of his native
powers, but I believe it to be a limitation that allowed ulti-
mately for greater intensity and freedom. Like the Thomas of
"Do not go gentle into that good night" and the unfinished
"Elegy" (completed from manuscript notes by VW), Watkins was
deeply affected by his father's death, and dedicates The Death
Bell to him. In his allusions to passages from Donne's sermons
and meditations, Watkins can be compared to Thomas, who also
made frequent references to Donne, especially to his last ser-
mon, "Death's Duell." Yet here, as argued in Chapter IV, Wat-
kins emerges more clearly as a traditional Christian metaphysi-
cal poet in the line of Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and Traherne.

It remains to consider the complex question of Thomas'
position on the issue of religion. The frequent biblical allu-
sions, his own sense of the holiness of life, especially in the
later poems, and Watkins' assumption that Thomas was moving to-
ward a more traditional Christian position in the later work,
force us to consider whether he can be classified meaningfully
as a religious poet, and if so, in what sense of the word?
William Empson has spoken of Thomas' "pessimistic pantheism,"
and Constantine Fitzgibbon, his major biographer, of his "re-
luctant agnosticism."[39] Other critics like Charles Williams and
Thomas Merton have argued with Watkins that he is essentially a
religious poet. In his essay, "The Religious Poet," Merwin, for
instance, argues that Thomas is a religious artist in the sense
of

> a celebrator in the ritual sense: a maker and performer
> of a rite. And also a celebrator in the sense of one

who participates in a rite, and whom the rite makes
joyful. That which he celebrates is Creation, and
more particularly the human condition.[40]

If we define the religious sense thus loosely, we can say
at the very least that Thomas has written several noteworthy
poems of religious celebration, and many poems of intense reli-
gious conflict. Among the poems of celebration I would include
"And death shall have no dominion," "Poem in October," "Fern
Hill," "In Country Sleep," "Over Sir John's Hill" and "Poem on
His Birthday." Many of these are among the later poems where a
new clarity and concern with people and issues beyond the self
begin to appear more strongly. The assumption in these later
poems that affirmation can be made even in the face of ultimate
annihilation provides a context for Thomas' own preface to
Collected Poems (1952):

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.[41]

This statement, along with earlier prose comments on his poetic
intention, asks the reader to grant that at one level at least
the poems come from religious sincerity.

The following answer to questions submitted by the editor
of New Verse, October 1934, reveals that from the time of the
early work Thomas considered himself to be involved in some kind
of religious quest:

My poetry is, or should be, useful to me for one reason:
it is the record of my individual struggle from darkness
towards some measure of light....[42]

Thomas' own particular method of moving from darkness to light,
however, involves a psychological, even Freudian "stripping of

the individual darkness." For in that same questionnaire he

has written revealingly of his attitude toward Freud:

> Whatever is hidden should be made naked. To be stripped
> of darkness is to be clean, to strip of darkness is to
> make clean. Freud cast light on a little of the dark-
> ' ness he had exposed. Benefiting by the sight of the
> light and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness, poetry
> must drag forth into the clean nakedness of light more
> even of the hidden causes than Freud could realise.[43]

One can never take the poet's interpretative comments on his

work as the absolute word. Yet many of the poems, both early

and late, confirm that Thomas was interested in the conscious

shaping of unconscious material. He is arguing here that

bringing to the surface as much as possible of the unconscious,

subliminal self is a way of enacting the movement from darkness

to light. Certainly, many of his poems are successful shapings

of the flow of images from a subliminal source.

Most traditional religious symbolism of light and dark,

however, implies the existence of a transcendent plane and the

possibility of translation from a lower to an upper world, from

an individual to a universal consciousness. In his essay,

"Second Thoughts About Humanism" (1929), T. S. Eliot makes a

distinction that is applicable here:

> Either everything in man can be traced as a development
> from below, or something must come from above. There
> is no avoiding that dilemma: you must be either a nat-
> uralist or a supernaturalist.[44]

In Watkins, whatever the limitations of his vision, the assump-

tion is clear that God, an eternal world, a second dimension

(or dimensions) beyond the physical one exists, and that this

dimension is more than an aspect of the individual unconscious

mind--that in Eliot's terms it proceeds from "above," from the

world of Spirit. Not only does he believe such a realm exists,
but that its existence demands from man a response in terms of
obedience and commitment. I have called Thomas an "agnostic"
in the etymological sense of one who reckons that nothing cer-
tain can be known about God, because he sustains an attitude of
ambiguity toward the existence of such an eternal world, a life-
beyond-death, a higher dimension, as well as toward the concept
of a beneficent Deity involved actively with his creation. Wat-
kins is not naive in granting Thomas a strong religious impulse
in the broader sense defined by Merwin; but in the sense de-
fined by Eliot Thomas remains essentially sceptical, and cer-
tainly not Christian. At the most we can say that Thomas is a
poet of religious conflict for whom the naive, Nonconformist
faith of his cultural background was intellectually and emo-
tionally inadequate, but who retained into adulthood its sense
of reprobation and guilt, of individual "fallenness," and on
the positive side, the Nonconformist's attitude of religious
celebration, his immersion in the language of the Bible, and
sensitivity to the devices of Welsh preaching rhetoric. More
than one critic of Thomas has noted the way the rolling rhythms
and sonorous oral patterns of his verse recapture powerfully
the feeling of the traditional Welsh sermon. Though Dylan's
father, D. J. Thomas, was what John Ackerman calls "a bible-
reading atheist," the brother of Dylan's paternal grandfather
had been a Unitarian minister, and the Nonconformist strain is
strong on both sides of the family.[45] Thomas' desire to shock
is at one level at least a response to the restrictive influence

of Welsh Puritanism and betrays an element of guilt, a sense of
moral tension that runs throughout his work.

Thomas' uneasy relation to the Nonconformist religious
tradition in which he found himself only partly accounts for the
presence of the many scriptural allusions in his work. What are
we to make of them, then, in terms of his interior religious
quest? I have suggested earlier that such allusions do not co-
here in a context of traditional belief and commitment. My fur-
ther conclusion is that Thomas uses his Christian symbols play-
fully, idiosyncratically, tearing them from their traditional
context of Christian consolation and assurance. As Ralph Maud
expresses it in Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry, "It is hard
to tell whether Christ is being praised or defamed."[46] Maud
argues convincingly that Thomas exploits Christian concepts of
life coming out of death for aesthetic purposes.[47] "Vision and
Prayer" is a late Herbert-style 'shape' poem that Watkins admired
and believed to have been influenced by Rilke. In spite of
allusions to the nativity of Christ, the poem focuses on the
poet's subjective reactions to his child's birth. Even at the
end of the poem when the speaker turns "the corner of prayer,"
and asks to be drowned or overwhelmed in the light of the sun,
symbol of Christ, his position is far from a traditional belief
in personal immortality. He conveys instead the notion that
the poet's office is to affirm in the face of probable annihi-
lation, and dwells on the impossibility of returning to "the
hidden land" of prenatal security. The poem is ultimately
about the agony of birth, with none of the usual consolations.

Emotionally it wavers between fear of and desire for annihila-

tion:

```
        I turn  the corner  of prayer  and  burn
          In   a  blessing   of   the   sudden
            Sun.   In the name of the damned
              I  would  turn  back  and run
                To   the   hidden   land
                  But   the  loud  sun
                    Christens   down
                      The   sky.
                          I
                      Am  found.
                    O     let    him
                  Scald me  and  drown
                Me in his world's wound.
              His lightning   answers   my
            Cry. My voice burns in his hand.
          Now  I  am  lost  in  the   blinding
        One.  The sun roars at the prayer's end.[48]
```

The religious vocabulary of "Over Sir John's Hill" with

phrases like "holy stalking heron," "psalms and shadows among

the pincered sandcrabs," and "Led-astray birds whom God, for

their breast of whistles, / Have mercy on...," never implies

real religious certainty, for the poem centers on natural de-

struction, and leaves the reader with the sense that God dis-

tances himself from the slaughter of creatures:

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In the pebbly dab-filled
Shallow and sedge, and "dilly dilly," calls the loft
     hawk,
"Come and be killed...."[49]
```

At best one can say Thomas comes face to face with the possibil-

ity of death as absolute finality without flinching, writing

heroically in "Poem on His Birthday,"

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....the closer I move
To death, one man through his sundered hulks,
     The louder the sun blooms
And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults....[50]
```

As John Ackerman argues in Welsh Dylan, Thomas is "wrestling

with belief and unbelief, yet finally settled in neither."[51]

In both poetry and prose, we can observe this tendency to hover between the poles of belief and doubt. Thomas says publicly that he writes his Collected Poems (1952) "for the love of Man and in praise of God," but qualifies himself by saying privately to John Malcolm Brinnin (July 1951) that the poems were written "in praise of God's world by a man who doesn't believe in God."[52] One of Thomas' early notebook entries next to the poem "Before I knocked" tells the story of an unsettledness on the issue of religion that was to persist throughout his life:

> If God is praised in poem one
> Show no surprise when in the next
> I worship wood or sun or none:
> I'm hundred-headed and countless sexed.[53]

When Watkins writes, then, in a footnote comment to Fitzgibbon's biography (1965) that Thomas was "religious and Christian," a "Blakean Christian,"[54] he is exercising (rather blindly I would argue) his old tendency to make Christian heroes of all the poets he most loved. Part of his readiness to assume in Thomas a religious impulse similar to his own, to overlook all differences and focus on essential unities, was his nature. But his later tendency to defend Thomas against all critical opposition was a reaction to the uproar surrounding Thomas, "the legend," at his death. Watkins was deeply shocked when the news of Thomas' death in New York reached him in Swansea in 1953. After a long silence, when the papers and magazines stressed the lurid details of Thomas' last days, Watkins proceeded to write a series of obituaries, articles and reviews that stand as an apologetic for Thomas the man and fellow Welsh poet.[55] Out of a phenomenal loyalty, many of Watkins' prose

statements seem to fly in the face of facts. He writes in "Mr. Dylan Thomas--Innovation and Tradition" (The Times, November 10, 1953), for instance, that Thomas "live[d] Christianity in a public way."[56] Along with Fitzgibbon, who defends Thomas the poet in his biography, Watkins believed that Thomas had been the victim of his own mask, that the drinker and actor had overwhelmed the true poet. In a May 1956 issue of Encounter, Watkins takes issue with John Malcolm Brinnin's book, Dylan Thomas in America (1956), which he considered sensationalistic, by arguing that "he [Thomas] was killed by his own mask, by the grimace which his entertainment produced, by a kind of disgust at the popularity of what he was not."[57] Watkins believed Thomas to have been the victim of his heartless American audiences who encouraged him in the false role he was forced to assume because they expected it of him. Only in later articles and private conversations was Watkins able to admit a self-destructive element in Thomas' personality. In his Afterword to Adventures in the Skin Trade, he speaks of a "heckler" in Thomas, "a dissenter who will not keep step with his fame, a spur which contradicts progress."[58] And in a remark to Jane McCormick shortly before his death Watkins was to admit:

> Yes, I still believe Dylan to be a religious poet, but he was not a religious man, and certainly not a Christian. I mean, if you're a Christian it changes your life, doesn't it? Dylan certainly never changed. If he had had half the respect for his life that he had for his poetry, he would have been a good man--and alive today.[59]

Nevertheless, Watkins never ceased to mourn Thomas in his poems or to lose the strong sense of identification with him as fellow poet, opposites though they were on the religious path.

