"THE EXISTENTIALIST VOID AND THE DIVINE IMAGE"

The Poetry of Dylan Thomas

by

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ABSTRACT

The principal aim of this thesis has been to trace the course of Dylan Thomas's poetic evolution, which falls roughly into three main periods. It would be wrong to consider these water-tight compartments, however, since it is possible to discern from any one stage of his development lineaments of the past or of the future. Thus any generalization is automatically so qualified.

The first period is principally concerned with the creative and destructive forces which comprise the pattern of the changing and unchanging universe. Its focal image is procreative and its exploration of the natural dialectic is rendered very largely through the kind of perceptions belonging to the subconscious mind. It would be mistaken to infer from this that the poetry is chaotic, but its almost continual reliance upon symbolic meaning demands a response in which areas of the mind outside the rational are very often brought into play. The obscurities of style reflect the difficulties inherent in the putting into words of the chaos beyond consciousness. There are places where a nucleus of significance is lacking, and the poet becomes lost in obfuscated imagery, but at best he achieves a superb, solidified resonance.

The second period shows a growing concern with the relation of the macrocosm to the microcosm. Correspondingly, the degrees of both affirmation and negation are more extreme. At this time the growing pressure of problems of personal existence and of a greater awareness results in the questions outnumbering the answers. There are poems so dense and so opaque they virtually defy efforts to elucidate them; others, however, reveal a greater measure of clarity and a more plastic command of language.
The third period is, in my opinion, the finest. It explores the many-colored world and possesses the mellowed abundance of artistic maturity. At last the poet appears to have transformed the void at the heart of being into a shining image of faith and redemption, but it should be remembered that in Thomas the negation remains and provides the impetus to his triumphant acclamation of life. Taken on its own terms existence is intolerable; his reconciliation occurs as a result of his rejecting the earth for a vision of immortality.

He achieves the poised tranquillity if not the neutral flexibility of the language of, say, Keats or Yeats, which marks the vast and detached power of great poetry. Though there are places where the inspiration seems a trifle flaccid, I should not hesitate to describe the end as a rich and complete poetic harvest.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Criticism of contemporary literature is often a battlefield of dissent. Also it is frequently most unreliable, since we may not only praise the worst for pandering to the vagaries of fashions we mistake for true originalities, but admire what is least admirable in the best. Despite this fact, dogmatism is the rule rather than the exception in the critiques of writers, either living or newly dead. Dylan Thomas has provided fertile ground for critical disagreements, which range from Geoffrey Grigson's description of his poetry as a "meaningless hot sprawl of mud"\(^1\) to Olson's claim "there are great poems in each of his three periods."\(^2\)

There have been many approaches to his work, none of which seems to me free of bias. Stanford has forced him into a Freudian strait-jacket and Merwin into a religious one. Perhaps his least partial critic is Olson. My own approach endeavours to be as literal as possible and it is my aim to examine what I consider to be the central course of his development in what Thomas calls . . . the stripping of the individual darkness, which must, inevitably, cast light upon what has been hidden for too long, and by doing so, make clean the naked exposure. Benefitting by the sight of light, and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness, poetry must drag further into the clean nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realize.\(^3\)

Poetic creation evidently meant for Thomas a process of
self-purification through the exploration of dark and uncharted regions of the soul. Though such an activity may participate in psychology and religion, it cannot be reduced to one or the other, since it incorporates areas of activity they do not include.

Much of his poetry suffers from an obscurity which lies in the nature of the material itself and in the very strangeness of the spiritual lands through which it cuts a path. To distort the poetry is almost inevitable, because, in rationalizing poems which record a struggle to articulate their matter, we can hardly avoid changing it. The act of elucidation itself constitutes an alteration.

I shall not enter into biographical discussions of Thomas, nor consider the interplay between his writing and dissolution among the demi-mondaine, nor how, a Bajazeth in a gilded cage, in response to inner compulsions he destroyed himself. The Wimbushes have done their worst and the lion is dead. Thomas offered an age avid for sensation a vast Bohemian possibility in a role he obligingly fulfilled: of the great, wild, drunken, enfant terrible, shocking and mocking his audiences, usually to their delight, occasionally to their mortification, but invariably to his own discomfiture.

As man and poet he has been compared with Rimbaud, but the resemblances seem to me marginal. Rimbaud's rebellion was a conscious attempt to épater le bourgeois and sprang from the conviction that to fulfil himself as a poet required him to act out his poetic manifesto. Thomas's "Up-Rimbaud-and-At-Em Approach" was simply an unreflective reaction to life. It is true their work
shares a predilection for the irrational but, unlike Rimbaud, Thomas was not an iconoclast. Most like were their spiritual endings. They were both destroyed by a jungle.

The poetry of both is obscure, but whatever difficulties particular details present the general outlines are usually clear. My intention is to divide Thomas's work into three main periods, not because I believe it conforms to a strict pattern of chronological divisions, but because it is sufficiently tripartite in character to justify such a procedure. My chief concern will be to trace the poet's evolution from the existentialist world of process, a sterile void ruled by death, to a vision of a universe at the centre of which reposes the Divine Image. A related, though secondary consideration, is the development of style, which naturally mirrors the content.

Save for an attempted fidelity to the works, I have no fixed critical bias, unless it be the desire to express a broadly humanist standpoint, for I do not believe that criticism is furnished with skeleton keys.
CHAPTER II

THE FIRST PERIOD

Part 1

Great poets, in whom nothing is lost, but all is changed, evolve continuously; minor ones play a few tunes, embellished with various rosalias, upon a single flute. Though real, Thomas's development is partial; brilliant and erratic rather than consistent and sustained; at times dense, at others vaporous; now iridescent and now clouded. In short, though confusion is prevalent in his work, I believe we can still accord him greatness.

In the first period, content and style are mostly homogeneous and the obscurities of symbol reflect the real chaos in the lower depths with which he is so deeply preoccupied. The second contains intenser degrees of light and darkness; some themes are elaborated, others discarded, whilst frequently he reaches resolutions only to discard them again. An increased awareness of the world around accompanies a declining absorption with process, but there are other pieces which seem little better than concatenations of fissionary symbols, whose meanings refuse to coalesce. In almost all respects, the third period is the most accomplished. Its imagery steeped in unified experience serves an increasingly integrated vision.

We may take the first eighteen pieces in *Collected Poems* as representative of the first period. Derek Stanford claims that the central image in these poems is that "of the womb" and "the ovum, the embryo, the homunculus, the seed."
Though procreativity occupies a central place in many and forms the nucleus of many images, unless we can relate the latter to the wider context of the poet's total development, we shall not capture their essential meaning.

In fact, the first poem, "I see the boys of summer," does not centre round procreativity, but rather uses it as a symbol of more general growth and fulfilment.

The first two stanzas describe the sterility of adolescence, a time when the microcosm is inverted, confused and aware of the self's incompleteness:

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There in the sun the frigid threads
Of doubt and dark they feed their nerves;
The signal moon is zero in their voids.
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The light of fulfilment contrasts with the darkness of isolation and, alone, man stands outside the bright circlet of the sun-light, breeding in his nerve-cells "doubt and dark," the victim of introversion and distrust. Nor does the white beacon of the moon, that shines on lovers, touch the barren self-projections of those immured in their own darkness. This statement concerns the poet himself, his generation and humanity at large.

The two stanzas that follow turn back to pre-natal existence, contrasting the seed's potentialities with its aborted fulfilment. "Night and day" alternate and may spiritually co-exist in the womb and the world, but whilst the embryo lives to the full its unconscious life, with growth natural sensibility becomes warped, since from the seed "shall men of nothing spring." Life engenders a void, begetting a race of "hollow men."
In the next section, the dialectic presents its antithesis. The fact the poet alters his persona to the collective "we" does not, I think, indicate as Olson suggests that the poet is a "pseudo-drama involving the 'boys,' their critic and the poet." I prefer to regard the poet as all three and, though there may simultaneously be suggestions of distinct characters, all merge into each other, rather as the subjects of certain surrealist paintings. This section continues to denounce "the dark deniers," who resist life, and defends the dangerous irrationality expressed in

"In spring we cross our foreheads with the holly, Heigh ho the blood and berry. . . ." where the poet celebrates the rebirth of the forces of instinct. This extends the notion, already discussed, that life resides in the mainsprings of nature, whose deadly enemy is the self-estrangement resulting from self-consciousness.

The poet's ambivalence prevents him from attaining a satisfying synthesis and throws this section into a certain confusion. The deniers of life are also its rebels and their conduct moves widdershins. This betokens their refusal to conform to the natural limitations, but is a poor recompense for their failure to adjust themselves to the world. Somewhat as Hardy's rebels, they demand some admiration for their refusal to accept the confines life imposes, but the price they pay is sterility and darkness. There is a grim irony in the fact that those who have the courage to protest against the human predicament reap nothing but nullity for their pains.
The last verse again adopts an ambivalent attitude towards the procreative pantheism which at once magnetized and angered Thomas.

I am the man your father was.
We are the sons of flint and pitch.
O see the poles are kissing as they cross.

Stanford describes the last line as a "damnatory image of homosexual action," an interpretation which seems to me at odds with the emphasis of the rest of the poem. Nor do I agree with Olson's statement that "the boys refuse to acknowledge any such father. They are 'the sons of flint and pitch,' the ageless universe." I think the poet identifies the child with the father and both with the sub-human universe, choosing symbols that suggest darkness, defilement, and barrenness, for the 'flint' is as sterile and the 'pitch' as black as the seed is fertile and white. In a word, man's instincts are tarred with the corruptions of a maculated existence. Even the instinctual elements then, which embody the most vital aspects of mankind, are polluted. The last line provides a resolution, as the phalloi are changed into a cross. The generative organs of father and son become the cross of death. It indeed supposes an ironic resurrection, not divine, but procreative, and ultimately ruled by death.

The dark and deathly side of life is here in the ascendancy. Existence revolves on the doomed wheel of generation, where conformity and resistance to the natural order must both succumb to death. The human trinity are grouped round the generative spark redeeming life from total destruction, but the conflict
between creation and destruction, so recurrent in Thomas, finds here no satisfactory solution.

"When once the twilight locks no longer" focuses almost exclusively on the poet's own genesis. It describes his ascent from the moment of inception to autonomous being and traces, therefore, his progression towards a kind of 'self-articulation.' Very literally, then, it records "the stripping of the individual darkness." 11

The paradox implied in the last poem, that 'tomb' and 'womb' are virtually interchangeable symbols, is clarified in this one. This certainly does not suggest to me, as it has to some critics, that Thomas is a poet of death in a manner comparable to Rilke. In the latter, death is life's harvest, but in Thomas as often as not it is a monstrous executioner.

The struggle for light is strongly marked as the seed grows until it bursts the lock-gates of the womb. It is most apparent in the last verse, which contains a feeling of liberation, where he says:

The fences of the light are down,
All but the briskest riders thrown,
And worlds hang on the trees.

But again death's shadow falls on the world, for, though the 'fences' are 'down,' life spares only the strongest riders; however, the fertility of the trees, which bear their flowers and fruits and seeds, presents a hopeful analogy: the erstwhile child-seed itself becomes a tree of fecundity.
As in the preceding piece, death triumphs, for

Some dead undid their bushy jaws
And bags of blood let out their flies.

The dead sprout nothing but hair and their dessicated cells emit merely minuscule pustules of blood. The inversion is grotesque. Death provides the source of a repellent parody of birth.

Again the familial triune is present, three figures who incarnate the race and the whole genetic cycle of mankind, but whilst the standpoint of the first poem is essentially personal, this one sets forth its theme as an objective fact of existence.

"Before I knocked" explores the notion of relativity through the pre-natal prescience of Christ, almost as if life in the womb were an anagram of all being. Rather than presenting Christ as a supernatural figure, endowed with special foresight, the poet uses him to assert an affinity between various modes and stages of existence, each of which contains all the others. There are certainly pantheistic elements present, but I doubt if we should be justified in applying the term without qualifications. Thomas focuses more upon the temporal relation of phenomena than upon the latter as objects of perception.

Concerning 'Mnetha's daughter' Olson comments, "he is merely saying that Jesus, as yet unconceived, was utterly formless, and had every and no relation to everything and everybody, as a consequence." I think this oversimplifies the poem's thematic structure, for the concluding quatrain stresses two distinct
aspects of Christ: as mortal, possessed with divine faculties, as divine and once invested with human attributes:

You who bow down at cross and altar,
Remember me and pity Him
Who took my flesh and bone for armour
And doublecrossed my mother's womb.

The metaphysical complexity of these lines is astonishing in one so often dismissed as an unintellectual rhapsodist. As God, Christ asks we may remember him and pity his former manhood taken from man and therefore from the poet himself, in which guise he betrayed the Madonna's womanhood by the grisly fruition of the crucifixion, wherein he crucified them both. Once more the organs of generation have changed into a symbol of death. Resurrection is implied rather than stated.

Insofar as the poem is pantheistic, it virtually equates the foetal Christ with the universe, but I assert Thomas is also suggesting that, since Christ as God and man contains in himself the entire created order, creator and created attest each other's being. Whether or not this constitutes the levelling of spirit and matter is a question we must attempt to resolve.

My heart knew love, my belly hunger;
I smelt the maggot in my stool....
defines Christ's mortality in terms of instinct. It therefore emphasizes his common humanity; but though his assumption of flesh has enriched our physical being, the converse is equally true:

I who was rich was made the richer
By sipping at the vine of days....
which complicates the issue by suggesting that the eternal has something to learn from the temporal. Throughout all his poetry, Thomas's Christ remains peculiarly anthropomorphic, the antithesis of Baudelaire's angel, who is reviled for his total ignorance of suffering. It would be false to claim that the first period is exclusively existentialist, but its axis is mortality and its presiding deity is death.

True pantheism appears more certainly in "A Process in the weather of the heart" and "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower," where a single generative principle, informing all matter, unites it into a single process. Both pieces are impregnated with a mortal immanence working through a dynamic principle. In the second work especially, a strong dialectic skeleton supports the symbols, forming a cohesive pattern of unity in diversity and the reverse, instead of as in various places elsewhere confronting the reader with a random assortment of kaleidoscopic fragments.