In her searching analysis of what she sees as Watkins'
rather one-sided relationship with Thomas in <u>Portrait of a</u>
<u>Friend</u>, Gwen Watkins sets their friendship in a completely new
light by suggesting that Watkins was able to sustain such an
intense identification because Thomas stood for him as an
"alter ego," the self he might have been had his life taken
another path:

> Dylan was his <u>alter ego</u>; when he supported, protected,
> admired Dylan it was because of the life he had never
> lived himself.[60]

She argues from her personal knowledge of the poet that the ex-
ternal differences between the two men conceal a deeper root of
identity--that Watkins' stable exterior hides a deeper immatur-
ity of character:

> Biographers have commented on the differences between
> the two, but this was merely that they were wearing
> different masks. It was the same man underneath--or
> rather the same immature, confused, unresolved being,
> who had turned from life, which he could not control,
> to words, which he could.[61]

Her study reveals a more complex image of Watkins than that
of the quietly responsible "bank clerk"; it reveals him as a
more passionate, exacting and recalcitrant personality than has
been imparted by Thomas' biographers, who tend to see him as
the great stabilizer in Thomas' life. In her discussion of
Watkins' religious sensibility she argues, in fact, that

> Watkins faith in God was as nebulous and as certain
> as Dylan's. In my opinion he is right to call Dylan
> a religious poet, since, he no less than Vernon, ex-
> pressed in his poems a strong feeling of, and belief
> in, the numinous.[62]

She focuses on the social and psychological elements of the
poet's life to present a more complete portrayal of Watkins as

a man; yet when dealing with the difficult question of the similarities and differences between Watkins and Thomas in religious belief, we are again forced back on the poems. The dualities and ambiguities in the poet's life are interesting as biography, but the poems must be given the priority in evaluation since it is there that he expresses his highest aspiration. To my mind at least, they reveal Watkins as the more serenely committed of the two in terms of religious conviction. Whatever the conflicts and insecurities of his interior self, the poems record both the process and the end product of his human struggle; they reflect or refract as art the life he created through conscious choice rather than what he might have been had he enacted a hidden or repressed self.

In the later poems from Cypress and Acacia, Affinities and Fidelities, long after Thomas' stylistic influence has vanished, he continues to appear in Watkins' work as a symbol of the artist. He is no longer simply the anarchic hero with the "iconoclastic frown," but the true poet who died young, the incompletely understood man of genius. Death has immortalized him. As mentioned in Chapter III, Watkins' many elegies for Thomas carry on the Welsh tradition of the lament for the fallen bard.

Though The Death Bell (1954) was the next volume to come out, only a year after Thomas' death, the symbol of the bell of the title tolls the death of Watkins' father, not that of Thomas. The elegies for Thomas do not appear in the Faber volumes until the publication of Cypress and Acacia (1959). By that time the full impact of Thomas' death has had a chance to

register at the deeper levels of Watkins' consciousness, and he expresses his grief in a series of veiled elegies. By "veiled" I mean that Thomas is not named or the details of his life alluded to directly, but that we may discover through internal evidence or the testimony of his widow that Watkins had Thomas in mind.[63] "The Sloe," "The Curlew," and "Buried Light" are three examples of such elegies in CA: "To a Shell" and "The Snow Curlew" follow in the same mode in F.

In "The Sloe," Watkins refers to a dream about Thomas that made a deep impression on him, and which he explores further in "The Exacting Ghost" and "The Return" from the same volume. Here Thomas is identified with the plumlike, astringent fruit of the blackthorn plant. Since "sloe" is also a type of gin, the title invokes with quiet irony Thomas' alcoholic's death. I cite the poem in its entirety to demonstrate how completely Thomas (the dead poet) is hidden in the natural imagery. Only the mention of the tomb and the "lineaments" (a Yeatsian-Blakean term) revealed in the "dream" indicate that this is an elegy for Thomas:

> Too like those lineaments
> For waking eyes to see,
> Yet those the dream presents
> Clearly to me.
>
> How much more vivid now
> Than when across your tomb
> Sunlight projects a bough
> In gradual gloom!
>
> Even such a curious taste
> I found, seeing Winter blow
> Above a leafless waste
> The bitter sloe.

It will not yet begin
To act upon the tongue
Till tooth has pierced the skin
And juice has sprung:

A flavour tart and late
Which, when the rest had gone,
Could hide in mist and wait,
Its root in stone. (CA, p. 38)

Watkins deals movingly with the delayed aftereffect of Thomas'

death by comparing it to the sharp taste of "the sloe," through

the simplicity of the short three and two-foot lines, and by

universalizing the poet through the symbol of the stubbornly-

enduring plant rooted "in stone."

Likewise in "The Curlew," Watkins refuses to name Thomas,

but connects him implicitly with the mysterious "one" of the

first line who, being dead, is no longer able to hear the cur-

lew's cry. In a tone similar to that of Keats' "Ode to a

Nightingale" Watkins writes:

Sweet-throated cry, by one no longer heard
Who, more than many, loved the wandering bird,
Unchanged through generations and renewed,
Perpetual child of its own solitude.... (CA, p. 54)

As the poem concludes, Watkins identifies the cry of the bird

more clearly with the voice of the dead poet. As in Keats'

poem, the invisible bird becomes a symbol for the entire realm

of the dead--that side of nature which is "unheard," unseen:

The quick light of that cry disturbs the gloom.
It passes now, and rising from its tomb,
Carries remorse across the sea where I
Wait on the shore, still listening to that cry
Which bears a ghostly listening to my own;
Such life is hidden in the ringing stone
That rests, unmatched by any natural thing,
And joins, unheard, the wave-crest and the wing.
                                        (CA, p. 54)

Here again, Watkins succeeds not only in identifying Thomas with

the natural world, the Welsh landscape he most loved, but in conveying powerfully a sense of his own bereavement and utter desolation as a lone figure "on the shore," the solitary place of meeting between the worlds of the living and the dead. As in "The Sloe," the life of the dead one (i.e. Thomas) is hidden in "ringing stone," that is, rooted in the most primitive element of nature's substratum.

"Buried Light" achieves a similar effect with its ballad-like four-line stanzas and veiled allusions to Thomas:

> What are the light and wind to me?
> The lamp I love is gone to ground.
> There all the thunder of the sea
> Becomes by contrast idle sound. (CA, p. 82)

The dead poet becomes the "buried light" (associated ultimately with Christ) in a stanza reminiscent of Hopkins' "The Habit of Perfection" in both form and imagery:

> Come, buried light, and honour time
> With your dear gift, your constancy,
> That the known world be made sublime
> Through visions that closed eyelids see. (CA, p. 82)

Like Hopkins, Watkins is concerned with the inner vision that expands only as the outer senses close. Hopkins writes:

> Be shellèd eyes, with double dark
> And find the uncreated light:
> This ruck and reel which you remark
> Coils, keeps, and teases simple sight.[64]

Perhaps Watkins' echoes Hopkins consciously here as a tribute to Thomas, who also admired the Victorian Jesuit and employed techniques similar to his.

Three of the elegies in CA explore the previously-mentioned "dream" of "The Sloe," a dream that assumed in Watkins' mind the authority of a visionary contact with the soul

of Thomas from beyond death. Though Watkins was not interested
in organized spiritualism like Yeats, there is evidence
throughout his work to suggest he believed literally in the
communication between the dead and the living, and did not find
it incompatible with his Christian belief and practice. "The
Exacting Ghost" actively reshapes a dream that seems to have
had all the authenticity of an actual encounter. Watkins is in
control of his language, which is compressed, concrete and
quick-moving. Again he exploits the simplicity of the four-
line, rhymed tetrameter stanza. As suggested in the first sec-
tion of this chapter, Watkins often uses a slightly Yeatsian
cadence and tone when writing about Thomas, but here the han-
dling and subject matter are his own:

> I speak of an exacting ghost,
> And if the world distrust my theme
> I answer: This that moved me most
> Was first a vision, then a dream.

In the second stanza, he addresses Thomas, the "exacting
ghost," directly:

> By the new year you set great store.
> The leaves have turned, and some are shed.
> A sacred, moving metaphor
> Is living in my mind, though dead.
>
> I would have counted good years more,
> But all is changed; your life has set.
> I praise that living metaphor
> And when I sleep I see it yet.

In the next stanzas (the first of which becomes a refrain by
its repetition at the end of the poem), the poet raises the
question of why the conscious mind cannot recreate the image of
the dead as accurately as the unconscious, dreaming mind; then
he goes on to describe the actual encounter with the "ghost"

of Thomas:

> Why is it, though the conscious mind
> Toils, the identity to keep
> Forgetful ages leave behind,
> No likeness matches that of sleep?
>
> Last night, when sleep gave back the power
> To see what nature had withdrawn,
> I saw, corrected by that hour,
> All likenesses the mind had drawn.
>
> In crowded tavern you I found
> Conversing there, yet knew you dead.
> This was no ghost. When you turned round,
> It was indeed your living head.
>
> Time had returned, and pregnant wit
> Lodged in your eyes. What health is this?
> Never had context been so fit
> To give old words new emphasis.

Watkins, a poet obsessed by timelessness, plays on the paradox

that the dream out of ordinary time and place seems to give

back "time," and the known particularity of Thomas in a charac-

teristic tavern setting. The irony of the poem is that even in

the afterlife Thomas does not suddenly become angelic or other-

worldly, but retains his unique individuality, his "pregnant

wit," even his sarcasm. Watkins goes on to study his own com-

plex emotional reaction to this sudden reunion on the border-

lands of time:

> If hope was then restrained by doubt
> Or joy by fear, I cannot tell.
> All the disturbances of thought
> Hung on my words; yet all seemed well.
>
> You smiled. Your reassurance gave
> My doubt its death, my hope its due.
> I had always known beyond the grave,
> I said, all would be well with you.

The speaker's naive assumption that Thomas' smile is one of

unqualified reassurance is quickly broken in the next stanza,

which marks the turning point of the poem:

> You fixed contracted, narrowing eyes
> To challenge my instinctive sense.
> The uncertainty of my surmise
> Their penetration made intense.

The ghost of Thomas, retaining all the anarchic characteristics
of the living man, proceeds to challenge Watkins' (the dream-
er's) "instinctive sense." The "gift" he accuses him of "arro-
gating" is the assumption that "all will be well" on the other
side of the grave:

> 'What right had you to know, what right
> To arrogate so great a gift?'
> I woke, and memory with the light
> Brought back a weight I could not lift.
>
> In sleep the dead and living year
> Had stood one moment reconciled,
> But in the next the accuser's spear
> Had sacked the city of the child.
>
> Why is it, though the conscious mind
> Toils, the identity to keep
> Forgetful years will leave behind,
> No likeness matches that of sleep? (CA, p. 44)

Watkins' old hope of the reconciliation of the "dead and
living year" present in the early "Mari Lwyd" is shattered by
the ghost's bold cynicism. The dream turns to nightmare; the
unbeliever confronts the believer. The unrelenting scepticism
of the "accuser" (a biblical designation for Satan) is ex-
pressed metaphorically as the sacking of "the city of the
child." Not only does the image invoke the biblical "massacre
of the innocents" by Herod, but allows Watkins to allude to a
passage from one of Thomas' own early poems, "Do you not father
me," where Thomas writes of his mother and the mothering fig-
ures in his life. The sacking of the child's city here, as in
Watkins' poem, is a symbol for the destruction of innocence and
hope. Thomas writes:

> You are all these [i.e. the father, the lover, the
>   sister, brother etc.], said she who gave me the
>   long suck,
> All these, he said who sacked the children's town....[65]

I have cited Watkins' "Exacting Ghost" at length because it reveals his continuing dialogue with Thomas after the poet's death, and because it shows the extent to which he was conscious of his differences from Thomas, his ability to envision him (even beyond the grave) in a realistic context. At a second level, Watkins may be using the conflict between himself and "the exacting ghost" to work out his own more personal and inward conflict between faith and doubt, since the ghost of Thomas is capable of shaking his native optimism. The poem shows Watkins at his best and most original, dealing with a real struggle within the self. The language is fresh, the imagery concentrated around a single action, and the tone (of hope about to be undercut by doubt) right throughout.

In _Affinities_ and _Fidelities_, the elegies to Thomas continue to appear. Some like "A True Picture Restored" (A) attempt to strip off the public mask and revive the true image of the man and poet as Watkins knew him. Poems like "At Cwmrhydyceirw Quarry" and "Cwmrhydyceirw Elegiacs" (F) are public tributes having to do with the choosing of the stone for the Dylan Thomas memorial in Cwmdonkin Park, Swansea. These elegies are no longer veiled, but explicit and full of topical references to Swansea, Cwmdonkin Park and other places with which Thomas was associated. Watkins writes in "A True Picture Restored" out of his old loyalty to place:

> Let each whose soul is in one place
> Still to that place be true.

The man I mourn could honour such
With every breath he drew.
I never heard him wish to take
A life from where it grew. (A, pp. 32-33)

Though wholly affirmative, these poems are, I believe, less

successful than "The Exacting Ghost" in capturing the complexi-

ties of Watkins' relationship with Thomas. They are on the

whole more public and commemorative expressions of grief.

The short poem "Exegesis," cited in a review of E. W. Ted-

lock's Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet (London: William

Heinemann, 1960), later appeared in Fidelities (1968), the last

of the Faber volumes. It too is an elegy for Thomas, but also

a defense against critics who, as Watkins expressed it, lacked

"the complete equipment to analyse" him:[66]

So many voices
Instead of one.
Light, that is the driving force
Of song alone:
Give me this or darkness,
The man or his bone.

None shall replace him,
Only falsify
Light broken into colours,
The altered sky.
Hold back the bridle,
Or the truth will lie. (F, p. 51)

Watkins was vehement to the end in registering his complaint

against premature generalities on the value of Thomas' work,

and the tendency to judge the man by the mask.

We can see that by the time of the later poems, Thomas is

not an active poetic presence in terms of style and content, but

remains a permanent symbol of the poet. Though Watkins focused

on transcendence, and Thomas on immanence, Watkins on God and

Thomas on the self, the friendship was surely the most important

in Watkins' life. For purposes of critical evaluation, it is
mistaken, however, to see Watkins as the same kind of poet as
Thomas, whose personality has overshadowed that of his less well-
known contemporary. As suggested in Chapter IV, a different
kind of critical apparatus is needed to come to terms with Wat-
kins, one which would set him among the seventeenth-century
metaphysical poets, and earlier representatives of the Christian
mystical or visionary tradition. His ancient sense of the Muse
demands that he be seen not merely as a post-Romantic, but as
part of a prophetic line stretching from Homer and Dante, down
to Milton, Blake and Wordsworth.

Unlike the just-named major poets who were also masters of
the long poem, Watkins chose to concentrate on the shorter
lyric. Yet as a predominantly lyric poet he did experiment in
interesting ways with long forms in the ballads ("Ballad of the
Mari Lwyd" and "Ballad of the Outer Dark") and the "long lyrics"
from The Lamp and the Veil ("Sea-Music" and "The Broken Sea").
To the extent that his collections of verse are not merely
groupings of disconnected poems but tightly unified progressions
in terms of theme and symbol, one can argue that they take on
the textual and structural coherence of larger works. In this
way they more resemble Yeats' carefully ordered volumes of
poetry or George Herbert's The Temple than many modern collec-
tions of lyrics. Though his vision is less comprehensive
(inclusive of the full range of human passions and experience)
than that of Yeats and Eliot, and sometimes lacks their intel-
lectual rigour and incisiveness, his poetry is surely distinc-
tive as a modern expression of that aspect of the Christian

tradition which looks at nature as both a mirror of eternity and a ladder which leads beyond itself to a more perfect reality. In his best poems he manages to bring together considerable technical mastery with a pristine sense of nature's dazzle and glory. His recurrent symbols achieve that "depth in the matrix" he believed indispensable to great metaphysical art. Though some of his work is uneven, the best poems of Vernon Watkins, poems like "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision," "Bread and the Stars," "Rewards of the Fountain" and "Earth and Fire," stand among the finest lyrics written in the twentieth century. As a metaphysical and religious poet he is, like his predecessors Vaughan and Traherne, a distinguished poet of indisputable excellence in his time. Because of its qualities of significant vision united with outstanding technical assuredness, I believe his work will continue to be valued and studied for its uncompromising otherworldliness and its original reworking of Platonic and Christian symbols in a contemporary context of religious belief.

NOTES

Introduction

[1] Roland Mathias, Vernon Watkins, ed. Meic Stephens and R. Brinley Jones, Writers of Wales Series (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1974), p. 27. Mathias is quoting from an unpublished lecture-reading by Watkins.

[2] Personal interview with Gwen Watkins, the poet's widow, Pennard, Wales, 28 June 1982.

[3] Mathias, Vernon Watkins, p. 27. Watkins also reiterates this idea in his edition of Dylan Thomas' Letters to Vernon Watkins (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 17.

[4] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lay Sermons, Vol. VI of The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Bollingen Series LXXV, ed. R. J. White (Princeton: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 30.

[5] David Jones, Epoch and Artist, ed. Harmon Grisewood (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 159. Jones' non-standard etymology is a variation on Augustine's " striving after one God and binding our souls to him."

Biographical Sketch

[1] Gwen Watkins, "Vernon Watkins, 1906-1967," in Vernon Watkins, 1906-1967, ed. Leslie Norris (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 17.

[2] Watkins also wrote an essay called "Swansea" which was published in The Texas Quarterly, 4, No. 4 (Winter 1961), 59-64.

[3] Mathias, Vernon Watkins, p. 14.

[4] Mathias, Vernon Watkins, p. 5.

[5] Mathias, Vernon Watkins, p. 22.

[6] Gwen Watkins, "Vernon Watkins, 1906-1967," p. 15.

[7] Mathias, Vernon Watkins, p. 27.

[8] Mathias, Vernon Watkins, p. 28.

[9] Mathias, Vernon Watkins, p. 27.

[10] Gwen Watkins, "Vernon Watkins, 1906-1967," p. 18.

[11] Vernon Watkins, "Prose," <u>Poetry Wales</u>, 12, No. 4 (Spring 1977), 56.

[12] Vernon Watkins, "The Poet's Voice," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," ed. Jane McCormick, Unpublished M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1969, p. 20.

[13] Gwen Watkins, "Vernon Watkins 1906-1967," p. 17.

[14] All subsequent references to the published volumes of Watkins' poetry will appear abbreviated in the text as follows here. Citations are from the first edition unless otherwise indicated:

<u>Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems</u> (2nd edition) = <u>BML</u>
<u>The Lamp and the Veil</u> = <u>LV</u>
<u>The Lady with the Unicorn</u> = LU
<u>The Death Bell: Poems and Ballads</u> = <u>DB</u>
<u>Cypress and Acacia</u> = <u>CA</u>
<u>Affinities</u> = A
<u>Fidelities</u> = F
<u>Uncollected Poems</u> = UP
<u>Unity of the Stream</u> = US
<u>The Ballad of the Outer Dark and Other Poems</u> = <u>BOD</u>
<u>The Breaking of the Wave</u> = <u>BW</u>

[15] After the Hungarian revolution of 1956 at the request of Hungarian refugees, Watkins translated the poetry of Gyula Ilyes and József Atilla. He worked from prose versions since he knew no Hungarian. Ian Hilton in his essay, "Vernon Watkins as Translator," in <u>Vernon Watkins 1906-1967</u> (Faber and Faber, 1970), gives an account of how the poems were transliterated.

[16] Mathias, <u>Vernon Watkins</u>, p. 117.

Chapter I

¹ Vernon Watkins, "Written to An Instrument," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 50. The poem, "Taliesin and the Mockers," was published later in <u>Affinities</u> (1962).

² "Taliesin in Gower" was first published in <u>The Listener</u> in 1950. A list of the Taliesin poems and poems that allude briefly to Taliesin in the published volumes follow in order of dates of publication. Some of these have been republished in the posthumous volumes. Dates of first publication are listed below also.

Taliesin poems in the published volumes:

1. "Taliesin in Gower," in <u>DB</u>, 1954; first appeared in <u>The Listener</u>, 1950.
2. "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision," in CA, 1959; first appeared in <u>The Times Literary Supplement</u>, 1952.
3. "Poet and Goldsmith," in <u>CA</u>, 1959; originally entitled "Taliesin at Sunset." This poem went through numerous revisions. It appeared in <u>The London Magazine</u>, 1954.
4. "Taliesin's Voyage," in <u>A</u>, 1962; first appeared in <u>The Northern Review</u>, 1953.
5. "Taliesin and the Mockers," in <u>A</u>, 1962; first appeared in <u>Poetry</u> (Chicago), 1955.
6. "Taliesin at Pwlldu," in <u>F</u>, 1968.
7. "Sea Chant (Taliesin to Venus)," in <u>F</u>, 1968.

Poems that mention or allude to Taliesin:

1. "Yeats in Dublin," in <u>LV</u>, 1945.
2. "The Broken Sea," in <u>LV</u>, 1945.
3. "The Salmon," in <u>Poetry Review</u>, 1949; revised version from signed typescript dated 1960. Republished in <u>BOD</u>, 1979.
4. "The Pulse and the Shade," in <u>Artisan</u>, 1952. Republished in <u>BOD</u>, 1979; revised version from signed typescript dated July 1967.
5. "Woodpecker and Lyre-Bird," in <u>DB</u>, 1954; appeared earlier in <u>Poetry</u> (Chicago), 1953.
6. "Poets in Whom Truth Lives," in <u>CA</u>, 1959.
7. "Night and the Swan," in <u>Poesia e Critica</u>, 1961; republished in <u>BOD</u>, 1979.
8. "Three Sonnets for Charles Williams," in <u>A</u>, 1962.
9. "Swallows," in <u>F</u>, 1968.

³ Ruth Pryor, "Vernon Watkins and the Taliesin Legend," <u>Anglo-Welsh Review</u>, 26, No. 59 (Autumn 1977), 52-53. Dr. Pryor points out that, "At a fairly early stage of their genesis, four of the Taliesin poems, later published separately and collected in separate volumes at different dates, were linked in series

under the common title 'Taliesin on the Beach.' The four poems of the sequence are 1. 'Taliesin's Voyage'; 2. 'Taliesin at Pwlldu'; 3. 'Taliesin and the Mockers'; 4. 'Taliesin and the Spring of Vision.'"

[4] Pryor, "Vernon Watkins and the Taliesin Legend," p. 59.

[5] Pryor, "Vernon Watkins and the Taliesin Legend," p. 51. The draft was entitled "Taliesin," and was written after the poet returned from a cycling tour made in the Spring of 1938 to explore the area of Tai near Lake Geironydd where Taliesin was said to have lived and died. Dr. Pryor informs us that in these early drafts, Watkins distinguishes himself from the bard, and speaks as one who wishes to tread in his footsteps, unlike the speaker of the published poems whose voice is wholly identified with that of Taliesin.

[6] "The Salmon" was first published in The Poetry Review (1949); revised version from a signed typescript dated 1960; republished in BOD (1979).