The first poem deserves a brief comment only. It is worth noting, however, that its underlying premise of being belies phenomenal reality when he writes:

... the quick and dead
Move like two ghosts before the eye.

Thus the realm of process itself has become an illusion superimposed upon a universe of shadows. Unbeing lies at the heart of all being. Life and death are simply two names for a dance
of shades. A terrible negation haunts these lines as if the poet had stretched out his hand to capture the quintessential heart of existence and found it closed upon nothingness. What depths of desolation lie behind his utterance! His search for truth compels him to penetrate ever deeper into the unknown, but at this point of his spiritual evolution, instead of the shimmering spires of the soul's restored Atlantis, he sees merely a vacuum.

"The force that through the green fuse drives the flower" is more subjective and more intense than the preceding lyric. The dynamic opposition of creation and destruction, forces at once successive and co-existent, are its two antipodes, between which lies all existence.

First comes the thesis:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age. . . .

then the antithesis:

. . . that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.

Life, like the Hindu god Shiva, at once makes and breaks man and matter. The imagery suggesting life is markedly sexual, whilst death appears at his most gruesomely mediaeval. In his critique of Thomas in a chapter entitled "The Medievalist," Treece observes, "The sense of sin . . . is implicit in the poet's conception of Death and retribution and is another way of stating the hope-fear motif." Possibly true, if creation and destruction are algebraically equal to hope and fear
respectively. But what is the advantage of translating them into questionably synonymous terms? Furthermore, this criticism overlooks the fact that life and death here emerge as inseparable forces which we cannot enter into moral filing-cabinets. For better or for worse, they govern us.

Despite the fact that all phenomena share a single fate, they exist in isolation. As the poet says:

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

and again in:

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

Herein lies the ultimate horror of life's tragedy. Each one suffers in solitude the same fate. Common participation in the same destiny does not alleviate our individual inarticulacy nor enable us to lighten it with communication. We are each alone in a countless crowd. This is a world foresold to death and we are the helpless driftwood of its dialectic.

At the conclusion, the twin powers unite and bind together the living and the dead, but it is death who is triumphant.

In "Where once the waters of your face" faith prevails over death, though it must succumb to it in the end. The poet can only vindicate life absolutely by converting it into death and transforming the latter into a supernatural parturition. Thus we cannot overlook the fact that death lies at the heart of not only his negations, but also his affirmations, since in either event this mortal existence is death-ridden and
tolerable only through its rejection.

This piece testifies to love's Promethean victory, which abuts upon death's final triumph, yet refuses to be quelled by it:

There shall be corals in your beds,  
There shall be serpents in your tides,  
Till all our sea-faiths die.

There is an obvious echo here of Ariel's song, which begins

Full fathom five they father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made. . . .15

In either case death changes rather than annihilates. In Thomas's poem, the object addressed is stripped of almost every human attribute and becomes a symbol of womanhood, of the feminine principle in life. This reflects the urge in the first period to render objects not as the conscious mind perceives them, but as the subconscious experiences them. They are therefore transformed into projections of the poet's psyche. He confronts us with a curiously systematic effort to dredge the depths of his soul and to portray its contents as they actually exist there. In "The Waste Land" Eliot uses a telegraphic technique extensively, recalling the processes of the stream of consciousness, but concentrates more upon external phenomena than upon the inner workings of the mind.

Though Thomas was not 'committed' in the fashionable sense to exposing the specific evils of our age, in "Our Eunuch dreams" he approaches a more recognizably modern landscape. Here he juxtaposes three central concepts: sleep, the false reflexion of life cast by the screen, and a waking state.
The dream, composed of sterile fantasy, is 'seedless;' the celluloid gives 'love the lie' by simply aping it, whilst the third section introduces a complication over and above the foregoing ones, as he demands:

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

thereby posing the question raised by a fable Chuang Chou relates of himself:

"Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering here and there just as if he was a butterfly, conscious of following its inclinations. It did not know that it was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he awoke; and then demonstrably he was Chuang Chou. But he does not know now whether he is Chuang Chou who dreamt he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he is Chuang Chou."

Both writers are questioning the nature of reality and both, in these passages at least, suggest it is only the subject's standpoint which distinguishes it from illusion.

The fourth section describes a world composed of celluloid and the 'trash' of dreams. Having reached an intellectual impasse, the poet seeks to resolve it with an appeal to faith and love. The dilemma present here runs parallel to Keats' struggle to reconcile life with art. In Thomas the conflict lies between reason and the super-rational. It would be false to accuse him of taking an easy escape. He is simply using a third force to illuminate a chaos of unrealities that
obscurely and distortedly mirror each other's illusory nature. It expresses the search to find love in a world where it is encompassed by Ersatz counterfeits that mock it.

"When like a running grave" presents greater difficulties than any piece so far considered, partly on account of its syntax and audacious punctuation, but also because of a consciously cryptic method of relating the symbols. The poet asks for, and is refused, deliverance from Death, ruler of this country of life.

Love's twilit nation and the skull of state, 
Sir, is your doom... 

is the masters' reply. At the conclusion, the poet realizes the futility of his plea and resigns himself to mortality. Though the piece as a whole is unsatisfactory, 'Cadaver' is important to our thesis. The destructive element in the twin force that 'through the green fuse drives the flower' is divorced here from its counterpart and is now 'stalking' life. This change in the poet's perspective indicates that he is emerging from the ambivalent world of the subconscious and becoming aware of, as distinct entities, the forces governing existence.

In strong contrast to the foregoing work, "In the beginning" is affirmative, Genesis and death compose yet another pattern, free from ambivalence and from hostility, in the poet's description of the primal unity of the universe, when he writes:

And, burning cyphers on the round of space, 
Heaven and hell mixed as they spun.

Perhaps for the first time clearly there emerges one of the main
concepts in his positive vision: that the original source of
life and its ultimate resolution consist of a unity in diversity
and the converse, between which lies a sea of chaos, or a fallen
order composing life as we ourselves experience it.

The act of creation unlocked a Pandora's box:

Blood shot and scattered to the winds of light
The ribbed original of love.

It also suggests that the process of creation consisted of re-
duplicating a single original image of love.

An expansion of the opening of St. John's Gospel, the
poem possesses a delicacy rare among the strident hectic violence
of much of the earlier poetry. The imprint of light and form
upon chaos and darkness is beautifully rendered:

In the beginning was the word, the word
That from the solid bases of the light
Abstracted all the letters of the void. . . .

In these lines the word is the act of creation, the divine logos,
printing its light upon primeval chaos. A flash of lightning
rips through the encompassing darkness and the unending cycle
of generation has begun. In his exploration of the whole theme
of genesis, the poet has now moved back to the first cause and,
in doing so, passed beyond the revolutions of the fallen order.
His discovery of an act of procreation, transcending the cycle
of our own existence, temporarily alleviates the sense of doom
from which he is never to escape entirely. Here the spirit has
turned to contemplate a light and darkness outside itself and
its awareness of the logos is touched with a shining wonder.
In "Light breaks where no sun shines," the same theme is developed in sexual rather than mystical utterance. A change in the poet's attitude towards process has become apparent. In the earliest poems every contrary dissolves into death, but as he grows more conscious of the numerous perspectives of life, more and more he questions the right of matter to monopolize reality.

In this piece he holds in his gaze unchanging nature and the seasons, but the last stanza complicates the prevailing mood:

When logics die,
The secret of the soil grows through the eye,
And blood jumps in the sun;
Above the waste allotments the dawn halts.

Reason must die that we may truly live in harmony with nature. The ruined vestiges of cultivation indicate the failure of reason to prevail and the dawn lights up their drabness. In this bisection of blood from brain, we can detect the first signs of the poet's realization of the conflicting elements in human nature. Though light and instinct triumph, their victory seems to expire with the close of the poem. Why does the dawn 'halt,' unless he means that reason paralyzes instinct? Perhaps this illustrates his contention that

Out of the inevitable conflict of images - inevitable because of the creative, recreative, destructive and contradictory nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war - I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem."17
At this point then, maybe peace is co-extensive only with the poem itself, leaving us therefore, instead of the feeling of restful finality, a sense of a brief respite from conflict.

In "I dreamed my genesis" and "My world is pyramid," a ghost relates its birth and death, but whilst in the first a resurrection occurs, the second ends on a more pantheistic note.

Stanford remarks that in the first piece "the poet looks back dreaming his act of birth over again. . . . pre-experiences death in war."18 This is true, but I think it is important to emphasize that he presents himself as a voice, located in neither time nor space, recording his birth and death.

The recollective dream unites the two functions. One . . . filed Through all the irons in the grass. . . .

the other forced

My second struggling from the grass.

Both are an exodus from earth, a struggle to free the self from the womb of darkness. Until the spirit has grown weary of matter, however, it cannot achieve the final liberation, when

. . . vision
Of new man strength, I seek the sun.

The dead soldier's ghost has become 'Stale of Adam's brine' and at last seeks the heart of light.

It is a complex pattern and at least five different kinds of rebirth are apparent: an actual birth, a dreamed-of birth, an actual death, a dreamed-of death and a pantheistic resurrection. This is a theme brilliantly developed in the magnificent elegies.
It is impossible to confine the early poetry within a single philosophy. A prevailing ambiguity surrounds the poet's attitude towards the nature of process. Using the three great fundamentals of existence, birth, procreation and death, as his thematic nucleii, he presents them in various relations to each other and seeks diverse solutions of the problems they raise. In the preceding piece, for instance, it is fruitless to speculate as to the specific form the resurrection assumes. He suggests that the ghost becomes slowly weaned from its adherence to matter, but in what sense it outgrows it cannot be settled. Like many poets, Thomas subsumes metaphysical concepts under a vision. Poetry, being a 'super-rational' activity, we cannot demand of it the logic of reason. Nevertheless, we may object that the poet's preoccupation with so few themes tends to become monotonous.

"My world is pyramid" moves from the seas of the womb to the seas of death. In "I see the boys of summer," he describes spiritual deformity; he now explores the conception of a cripple, of whom he says

... half of love was planted in the lost
And the unplanted ghost.

Half of the procreative force in either parent was lost in the ghostly complement that is the measure of man's incompleteness. The cripple is not simply an unlucky accident; he is the poet himself, he is man and the deficiencies of man's warped state. A sense of life's failure to fulfil itself and of its destructiveness is not new to the poetry, but it is a theme which gathers
momentum throughout his development.

The first section suggests the horrors that lurk in the subconscious, which is surrounded by

... tide-tongued heads and bladders in the deep... and 'braiding adders' of Medusas; in a word, all the monstrous paraphenalia of the images which haunt the lower depths of the spirit.

The first section concludes with the ghost's dumb bewilderment, as, plunged into death, it gropes for some clue to the meaning and nature of existence.

The ghost is dumb that stammered in the straw... emphasizes its inarticulacy.

The next section takes us into a land of death, where the voice of the dead man describes his dissemination amongst the world:

Who seek me landward, marking in my mouth
The straws of Asia, lose me as I turn
Through the Atlantic corn.

These lines raise a problem, namely, what is the relation between the voice and its scattered particles? Does the poet pose a spiritual entity distinct from its physical elements, or is he endowing the discrete remnants of physical life with awareness? The answer would seem to be that, though its fleshly elements are dispersed through the world, despite their tragic disintegration, the spirit clothed in an 'angel's hood,' retains a sense of physical unity.

The conclusion suggests that the ghost is about to
enter a further cycle of existence:

My clay unsuckled and my salt unborn,
The secret child, I shift about the sea
Dry in the half-tracked thigh.

It also unites the crippling of the narrator with the bisection of the creative force. This final gesture to reconcile the disparate elements of the work and to reintegrate body and soul does not succeed completely. But, despite a perceptible degree of metaphysical confusion, the gist of the utterance is clear. Man, says the poet, is incomplete and stunted; his development is abortive; at his death yet a further decreation occurs; yet rebirth is a coalescence and, indeed, until he has achieved completeness, he must re-enter the physical wheel of being. Though the form which such notions take here is disconcertingly strange, their seminal content is recognizable in Platonism and Buddhism. The central position in Thomas's poetry of a deadly void suggests the unconscious intrusion of certain ideas familiar to the student of Eastern religion and some of its philosophical tributaries. Venal man alive and dead fulfils the dictates of fate and remains the passive victim of his karma. Like Jude, this ghost is the dwarf of giant circumstance.

"All all and all the dry worlds lever," the last of Eighteen Poems, is a diffuse rhapsody on the omnipresence among all creation of the generative principle. It is literally an address to process, but its failure to create a nodal point results in chaos. Unity in diversity is a theme that persists through the poet's work and becomes successful only when he allies
it to some particular situation.

Some critics regard

Flower, flower the people's fusion. . . .
as a plea for political unity, but I doubt if the desire to establish a unified world shows here anything more specific than a basic sense of human responsibility to an obvious need: cosmic harmony.

Among the early poems there is a group that stands apart from the rest. In order to present the poet's total evolution as faithfully as possible, I have decided to incorporate *lit.* into my analysis.

"If I were tickled by the rub of love" is the first. Unlike the pieces we have examined so far, which are chiefly concerned with various aspects of man in relation to a dynamic principle, in this the poet confronts us as a literary artist attempting to define his relations with the world.

The first five stanzas show the inadequacy of love to provide a satisfactory palliative for his insecurity. It is mortal itself and left, no less than he, at time's mercy and to death which will devour them both.

Having failed to find a refuge, the poet can only

. . . sit and watch the worm beneath my nail
Wearing the quick away.

And that's the rub, the only rub that tickles.

By death alone he affirms his existence. This is a hideous irony! The shock of its discovery renders him helpless and
passive, contemplating the process of destruction that is already at work in him.

The conclusion, however, resolves the enmity established between love and death, as he asks:

And what's the rub? Death's feather on the nerve? 
Your mouth, my love, the thistle in the kiss? 
My Jack of Christ born thorny on the tree?