[7] Charlotte Guest, trans., The Mabinogion (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1906), p. 265.

[8] Leslie Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," Diss. Southampton University 1972, p. 91. See also Glyn Jones' remarks on Watkins' knowledge of the earlier sources in Leslie Norris' memorial edition, Vernon Watkins: 1906-1967 (London: Faber and Faber), p. 25. Jones argues that Watkins knew the works of Aneirin, Taliesin and Llywarch Hen in translation from early childhood.

[9] Dora Polk, "Vernon Watkins: An Ambience for Reading the 'Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems,'" Diss. University of California 1970, p. 265. See also A. O. H. Jarman, "The Later Cynfeirdd," in A Guide to Welsh Literature (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1967), p. 107; and Gwyn Williams, An Introduction to Welsh Poetry (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 26.

[10] Gwen Watkins, the poet's widow, informed me in an interview (June 1982) that Watkins' primary source for the Taliesin poems was the Guest translation of The Mabinogion. Her statement is based on a firsthand knowledge of the poet's reading.

[11] Patrick K. Ford, ed., The Mabinogi (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. x.

[12] Jane McCormick, "'I Sing a Placeless and a Timeless Heaven': A Study of Several Themes in the Poetry of Vernon Watkins," Diss. Lehigh University 1975, p. 33.

[13] McCormick, "'I Sing a Placeless and a Timeless Heaven,'" p. 33. We note also in support of this argument that Taliesin appears in the context of references to Aneirin and Llywarch Hen, heroic figures from the Welsh historical poetry in the

poem, "Swallows" (<u>F</u>, pp. 62-63).

> Still Taliesin stays,
> Touching more than all we know,
> The pulse of praise,
> Deeper, more strong, than string of harp or bow.

[14] Guest, p. 264. Dora Polk in her dissertation points out that in the Iolo Manuscript from which Guest drew her notes, Taliesin is already associated with Gower. (Polk, "An Ambience for Reading," p. 290.)

[15] Pryor, "Vernon Watkins and the Taliesin Legend," pp. 56-57.

[16] Watkins, "Commentary on 'Poet and Goldsmith,'" in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 158.

[17] Ford, <u>The Mabinogi</u>, pp. 185-86. Watkins could have known this poem in translation both through H. I. Bell and through Graves.

[18] Jones, <u>Epoch and Artist</u>, p. 155. In "Art and Sacrament" Jones writes,

> We have ample archaeological evidence to show us that palaeolothic man, whatever else he was, and whatever his ancestors were, was a sacramental animal.

[19] Jones, <u>Epoch and Artist</u>, p. 150.

[20] Watkins, "New Year 1965," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 199.

[21] Kathleen Raine, <u>Defending Ancient Springs</u> (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 33.

[22] Raine, <u>Defending Ancient Springs</u>, p. 33.

[23] William Blake, <u>Complete Writings</u>, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 611, 657, 687. It is interesting to note here that Thomas Traherne, another of Watkins' sources, employed the image of the grain in a similar context when he wrote, "You never enjoy the world aright till you see how a sand exhibiteth the wisdom and power of God." (from Traherne's <u>Centuries of Meditation</u>, "The First Century," no. 27)

[24] Blake, "Jerusalem," in <u>Complete Writings</u>, p. 657.

[25] Blake, <u>Complete Writings</u>, p. 418.

[26] Blake, "Jerusalem," in <u>Complete Writings</u>, p. 687.

[27] I am referring here to two primary works of Christian mysticism: <u>The Ascent of Mount Carmel</u>, including "The Dark

Night of the Soul" by St. John of the Cross, and the anonymously
written fourteenth-century work of mystical theology, The Cloud
of Unknowing. Watkins knew and translated Spanish and shared an
interest in John of the Cross with his friend Roy Campbell who
translated the "Spiritual Canticles" of St. John.

[28] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 28. Many of
Watkins' sources, such as Blake, Plotinus and Von Hügel "were
suggested by his study of Yeats' poems," writes Norris. I shall
be exploring Yeats' influence in Chapter V.

[29] Polk, "Vernon Watkins: An Ambience for Reading," p. 299.

[30] Watkins' use of Dante has been investigated by Ruth Pryor
in her article, "Vernon Watkins and Dante," Anglo-Welsh Review,
23, No. 52 (Summer 1974), 94-101. Watkins translated sections
of the Divine Comedy and was influenced by Eliot's use of Dante
in The Four Quartets. Leslie Norris has traced Watkins' use of
Blake in an appendix to his dissertation.

[31] Watkins, "A Note on 'Earth-Dress,'" in "The Prose of
Vernon Watkins," p. 236.

[32] For references to Zacchaeus or to the image of the syca-
more and its keys see:

"Sycamore," BML
"Thames Forest," BML
"Autumn Song," BML
"Four Sonnets of Resurrection," LU
"A Man with a Field," CA
"The Scythe," CA
"Poet and Goldsmith," CA
"Movement of Autumn," F

[33] W. B. Yeats, A Vision (New York: Collier Books, 1966),
p. 275.

[34] Roland Mathias, "Grief and the Circus Horse: A Study of
Mythic and Christian Themes in the Early Poetry of Vernon Watkins,"
Triskel One (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1971), p. 97.

[35] Watkins translated a number of Hölderlin's poems and
wrote several eulogies on the German Romantic, "To Hölderlin,"
and "The Childhood of Hölderlin" in Affinities. In the former
poem he speaks of Hölderlin as one in whom "the Christian and the
Greek were reconciled." (A, p. 48)

[36] Polk, "Vernon Watkins: An Ambience for Reading," p. 277.
In her thesis Polk conducts a thorough discussion of the shaman-
istic aspects of the bardic figure.

[37] See Watkins' use of these birds as symbols of the artist
in "The Kestrel" (CA, p. 55) and "Art and the Ravens" (DB, p. 57).

[38] Vernon Watkins, "Le Cathedrale Engloutie," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 174.

[39] Watkins, "New Year 1965," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," pp. 198-99.

[40] David Jones, In Parenthesis (New York: Chilmark Press, 1961), pp. 79-84.

[41] Guest, p. 267.

[42] Guest, pp. 281-82.

[43] Guest, p. 274.

[44] Raine, Defending Ancient Springs, p. 20.

[45] Kathleen Raine, "Vernon Watkins: Poet of Tradition," Anglo-Welsh Review, 14, No. 33 (Summer 1964), p. 27.

[46] Guest, p. 268.

[47] Other Celtic trios of supernatural shape-changing women include Morrigan or Morrigina of Irish myth and a triad called the "Matrone" or "Matres" (Mothers) of Latin origin. Polk argues (along with Graves and others) that these female goddesses were originally associated with horse worship. See Polk's "An Ambience for Reading," p. 102. "Y Mamau" can also be compared fruitfully to the Irish three Brigids and in Christian theology to the three Marys.

[48] Guest, p. 271. In Taliesin's song the bard refers to Badon's fight, mentioning both knife blades and the idea of vengeance in conjunction:

As erst in Badon's fight,--
With Arthur of liberal ones
The head, with long red blades:
Through feats of testy men,
And a chief with his foes.
Woe be to them, the fools,
When revenge comes upon them.

[49] Gwen Watkins makes this point in her notes to the poems from Unity of the Stream, a posthumous selection of Watkins' verse (Cardiff: Gomer Press, 1978), p. 105.

Chapter II

   ¹ Dora Polk, <u>Vernon Watkins and the Spring of Vision</u>
(Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1977), p. 28.

   ² Watkins, "The Poet's Voice," in "The Prose of Vernon Wat-
kins," p. 22. Watkins often introduced himself at readings as a
Christian poet. In "The Poet's Voice," a radio broadcast of
Sept. 25, 1947, he states:

   I am a Christian poet and believe that a poet should not
   offer mankind less than the whole truth of his integrity.

   ³ Watkins, ed. <u>Letters to Vernon Watkins</u>, p. 17.

   ⁴ E. H. Blakeney, ed., <u>The Histories of Herodotus</u> (London:
J. M. Dent & Sons, 1964), p. 299.

   ⁵ Mathias, "Grief and the Circus Horse," p. 124.

   ⁶ B. Jowett, trans., <u>The Dialogues of Plato</u> (New York:
Random House, 1937), II, 12. There Timaeus argues:

   The work of the creator, whenever he looks to the un-
   changeable and fashions the form and nature of his work
   after an unchangeable pattern, must necessarily be made
   fair and perfect.

   ⁷ In "Four Sonnets" he writes, "The pagan creeds fly back,
staining white stones...." (<u>LU</u>, p. 99). In "The Cave-Drawing"
he describes the "Five colours a mist-formed rainbow spun / From
the dawn of time...." (<u>LU</u>, p. 100).

   ⁸ Roland Mathias, Vernon Watkins, p. 57. See also Kathleen
Raine's "Vernon Watkins: Poet of Tradition," p. 23. In Dora
Polk's <u>Watkins and the Spring of Vision</u> the author writes:

   He [Watkins] was deeply devoted to the English mystics
   such as Rolle and Julian of Norwich, and read extensively
   and intensively in the poets of the religious and hermetic
   tradition. Like Yeats, whom he admired tremendously...
   Watkins was familiar with the Neo-Platonists, as citations
   and quotations from Plotinus' <u>Enneads</u> in his notebook
   suggest. (p. 14)

A letter from Gwen Watkins to the present writer dated March 28,
1983 confirms that Watkins, "did use the large MacKenna transla-
tion of <u>The Enneads</u>, six volumes. He must have bought it in...
any of the years from 1931 to 1935." Yeats himself cites the
MacKenna translation in <u>A Vision</u> (Collier, 1966), p. 20.

   ⁹ Plotinus, <u>The Enneads</u>, trans. Stephen MacKenna, 4th ed.
(London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 236. The original edition
is long out of print, but the second, third and fourth editions
retain substantively the content of the first.

10 Plotinus, p. 324.

11 Plotinus, p. 473. The concept of "pure whiteness" can also be traced back to Plato's Philebus, a source well-known to the Neoplatonists and later translated by Marsilio Ficino. (Jowett, Vol. II, p. 388)

12 Plotinus, p. 497.

13 Plotinus, p. 506.

14 Plotinus, p. 510.

15 Plotinus, p. 429.

16 Thomas, Letters to Vernon Watkins, p. 102. Thomas wrote:

Any more about your leprous collection? Perhaps the volume should be surgically bound. I do hope it comes out this summer, just before the gas.

17 The following poems make reference to the figure of the leper:

"Ballad of the Mari Lwyd," BML, p. 38.
"The Collier," BML
"The Broken Sea," LV
"Money for the Market," LU
"Song of the Good Samaritan," LU
"Quem Quaertis," A
"Five Poems of Magdalenian Darkness," A

18 Joseph P. Clancy, trans., The Earliest Welsh Poetry (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 91-95 & 202.

19 Watkins may also have been aware of Father Damien's (1840-1889) work with lepers. A book on the Belgian priest's life, Damien the Leper by John Farrow, was published in 1937, and the BBC took up the story of his mission to a colony of lepers in the Sandwich Islands, Hawaii, in its School Broadcasts of the 1940's. Since Watkins read occasionally for the BBC and followed its programs during those years, it is highly likely he knew the story.

20 For other examples of Watkins' use of the graveyard setting see "The Burial," "Gravestones" and "The Yew-Tree" in LU.

21 George Herbert, The Poems of George Herbert, ed. Helen Gardner (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 56.