Question follows question as he seeks to find some solution to the fact that death lies at the heart of all his devices to evade its fear. He resolves this conflict by dedicating himself to man, who contains the fruits of life and death and embraces in his being all thoughts and feelings. The poet rejects nothing; he makes no attempt to cancel death, but he says, since man is all his contraries, it is of him that he should sing. The last line rings like a declaration, as if Thomas, having explored life's two boundaries and attempted to unite them through the driving image of procreation, has begun to become more acutely aware of all that lies between: the human predicament as a man experiences it. He has also begun to accept certain fundamentals, above all the indivisible co-existence in humanity of love and death. Art is the supremely unifying force.

Keats faced a different problem: the difficulty of interweaving life and art. But in Thomas there is no such dichotomy: art in itself is a harmony that seeks to integrate the disparate matter of experience. Throughout his whole development, the act of writing remained for him an unquestioned
need and I doubt if he ever reached a point of artistic self-detachment where he became aware of his art as a phenomenon itself posing no fewer questions than other aspects of life. We find in his work nothing, I think, that seems to fill utterly the world it creates, in the fashion of Keats's Odes.

Perhaps the finest of the early poems is "Especially when the October wind." In contrast to the foregoing lyric, it presents art and life as virtually interchangeable.

The first stanza describes a landscape that is at once both actual and symbolic, both microcosmic and macrocosmic. He describes his poetic intent in terms of the setting where fire and ice mingle, and wishes to interpenetrate his art and the scene.

My busy heart who shudders as she talks
Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words. . . .
attests the merging of his whole being with poetry. He is the crucible in which the actual and the poetic fuse. Poetry is a power that embraces the whole man and rises from the traditional centre of being, the heart. But words too have a heart and as the heart drains the words, so do the words bleed it. 'Shudders' suggests the orgiastic ecstasy and pain of composition. Thus, in this stanza the poet describes the relation between art and life and of both to himself and defines his creative aims in images.
The second stanza establishes that for him the world of art enfolds all existence:

Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark
On the horizon walking like the trees
The wordy shapes of women.

The word isolates him, but it is also a tower of potency. It perceives the underlying associations between all kinds of life and realizes its latent powers of articulation. It reveals the mysteries of existence that the artist is empowered to express.

The haunting figure of time enters now in the third stanza, dogging the poet like his own shadow:

Behind a pot of ferns, the wagging clock
Tells me the hour's word, the neural meaning
Flies on the shafted disk, declaims the morning
And tells the windy weather in the cock.

Man measures time upon his nerves; he experiences it as something in himself. He is, therefore, as much a part of it as it is of him. The preceding stanza focused upon space; this one is chiefly occupied with time, in all its manifestations, which the clock gives tongue to. This is the voice of doom, reminding man of his end. But it is the poet who can record time's words and the converse is not true, insofar as time is the silent servitor of art. If his work is enduring, time will bear witness to it, but it requires him to interpret time to itself.

The final stanza throws the themes he has developed into a new perspective. The conclusion is a twofold resolution: this particular act of creation has 'drained' the poet and
thereby itself embodies the process of composition it describes. It is what it speaks of; it lives its own subject.

The end bespeaks utter desolation:

The heart is drained that, spelling in the scurry
Of chemic blood, warned of the coming fury.
By the sea's side hear the dark-vowelled birds.

He is now mere mortal man and death confronts him. Yet, in
his role of the artist, he has given meaning to the human pre-
dicament, by imposing on it an all-containing form. Every end
is a kind of death, even the end of a poem. Thus the form of
the poem may be taken as a miniature of the whole pattern of
existence. So Thomas describes his art, and, in this piece,
the art acts out a pattern of birth and death in the form of
the poem. The poet is speaking here not of art as something
timeless, but of the process and substance of creation.

It is not only a very beautiful poem in its own right,
it is also useful in helping us to understand the peculiar
cast of Thomas's vision. For all his artistry it seems clear
that he had in the best sense a primitive mind, inasmuch as
he was able to perceive the qualities common to the most wide-
ly diversified facets of life.

To complete my analysis of the first period, I shall
touch briefly on a few lines of "From love's first fever to
her plague":

And from the first declension of the flesh
I learnt man's tongue, to twist the shapes of thoughts
Into the stony idiom of the brain,
To shade and knit anew the patch of words
Left by the dead who, in their moonless acre,
Need no word's warmth.
The root of tongues ends in a spent-out cancer, That but a name, where maggots have their X.

The sustained metaphorical interplay between a literal and symbolic use of linguistic terminology again illustrates the poet's capacity to describe life in terms of art and the latter in terms of the former, uniting them by translating both into objects of his art. For, they are both elements that form part of a poem.

Once more the struggle to illuminate the darkness appears as his central concern. In this instance, he expresses his devotion to renewing for himself the assault of his dead predecessors upon the dark of uncreation. For each poet the task is the same: to create a shining image in a void, left by the deaths of the great dead. Since every artist is doomed, art must perpetually recreate its world.

We can hardly doubt that, though in these earlier pieces the poet is continually seeking to extirpate various kinds of darkness, he sees the world and the soul as essentially void and unlighted. Obviously, otherwise he would feel no cause to attempt time and again to fill and irradiate them. For this reason I have described his vision as existential, but I certainly should not wish to suggest that he is to be considered a poetic exponent of that philosophy. I have applied the term for convenience and am well aware that at no point of his development does the vision conform to any single school of thought. There are very few poets who seem to me philosophically consistent. One of the artist's privileges is to be able to change his mind as often as he can justify his inconsistencies artistically.
Time, death, procreation and parturition recur continually in these lyrics, which are less concerned with subject and object than with cause and effect. One mark of their modernity is their concentration upon dynamic dialectic rather than upon an order of being and upon energy rather than substance. The influence of psychology, biology and physics is detectable, but does not inhibit the work.

In order to stress the particular focus of Thomas's vision, we could hardly do better than to contrast him with Eliot who is in so many ways his antithesis. Time for the latter is above all an obstruction, standing between the soul and the beatific vision, and life is a preparation for purgatory; for the former, the one is a murderer and the latter only tolerable if denied. At first sight, we might conclude from this statement that their attitudes are not, after all, so opposed. But, though both appear to have found life on its material terms impossible, Eliot came to view it sub specie aeternitatis, whereas for Thomas it remained a bitter joy, and, to the end, he remained unable to accept it as a link in man's eternity. For the former, compromise was probably easier, since his capacity for vital response appears never to have been strong; but for the latter human existence became intolerable because he could not bear that its ecstasies should be so transient.
CHAPTER II

PART 2

It is impossible to exclude from this analysis a brief conspectus of the poet's stylistic development. For the confusion and chaos of the darkness he explores are reflected in the style, just as the brilliance and lucidity he later acquired mirror the radiance of their content.

His own observations on his mode of composition deserve pride of place:

... the life in any poem of mine cannot move concentrically round a central image; the life must come from the centre; an image must be born and die in another and any sequence of my images must be a sequence of creations, recreations, destructions, contradictions.

I cannot ... make a poem out of a single motivating experience ... Out of the inevitable conflict of images - inevitable, because of the creative, recreative, destructive and contradictory nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war - I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem. I do not want a poem of mine, nor can it be, a circular piece of experience placed nearly outside the living stream of time from which it came; a poem of mine is, or should be, a water tight section of the stream that is flowing all ways, all warring images within it should be reconciled for that small stop of time. I agree that each of my earlier poems might appear to constitute a section from one long poem; that is because I was not successful in making a momentary peace with my images at the correct moment ... 19

Report from a poetic battlefield? Is the conclusion of a poem an armistice no sooner signed than broken? What exactly does the poet mean? That his poems are born of conflict and are themselves turbulent and that a brief suspension of the chain
reaction among the images is the miracle which he aims at achieving. He tells us himself that the structure of his work is peculiar and its harmonies precarious. We could hardly ask for a more expository comment. Then what of the 'water tight section'? He refers to the quality of self-containment essential to any successful work of art, though its dykes may be no more than their partition erected against the stream of life and of its associations.

The form of his poetry, he tells us, is centrifugal and not centripetal. The continuous disintegration and reintegration of which he speaks compose the dialectic of which we have spoken. In a sense every new metaphor is an act of destruction in that it breaks down a barrier that withheld us from relating two or more aspects of the universe.

The difficulty with Thomas's poetry is that it packs so many and such varied images into so small a compass that at times he appears to be writing riddles. Unlike that of Yeats, but like Shakespeare's, most of his symbolism is eclectic. Thus an esoteric interpretation is rarely appropriate and in dealing with the majority of his pieces, we have nothing but our native wit to guide us. No other modern poet writing in English has made nearly such an extensive use of the ambiguities and puns in which the tongue is so especially rich.

Paradoxically, the use of fissionary symbolism accompanies an approach to experience, which almost conforms to an algebraic formula. Taking small stock of persons and personalities
he concentrates chiefly upon the forces that govern existence. For instance, if we compare "To his coy mistress" with "Where once the waters of your face," we find that, whilst in the former an individual woman is addressed, in the latter the artist explores the kind of meaning she holds for the subconscious depths of his being.

David Aivaz's comments on Thomas's interest in process are worth quoting, where he says, "Process, the subject of vision, needs man to 'happen' to it to give it life," and later, "Process, the cyclical return . . . requires only that the mind and heart evolve an ever fuller relationship" with the struggle from darkness to light. I should myself prefer to reverse the statement, since as Thomas developed he succeeded more and more in breaking free from the cyclical wheel. There is, in fact, no real opposition between process and spiritual enlightenment. Eternity itself, after all, is easiest to represent as a circle or sphere. Indeed, it is quite possible to maintain that he did not reject the notion of process, but simply amplified it to the point of its inclusion in a supernatural cycle. This is a possibility to which we shall later return.

Olson says that Thomas's symbolism falls under three general headings: "(1) natural, (2) conventional and (3) private." He continues, "Metaphor and simile are based upon resemblance only; symbols are based upon many other relations." I do not
accept his view that symbolism is innately superior to other kinds of imagery, for it seems to me that a poet who uses simile profoundly is preferable to one who employs symbols badly. According to Olson, "A metaphor ... involves verbal substitution merely," whereas a symbol occurs as a consequence "of a conceptual substitution." The first half of the statement is demonstrably inadequate. To replace 'amare' with 'to love' represents a form of verbal substitution. Next, I am not at all sure that the term 'substitution' is appropriate to any kind of imagery. In, say:

... violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytherea's breath...

since it is impossible to infer exactly what Shakespeare has substituted, I do not see that we are in a position to claim such a process has occurred. If a new image is an instantaneous perception of hitherto unrealized relations, the notion of replacement does not intrude on the discovery. The most single striking factor in symbolism, which I take to include not simply its verbal forms, but also certain properties, like the mill-race in Rosmersholm, is the presence of an irrational content, which precludes us from translating the symbol into the rational. In fact I should go so far as to claim that any image which resists paraphrase is symbolic. It may be said that in introducing the possibility that we can paraphrase some kinds of imagery I am allowing a kind of replacement. This is true, but what I am speaking of does not affect the issue at stake,
namely, whether or not simile and metaphor are the consequence of substitution, since I have confined my own use of the term to the reader's response. Finally, there is the fact that in literature the only exactly equivalent statements are those which are identical in every respect.

Since Thomas was deeply concerned with the subconscious and irrational areas of life, it is not surprising that the symbolic image preponderates in much of his work. It also accounts in part, for the disparity between the immediate impact and resistance to rational comprehension of many of his poems.

He is most successful when a co-ordinating theme controls the symbols, as in these lines from "In the beginning":

In the beginning was the pale signature,
Three-syllabled and starry as the smile;
And after came the imprints on the water,
Stamp of the minted face upon the moon;
The blood that touched the crosstree and the grail
Touched the first cloud and left a sign.

The superb delicacy allied to the simple power of these lines is astonishing. Their beauty is miraculous. The sense of mystery and otherworldliness they create recalls passages in Rilke's superb elegy Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes:

But there were rocks
and shadowy forests. Bridges over nothing,
and that immense, grey, unreflecting pond
that hung above its so far distant bed
like a grey rainy sky above a landscape,
and between meadows, soft and full of patience,
appeared the pale strip of the single pathway
like a long line of linen laid to bleach.27

Pictorially and musically Rilke is profounder and subtler than Thomas; even so, when the latter writes with such
liquid intimacy he is superb. At times he rants and at others resembles a frightened man shouting desperately to be released from an oubliette. Perhaps worst of all are places where he is simply meretricious, as in: the following lines from "My hero bares his nerves":

He holds the wire from this box of nerves
Praising the mortal error
Of birth and death, the two sad knaves of thieves,
And the hunger's emperor;
He pulls the chain, the cistern moves.

This obfuscated description of masturbation seems to me virtually pointless. Here the symbols simply do not coalesce.

The first stanza of "When like a running grave" is an unwieldy concatenation of images that move to a deadened rhythm, poorly masked by their grotesque bizarre. The language simply revolves upon itself and possesses no antennae that touch our feelings or intellect. Thomas's bad imagery is always imprisoned in a vicious circle of verbiage and usually allied to rhythmical lameness.

I disagree with those who maintain that the poet's predilection in his early poetry for the iambic line is a weakness. It was one that certainly Shakespeare made no attempt to conquer. But it is true that Thomas tends to overwork highly emphatic iambic rhythms to the point of tiresome insistence. However, as he developed he overcame his habit of somewhat overweighting his lines.

I strongly disagree with Treece's contention:

"his moods of literary mischievousness alternated with phases of poetic grandeur, as in "The hand that signed the paper," so that one became temporarily reassured, and hopefully waited for further manifestations of this magnificent clarity. And that, in any satisfying and final degree, we are still waiting for."28
Since only a few poems appeared after The book was published, it is unlikely they would have caused him to revise this opinion. As I hope to show, I think Thomas evolved to the end. It is customary to say that he developed and died young, but when Shakespeare died he was only thirteen years older. Keats, Shelley and Byron died younger still and Wordsworth had written his best work before the age of thirty-nine.
CHAPTER III
THE MIDDLE PERIOD
Part 1

The second period is the most difficult and contains the largest number of poems in which there is no satisfying reintegration. It includes the pieces published in 25 Poems, and The Map of Love. Let it be clear, however, that I do not consider that with each new volume the poet attained a completely new stage of development. His evolution remained continuous and uncertain. In a sense, every new poem represents a new stage in a poet's expansion, either more or less according to its relation to his previous works.

Derek Stanford virtually throws up his hands in despair at 25 Poems, remarking that, "save for one specimen piece, I shall not try to interpret them."29 He continues, "It is the powerful entry of Christian currents of thought that create new and warring elements in these poems."30 But there are signs in the earlier poems of Christian influence; also, the confusion in the middle period seems to me the result of the intensified pressure of many forces, besides religion.

As the poet's response to life grew deeper, he found it difficult to maintain the precarious harmony that he had achieved in many of the earliest poems. It would appear he had reached that time when a man, in search of some artistic faith in which to crystallize his vision, feels the winds of contraries beating on heart and brain as he stumbles among wastes of chaos, for the most part lost in darkness but occasionally lit up.
Though as a whole I agree with W.S. Merwin's approach, I think, in presenting his work as a more or less continuous movement towards fulfilment in a religious vision, he underestimates its negative aspects and its sheer electric blackness. Moreover, though much of the poetry is deeply religious, its spirit is secular. In short, Thomas never threw over the world. Unlike Donne, who tried and failed, I doubt if he ever wished to.

Some of the pieces in this middle period are very difficult and I do not understand them clearly. My attempts to elucidate them, therefore, are in many instances extremely tentative.

Of the first three stanzas of "I, in my intricate image" Stanford observes, "heaven may understand him, I do not." But I refuse to dismiss the work of so careful a craftsman as Thomas as a puzzle in algebraic symbolism.

The opening line embodies the main theme: the numerous and complex perspectives which the poet's own image suggests to him. The poem explores not only the complexities of human nature, but of man regarding himself.

My half ghost in armour holds hard in death's corridor,
To my man-iron sidle . . .

recalls

And cast a shadow crab upon the land.

The greater involvement of the first two lines indicates the growth of the poet's sense of man's intricate nature. In his glossary of Thomas's more cryptic terms, Olson says that
'man-iron sidle' refers to "the sidling walk of one, handcuffed or otherwise bound to another in man-irons. Here used of the hero as so bound to his "ghost"." Body and soul are two halves existing in doubtful alliance.

'Metal phantom' is an image of images. The poet, using alchemical terms, suggests that he is an image reflecting and uniting other images. Again he attests the complexity of human nature, so largely composed of opposites. Out of them radiate the 'twin miracle', which refers to the miraculous conjunction of man's two halves; 'the dead nuisance', hereditary guilt; 'manhood of ending', his physical transience and 'sea-blown arrival', his passage across the waters of death. Here is 'the womb of war', where a furious foment of symbols takes place.

In the second section he describes how his images rang over existence until they reach a check-mate in "The circular world stands still." Physical life is a record, whose needle has now reached the inmost groove. It might almost be said to co-incide with its having attained the inmost heart of truth, as if at death man came home to himself.

The third part takes us into the land of death,

And, as for oils and ointments on the flying grail,
All-hallowed man wept for his white apparel.

'Flying grail' refers to the spirit's release from the laws of gravity, but it still mourns for the flesh, as if time were required to wean it from this world.
The first section described the complexities of man's divided image; the second addressed itself to the physical aspects of his nature; the third to his ghostly half and now at its conclusion it unites them.

And my images roared and rose on heaven's hill . . . is a projection through which the poet assumes a retrospective standpoint from which he contemplates his human and poetic images ascending towards God.

The poet has here undertaken a diverse exploration of his human image in the imagery of his art. In a sense all are one, for together they compose his total existence as man, seen from within and outside time and space. He has chosen his theme in

Man be my metaphor.

Thus, in a sense, he is engaged in analysing the constituents of his vision. He does not entirely succeed, for the concentrated diversity of the symbols renders coalescence virtually impossible. However, though the variety of perspectives results in confusion, it does not amount simply to nonsense. We may take this piece as a prologue to the complexities which adhere to the 'intricate image' of the middle period.

Though it is hard to estimate to what extent Thomas's symbology implies philosophical commitment and perhaps wiser to regard the quasi-philosophical patterns that merge from his works rather as the products of his symbolism than its progenitors, "This bread I break" seems to me as a whole explicitly Christian.
It is a superb little lyric, its last line magnificently timed to introduce a new dimension, with:

My wine you drink, my bread you snap.
The wine and corn speak with Christ's voice. Here there is present in germinal form the poet's increasing awareness of the sanctity of nature, as he describes how, when we eat and drink the body and blood of earth, we are eating and drinking of God.

It is the first piece, I believe, where he records objectively, treating himself as an object among many others. It is important to recognise that the difference between objective and subjective poetry does not depend on whether or not the author enters into the work, but simply on his attitude towards his composition. Those which seem to draw their life from a personality may be accounted subjective; but when we feel the poet is simply a medium they may then be considered objective.

"Incarnate devil" offers us a sequel to "In the beginning", continuing the story of Genesis from the idyll of Eden until the Fall. To Thomas the age of perfection predated both good and evil, which came into being as a result of the angelic defection. They are both a consequence and result of choice and preclude the unity which transcends them.

We in our Eden knew the secret guardian . . . suggests that, though our genesis stems from Adam, we ourselves participate in the Fall. Thus each man relives the original doom laid upon the race. In the later poetry the notion that creation repeats or continually recreates its primal pattern
receives fuller treatment.

At this time the poet's attitude towards God, who now enters more frequently into his works, was ambivalent. Here he is quite definitely displayed in an unflattering light:

And God walked there who was a fiddling warden. And played down pardon from the heavens' hill.

'Warden' suggests a prison-gaoler, but 'fiddling' is ambiguous. It is an allusion to Nero, who fiddled while Rome burned, but it also describes the Almighty as a meddlesome busy-body, who offered man pardon for the Fall that he himself had connived at, through his negligent protection of the human pair. If man is his brother's keeper, then how much greater divine responsibility! But the poet goes even further, for he implies that, since man in Eden did not enjoy absolute liberty, he was a prisoner. Is this Job's question? If not, then one much like it. Man does not seem much more here than a pawn in a supernatural chess-match.

With the Fall all the contraries came into being:

And when the moon rose windily it was Black as the beast and paler than the cross.

All nature suffered the consequent dichotomy, and the moon took on an infernal and bestial dark, but also the whiteness of the agonized face of the crucified Christ. Black and white indeed are not colors; they are the condition of the fallen world. The poet is struggling with the problems of pain, sin and death and is beginning to acquire the Promethean spirit which later he was to express with an agonized magnificence, above all in "Do not go gentle into that good night." He is moving
away from the world of vegetable and animal process towards specifically human issues.

"Shall gods be said to thump the clouds" raises and answers the question of God's existence. He says that, if we can reduce supernatural phenomena to the ikons through which man worships them, then

Let the stones speak
With tongues that talk all tongues.

Thus, however much we seek to level the gods, they shall still proclaim their being. Though we whittle them down to mere stone, these stones shall attest divine existence.

Metaphysically the structure of this lyric is particularly neat. The poet appears to give way to the arguments of negation until the end, when suddenly he uses them to discredit the denial. Of course, it is likely that he is himself on both sides of the question and that the solution resolves an internal dilemma. He is engaged at this point in facing some of the great questions with which Hardy went on wrestling until his end. Thomas usually settles them with a blind leap of faith into the dark.

In "Why east wind chills" he poses and accepts an insoluble paradox: that however much knowledge and experience we may acquire, the profoundest questions of all will continue to baffle us.

The first stanza depicts the inscrutability of life. For the ignorance of the child will receive no enlightenment through age. Fundamentally, we remain children.

The next describes the proverbial insistence of
children upon always asking 'Why?' But it proceeds:

Not till, from high and low, their dust
Sprinkles in children's eyes a long-last sleep
And dusk is crowded with the children's ghosts,
Shall a white answer echo from the rooftops.

We continue to ask the same questions, though we make no advance in answering them. Only death can resolve them, when the question we ask shall itself provide the response we have sought. Its echo shall enlighten us. It is necessary, the poet tells us, to enter the night of death that we may see that the question contains its own reply.

In the next stanza he appears to reverse his position, when he says 'All things are known.' In a sense this is true, for we do know everything and nothing - something of everything, but no truth entirely.

Just as grown-up people hush children who ask insoluble questions life tells us, 'Be content' (to be ignorant) and the poet ends by identifying himself with the children's bewilderment, which is no greater than his own.

Three perceptible perspectives illuminate a single concept; first he presents man as child; then contrasts men with children and then reaches the conclusion that there is no fundamental difference between them. That is in itself, the answer. His technique resembles symphonic music and painting; the former in his elaboration of a theme, which he unites with the intervening movements into a concluding harmony which transforms and resolves its antecedent discords and variations; the latter in the effect he achieves of a chiaroscuro, often highlighting his subjects with much skill.
I disagree with Stanford, who describes the poem as an "agnostic's confession . . . really a"homage to the profundity of existence," for this lyric is not concerned with the existence of God, but the problem of man's incapacity whilst he is yet alive, to enter into super-human speculations. From the end it seems clear that death will allow him to answer his questions.

The degree of philosophical speculation in Thomas's poetry seems to me underrated. He is not only the poet of ode and elegy; he is also a perplexed and enquiring intellect, restlessly probing the metaphysical universe. Some critics have even charged him with moral insensitivity, but in doing so all they have revealed is the gnarled black hand of Puritanism momentarily withdrawn from the antiseptic glove of 'in-criticism', a detestable description of close elucidation, since it appears to equate its practitioner with the most unskilled sort of boxer, presumably using his author as a punch-bag. In charity, it might be urged that its opponents, in deploiring those of this school who demand of modern art a formless and mindless brutality, have short-sightedly rejected the best with its worst exponents. The more hysterical quarters have hailed Thomas as the great Dionysiac bard, as if he were a Lawrentian apocalyptic goat. But there is too much tenderness and bawdry in him to turn him into a champion of the dark gods.

"Ears in the turrets hear" explores the dilemma in which the poet's relation to the world involves him. It deals with the problem of the individual's participation in existence.
In the first verse he presents himself as a house, in the second and third as an island, whilst in the third and fourth he unites them.

The outside world comes to him, wishing to establish contact. He debates as to whether or not he shall permit it to traffic with his 'island'. Before he decides, however, he wishes to know:

Hands of the stranger and holds of the ships, 
Hold you poison or grapes?

Will life destroy or enrich his being? Obviously and ironically the event alone can decide the issue, for only by entering into life can we determine what it will bring us. Aware of its risks the poet is left unable to make up his mind to accept or reject them. To refuse communication with the world and deny the commerce of living provides a kind of refuge. At every moment of our being the question is always before us. Life is constantly imposing choices upon us. Donne, as we know well, declared against self-incarceration. Rilke advocated it for himself, in order to generate the utmost intensity of poetic inspiration. Here Thomas offers no conclusion, save that the fear of life, tugging him between withdrawal and exposure, is left at the end and therefore permanently.

In discussing the whole question of an artist's self-absorption Treece cites Eliot:

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. . . Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."35

He goes on himself to say of Thomas:
The writer seems to have grown into his poems, or the poems to have grown round the writer, so that he is unable or unwilling for the most part, to abnegate his personality, to divorce himself from his work, and, stepping back, to explain as impersonally as possible, and having regard to the opinions and experiences of his readers, what he is writing about. Treece cites Eliot with the air of a Biblical literalist justifying his pedantries from the text, but the statements of either seem to me questionable. Like so many of Eliot's critical remarks this one is clearly based on his personal experience. He makes the mistake of presenting it as a papal Bull. Besides, it contains a contradiction: to extinguish and escape from the personality are incompatible. In escaping we leave something behind; there must be something from which and to which we pass. If the former happens to be our personality we may be sure it will pursue and overtake us. Self-extinction, the aim above all, of the Oriental ascetics consists of transcending oneself, and is based upon the ability to attain an absolutely objective self-evaluation in relation to a universe at the heart of which lies God. Furthermore, whereas good art must transform actual into artistic emotion, it cannot be said to escape it, for, were this so, it would be utterly passionless. Rilke provides a good example of an artist who attempted continually to transcend himself by using his being as a pressure chamber from which inspiration erupted spontaneously into art. We might say that he used himself to explore his poetic energies. Self-escape is inevitably mirrored by art which, if it be in the least original, must express the
creator's personality. Hemingway seems to me the case par excellence of a writer who in attempting to hide himself from his weaknesses simply draws our attention to them. The further a work transcends the personality the greater the degree of objectivity possible to it; self-display and self-escape reflect the artist's personal defects and repressions. The most successful poets as they develop probably become more and more the instruments of their creations.

Treece's charge, which invokes Eliot's support, oddly enough does not seem to focus upon Thomas's poetry, but upon his failure to justify himself to his audience. There is a simple answer to this: unless the poetry be its own justification, there is no other. I suppose he may refer to the cryptic density of many of the poems and imply that this characteristic results from a preponderance in them of private meanings. If so he is placed in the somewhat uncomfortable position of claiming that his failure to understand Thomas is entirely the latter's fault, thereby implying that were his works intelligible he, Treece, would assuredly comprehend them. Personally, I deplor those critics who declare that what they cannot fathom is mud.

"Should lanterns shine" deals with exposure and choice. It depicts the penalties of human awareness.

The first stanza unmasks the mummified image of beauty that exists in the heart of youth. It is mummified, first because it is based upon an Oedipal distortion of the facts of nature, second because it has no real existence and
third because an increased awareness exposes it as an embalmed corpse. The light of truth is terrible indeed in its ruthless disclosure of the frauds that darkness may practise on the mind, forcing us to reject the affable delusions we have cherished there.

The recognition of truth imposes a choice. It precludes us from prolonging the indecisions of unawareness and sets the head, heart and pulse, or intellect, emotion and instinct at odds. We are forced to try to reconcile them.

Time re-appears, now as a silent and ever-present male sacophagus. The speed of the poet's progress seems to defy time, but this an illusion, since movement itself is temporal.