22 Watkins' "swan poems" include: "Swan Narcissus" (F, p. 44) and "Night and the Swan" (BOD, p. 43).

23 Plotinus, p. 461.

24 A. E. Taylor, trans. The Laws of Plato (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1934), p. 103.

25 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, The Divine Names and Mystical Theology, trans. John D. Jones (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1980), pp. 211-14.

26 Lecture-notes 1-22, TS, University of Washington, Seattle, 6pp.

27 During the period from 1874-76 when Hopkins was reading theology in North Wales he took a keen interest in Welsh poetry. Passages from his letters not only reveal that he was beginning to learn Welsh, but that he was adapting Welsh verse techniques like "cynghanedd" to his own poetry.

28 Notebooks on Hopkins and Yeats, University of Washington, Seattle. The notebooks indicate that Watkins was reading John Burnet's Early Greek Philosophy (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1899) at the time of his first appointment at the University of Washington. This work contains a long section on Heraclitus. Watkins' reference to Heraclitus in the early poem, "Discoveries" (BML, p. 65), argues a longstanding interest in the Pre-Socratics.

29 I have in mind here Heraclitus' fragments: "This order ...is now, and ever shall be an everliving Fire, fixed measures of it kindling and fixed measures going out," and "You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you." (Burnet, pp. 135-36)

30 In this poem Watkins has in mind an actual underground stream near his home on Gower. At one level he associates the stream's disappearance underground with his father who had recently died at the time of the poem's composition.

31 Plotinus, pp. 58-9. Brian Keeble first pointed out that Watkins may have used this passage in "Time's Glass Breaks," Thames Poetry, 1, No. 3 (Winter 1977), p. 19.

32 Jowett, The Dialogues of Plato, I, 855.

33 Watkins, "Replies to the Wales Questionnaire," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 16. The revised version from Fidelities reads:

When the trees drop their leaves in frost,
Old Earth, deep-rooted, knows her own;
Poets, who loved her, are the last
To leave her, when the rest have flown.

34 McCormick, "'I Sing a Placeless and a Timeless Heaven,'" p. 134.

[35] William Ralph Inge, <u>The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought</u> (New York: Longman's Green, 1926), pp. 10-13, and Paul Oskar Kristeller, <u>The Classics and Renaissance Thought</u>, XV, Martin Classical Lectures (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1955), 48-69.

[36] T. S. Eliot, <u>The Four Quartets</u> (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 16.

[37] Eliot, <u>The Four Quartets</u>, p. 44.

Chapter III

Part I

[1] John Heath-Stubbs, "Pity and the Fixed Stars: An Approach to Vernon Watkins," Poetry Quarterly, 12, No. 1 (Spring 1950), 19.

[2] James Dickey, "First and Last Things," Poetry (Chicago), 103, No. 5 (February 1964), 319.

[3] Roland Mathias, "A Note on Some Recent Poems by Vernon Watkins," Dock Leaves, 1, No. 3 (Michaelmas, 1950), 39.

[4] Watkins, "The Joy of Creation," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 181.

[5] Of the approximately three hundred poems in the published volumes, sixty-seven of them are sonnets. Watkins has written six formal odes and at least twelve long ballads in addition to the poems which use a ballad-like refrain as in "Expectation of Life" from Affinities.

[6] Heath-Stubbs, "Pity and the Fixed Stars," p. 18. He writes of Watkins' association with this group in the following terms:

> Into this framework were fitted the rhetoric of Mr. Hendry, the naive romanticism of Mr. Treece, and the marginal comments of Mr. Fraser and Mr. Moore (two somewhat tender-minded intellectuals with a taste for the easier forms of English versification); and apparently, the finely-wrought, hieratic, and formal verse of the poet who forms the subject of this essay [i.e. Watkins].

See also Philip Larkin's, "Vernon Watkins: An Encounter and a Re-encounter," in Vernon Watkins: 1906-1967, p. 29. Larkin argues that though Watkins' name had been associated with the Apocalyptics, "in fact his poetry was much more controlled than theirs and reached further back to the symbolist poets of Europe."

[7] Watkins, "Poets on Poetry," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 104.

[8] John Press, "English Verse Since 1945," in Essays by Divers Hands, 31 (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 160.

[9] Press, "English Verse Since 1945," p. 151.

[10] Gross, p. 248.

[11] Jenijoy La Belle, "Vernon Watkins: Some Observations on Poetry," The Anglo-Welsh Review, No. 65 (1979), p. 102.

[12] McCormick, "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," pp. 3 & 6. She notes that, "In addition to the Taliesin example...he echoed 'The Poet's Voice' in the poem 'Woodpecker and Lyre-Bird'; 'Poets on Poetry' is echoed in 'Affinities' and in several poems in Fidelities; and the articles on Dylan Thomas are prophetic of the poems on Thomas." (p. 6)

[13] Watkins, "The Second Pressure in Poetry," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 161.

[14] Watkins, "W. B. Yeats: The Religious Poet," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 130. Watkins writes of Yeats as follows:

How much patience must have gone to the making of these poems, how much patience in waiting for the 'luck,' as he called it, for the unpredictable word, the unpredictable correction that is so personal to the poet, so much a part of his soul.

And in "New Year 1965," Watkins quotes Yeats' conversational remark, "[P]erhaps when you least expect it, you get the luck." ("The Prose of Vernon Watkins," pp. 201-02.)

[15] Watkins, "The Joy of Creation," p. 179.

[16] Watkins, "The Second Pressure in Poetry," p. 161.

[17] Kathleen Raine, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," in Vernon Watkins: 1906-1967, pp. 42-43.

[18] Watkins, "The Second Pressure in Poetry," pp. 161-62.

[19] Michael Hamburger, "Vernon Watkins, a Memoir," in Vernon Watkins: 1906-1967, p. 50.

[20] Watkins, "Written to An Instrument," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," pp. 48-49.

[21] Watkins, "For the Reading of Poems at Greg-y-nog," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 233.

[22] Watkins, "Written to An Instrument," p. 55.

[23] Watkins, Research and Reperception," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 168.

[24] Watkins, "Poets on Poetry," p. 104.

[25] Watkins, "Context," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 148.

[26] S. T. Coleridge, "Principles of Genial Criticism: Essay Third," in Biographia Literaria, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), II, p. 235.

27 Watkins, "For the Reading of Poems at Greg-y-nog,"
p. 232.

28 Watkins, "Poets on Poetry," p. 103.

29 T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," in On Poetry and
Poets (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 33.

30 Watkins, "Context," p. 147.

31 Watkins, "For the Reading of Poems at Greg-y-nog,"
p. 232.

32 Watkins ed., Letters to Vernon Watkins, p. 13.

33 Robert Gorham Davis, "Eucharist and Roasting Pheasant,"
Poetry (Chicago), 73 (December 1948), 173. Davis writes of Wat-
kins' work that, "where the difficulties are not intrinsic, they
are largely a matter of syntax, which is sacrificed to the
poetry."

34 Vernon Watkins, "Prose," in Poetry Wales, 12, No. 4
(Spring 1977), 54.

35 Under a Bright Heaven, BBC, University of Washington,
1967.

36 Watkins, "Poets on Poetry," p. 104.

37 Watkins, "Poets on Poetry," pp. 103-04.

38 Watkins, "The Joy of Creation," p. 183.

39 Watkins, "The Poet's Voice," in "The Prose of Vernon
Watkins," p. 20.

40 T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in
The Sacred Wood, 7th ed. (London: Methuen & Co., 1950), p. 49.

41 Hamburger, "Vernon Watkins, a Memoir," p. 51. Roland
Mathias has also written in "A Note on Some Recent Poems,"

I am not persuaded that...this reverence of his for the
witnessing saints is anything but crippling to his own
development....Can undue reverence be creative? (p. 43)

Part II

1 Gwen Watkins, ed., The Breaking of the Wave, by Vernon
Watkins (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1979), p. 6.

2 "The Joy of Creation," p. 179. He writes,

I am convinced that the foundation of art is joy. In
the visual arts, in poetry and in music, the act of cre-
ation is joy.

[3] La Belle, p. 101. Actually, the comet appears every
seventy-six years on the average.

[4] Watkins, "First Choice," in "The Prose of Vernon Wat-
kins," pp. 59-60.

[5] Thomas Parry, A History of Welsh Literature, trans. H.
Idris Bell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 266.

[6] See Watkins' Selected Verse Translations, with an Essay
on the Translation of Poetry (London: Enitharmon Press, 1977)
for an indication of the range of Watkins' translations. Ian
Hilton has written a helpful essay, "Vernon Watkins and Hölder-
lin," in Poetry Wales, 12, No. 4 (Spring 1977), 101-17. See
also H. W. Waidson's "Vernon Watkins and German Literature,"
Anglo-Welsh Review, 21, No. 47 (Summer 1972), 124-36. The only
volume of Watkins' translations to be published during his life-
time was Heine's The North Sea (New York: New Directions, 1951).
Many individual poems by French and German poets (Hölderlin,
Heine, Rilke, Goethe, Schiller, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Válèry and
others) appeared in journals. He also left unpublished poems
in Homeric Greek (passages from Homer), Italian, Spanish and Hun-
garian.

[7] Gwen Watkins, Vernon Watkins: Poet of the Elegiac Muse,
The W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture (Swansea: University of Swan-
sea Press, 1973), p. 4.

[8] Watkins, "Prose," in Poetry Wales, p. 53.

[9] Parry, A History of Welsh Literature, p. 51.

[10] Gwen Watkins, Poet of the Elegiac Muse, p. 20.

[11] See, for instance:

"The Eastern Window," BML, p. 62.
"Four Sonnets of Resurrection," LU, p. 58.
"The Burial," LU, p. 71.
"Gravestones," LU, p. 73.
"The Yew Tree," LU, p. 101.
"Testimony," DB, p. 29.
"The Pulse and the Shade," BOD, p. 50
"Rhadamanthus and the New Soul," BOD, p. 50.

[12] Watkins, "Replies to the Wales Questionnaire," in "The
Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 17.

[13] McCormick, "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 16. The
glossary was first published in David Jones' "The Tutelar of
the Place," Poetry (Chicago), 97, No. 4 (Jan. 1961), 203-09.

[14] Kathleen Raine, "Vernon Watkins: Poet of Tradition," p. 23. See also Raine's "Intuition's Lightning," in Poetry Review, 59, No. 1 (June 1968), p. 53, and her Defending Ancient Springs (Oxford, 1967), where she develops this argument.

[15] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 175. The englyn is technically a three or four-line stanza of 10, 7, 10 syllables and one main rhyme.

[16] Glyn Jones, "Whose Flight is Toil," in Vernon Watkins: 1906-1967, p. 25.

[17] Ruth Pryor, ed., David Jones: Letters to Vernon Watkins, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976), pp. 74-75.

[18] Raine, "Intuition's Lightning," p. 53.

[19] Anthony Conran, "The English Poet in Wales (I)," Anglo-Welsh Review, 10, No. 25 (1959), 30.

[20] Ceri Lewis, "The Court Poets: Their Function, Status and Craft," in A Guide to Welsh Literature, ed. A. O. H. Jarman and G. R. Hughes, I (Swansea: Christopher Davies), 145-46.

[21] Gwyn Williams, An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), pp. 12-13.

[22] Jones, David Jones: Letters to Vernon Watkins, p. 55.

[23] Jones, David Jones: Letters to Vernon Watkins, p. 59.

[24] Jones, Epoch and Artist, pp. 238-39.

[25] Raine, Defending Ancient Springs, p. 25.

[26] Gross, p. 32.

[27] Gross, p. 34. It should be noted that the traditional Sapphic stanza (developed by Horace) is composed of three lesser lines of eleven syllables, followed by an Adonic line of five. In English the stress normally falls on the long third and fifth syllables or on the fourth and sixth. The Sapphic line was arranged as trochee, spondee, dactyl, trochee, trochee. The Adonic consisted of a dactyl and either a spondee or a trochee. According to the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), the stress patterns are as follows:

Lesser Sapphic Line: —◡—◡—◡◡—◡—◡
Adonic:　　　　　　　—◡◡—◡

[28] Gross, p. 34.

[29] Gross, p. 273.

[30] Mathias, "Grief and the Circus Horse," p. 104.

[31] Raine, "Intuition's Lightning," p. 52.

[32] Ian Hilton, "Vernon Watkins and Hölderlin," _Poetry Wales_, 12, No. 4 (Spring 1977), 115.

[33] Michael Hamburger, trans., _Poems and Fragments_, by Friedrich Hölderlin (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. xvii.

[34] The scheme for the Alcaic is:

$$\smile - \smile - \smile - \smile \smile - \smile \smile \text{(twice)} \|$$
$$\smile - \smile - \smile - \smile - \smile \|$$
$$- \smile \smile - \smile \smile - \smile - \smile$$

[35] Gross, p. 274.

[36] McCormick, "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 7.

[37] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 109.

[38] David Wright, "Essay on Vernon Watkins," _Nimbus_, 3, No. 1 (Summer 1954), 13. Wright enumerates some of the common grounds of attack in order ultimately to defend Watkins against his critics.

[39] Davie, _Purity of Diction_, p. 16. Davie distinguishes between poets like Shakespeare, who enlarge and recreate the language and those who undertake "to preserve or refine a poetic diction."

[40] Gwen Watkins and Ruth Pryor, eds., _I That Was Born in Wales: A New Selection from the Poems of Vernon Watkins_ (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976), p. II.

[41] Hamburger, "Vernon Watkins, a Memoir," p. 56.

Chapter IV

Part I

[1] Raine, "Vernon Watkins: Poet of Tradition," p. 35.

[2] Raine, "Vernon Watkins: Poet of Tradition," p. 35.

[3] Louis Martz, "New Poetry: In the Pastoral Mode," The Yale Review, 44 (Winter 1955), 307-08.

[4] Mathias, Vernon Watkins, p. 2.

[5] T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), p. 247.

[6] Eryl Davis, "Four Tributes," Anglo-Welsh Review, 17, No. 39 (Summer 1968), 9-10.

[7] Henry Vaughan, The Complete Poems, ed. Alan Rudrum (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), p. 65. See the epigram to "Olor Iscanus," ("The Swan of Usk"):

O who will set me down in the cool valleys of the Usk,
and protect me with the ample shadow of his branches!
(p. 65)

[8] Jones, David Jones: Letters to Vernon Watkins, p. 59.

[9] Watkins, "Prose," in Poetry Wales, p. 59. He also wrote,

So Milton, when he was overtaken by blindness, spoke of "that one talent which is death to hide." ("The Joy of Creation," p. 178.)

Significant references to Milton occur in the following poems:

"Discoveries," BML
"The Broken Sea," LV
"The Immortal in Nature," CA
"A True Picture Restored," A

It can also be argued that Watkins' Samson poems, "The Measure Moves" (F) and "Samson" (BW), are indebted to Milton's Samson Agonistes.

[10] Watkins, "The Poet's Voice," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 22.

[11] John Donne, The Complete Poetry of John Donne, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: New York University Press, 1968), pp. 390-92. Subsequent references to the complete poems of Donne are drawn from this edition.

[12] George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, eds., The Sermons of John Donne, 10 vols. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1953-62). See, for instance, Sermon XV, Folio of 1640 preached at Whitehall, March 8, 1622, where he writes:

> Doth not man die even in his birth? The breaking of prison is death, and what is our birth but a breaking of prison? (Vol. IV, p. 52)

See also Sermon XXXVI, Folio of 1640 on "the decay of the world" and his last sermon, "Death's Duell" or Sermon XXVII, Folio of 1649 preached at Whitehall, Friday, February 25, 1630.

[13] Vaughan, p. 147.

[14] Vaughan, p. 149. The poem concludes: "Lord, then said I, On me one breath, And let me die before my death!"

[15] George Herbert, The Poems of George Herbert, ed. Helen Gardner (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 79.

[16] Herbert, p. 33.

[17] Donne, The Complete Poetry, p. 368.

[18] J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 3.

[19] J. D. Cooper, An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 10.

[20] Thomas Traherne, Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings, ed. H. M. Margoliouth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), II, pp. 113-16. Traherne writes in "Section II":

> From Clay, and Mire, and Dirt, my Soul,
>   From vile and common Ore,
> Thou must ascend; taught by the Toll
> In what fit place thou mayst adore;
> Refin'd by fire, thou shalt a Bell
> Of Prais becom, in Mettal pure.... (p. 114)

All subsequent references to Traherne are drawn from this two-volume edition.

[21] Donne, The Complete Poetry, p. 339.

[22] Herbert, p. 113.

[23] Donne, The Complete Poetry, p. 142.

[24] Herbert, p. 97.

[25] Sermons of John Donne, Vol. IX, pp. 173-88. Herbert also uses the hourglass figure in "Church-monuments":

....flesh is but the glass, which holds the dust
That measures all our time; which also shall
Be crumbled into dust.... (Herbert, p. 57)

26 John Donne, The Epithalamions, Anniversaries, and
Epicedes, ed. W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978),
pp. 6-10.

27 We have seen his development of this theme earlier in
"Song of the Good Samaritan" discussed in Chapter I. In "The
Death Bell" he again makes reference to the Samaritan's deed
and other incidents from the gospels including the story of
Simeon, and the day of Pentecost from Acts:

O who can match the speed
Of whirling nebulae
To the Samaritan's deed
Performed in sympathy? (DB, p. 104)

28 Raine, "Vernon Watkins: Poet of Tradition," p. 35.

29 Donne, The Complete Poetry, p. 390. Donne's lines are
as follows:

Since I am coming to that Holy roome,
      Where, with Thy Quire of Saints for evermore
I shall be made Thy Musique....

30 Donne, The Complete Poetry, p. 391.

31 Letter from Gwen Watkins, the poet's widow, 28 March
1983. Mrs. Watkins writes:

Herbert he [Watkins] knew at Repton, and read him again
a great deal because Dylan Thomas especially loved him.

32 See also Watkins' poem, "One Theme":

Why should you wander in the clouds
If art has but one theme:
Did not those transfigured shrouds
Shake you from your dream? (BW, p. 38)

33 Traherne, I, p. 10.

34 The reference to "His [Christ's] beating heart" strongly
echoes the words of the amazed Greek in Yeats' play, The Resur-
rection, "the heart of a phantom is beating!" Like Yeats, whose
influence will be considered in Chapter V, Watkins emphasizes
the great paradox of a spirit becoming flesh and blood.

35 Herbert, p. 48.

36 Herbert, p. 31. See also Watkins' "The Restitution"
(UP, p. 25) for another statement of the theme of "reprisal."

[37] Herbert, p. 32.

[38] See Matt. 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50 and John 12:3-5.

[39] Herbert, p. 164.

[40] Vaughan, p. 273.

[41] Vaughan, p. 275.

[42] Martz, The Poetry of Meditation, p. 184.

[43] The dates of these writers are:

Donne: 1571-1631
Herbert: 1593-1633
Vaughan: 1622-1795
Traherne: 1637?-1674

Part II

[1] Being a native speaker of Welsh, Vaughan would have known that "gwyn" was the word used in the Welsh Bible for "white," "holy" and "blessed." Though modern scholarship cannot delineate his exact Welsh literary sources, it is highly likely that he had read much of the older poetry where "gwynfyd" imagery abounds. Thomas Parry in his A History of Welsh Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), points out that there was a vigorous anti-quarian revival in Wales throughout the seventeenth century (pp. 222-24). "White light" is also an important symbol of trans-figuration or transmutation in the documentable Hermetic sources which he shared with his twin brother, Thomas, sources like Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Boehme. See F. D. Hutchinson's, Henry Vaughan, A Life and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), pp. 155-62, for a discussion of Vaughan's use of Welsh concepts and literary devices like cynghanedd and "dyfalu" or a piling up of comparisons. Watkins would have acquired his sense of "gwynfyd" both from ancient Welsh and more esoteric sources like Hermeticism and Neoplatonism as discussed in Chapter II.

[2] Louis L. Martz, The Paradise Within, Studies in Vaughan, Traherne and Milton (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), p. 52.

[3] Traherne, II, pp. 128-30.

[4] Traherne, I, pp. 111-31. In "The Third Century," Traherne treats the revelation of God in the Creation (No. 3), the self or soul (No. 18) and in "The Book" or biblical tradition (Nos. 27-35) as he explores his own search for what he calls "Felicity," a word that comprehends the notions of happiness, blessedness and

joy. The idea of the world as "God's Book" is Medieval and can be traced to Augustine and Bonaventure, two of Traherne's probable sources. Louis Martz has examined the presence of Augustinian concepts in Vaughan, Traherne and Milton in his The Paradise Within. For a fine synopsis of the Medieval metaphor of the book see E. R. Curtius' European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, Bollingen Series, No. 36 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 315-26.

[5] Vaughan, p. 173.

[6] Vaughan, pp. 241-42.

[7] This essay was published in Labrys 1 (Feb. 1978), and republished as "War and Poetry: The Reactions of Owen and Yeats" in Yeats and Owen: Two Essays (Frome, Somerset: The Hunting Raven Press, 1981.

[8] Watkins, "War and Poetry: The Reactions of Owen and Yeats," p. 27.

[9] Letter received from Gwen Watkins, 28 March 1983.

[10] The only area in which Watkins' canon does not parallel that of Vaughan in range is in the presence of satiric pieces like Vaughan's early translations of Juvenal. Yet one can argue that in the satires and poems to "Amoret" Vaughan is less himself and more imitative of Donne. It should be noted that some of Watkins' later poems in Fidelities are more socially and politically concerned, like "Trees in a Town" and "Postscript (for J.F.K.)," but his work is generally free of topical and polemical references.

[11] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 35. Norris writes:

> Some of the properties we noted in his first book begin to show themselves here, the inversions, a certain obscurity, and some very commonplace writing.

[12] Watkins' lecture-notes from the University of Washington reveal that he was studying and teaching this poem at the time of his death. See lecture-notes on Hopkins' "Wreck of the Deutchland," TS, 27 Sept. 1967, University of Washington, Seattle, 3 pp.

[13] Dafau-Labeyrie was the friend who accompanied Watkins on his visit to Yeats in 1938, and who also translated Thomas' Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog into French.

[14] I have in mind here Jesus saying of children that "their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 18:10), as well as his treatment of "little ones" in the gospels in general. Plato's Republic, Book VII, on the allegory of the cave deals with the loss and recovery of the memory of eternity in terms of darkness and light.

[15] Vaughan, p. 172.

[16] Traherne, I, p. 110.

[17] The following are only a few of the many references to the symbol of the fountain in Watkins' work:

"The Fountain," BML
"Peace in the Welsh Hills," CA
"Candle Constant," UP
"Child of the Fountain," BW

[18] Vaughan, p. 148.

[19] Vaughan, p. 263.

[20] Vaughan, p. 282.

[21] Traherne, II, p. 64.

[22] Traherne, I, p. 79.

[23] Traherne, I, p. 78.

[24] Traherne, I, p. 114.