The concluding lines:

The ball I threw while playing in the park
Has not yet reach the ground . . .

introduces the concept of relativity, through which he seeks to reconcile the various conflicts he has posed. Any moment may exist eternally, thus time is itself the arch-delusion. The relation of subject to object alone determines their relation to each other and the existing order. Thus, just as the tenses resolve themselves into a mathematical illusion, so the possibilities of choice are arbitrary. However, this results, not in chaos, but in a vision of eternity consuming the temporal world.

Undoubtedly the poet consciously drew upon Hopkins' limpid lyric for "I have longed to move away", but whereas the earlier poem surrenders to eternity, the later expresses
a desire to outgrow certain fossilised personal attributes and beliefs and to break free from the chains of darkness:

I have longed to move away
From the hissing of the spent lie
And the old terrors' continual cry
Growing more terrible as the day
Goes over the hill into the deep sea . . .

"hissing" suggests the devilish snake of Christian myth, or the crocodile god, but also perhaps the rancorous malice of the religioso, concerned with the empty husk of religion. The old terrors are the atavistic monsters that prowl the subconscious and which spiritual evolution attempts to cast off. "Salutes" embodies all the pomp of parades: public exhibitions or assertions of blind power. But the poet recognizes that all these are elements of himself and that liberation is self-conquest. It is not enough to reject irrational fears on the conscious level alone; for mere repression exacts a terrible revenge.

The solution is oblique. Thomas accepts the continuing power in himself of blind fears, but tells us he need not succumb to them. In fact, by accepting their presence, he is able to free himself from them at least partially, since what we incorporate into our being falls under our government.

By these I would not care to die,
Half convention and half lie. . .

is directed against the shell of religion and all the inbred loyalties to which we adhere through unreflexion. I am reminded of a remark make during the last world war by St. Exupery, to the effect that we were fighting a quarter
truth in the name of a half lie. Obviously he does not mean that the Nazi doctrines were in any sense admirable, but simply that a very large number who fought had a small, or a misguided, notion of what they stood for.

"And death shall have no dominion" is a triumphant tribute to the after-life's victory over this one. It recalls Donne's sonnet, "At the round earth's imagin'd corners blow", which also magnificently rejects the fallen world's defeats. Thomas's poem is like a great fugue, strong and rich in its elaborations.

Death shall restore what life has robbed its victims of:

When their bones are picked clean and the cleanbones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

Nothing is lost in this vision, though everything is changed as life shall continue to assert its supremacy over its own destructive components until 'the sun breaks down', until, that is, time ends.

In both senses this is an objective piece, where the poet becomes a mediator between his inspiration and the written word. It proclaims a certitude which he did not sustain, but which he tried again and again to achieve. Furthermore, it possesses the lucidity which denotes a final quality in the vision itself.

In contrast "altarwise by owl-light" is one of the obscurest sonnet sequences in the language. Elder Olson has
given a brilliant interpretation of it in which he posits
at least six distinguishable levels, which the poet
intricately inter-relates: (1) a level based on the
analogy of human life to the span of a year . . . . (2) a level based on an analogy between the sun and
man . . . . (3) a level of Thomas's 'private'
symbolism; (4) a level based on ancient myth . . . . (5) a level based on the relations of the
calendar Hercules to other constellations and
astronomical phenomena; and (6) a level derived from
the Christian interpretation of levels 4 and 5.

He continues,

In Sonnet I . . . the true faith, bitter as it is,
is in death; nothing else is real. . . . Everything is
a metaphor for death. . . . The very ladder of ascent
is made of the bones of death, and leads down to
death in the end. In Sonnet III . . . a year is
short; when it is nearly spent there is small comfort
in reflecting that our autumn is another spring. . .
all must die. In Sonnet IV . . . once he had plagued
his faith with questions, played the sophist with it,
for at that time he had felt secure in his faith. . . .
Now he sees. . . .

the motion and aspect of the stars as something sinister.

In Sonnet V he imagines the sun-Hercules narrative
as continuing from the autumnal equinox; it is a
nightmare . . . . Life is no more than a nightmare
dream of death. In Sonnet VI man and sun are
discovered to be like burning candles. Man is
wounded with the birth-wound; time will see that he
bleeds to death of that wound. In Sonnet VII the
hero of the poem spurns time . . . he pins his faith
in the heavens. . . . In Sonnet VIII the Cross sets;
this is the Crucifixion, then, both of Christ and of
man; he must die, like Christ, to nourish those who
come after. . . . In Sonnet IX he thinks of the most
notable human effort to withstand death: Egyptian
embalmment . . . he spurns it; let him be entombed
with the dead in a world of death. In Sonnet X the
reappearance of the Cross signalizes the Resurrection
to come. . . . Let time have its way, then . . .
until the Day that will never end, when all will be
restored.

Thus he goes on,

we have two 'voyages', real or fancied: the Christless
Olson reveals how Thomas traces the growth of three cycles — one natural, one pagan, one Christian, fusing them in the crucifixion with the setting of the constellation of the cross. The poet himself participates in the action; thus, its development reflects a personal evolution, which is finally subsumed into an image of universal redemption.

Of course, all poetry is a mental event and has no meaningful existence outside the mind; therefore, any poetic voyage is internal, but it is important to recognize that here the poet represents the action as a manifold process in which various aspects of existence coalesce.

Here death seems almost to swallow up the whole world and even to have overcome Christ, but at the uttermost point of sheer negation the comic movement begins and swells to a triumphant denouement. But though redemption as an event occurs in time, it can only be realized outside it. Salvation lies beyond rather than in life which is ruled by death. It is therefore possible to live towards salvation, but only with death does it become attainable.

The dramatic structure of this extensive sequence and an accompanying growth in the poet's awareness of a hierarchy of values mark considerable development. For he has now defined certain contours, placing Christ at the centre of his map and relating him to all other forms of existence. By presenting
the crucifixion as the decisive moment in history he has broken the unopposed supremacy of death in time. He merges himself in the astronomical, astrological, historical, religious aspects of Christ's death by adopting a double standpoint, where relativity and chronological time fuse. Not only did the whole movement of history converge on this act, but all being participated in it. Thus, if the poet himself shared in the act of redemption, the latter spans the entire past and future, from the beginning until the end of time. It is, therefore, possible to view the universe as a temporal confluence around Christ.

Though the sequence interweaves a large number of perspectives and succeeds in unifying them, nonetheless I do not share Olson's enthusiasm for it, not, as I hope, from a dislike for extreme subtlety, but a conviction that it is here contrived and passionless. Since he has elucidated each piece most perceptively, I shall not embark upon a detailed examination, but shall conclude my discussion of the sonnets by observing that the existential world of death and the higher vision come face to face here and that the latter triumphs over the former.

"A saint about to fall" is ominous with impending disaster. It was written very shortly before the second world war broke out and seems impregnated with prophetic forebodings.

The fall it describes is multiple: the smashing of
peace, the ruin of Lucifer, the fall of man, as species and individual, and the Platonic notion of the fall to earth of a spirit. At the centre stands the saint on whom the close-packed images all converge, demanding a literal interpretation, that the mind may follow where the poet leads it. At one point in his career he complained of a very favourable appreciation by Edith Sitwell, because, as he said, "She doesn't take the meaning literally". If we take him at face value, we find that he invites the imagination to move centrifugally; if we do not, then we are forced to search for equivalents. No doubt his strangeness has tempted critics to approach his poetry indirectly; but, though he may occasionally fail us, usually he does not. His peculiar cast of vision recalls Blake and to a lesser degree Hopkins; the former in substance, the latter chiefly in language.

The poem depicts a fall from Grace in physical terms, the fall of the spirit and physical degeneration being insperable. 'Kite hems' suggests the smell of carrion is already on the fallen saint, who has now sold himself to death and wakes in a state resembling hell, where one by one heaven, virtue and Christ forsake him, until

Heaven fell with his fall and one crooked bell beat the left air. . . .

which suggests that any single event in creation affects the rest. This is a perfectly logical standpoint. For so long as there be one flaw in the universe it will taint the entire
order; just as one death mirrors its universality.

In the second stanza the poet identifies himself with the saint, for each sees heaven from below:

The scudding base of the familiar sky,
The lofty roots of the clouds.

Then the earth becomes a hell:

The skull of the earth is barbed with a war of burning brains and hair. . . .

where he again emphasises the interchangeable nature of the microcosm and the macrocosm. The saint contains all heaven, just as the earth is a single head.

The third stanza unkennels a whirlwind of horror and destruction, which follow the fall, a manifest return to "The old mud hutch again" and to the squamous grief and conflict with which sin and death reward us. So long as man's spirit is forced to return to or remain in the wheel of physical existence there is no peace for him, for the existential order is at best a void and at worse cursed.

This piece has no precedent in the poet's works. It is important to observe how the saint, having been identified with the poet, becomes him. It suggests not simply the affinities existing between two people on the same level of being, but a kind of transmigration. A dissociation between body and soul also occurs, since one consequence of the fall is the fragmentation of the spiritual personality. Never before has the poet's sense of man's divided selves expressed
itself so acutely. New too, is its particular dual movement which involves the fall from heaven to earth and the dissolution of one identity into another. He conceives the infernal predicament quasi-dramatically, expanding one moment into a condition of existence.

A growth in spiritual sensibility is certainly visible. Thomas is no longer merely concerned with death as a force in cyclical process, nor even as the womb of future tranquility; here it invades the known world and becomes its spiritual ruler. Life has become the kingdom of death.

We have watched a growth in the poet's sense of personal pain, the decline of his pantheism and greater awareness of spirituality, accompanied by a sharper realisation of sin and spiritual mortality. He now possesses an ideal of being which, being injured, imposes the penalty of guilt and sodden misery.

Most of the secular poems of the central period reflect these tendencies. Since space is limited we shall have to omit those which seem least valuable and concentrate on the most important. Unfortunately, Thomas does not lend himself to representative selections, precisely because, though variations and modulations abound landmarks are rare. Moreover, if there are few, if any, virtually perfect pieces, almost none is totally worthless.

The next group comprises the two elegies of the period "After the funeral" and "The tombstone told when
she died." In relation to his total canon both look forward rather than back.

The first has justly been much praised. It is perhaps a trifle coarse-grained, but I think none will deny its remarkable plastic power.

The first six lines describe the folly of the funeral and an unnamed decaying body and

The spittled eyes, the salt ponds in the sleeves. . . .

but as he continues, the poet isolates himself and identifies the dead person: she is his theme and he her elegist, or sculptor carving her image in stone. Thus:

... this skyward statue
With the wild breast and blessed and giant skull
Is carved from her in a room with a wet window
In a fiercely mourning house in a crooked year. . . .

and

... sculptured Ann is seventy years of stone. . . .

which suggest the silence, immobility and persistence of stone. He turns her into a statue and thereby endows her with a new lease of life through his art, but at the end a kind of restoration takes place, for Ann's image storms the poet

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

It is as if the spirit of love emanating from Ann and her statue, which have become identified, infuses new life into the objects that once surrounded her, resulting in a miraculous regeneration.

There are three main stages in the piece: physical
dissolution, the carving of Ann's image (a kind of transformation) and a resurrection. Thus the poem moves through death and life in art to a life in which both are subsumed.

"The tombstone told when she died" depicts the wedding of a virgin to death, the demon lover. Here certain recurrent modes of thought in his work are clarified: sexual consummation and death are virtually synonymous. The death-wish sublimates a sexual Sehnsucht no flesh can appease, just as the orgasm is itself a kind of death. Even their symptoms are alike: the shallow breathing, the shudder, the release, followed by repose.

The pain of the girl's death resembles the anguished ecstasy of deflorescence as

She cried her white-dressed limbs were bare
And her red lips were kissed black,
She wept in her pain and made mouths,
Talked and tore though her eyes smiled.

Dressed in the white of a bride or a corpse, she surrenders her life to death as if she were yielding up her virginity to a lover. The passion and tenderness of these lines is deeply moving. I particularly admire 'and made mouths,' which is not only a fine pun, but suggests too the helpless inarticulacy of womanhood in the grip of unutterable emotion.

In the second part the poet describes his vision in the form of a film or projection of the mind as the woman speaks through the stone-bird and tells how death deflowered her.

Death, the lover, has had a long history in literature,
but Thomas presents him with a biological precision which is highly original. He has undergone a remarkable change from a Grand Guignol figure of horror to a lusty bridegroom who satisfies the girl and makes up to her for her barren life of mortified virginity.

Perhaps for the first time in his work a complete transvaluation has occurred: life is totally barren and death fertile. The suggestion that he experienced the virgin's consummation before even her conception harks back to the great world of potentiality, which we find in works as removed from each other as *The Fairie Queene* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Human existence frustrates rather than fulfils being and in the time-space continuum the past, present and the future merge. From this point onwards in Thomas, death becomes increasingly less the destroyer of sex and ever more the ultimate sexual symbol, resolving the existential problem.

"Find meat on bones", however, is a violent revulsion against the laws of life, where love and death are deadly enemies and against a universe ruled by

...the binding moon
And the parliament of sky,
The kingcrafts of the wicked sea,
Autocracy of night and day,
Dictatorship of sun...

which are all time's satraps, though all are themselves doomed. The spirit of the piece is grimly Promethean and is charged with disgust at the monstrous ravages death inflicts on love, to which the poet responds by suggesting a symbol of sexual love
be hung over the grave in mocking epitaph.

The third and fourth stanzas dramatise the poet's feelings as he speaks inside a personal frame. Their perspective in relation to the other somewhat reminds me of a global mirror in a Dutch interior painting, which reflects the rest. Still living he feels he is already rotting.

Then in

War on the spider and the wren!
War on the destiny of man!
Doom on the sun!

which recalls Webster, his rage reaches a Biblical furore. He embraces the whole universe in his invocation to destruction. He cannot reject life, but its transience makes its pleasures unbearably bitter. At the last moment he retracts and seems to accept life and death in

Before death takes you, O take back this.

It is a somewhat problematical resuscitation, more easily explained in psychological than logical terms. Perhaps it is that in cursing creation he finds he has cursed himself and that in denying life he is denying himself. He recognizes that, however terrible, the laws of life must be accepted, though the anguish of self-adjustment tear the human fabric.