[25] Vaughan, p. 230.

[26] Vaughan, p. 308.

[27] Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, Hamlet's Mill, An Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time (Boston: David R. Godine, 1977), p. 2.

[28] Isabel Hyde, "Primary Sources and Associations of Dunbar's Aureate Imagery," Modern Language Review, 51 (1956), 487.

[29] Under a Bright Heaven, BBC, University of Washington, 1967.

[30] Vaughan, p. 228.

[31] Vaughan, p. 242.

[32] Vaughan, p. 188.

[33] In his thesis, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," Leslie Norris points out that passages from this poem echo the tenth-century anonymous Welsh lyric, "Winter," as well as the Llywarch Hen poems. (pp. 129-30)

[34] Vaughan, p. 251.

[35] Vaughan, p. 307.

[36] Vaughan, pp. 306-07.

[37] Vaughan, p. 307.

[38] Martz, The Paradise Within, p. 37. See also Gladys I. Wade's Thomas Traherne (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1946), pp. 215-38.

[39] Martz, The Paradise Within, p. 37.

[40] Some of Watkins' poems on or to children are listed below:

"Sonnet (Infant Noah)," BML
"First Joy," LU
"Llewelyn's Chariot," LU
"A Child's Birthday," LU
"A Christening Remembered," LU
"A Prayer," DB
"The Caryatids," DB
"Serena," CA
"Birth and Morning," CA
"For a Christening," CA
"Poem for Conrad," F
"Fragment from Poems for a Child," BOD
"For a First Birthday," BW
"Child of the fountain," BW

[41] Reprinted in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 196. There Watkins writes of "the truth of Wordsworth's reperception of childhood, or of Traherne's...."

[42] Letter received from Gwen Watkins, 28 March 1983. Mrs. Watkins confirms from her firsthand knowledge of Watkins' reading that he did know Traherne's prose.

[43] Traherne, I, p. 110.

[44] Traherne, I, pp. 110-11.

[45] Traherne, I, p. 111.

[46] Watkins developed the figure of Noah in a similar context as a type of the holy infant earlier in "Sonnet (Infant Noah)" (BML, p. 57).

[47] Traherne, I, p. 68.

[48] Traherne, I, p. 18.

[49] Traherne, I, pp. 96-97.

[50] Traherne, I, p. 206.

[51] Traherne, II, p. 217.

[52] Traherne, I, p. 3.

[53] Traherne, I, p. 103.

[54] Traherne, I, p. 137.

[55] Traherne, I, p. 176.

[56] Watkins, "For the Reading of Poems at Greg-y-nog," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 234.

[57] Rosemond Tuve, A Reading of George Herbert (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 104-05.

[58] Blake, "Jerusalem," in Complete Writings, p. 684. Blake writes, for instance, "This is Jerusalem in every Man / A Tent & Tabernacle of Mutual Forgiveness...."

[59] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 124.

[60] F. T. Prince, Collected Poems (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1979), p. 105.

[61] Eliot, Selected Essays, p. 345.

[62] Eliot, Selected Essays, p. 346.

[63] T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods, A Primer of Modern Heresy (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934), p. 19.

[64] Raine, "Intuition's Lightning," p. 51.

[65] Thomas, Letters to Vernon Watkins, p. 25.

[66] Traherne has been called Pelagian after a Welsh monk (Pelagius) of the fourth and fifth centuries who denied the doctrine of original sin. I would submit that neither Traherne nor Watkins avoids the "problem of evil" in their shared sense that the soul has a timeless centre in Spirit, since they both present the soul as a moral agent capable of freewill choice with the ability to regain or deny that original unity.

Chapter V

Part I

[1] Watkins, "Context," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 147. See also Watkins "Prose" in Poetry Wales, 12, No. 4 (Spring 1977), 52.

[2] Others who argue the strong technical and stylistic impact of Yeats are Leslie Norris ("The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," Diss. Southampton University, 1972, p. 5), Kathleen Raine (Defending Ancient Springs, London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967, p. 30), and Gwen Watkins (Poetry Wales, Vol. 12, No. 4, Spring 1977, p. 64).

[3] Watkins, "On T. S. Eliot," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 207.

[4] Watkins, "On T. S. Eliot," p. 208.

[5] Watkins, "The Need of the Artist," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 151.

[6] Watkins, "New Year 1965," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 205.

[7] See Marianne Moore's commemorative poem on Watkins at his death in Leslie Norris' Vernon Watkins, 1906-1967, p. 44.

[8] Gwen Watkins, Introd., The Influences, by Vernon Watkins (Middlesex: Bran's Head Press, 1977), p. 1.

[9] Vernon Watkins, "Prose," in Poetry Wales, 4, p. 64.

[10] Vernon Watkins, Yeats and Owen: Two Essays (Frome: The Hunting Raven Press, 1981), p. 3.

[11] Watkins, "Prose," p. 58.

[12] W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London: Macmillan & Co., 1955), p. 541.

[13] The major essays by Watkins on Yeats are:

"W. B. Yeats--The Religious Poet," TSLL, 3, No. 4 (Winter 1962), 475-88.

"The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," in Yeats and Owen, pp. 3-18.

[14] All citations from this essay are derived from the 1962 version published in TSLL (see note 13).

[15] Vernon Watkins, "Visit to Yeats in Dublin, Spring, 1938," Poetry Wales, 12, No. 4 (Spring 1977), 66-77.

[16] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 30.

[17] Watkins, "W. B. Yeats--The Religious Poet," p. 476.

[18] W. B. Yeats, A Vision (Macmillan, 1937; rpt. New York: Collier Books, 1966), p. 279.

[19] Watkins, "New Year 1965," p. 200.

[20] Yeats, Autobiographies, pp. 371 & 272.

[21] Raine, "Intuition's Lightning," p. 52.

[22] Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 490.

[23] Yeats, The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1950), p. 284.

[24] Watkins, "W. B. Yeats--The Religious Poet," p. 484.

[25] Watkins, Yeats and Owen, p. 4. See also his "W. B. Yeats --The Religious Poet," p. 488.

[26] Watkins, "W. B. Yeats--The Religious Poet," p. 484. See also his Yeats and Owen, p. 4.

[27] Watkins, Yeats and Owen, p. 3.

[28] Yeats, A Vision, p. 268.

[29] Yeats, A Vision, p. 305. Watkins may also be remembering Thomas' poem on Egyptian burial in the sonnet sequence, "Altar- wise by owl-light in the half-way-house" (IX) from the early Twenty-Five Poems (1936).

[30] McCormick, "'I Sing a Placeless and a Timeless Heaven,'" p. 176.

[31] For Yeats' use of this construction see "What Magic Drum" and "The Statues" in his Collected Poems.

[32] Yeats, A Vision, p. 20.

[33] Desiree Hirst, "Vernon Watkins and the Influence of W. B. Yeats," Poetry Wales, 12, No. 4 (Spring 1977), 95.

[34] Mathias, Vernon Watkins, p. 28.

[35] See Yeats' "The Symbolism of Poetry," in Ideas of Good and Evil (London: A. H. Bullen, 1914), pp. 165-78.

[36] The following passage from DB shows Watkins using Blake's notion of "fourfold" or integrated man:

In death the fourfold man
Still rules time's bell and can
Teach the competitive
The loss by which we live. (<u>DB</u>, p. 107)

[37] Blake, <u>Complete Writings</u>, p. 743.

[38] Blake, <u>Complete Writings</u>, p. 149.

[39] Yeats, <u>A Vision</u>, p. 13.

[40] Yeats, <u>Autobiographies</u>, p. 503.

[41] See Blake's "Infant Sorrow" and "The Mental Traveller."
In the former Blake deals with the infant "striving against [his]
swaddling bands." Watkins has combined Blake's symbol of the
serpent of generation with Blake's idea of the constriction im-
posed upon the child by an adult society. "Regenerative love"
alone can break those bonds.

[42] Yeats, <u>A Vision</u>, p. 72.

[43] Yeats, <u>Ideas of Good and Evil</u>, p. 120.

[44] Yeats, <u>Ideas of Good and Evil</u>, p. 148. There he writes:
"The historical Christ was indeed no more than the supreme sym-
bol of the artistic imagination...." He also speaks of making
the soul out of art rather than of orthodox morality:

In our time we are agreed that we "make our souls" out
of some one of the great poets of ancient times, or out
of Shelley or Wordsworth, or Goethe.... (pp. 117-18)

[45] Yeats, <u>A Vision</u>, pp. 118-19.

[46] Yeats, <u>Collected Poems</u>, p. 267.

[47] Watkins, <u>The Influences</u>, p. 6.

[48] Gwen Watkins, Introd., <u>The Influences</u>, pp. 1-2.

[49] Brian Keeble, "Vernon Watkins and the Wisdom of Poetry,"
<u>Poetry Wales</u>, 2, No. 1 (Summer 1975), p. 23.

[50] Yeats, <u>Ideas of Good and Evil</u>, p. 168.

[51] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," "Abstract" and
p. 192.

[52] Blake, <u>Complete Writings</u>, p. 604.

[53] Yeats, <u>Ideas of Good and Evil</u>, p. 23.

[54] Watkins, <u>Yeats and Owen</u>, p. 6.

[55] Gwen Watkins, "Vernon Watkins and W. B. Yeats," Poetry Wales, 12, No. 4 (Spring 1977), p. 64.

[56] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 7.

[57] Watkins, "New Year 1965," p. 202. The description of the poem coming together "like a click of a box" is Yeats' own phrase as used in his Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1940), p. 24.

[58] Yeats describes the laborious process of revision in Autobiographies, p. 202.

[59] John Heath-Stubbs also makes this point in "Pity and the Fixed Stars," p. 20.

[60] Watkins, "The Joy of Creation," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 177.

[61] Watkins, "The Joy of Creation," pp. 180-83.

[62] Watkins, "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 38.

[63] Watkins, "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," p. 39.

[64] Watkins, "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," p. 39.

[65] Yeats, A Vision, pp. 18, 277 & 280.

[66] Blake, Complete Writings, p. 677.

[67] McCormick, "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 40.

[68] Watkins, "The Lady with the Unicorn," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 41.

[69] Yeats, Ideas of Good and Evil, pp. 210-11.

[70] Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 333.

[71] Yeats, Autobiographies, pp. 115-16.

[72] Eliot, After Strange Gods, pp. 34 & 50.

[73] Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 378. Yeats writes:

I was crossing a little stream near Inchy Wood and actually in the middle of a stride from bank to bank, when an emotion never experienced before swept down upon me. I said, "That is what the devout Christian feels, that is how he surrenders his will to the will of God."

Watkins quotes this passage at the end of "W. B. Yeats—The Religious Poet," p. 488.

[74] Watkins, "The Need of the Artist," p. 155.

[75] W. B. Yeats, "Art and Ideas," in Essays (London: Macmillan, 1924), p. 435.

[76] W. B. Yeats, Per Amica Silentia Lunae (London: Macmillan, 1918), p. 39. See also Autobiographies, p. 270.

[77] Yeats, Per Amica, p. 33.

[78] Yeats, A Vision, p. 271.

[79] Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 223.

[80] Yeats, A Vision, p. 276.

[81] Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 286.

[82] Watkins quotes Shelley's remark in "New Year 1965," p. 204.

[83] Hirst, "Vernon Watkins and the Influence of W. B. Yeats," p. 97.

[84] Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, p. 239. Cirlot points out that the peacock's tail in the Ars Symbolica of Bosch represents the blending together of all colours and the ideal of totality. This concept of mystical unity would have appealed strongly to the author of the "Music of Colours" sequence.