His frenetic rage against the existential order here reaches its extreme. It signifies his release from the earlier world and entry into a world of individual identities. The recognition does not illuminate the darkness, but forces it to betray itself, as he perceives the darkness he discovered
in himself reflected in the entire universe. It shocks and maddens him. Personally I do not think one final countermanding gesture can efface the overwhelmingly strong impression the rest of the poem creates: frenzy, anguish and despair.

The pastoral note, so beautifully struck in the last period, emerges clearly in "Hold hard, these ancient minutes in the cuckoo's month;" but, unlike the later pieces, it has almost no inner weather. It presents a flattened perspective.

Though the figure of time hints at his immanence in the later poetry, here he is a spring time:

Time, in a folly's rider, like a county man
Over the vaults of ridings with his hounds at heel,
Drives forth my men, my children from the hanging south.

He is the huntsman in hunting pink and his quarry is man. Even so the atmosphere of the poem is green, charged with the sap and vibrancy of the season. Though the piece is diffuse, it occupies an important place in the poet's development. He is moving here through a world of light, and its contours are sensuous.

In "We lying by seasand" a consciously controlled relation with the world supersedes the chaotic danse macabre of the mind submerged in a polluted sea of genesis. As the preceding poem its interest lies in its promise rather than its fulfilment:

We lying by seasand, watching yellow
And the grave sea, mock who deride
Who follow the red rivers, hollow
Alcove of words out of cicada shade,
For in this yellow grave of sand and sea
A calling for colour calls with the wind. . . .
These lines show, I think, an untimely transference of a characteristic appropriate to the earlier poetry: a circular pattern, which here merely seems repetitious.

"The hand that signed the paper" indicates a direction the poet did not take. It is almost epigrammatically terse and its flavor is satiric. Stanford observes "Film-like . . . . the activating hand is shown impersonally without a head attached, so that the inhuman aspect of the action becomes the more evident". This is a fine insight, but we should add that Thomas adapts cinematographic technique to the needs of the lyric form. We can speak of the pictorial qualities of his language, but hardly of the linguistic character of his picture.

The first stanza depicts an act of collective and individual murder, compressing in little compass a whole sheaf of circumstances. "Sovereign" subtly suggests, not only the power of the absolute rulers, but also the glitter of gold upon fingers, we learn later, to be cramped.

The second stanza contrasts the might of the invested power with the human reality behind it: a creature who resembles nothing so much as an aged pedagogue. There is a hideous irony in the fact that one personally so puny should hold at his disposal the lives of countless others.

In the third stanza the poet bitterly protests against the subjection of the race to the signature of a scribbler:
Great is the hand that holds dominion over Man by a scribbled name.

What above all comes through is the sheer irresponsibility of the tyrant! There is no correlative between the act of signing the declaration of war or a treaty and the results of either, which are horrible, since the aftermath of slaughter is hardly better than the bloodshed.

The hand, a grotesque image, that runs through the poem, prevails in the end:

A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven; Hands have no tears to flow.

The human and divine dictatorships that govern men's fates are familiar themes. Shelley ranted, Hardy brooded and Thomas shakes a clenched fist. He is not only denouncing exploitation, the subjugation of the many to the few, but the entire racial predicament, the fact that one man, or one bad group of men, has time and again sent masses of fellow human beings to the wall - with a scribble. The whole piece emphasises the monstrous incongruity between cause and effect; one is totally inhuman, an unattached limb, whilst the other is a numberless legion of victims.

The structural pattern indicates that an historical perspective operates in the first and third verses, whilst the second and fourth relate the action to the immediate present, that is also eternally recurrent, as generation on generation goes to its death like sheep to the abattoir.

It's perhaps regrettable Thomas did not develop
further in the direction this poem follows. It is certainly one of the most powerful of his short works. No one reason for his unconcern with evolving further satirically suggests itself. We can only speculate, but it seems to me possible that the pressure of his growing spiritual vision precluded him from maintaining the attitude which the poetry of denunciation requires.

"Oh no work of words" records a creative pause or fallow period which troubled the poet. In itself, it is poor stuff; in places almost unbelievably bad:

Puffing the pounds of manna up through the dew to heaven,
The lovely gift of the gab bangs back on a blind shaft.

These lines do not simply present tense inarticulateness, they conform to it. However, in defining the relation between artist and art the piece is revealing. Death is 'a bad dark', art is the 'manna' which he returns for the gift of life; thus, creative sterility is a double death. Art means love and life; love because it repays life for its gift and life because it challenges death, 'the expensive ogre'. He comes very close here to suggesting, as a man alive in time, the imagination alone enables him to transcend the existential order. Spiritual vision may disclose visits beyond this life, but perhaps art alone renders physical existence tolerable.

My discussion of the poet's evolution through his middle period is now complete. I have attempted to convey
something of the impression of confused expansion and clouded struggles for affirmation with which it has left me. Above all, it is necessary, I believe, to emphasize that with an enlarged awareness of the horror life may inflict, there is also a surer perception of the variety and the light of the known world. The process of expansion in any sphere requires hard labor and much sweat and perhaps some tears. Lucky indeed the man or artist who achieves this painlessly, though I am not sure the result would impress us!
CHAPTER III

Part 2

Sheer technical accomplishment, which has carried many poets through mediocre poems, was not one of Thomas's doubtful accomplishments; even though he was probably one of the greatest masters of versification the language has known, for where the utmost inspiration is lacking he loses his art in various kinds of excess.

The problem of style is as infinite as the mind; therefore, any generalization can contain at best no more than a fractional truth. But I think we can say that Thomas did not find a neutral point of departure such as Yeats reached. His finest work is tessellated, like a mosaïc composed of very many brilliantly coloured stones of different shapes and sizes, all of which contribute towards the complete harmony of the whole effect. Sometimes he fails to achieve the design; sometimes it is difficult to know whether our dissatisfaction may be his fault or our own. With recent or current works it is always a problem. We are very much like children in a great forest, who can only cling tightly to the artist's hand if we trust him and if we do not, leave him. When Thomas offers us not a feast of poetic exuberance, but a well-wrought dish cover containing only dust, we are entitled to quit his company, as these lines from "Now" would indicate:
Now
Say nay,
No say sir
Yea the dead stir,
And this, nor this, is shade, the landed crow,
He lying low with ruin in his ear,
The cockerel's tide upcasting from the fire.

What I object to here is not obscurity, though it is certainly marked, but the palpable, mannered obfuscation which has occurred to the detriment of sensuous immediacy. Others have cited other passages to condemn; however, I have no doubt that it would be perfectly possible to take a few lines from Shakespeare and hold them up to ridicule or condemnation. There is more to Thomas than his worst lapses! though these can be astonishingly crude, as when he writes of 'metal phantoms', 'the dear daft time' or 'the quiet gentleman', where vulgarity and elegant variation conspire to his downfall.

A more serious fault is the ungainly rhythm that sometimes interposes, as in these lines from "Grief thief of time."

Now Jack my fathers let the time-faced crook,
Death flashing from his sleeve,
With swag of bubbles in a seedy sack
Sneak down the stallion grave,
Bulls-eye the outlaw through a eunuch crack
And free the twin-boxed grief,
No silver whistles chase him down the weeks
Dayed peaks to day to death...

where a monotone creaks by. I understand that Robert Graves offered a pound note to anyone who would come forward with a convincing interpretation of a passage that coincides more or less with this. Incomprehensibility is a problem I am
prepared to accept, hoping that subsequent readings will slowly enlighten me, not, because I believe the reader is always the blind one, but because I trust Thomas's artistic integrity for the excellent reason that, where I feel at home with his work, though it may not have been at once perceptible, I find there is always a meaning.

Where rhythm fails, however, no more need be said. It is the one element in poetry which, in my estimation, cannot be faked. Mere cleverness will never suffice to hide false rhythm and when this intrudes, nothing can redeem the defection.

In Thomas, the overloaded imagery that often accompanies rhythmical deadness is less a cause than a symptom of faulty inspiration and masks a deeper inadequacy. Like man, who seeks self-assurance, to conceal the revelation silence may sponsor, the poet resorts to loud and voluble talk and gesture. He gesticulates, rants, contorts himself, throws sparkling sand in our eyes, or instead of offering us a work as fresh as glowing womanhood, becomes a marriage-broker of sacophagi.

His real faults resemble less Hopkins's than Hardy's. Like the former he can sometimes be rough, unlike the latter who, though at times rhythmically obvious, rarely strikes a false note. His poetry is also less orotund than Hopkins's; it possesses a nervous, sometimes staccato energy, that in places
captures the tang and jagged power of Hardy's vigorous lyrics. But usually he is richer, easily estranged from his theme, inclined to elaborate disguises for incoherence, but at his best so magnificently, surpassingly fine, to labour over his shortcomings were churlish.

At first sight, he seems to share certain baroque characteristics with the Metaphysicals. Baroque, I take it, is an art which carries elaboration to the farthest limits of congruous relevance, every detail manifesting a central design, still discernible in them. It suggests a culture dedicated less to revolution, than infinite modulation. It is abundant and encourages its material to express itself to the point of exhaustion. Essentially, it is the art of the facade and is highly conscious of its relation to particular settings and therefore to its society and culture as a whole. A study of Hindu religious sculpture would clarify this point.

Thomas's nuclear imagery often possesses associative, rather than conceptual relevance, and his harmonies often depend on a precarious, though skilful juxtaposition of discords. Frequently his work is alive with ferment. Unlike the baroque, which seems fully at home in its themes and presents them with assured awareness of public response, Thomas suggests a spirit engaged in struggling to impose order on itself and on the world around.

At a time when he was emerging from the confines of his psyche, uncertainty and confused excess reflect the vacillations
of an artist trapped between an existential void and a spiritual vision. The inevitable intrusions of the creative personality which result would be unthinkable in baroque. There are places, however where he achieves a crisp, naked power, as in "The hand that signed the paper" or a grave pungency, as in "After the funeral":

Argument of the hewn voice, gesture and psalm,
Storm me forever over her grave until
The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry Love
And the strutting fern lay seeds on the black sill,

where, despite the merest traces of verbosity, he almost reaches the stillness lying at the heart of the greatest poetry and the silence heard behind the words which echoes on long after they have ceased.

As he breaks the dark chrysalis of the self and sheds the more constricting elements in his personality, he moves into the light and becomes an instrument expressing the commands of inspiration. He becomes more attuned to catching the inner notes which can be heard only when the mind itself has been stilled and can repose in a calm that is colourless like spring-water. Then indeed can a poet lay his ear to the secret heart of the world and catch the music of its pulse!
CHAPTER IV
THE THIRD PERIOD

Many poets have lived to reflect the sterility of an inspiration that has forsaken them, but which they refuse to recognize has vanished. Wordsworth and Tennyson were both capital offenders against the silence that an artist should respect, when his daemon has evaporated. Thomas left virtually nothing we can dismiss as the caperings of the performer mimicking his own tricks.

Geoffrey Moore has written, "He was a poet of affirmation, T.S. Eliot was a poet of negation." I do not think this is quite true. Eliot is admittedly a depressed poet characteristically, whereas Thomas is exuberant and occasionally ecstatic; but Eliot's later work is affirmative and Thomas's possesses certain negative attributes.

The most fundamental difference between them, I think, lies less in their conceptual and emotional interests, than in the divergent cast of mind and feeling lying behind their works. Both share a magnanimous sense of human suffering, a transcendent pity and infinite understanding of the mortal lot. Geoffrey Grigson deserves a hearing at this juncture; "Mr. Eliot's poems live tightly above the waist, rather higher than that, above the heart; Mr. Thomas's live, sprawl loosely, below the waist. The self in Mr. Thomas's poems seems inhuman and glandular." The charge implies in both the same defect; lack of heart, the result in one case of mortifying cerebral attenuation, in the other of the controlling power of mere instinct.
Later in the same essay, he remarks that Thomas's statement, "Whatever is hidden should be made naked, etc." suggests the disinfection of psychological ordure, which places the poetry on the level of substitution for anal sexuality. Very well, genital and excretive! A record of anal eroticism! Mr. Grigson has evidently read, or perhaps misread, Freud! Though grossly unjust, his essay contains a quarter-truth. Eliot's poetry suffers from repressions and Thomas sometimes abandons the human for mere somatic indulgences.

Robert Horan, one of the poet's most perceptive critics, has said: "Thomas's subject matter ... is an effort to free memory from the strictures of paternity, from religion and from death; to establish the unique individual, not merely as the victim, but as the agent, of choice; not alone created by history, but creative in history." Self-awareness is a preliminary condition for love. Thomas moves from a somewhat passive analysis of love to an active self-detachment, enabling him to express the quality of love in his work.

I disagree with Shapiro that "the puritanism sets up the tension in his poetry – a tension based upon love and fear of love – the basic sexual tension, the basic theological tension. The great weakness of Thomas is that he takes to his heels when he tries to grapple with it." I object to the confused approach which seems undecided if it is directed to the art or the artist himself. Nor do I understand in the least what "the basic theological tension" means. Certain modes of theology
may harbour a depraved hostility to sexual liberation, but I think Buddhism and the Hindu religion have fared better than most philosophies in eliminating from human life the problematical aspects of sex. Moreover, sane theologies do not repress sexual in favour of a more spiritual form of love; they teach us that the former is necessary and desirable until it has left us and that we can only rise by having lived desire to the full. But then I suspect that, in common with many others, Mr. Shapiro tends to equate the most foolish manifestations of the human mind in a given realm with its total possibilities.

Certainly it is true that Thomas's poetry is largely the art born of conflict, in which the artist seeks to achieve resolution, rather than that written from a tranquil inspiration already purged of stress. He is therefore dramatic rather than contemplative. In Shakespeare's last plays a strange transformation takes place, through which the dramatic artist moves onto a contemplative plane.

Thomas's third period contains a number of contemplative elements, but its most outstanding attribute, I believe, is its abundance, its fertile awareness of the many-coloured world and the diversity of life. There are many great themes: childhood, the seasons, the skies, the sea and the birds, the beasts and the fishes, death and sexual and spiritual ecstasies. To approach such work through Freudian analysis will not serve. It may reveal much about the artist, but will tell us extremely little about his art. It is easier to play a sedulous
psychological ape with poetry than pottery, but not a whit more justifiable. Shapiro's comment that in Thomas "The main symbol is masculine love, driven hard as Freud drove it" is ambiguous: in the first place, Freud erected on a purely physiological basis a method of investigating the mind, in which he paid small heed to love, a mental state that may or may not accompany copulation; in the second place, if he is suggesting that the central image of Thomas's poetry is the phallus, we are entitled to ask to what use he puts it. It is one of the great symbols of the Hindu religion, but possesses an entirely different meaning from what it would have in a pornographic picture. In fact, I think the phallic symbol means many things in the poet's works. Sometimes it enshrines the creative process; sometimes it is co-extensive with self-fulfilment; sometimes it simply exists in a chaos of diffuse sexuality, which makes poor poetry; sometimes it incarnates the obstacles preventing man from spiritual fulfilment; sometimes it becomes integrated into a vision, where the body and the soul truly coalesce. But granted the omnipresence of the phallus, which is questionable, it seems a pity to confine oneself by a generalization which excludes so much more than it incorporates. As we shall see, the last period is too superabundant to let us dispose of its fecundity in one brief phrase.

"The conversation of prayer" explores the problem of the relation of divine providence to two lives and of the lives to one another. Stanford asks, "Are we to read the healing of
the man's 'dying love in a high room' as a miracle, the terms of which necessitate an exchange of the man's and the child's fate?" If so, how do we reconcile this notion with the end, where the two prayers become one?

The sound about to be said in the two prayers
For the sleep in a safe land and the love who dies
Will be the same grief flying.

I think the answer is this: we cannot distinguish between two sorts of sorrow. All sorrows are one; all presuppose that there is something we would have otherwise. Therefore, their end is also one, whether it be for a sleep in a land of sweet dreams or for the recovery from mortal sickness of one we love.

So the human predicament consists, among other things, of grief differing only in its specific causes; but to God there is only one sorrow: man's. It follows then that there is no great comfort in the divine response to one particular prayer, for it does not solve the problem of grief, which remains. And for one prayer that is satisfied there is always another that is not.

Thus, the poet is telling us, the real problem is not a single sorrow, but its inevitable persistence through human lives. I do not think he is voicing the doctrine of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," that what God grants with one hand he takes away with another. But, by exchanging the child's and the man's roles as supplicants, showing us that we can only realize the nature of the problem on a level that transcends the particular.

Indeed, the totally irrational transference that occurs is itself a comment upon the incomprehensible inconsistencies
in life, which refuses to submit to the order our reason would impose on it. This does not necessarily imply there is no meaning, but that we shall not find it on our humble terms. What does the stone know of the human heart or the mind of man of the whole universe? Why sorrow comes to one or forsakes another is a mystery. It seems to be arbitrary. It may lead us to indict the gods for stupidity, malevolence or indifference, but the poet is too subtle to project in such a way. He poses Job's question and indicates that the answer must exist, if it wished to disclose itself.

What variety this poetry possesses! Rage, resignation, metaphysical speculation, insoluble riddles are all present. There is also a wisdom, which has often been missed, simply because to some minds its co-existence with the Dionysiac and orgiastic utterance seems improbable.

"There was a saviour," a religious ode addressed to Christ, is beautiful, though not quite even.

The magnificent oratory of the first three verses, which describe the glory of incarnation, is suddenly displaced by one of the most startling lines in the poet's whole corpus:

Now in the dark there is only yourself and myself.

The electric leap from a collective to an intensely personal utterance delivers an astonishing shock. What a gulf lies between the impact of Christ's public life, a galaxy of miracles, and the silent communion allowed the poet. It is dark in several ways; first, because it is internal, second because it is intangible
and third because the soul's darkness reflects the mystery sur-
rounding God. We can know no more of the divine than our own
minds can contain of it, yet in this state of isolation man has
only God's companionship.

Having explored Christ's two natures the poet now de-
cribes man's mortal and immortal halves, though each in a sense
contains the other, for Christ was both man and God. He says:

Two proud, blacked brothers cry,
Winter-locked side by side. . . .
symbolizing the dead and graceless state where man's two halves
exist, and cannot therefore respond to Christ by emulating his
compassion:

O we who could not stir
One lean sigh when we heard
Greed on man beating near. . . .

Unregenerate man remains a passive conspirator in the stratagems
of evil. He is self-imprisoned and inert.

He now identifies contemporary man with Christ's multi-
tudes. Life, he would tell us, imposes a choice: whether we
shall turn our faces to the wall when human suffering and evil
confront us, or whether we shall show true charitas.

At the conclusion, he depicts the resurrection of the
Christlike nature of man:

Now see, alone in us,
Our own true strangers' dust
Ride through the doors of our unentered house.
Exiled in us we arouse the soft,
Unclenched, armless, silk and rough love that breaks all
rocks.

The 'strangers' dust' refers to the physical attributes of man's
Christlike nature, his inescapable dust, and therefore to the physical form the response must take. The 'house' is the soul which, since we are made in Christ's image, he necessarily inhabits. There follows the awakening of divine love in man, estranged from God and living in exile here.

It is a complex piece dealing with man's and Christ's two natures and their relation to each other. An interesting change has occurred. The poetry has become both more dramatic and more tranquil.

According to Merwin in "Vision and Prayer," "he prays that death may die indeed," a comment that recalls Donne's superb sentence on death. Stanford is right, I believe, in disagreeing the poem's religious fervor derives from Herbert's "Wings", which in form it certainly resembles. Herbert's inspiration stems from the traditional Christian belief that, without God, man is nothing, but that he can attain beatitude through salvation. Thomas sees spiritual fulfilment as the discovery of the god in the self. I suspect that Herbert would have found his intensely anthropomorphic religious sensibility slightly irreverent. Instead, Stanford cites Muriel Spark's explanation of the form, who observes how "the varying forms of the stanzas the extension and contraction of the first line of each part in section one may be taken to represent the spasms of the womb attendant on delivery." This is a brilliantly ingenious suggestion and may well be correct. By analogy the form of the second section, composed of two triangles whose apexes converge at the centre, may be said to represent in the form of a uterine anagram, the whole movement of
life, dwindling down to death's bottle-neck and thence expanding, through a rebirth, into life eternal.

This is a much finer sequence than "Altarwise by owl-light." Whereas the latter is clever and abstruse, this glows with incandescent passion. It speaks with the infinite resonances of the inmost heart and it is to the heart that it appeals.

The birth of the redemptive child, both Christ and the Christ in man, resembles a blazing meteor:

And the winged wall is torn
By his torrid crown
   And the dark thrown
   From his loin
   To bright
   Light.

The birth changes earth's darkness to light and his loins, symbolizing life, impregnate the darkness with their light, charging the world with a shining spiritual potency.

Once more the poet participates in Christ's human life, as he writes:

I shall run lost in sudden
   Terror and shining from
   The once hooded room
   Crying in vain
   In the cauldron
   Of his
   Kiss.

"The once hooded room" refers to the virgin womb, hooded with its hymen. He suggests we all share in Christ's physical life, just as he shared in ours. The unique historical event, therefore, is still recurring all over the world and is the means by which the poet reconciles the existential order with a spiritual vision.
In the next sonnet he affirms Christ's healing properties more explicitly. Redemption comes to the poet, erstwhile 'lost' and he is blinded by the blood of Christ's wound. The image suggests total immolation, but further, implies, I think, that a kind of symbolic physical birth occurs, the wounds of Christ being not only a baptismal font, but a womb from which the votary emerges cleansed and reborn. His blood silences the crying mouth, nourishing the soul, parched from desolation, plucking the pursuant of grace from the desert of isolation. Through losing himself in Christ, man finds himself.

In the next two pieces, the poet describes the poles of human existence: the last judgement and the original state of perfection before the Fall. He associates himself with both and presents existence as a movement from life to death and thence to life again. A complex intellectual counterpoint is active here: all creation is engaged in going home to God, to recover lost perfection, and man, after death, can regain his pristine purity.

Characteristically, the focus now alters, from an objective to a subjective vision, using the terms in a philosophical sense. In this respect, the sequence is structurally comparable to "There was a saviour."

Death now becomes the focal point. A second cycle is inaugurated and modifies the first, so that, although the poet has already portrayed an ultimate regeneration, he now realizes it.
He speaks for the 'lost', all the living exiled from Christ, and, as I have remarked, uses a verse form that embodies rebirth:

And the green dust  
And bearing  
The ghost  
From  
The ground  
Li k e pollen.

Having entered the land of death, he now speaks on behalf of the dead and entreats that Christ may suffer them to sleep

In the dark  
And deep  
Rock  
A w a k e  
No heart bone  
But let it break  
On the mountain crown

where he asks the dead may escape the sufferings of consciousness for, until their final restoration, better they should sleep than lie in waking torment. Not until the last vision shall man's spirit escape the consequences of his enslaved continuance in the wheel of destiny. Memories of his past existence will otherwise haunt him. Mortal awareness is unbearable to the poet; extinction in death, which leads to oblivion through entering into Christ's being, provides a release from the curse of knowledge.

Seen from a human standpoint, life and death seemed swathed in darkness, but Christ enters the 'mazes' of death and irradiates the sleepers' night, as after his own death he descended into hell and released from it the souls of men who had died before him. Viewing his death, the poet expresses his desire to return to earth.
But the loud sun
Christens down
The sky.
I
Am found.

The visual pattern reinforces the theme of regeneration.
'Christens down' is both the sun and Christ, the son, transforming man's world through the baptism of death and carrying him under this hemisphere of existence into the dawn of the next. At the moment of inception, the poet finds himself. Complete self-awareness comes to him as he is gathered into the "One". 'The sun roars at the prayer's end' is an allusion to the transfigured sun and the Biblical lion, which are both symbols of Christ or a Messiah.

It is a beautiful sequence, where the transformation of dark into light and life into death rings out with magnificent clarity. It would seem the poet had at last discovered a resolution after the pain and torment of the central period. Such an achievement must always be relative in time. I doubt if he had come near the recognition that life and death are the two chambers of one heart and that fulfilment need not demand rejection, but simply the sloughing off of obsolete attributes, as the snake renews its skin. In other words, he has not succeeded in discarding the negation that lurks in the tabernacle of his faith.

We come next to the triumphant elegies, which rank among his finer poems.

Though it is immensely affirmative, "A refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" seems to me the least good. The apocalyptic utterance, sustained at length, is tangential and rhetorical. In the overblown gesture we can sense
the poet's excruciating compassion, but I do not think that, in deflecting his spontaneous reaction, he succeeds in transcending it.

He welcomes death's finality, for the good reason that he believes it comes only once. His emphasis upon after-life accompanies a devaluation of this one, but the eschatological vision simply fails to incorporate the child, and the horror, the sheer, physical horror, comes through unconsciously in

The majesty and the burning of the child's death. A holocaust? Maybe, but the juxtaposition of 'majesty' and 'burning' serves only to invalidate the high rhetorical note. I do not think he has failed to visualize his object, but missed recognizing that the least intrusion of the physical facts of the child's death must inevitably discredit the rest, as occurs when he introduces an ugly metaphor in 'the long friends.' It would appear that poetry can only reconcile itself to acute, physical horrors by presenting them with naked truth. Homer and Shakespeare both allow the shocking to have its way.

A similar subject develops in "Ceremony After a Fire Raid." Its structure moves in the opposite direction; for, whereas in the previous piece the apocalyptic vision contracts into a statement of the particular incident before both are expanded in some kind of a unified relationship, this converts a particular episode into a tremendous affirmation of eternal life. It is by far the finer poem of the two. Instead of resorting to fulsome, windy hyperbole, here the poet speaks with controlled and measured cadence.
He describes the child as a type of the phoenix, rising from its ashes and being reborn, transfigured, through its death. Yet 'miracles cannot atone' for his death, for which we are all responsible. Therefore he asks

Forgive
Us forgive
Us your death. . . .
as if he were addressing Christ on behalf of erring man. The identification becomes even clearer in

A star was broken
Into the centuries of the child. . . .

which contains an allusion to the star of Bethlehem, whereby the Magi came to the manger. But this child of earth has himself been changed into a star, pure fire and light.

The poet suggests we are all each other's keepers and we are all guilty when an innocent dies, especially through the direct result of adult wars. Moreover, none save our victims can forgive us and thus, when they rise radiantly from their ashes, we must humbly sue to them for reprieve.

The end of the first part:

Love is the last light spoken. Oh
Seed of sons in the loin of the black husk left. . . .

contrasts the light rising from death, the reconciliation of life's contraries, with the 'black husk' which the body has become. But its black sterility is nothing to that of the living transgressors among whom he numbers himself.

The second part unites the child's death to our first parents, physically and spiritually. It concentrates, as it were,
the whole history of man within the child's skull. Its death repeats the first death from which it stems and as a consequence of which:

Man and woman undone,
Beginning crumbled back to darkness
Bare as the nurseries
Of the garden of wilderness.

These lines signify the descent of life into the primeval chaos whence it had emerged. Death meant a return to unbeing, in a physical and spiritual sense, but, paradoxically, death alone can restore us to the lost paradise. Thomas is contrasting here two aspects of man: the *principium individuationis*, which emphasizes the uniqueness of each entity and its power to redeem the race by becoming a holocaust, and the notion that each life contains all others. Two cycles merge; then, the cosmic and individual, 'myselfs' being both.

The third section soars out of the uncreated void - to which our elements revert - up to the 'ultimate kingdom' where all life shall conmingle in uttering

\[ \ldots \text{ for ever} \\
\text{Glory, glory glory. } \ldots \]

in a triumphant paean when God's light shall fill the entire universe. The strongly sexual associations embedded in the last eight lines are characteristic of the most intense religious poetry, as can be seen in the works of St. John of the Cross, Crashaw and Hopkins.

Once more the poet has set on fire the void despair afflicting the world of genetic process. The thematic harmony
he establishes is complex, but I shall not dwell upon it, because though nearly every poem in the last period is strikingly individual, the thematic patterns tend to be recurrent.