Part II

[1] Watkins, ed., Letters to Vernon Watkins, p. 13.

[2] Cited by Gwen Watkins in Norris' Vernon Watkins, 1906-1967, p. 16.

[3] Though Thomas disputes the technical influence of Hopkins in a letter, he had read him before he met Watkins. See Ralph Maud's edition of The Notebooks of Dylan Thomas (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 15.

[4] Ralph Maud, Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963), p. 7. Maud argues that figures like Donne, Hopkins or Rimbaud are of little use in illuminating any particular poem by Thomas.

[5] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 4.

[6] Paul Ferris, Dylan Thomas (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 126.

[7] Jane McCormick, "'Sorry, Old Christian,'" Anglo-Welsh Review, 18, No. 42 (February 1970), p. 79.

[8] Maud, _Entrances_, pp. 122-23. Critics who assume Thomas was working toward greater clarity on the basis of chronology alone are mistaken, since the supposedly later (less obscure) Twenty-Five Poems were actually written before many of 18 Poems. Watkins was completely unaware that Thomas' poems for the former volume were being quarried from the early notebooks.

[9] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," pp. vii-viii. See also Thomas' _Letters to Vernon Watkins_, p. 18.

[10] For essays on Watkins' translations see Chapter III, Part II, note 6.

[11] Constantine Fitzgibbon, _The Life of Dylan Thomas_ (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1965), p. 44.

[12] Cited by Gwen Watkins in Norris' _Vernon Watkins, 1906-1967_, p. 16.

[13] Watkins, "Mr. Dylan Thomas--Innovation and Tradition," _The Times_, 10 Nov. 1953, in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 44.

[14] Thomas, _Letters to Vernon Watkins_, p. 29.

[15] Thomas, _Letters to Vernon Watkins_, p. 38.

[16] Thomas complained in a letter written in January 1939 that Watkins was impervious to criticism:

> Since you've apparently been taking lessons from John
> Pritchard [sic] in refusing to accept adverse criticism,
> I shall make my grumbles about your good Yeats poem
> [i. e. "Yeats in Dublin"] illegible to invisibility.
> Here come the grumbles, hot, strong, and logical, but
> you can't see them. (_Letters to Vernon Watkins_, p. 53)

Thomas, on the other hand, was quite free with drafts and unfinished poems, but could be equally stubborn about criticism.

[17] Mathias, _Vernon Watkins_, p. 60.

[18] Watkins, ed., _Letters to Vernon Watkins_, p. 19.

[19] Thomas, _Letters to Vernon Watkins_, p. 66.

[20] Watkins, ed., _Letters to Vernon Watkins_, p. 17.

[21] Watkins, "Prose," in _Poetry Wales_, p. 60.

[22] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 12.

[23] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 1.

[24] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 4.

[25] Thomas, _Letters to Vernon Watkins_, p. 36.

[26] Fitzgibbon, Life of Dylan Thomas, p. 28.

[27] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 9.

[28] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 11.

[29] Watkins, ed., Letters to Vernon Watkins, p. 16.

[30] Maud, Entrances, p. 28.

[31] Henry Treece, Dylan Thomas: "Dog Among the Fairies" (New York: John de Graff, 1956), p. 14.

[32] Maud, Entrances, pp. 39-40.

[33] John Heath-Stubbs, "Pity and the Fixed Stars," p. 22.

[34] Raine, "Vernon Watkins: Poet of Tradition," p. 29.

[35] Raine, Defending Ancient Springs, p. 26.

[36] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 58. For an account of Thomas' pronunciation of the word "tear" (tare) in this line see Gwen Watkins' Portrait of a Friend (Llandysul, Dyfed: Gomer Press, 1983), pp. 138-39.

[37] Norris, "The Poetry of Vernon Watkins," p. 56.

[38] A. J. Roderick, Wales Through the Ages, I (Llanydbie: Christopher Davies, 1959), pp. 76 & 115.

[39] Fitzgibbon, Life of Dylan Thomas, p. 262. Empson's remark is quoted in Mathias' Vernon Watkins, p. 79.

[40] W. S. Merwin, "The Religious Poet," in A Casebook on Dylan Thomas, ed. John Malcolm Brinnin (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1960), p. 59.

[41] Dylan Thomas, The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. xiii.

[42] Dylan Thomas, "Replies to an Enquiry," in A Casebook on Dylan Thomas, p. 102.

[43] Thomas, "Replies to an Enquiry," p. 103.

[44] T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays, p. 433.

[45] John Ackerman, Dylan Thomas, His Life and Work (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 12. Ackerman writes of the Nonconformist Welsh conscience as follows:

> There was a racial Puritanism that had been ingrained in the Welsh character over many centuries. Even when the

orthodox Nonconformist way of life had been rejected,
the Nonconformist conscience remained.   (p. 34)

[46] Maud, Entrances, p. 95.

[47] Maud, Entrances, p. 94.

[48] Thomas, Collected Poems, p. 165.

[49] Thomas, Collected Poems, p. 188.

[50] Thomas, Collected Poems, p. 193.

[51] John Ackerman, Welsh Dylan: Dylan Thomas' Life, Writing
and his Wales (Cardiff: John Jones, 1979), p. 92.

[52] John Malcolm Brinnin, "from Dylan Thomas in America,"
in A Casebook on Dylan Thomas, p. 208.

[53] Maud, The Notebooks of Dylan Thomas, p. 29.

[54] Fitzgibbon, Life of Dylan Thomas, p. 262.   Thomas once
informed Pamela Hansford Johnson in an early letter that he was
"in the path of Blake." (See Maud's The Notebooks, p. 28) It is
probable that in the early days of their regular meetings he
introduced himself to Watkins similarly, though he and Watkins
derived very different things from Blake (as noted in Part I of
this chapter).

[55] Many of these prose pieces have been published in McCor-
mick's "The Prose of Vernon Watkins." They include:

"Mr. Dylan Thomas--Innovation and Tradition," The Times,
10 Nov. 1953.

"Dylan Thomas and the Spoken Word," Times Literary Supple-
ment, 52, No. 2755, 19 Nov. 1954, 731.

"Prose Writings of Dylan Thomas," Times Literary Supplement,
54, No. 2788, 5 Aug. 1955, 466.

"Dylan Thomas in America," Encounter, 4, No. 6 (June 1956),
77-79.

"An Exchange of Letters Between Stephen Spender and Vernon
Watkins," Observer, 24 Sept. 1969 and 15 Dec. 1957.

"Afterword" to Adventures in the Skin Trade by Dylan Thomas
(New York: New American Library, 1960), pp. 184-90.

"Foreword" to A High Wind in Jamaica by Richard Hughes
(New York: New American Library, 1961), pp. v-xi.

"Behind the Fabulous Curtain," Poetry Chicago, 98 (May 1961),
124-25.

[56] Watkins, "Mr. Dylan Thomas," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 46.

[57] Watkins, "Dylan Thomas in America," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 81. (See also p. 116)

[58] Watkins, "Afterward" to Adventures in the Skin Trade, in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 81.

[59] McCormick, "'Sorry, Old Christian,'" p. 82.

[60] Gwen Watkins, Portrait of a Friend (Llandysul, Dyfed: Gomer Press, 1983), p. 215.

[61] Portrait of a Friend, p. 215.

[62] Portrait of a Friend, pp. 13-14.

[63] Watkins, I That Was Born in Wales, p. 72. See editorial notes for the genesis of many of the poems on Thomas.

[64] Gerard Manley Hopkins, Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), p. 6.

[65] Thomas, Collected Poems, p. 54.

[66] Watkins, "Behind the Fabulous Curtain," in "The Prose of Vernon Watkins," p. 116.

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      New York: New Directions, 1960. CA

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APPENDIX

Synopsis of Lady Charlotte Guest's Translation of the Taliesin
Material from The Mabinogion (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1906)

     In Penllyn near Lake Tegid there once lived a man named
Tegid Voel and his wife Caridwen. Her son Avagddu was the ugli-
est man in the world, and she feared that because of this disad-
vantage he might not be admitted among the ranks of the nobility.
Therefore she decided to compensate him for his deficiency by
making him learned in the mysteries of "the future state of the
world." Caridwen proceeded to boil a magical cauldron of herbs
for a year and a day in order to obtain "three blessed drops of
inspiration." She told Gwion Bach, the son of a neighbor, to
stir the cauldron, and left a blind man to kindle the fire. One
day when she was away gathering herbs for the cauldron, three
drops of the fluid flew from it and fell upon Gwion Bach's fin-
ger. He put his finger to his mouth; and as soon as the drops
touched his lips, he gained prophetic knowledge of past, present
and future.

     Realizing immediately that he must protect himself from
Caridwen, he fled away. When Caridwen arrived and saw her plan
spoiled, she wrongfully struck the blind man, who defended him-
self by informing her it was Gwion Bach who had robbed her.
Caridwen then set out in pursuit of Gwion. On seeing her coming,
he changed into a hare. She changed herself into a greyhound.
He became a fish; she an otter-bitch. He turned himself into a
bird; she pursued him as a hawk. Finally, he spied a heap of
wheat on the floor of a barn and turned himself into one of the
grains. She transformed herself into a hen and swallowed him.
Nine months later she bore him as a child. Because of his beauty
she could not kill him, so she wrapped him in a leather bag and
cast him into the sea.

     The "unlucky" son of Gwyddno, Prince Elphin, was fishing in
the salmon weir on the beach between Dyvi and Aberystwyth when
he spotted the bag. On opening it he saw the forehead of a boy
and exclaimed, "Behold a radiant brow! Taliesin be he called."
Then Elphin placed Taliesin behind him on his horse and carried
him home, while Taliesin recited his first poem, a song of con-
solation to his new master for losing his catch of fish. Next,
Taliesin sang a song to Gwyddno Garanhir telling of his various
transformations through many times and places. At the court of
Gwyddno, Elphin's father, Taliesin continued the song of his
transformations, speaking of his relation to "his Lord," the "Son
of Mary." The child was then reared till he was thirteen years
old, when he was taken by Elphin to the court of Maelgwn Gwynedd.
There he figured in a series of incidents where he displayed his
great knowledge and skill before the court. In one of these, he
embarrassed twenty-four of Maelgwn's best bards by reducing them
to playing the nonsense phrase, "Blerwm, blerwm," on their lips
before the king. When asked by the king to give an account of

himself, he continued to sing of his transformations:

>   I was with my Lord in the highest sphere,
>   On the fall of Lucifer into the depth of hell
>   I have borne a banner before Alexander;
>   I know the names of the stars from north to south;
>   I have been on the galaxy at the throne of the Distributor;
>   I was in Canaan when Absolom was slain;
>   I conveyed the Divine Spirit to the level of the vale
>   of Hebron;
>   I was in the court of Don before the birth of Gwdion.
>   I was instructor to Eli and Enoc;
>   I have been winged by the genius of the splendid crosier;
>   I have been loquacious prior to being gifted with speech;
>   I was at the place of the crucifixion of the merciful
>   Son of God;
>   I have been three periods in the prison of Arianrod;
>   I have been the chief director of the work of the tower
>   of Nimrod;
>   I am a wonder whose origin is not known....

In the last series of riddling fragments, Taliesin goes on to
prophecy the destruction of the court.

>   A most strange creature will come from the sea marsh of
>   Rhiannedd
>   As a punishment of iniquity on Maelgwn Gwynedd.

Finally, after freeing his master Elphin, who had been imprisoned
by the king for making extravagant claims about Taliesin, the
bard ends with a song of creation.