Last in this group comes the finest, "Do not go gentle into that good night," perhaps the most final piece he ever wrote. It seems to have been struck upon a silver anvil! Every word rings out with inevitable assurance! It is a superb Promethean plea for the persistence of life and yet more life and in spirit it recalls the words of the dying Goethe: 'mehr Licht!'

Though death's night may be good, yet let us pay homage to the will to survive against doom, for as it draws near all our unfulfilled potentialities clamour for realization and all the regrets of what might have been and of the futility of our achievements pile on our heads. Here he captures the terrible irrevocability of time, the urgency to live the approach of death awakes and the knowledge that individual life leaves only a footprint within the sweep of the tide. Waste of life and the transience of the flesh are tragic.

The whole weight of the poem is thrown in the struggle to fight the enemy who will convert 'might' into 'never'. Perhaps there is nothing in this world more tragically compelling than the superb defiance of unavoidable doom. Thomas's heroic stand differs, however, from that of certain Anglo-Saxon poets for, whereas they were expressing the convictions of a society who preferred death to ignominy, here it is the one human
chance that is at stake. No matter what the odds, he protests, let the human spirit be invincible! Let man's courage shine through the rags of his defeat! Here then he fights the existential predicament on its own terms, with a rage, sublime as the love that prompts it. Man triumphs in his destruction!

Two occasional poems belonging together are "Into her lying down head" and "On the Marriage of a Virgin", which, in somewhat Dionysiac fashion, celebrate two wedding nights. I suspect these poems must be reckoned among those where the poet's attitude to sex has been censured. For instance, Francis Scarfe comments "A little probing reveals not a liberated body but an obsessed mind," but the charge surely misses the point. Obsessional writing shows the artist has failed to liberate his material from his personality; but writing that expresses obsessions may be completely objective. Hamlet, Measure for Measure and Troilus and Cressida are great plays which reveal obsessions, whilst Baudelaire has written great poetry that uses them as its matter. I grant that, however successfully a writer may transmute his problems into art, obsessions he fails to transcend will limit him. Undoubtedly, there is a morbid imbalance in Baudelaire. Eliot invokes the law of inversion in defending him, but to call a diabolist a Christian upside down still does not stand him on his feet.

The real weakness of both the poems is the diffuse admixture of a specific act of consummation with a hymn upon sexual intercourse, in which the man and woman are reduced to
symbols, so that she is 'everywoman' and he is everyman, epitomizing the essence of sexual satiation.

It expresses a tendency of the times, where the act of 'the always anonymous beast' has become dissociated from individual personality. The poet presents it as the universal principle of organic life, where the mating of man and woman exists on the collective level. Consequently, the two lovers may be described as

Two sand-grains together in bed,
Head to heaven-circling head.

their whole life being poured into their essentially sexual attributes. Copulation is not a highly individual subject. Like eating, drinking and excreting, it is simply a normal human function. In this poetry, it becomes a complement, a parallel to and sometimes an expression of a spiritual vision. Thomas writes in the language of ecstasy. However, the celebration of sex in a vacuum does not succeed here. I feel that the poet is the fascinated slave of his images and, though in places he writes beautifully, the lack of specific focus spells failure. Nonetheless, the undertaking is interesting from two standpoints, first because, so far as I know, it has no precedent in English poetry and, second, because later he was able to cast a similar emotion into a more substantial form.

I certainly do not admit the charge he was being merely adolescent. A poet is not obliged to treat sex under the aegis of romantic love; if he can impose order upon the theme of sexuality, much joy to him! The great advantage of
mythology is its provision of figures who incorporate instinctual attributes and, in the later pieces, where he succeeds in unifying his vision of sex, he uses quasi-mythological narrative.

"On the Marriage of a Virgin" is better balanced than "On a Wedding Anniversary;" even so, it tends to sprawl. Stanford remarks, "Her bed is referred to as the place where she 'married alone', since in Thomas's work there is no single existence. All things are nubile and enter into contact." This is so, but does not go far enough. The fusion of the two suns; one the star or the generative principle of physical life, (also to be identified with Christ as in "Vision and Prayer"), the other, the dark sun of the phallus, (also to be identified with Dionysus), is important. I think David Aivaz goes too far in the opposite direction when he writes, "It is the mystic who consorts with God, who lives in the 'moment' 'unending' although 'old' in time. . . it is the artist who celebrates without participation, 'alone in a multitude of loves', as Christ with the multitude. . . . The shift, then, is not only from God to man, but also from the one to the one-of-many, from celebration to choice." I see no evidence in the poem for suggesting it contains a contrast between the mystic and the artist. The references to Christ are more simply and more faithfully explicable: Thomas by now habitually associates all human life with the stories of Adam and Eve and Christ. He draws a parallel between the girl's virginity and the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Their connexion is admittedly marginal: what they share is a miraculous proliferation. Either was marvellous, though in different ways. However,
if it is the object of learning to establish distinctions, the purpose of wisdom is to relate. The poet expresses the notion that supernatural and natural acts of reduplication are marvelous. Creation is one stupendous miracle, pervaded with sanctity.

The poet relates the sun-god, Apollo, and Christ, to the act of sex. A supernatural male force, symbolizing the masculine aspect of the twin god of procreativity, deflowers the girl, who is thereby mated with the sun and the Son of man. Christ and Cupid are one. It is always a divine fire that burns through virginity and physical fulfilment embraces the two great halves of our being: the Christlike and the Dionysiac. Man and woman, therefore, incarnate the divine principle of generation, fusing the spiritual and the sexual in one sacrament.

In fusing the spiritual with the animal, a process that is to go further in his development, Thomas has virtually succeeded in reconciling the tensions that exist in "Altarwise by owl-light." Certain, probably unconscious, traces of Oriental religion make themselves felt in his later work. There are elements in the preceding poem which suggest the yin and yang of Taoism, even perhaps the Kali and Siva of the Hindu religion, creative and destructive, spiritual and sexual deities, who embody every level of procreativity, from the divine to the purely animal.

Though the poetry may not be wholly successful, the poet's integration of his earlier contradictions into an image of unity in diversity and the converse marks tremendous progress. His world is no longer merely a vicious circle, but has become changed into an image of the continual evolution of life towards an ultimate harmony.
Much criticism has been written on the first and second of the three narrative pieces we must now consider: "A Winter's Tale", "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait" and "Lament", where sex is related to the miraculous, the supernatural and the religious.

Several critics have remarked on the recurrent duality of Thomas. D.S. Savage, for instance, comments, "all Thomas’s poems are erected from the double vision which is the source of his understanding... caballistic perception of the world itself as of a metaphorical nature, intimately related to the articulation of language." I agree with this in the main, for as we have seen, word and world are interchangeable in the poetry. Moreover, it is certainly true that his vision is essentially metaphorical.

Glyn Lewis interprets the duality somewhat differently. He says, Thomas showed "difficulty in avoiding an amalgamation of two traditions - his devotional heritage and the non-Christian occult philosophy to which he shows marked inclinations." But why should he wish to avoid doing so, not that I believe the statement represents the relations between the religious philosophies contained in his work, very justly? Moreover, there is a great deal of ambivalence implicit in the material itself, as must inevitably happen when a poet makes such extensive use of the subconscious and its symbols, which, long after his concern with the former has abated, continue to appear and impart depth to his perceptions of the world outside himself.

"A Winter's Tale" is perhaps the most beautiful poem he ever wrote. It is a superbly delicate, yet powerful, pastoral
narrative, erected upon a pseudo-myth, which W.S. Merwin examines with rigorous fidelity to Thomas's orphic gifts. "It contains," he says, "most of the essential elements of a mid-winter ceremony of the rebirth of the year... If the poem was based upon some legend, then we might suppose that in the original ritual the real spring came, and that the one-night version was later." Very true, and I have no doubt that a Jungian critic might demonstrate interesting associations with other similar works. Stanford perceptively suggests that the 'he-bird' in Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" may have inspired Thomas to create his 'she bird'. It also possesses several marked affinities to the "Eve of St. Agnes," where two lovers fly the winter cold and fuse in a great flame of love, in a tale which the poet is at pains to stress belongs to remote antiquity.

The resemblances to Shakespeare's play increase our enjoyment of Thomas's piece. In either case a man wins his love after a long period of wintry isolation, through a miracle; both moreover depict a regeneration in which the seasons share. The differences, however, are striking: the central theme of the play is personal and vicarious expiation; here the man's deprivation is simply a fact of existential existence. Furthermore, whereas in the play the reconciliation occurs in and through time, in the poem it demands the victim's death.

The landscape which the opening paints suggests first the man's spiritual moribundity, but also the white, and as yet inaccessible, paradisal image of consummation and peace which unfurls at the end:
In the always desiring centre of the white
Inhuman cradle and the bride bed forever sought
By the believer lost and the hurled outcast of light.

Deliver him, he cried,
By losing him all in love, and cast his need
Alone and naked in the engulfing bride,
Never to flourish in the fields of the white seed
Or flower under the time dying flesh astride.

Man in time lives alone and only when he is released from the
wheel of karma can love blossom. He exists in darkness, the
'hurled outcast of light', excluded from love and illumination.
Thus the snowy landscape serves a double function: it contains
the still frozen lineaments of ideal love, but also reflects the
state of the man's mind. He is his world and his world is him.

The next part, with infinite beauty, describes the miracle.
A magical spring comes to the land, as the miraculous bride ap­
proaches:

A she bird rose and rayed like a burning bride.
A she bird dawned, and her breast with snow and scarlet
downed.

She wears the colours of passion and purity - scarlet and white.
Now the poet bids us use our senses as he begins to paint the
awakening of the whole world from a winter ages old, whilst the
'she bird' answers the prayer of the supplicant. He follows in
her wake and hastens towards the death the consummation requires:

In the far ago land the door of his death glided wide. . .
She is his death and its 'door' is also her 'womb'. So, death
and fulfilment have become synonymous terms. One cannot occur
without the other.

For every man there is a 'she bird', an image of
transcendent love, who will come to illuminate the darkness of
the spirit. Such love asks the highest sacrifice, a life for a life, or a life-in-death for true life. But the miraculous spell withers and

The springs wither
Back. . . .

which implies that the seasonal transformation occurred only for the supplicant. As love drew near, his whole world changed with him. But once he has passed beyond existence to a final self-fulfilment, the ordinary world returns to our consciousness.

At the end the poet describes the consummation as his soul enters the 'she bird':

. . . in the folds
Of paradise, in the spun bud of the world.
And she rose with him flowering in her melting snow.

She now emerges from her disguise, a device common to supernatural visitors, and reveals herself as the source of love, as her snow melts and the two spirits fuse in mystical sexual fulfilment.

The poet's vision can hardly be translated into conceptual language, nor do I think the attempt to do so profitable.

This is an obviously beautiful poem, a faultless fairy-tale, which Stanford somewhat oddly evaluates: "As a work of art it is perfect, as a human document just a little elementary," a statement which is both suspect and perplexing. A work of art is a human document! Perhaps he means its technical skill here surpasses the value of its content. I shall not spread myself in trying to refute the charge; suffice it to say that one quality which we find in fairy-tales is elementalism. If you happen to dislike them, then it is better to admit a limitation than to
justify a personal deficiency by pejorative observation.

"Ballad of the Long-legged Bait" has been roundly condemned, largely, I suspect, as a result of misconceptions. The poet here reveals the other aspect woman may reveal to the subconscious: sin and death. Ideal beauty necessarily entails its opposite and I believe he is remarkably successful in reconciling them in a concluding harmony.

Once more, he creates his own myth. Admittedly it is gruesome, but then so are many others. As usual, Olson writes illuminatingly, when he says. "The Ballad of the Long-legged Bait" ... has as its bare theme the notion that salvation must be won through mortification of the flesh. ... With the death of the girl, the sea gives up its dead, as foretold in Revelations XX:13; Eden returns, 'A garden holding to her hand / With birds and animals'; and the sea disappears accomplishing the prophecy of Revelations XXX:I ('and there was no more sea') ... the subduing of sensual desire becomes mysterious and cruel as the immolation of the girl, the salvation takes on the beauty and mystery of the resurrection of the dead and the past from the sea."62 Elsewhere he observes, "We are held in constant suspense until the last line of the poem, for until then we do not know what the action is, or who the agents, or what the circumstances."63 Henry Treece, who with Stanford condemns the piece, remarks on a "suspected Freudian symbolism, but also the influence of Rimbaud's Bateau Ivre."64 'Suspected' seems to me an unwittingly ironic understatement!
Even Olson, I think, misunderstands the work. It does not depict the mortification of the flesh; on the contrary, it would seem the only way to overcome weakness, evil or enslavement to some vice is to give it free scope, so that the soul may rise through what it falls by.

Stanford and Treece censure the piece, as contrived and tedious. Though I once shared this view, I have now come to see the poem in another light. Having reached the point where I believe I understand at least its broad outlines, I find it strangely compelling.

Psychologically, its allegorical structure is simple: the woman is everyman's subconscious sexual projections which he trails through the sea of life, subjecting her image to the orgiastic deflorescence, indeed wholesale rape, which his desires would perform upon womanhood. The purpose of the voyage is to overcome the lower mind's bestial attachments. To be purified, its contents need to be exposed, after which the abominable image can perish, and, as the lower nature outgrows its fouled rags, mystical release and consummation can begin. This is a ritual cleansing of the spirit. Unfortunately, some have found its expression repellant, though there are passages in *Gulliver's Travels* and *Troilus and Cressida* which strike me as far more deeply shocking.

I think it important to stress that in writing this poem Thomas was breaking new ground in English poetry. Symptomatic and allegorical journeys have a long enough history, but no English poet had previously undertaken to create a poetic narrative focused upon the whole corpus of masculine sexuality, which
becomes transformed into a force participating in a transcendent consummation.

The conclusion, however, differs considerably from the ending of "A Winter's Tale," for whereas the latter depicts the salvation of an individual, the former describes the fulfilment of the prophecy of Revelations. The whole process of sex has been sublimated into an everlasting vision in which the whole of human nature shares. The last spring is endless.

Man succeeds in sloughing off his animality, and he comes home

With his long-legged heart in his hand.

The 'bait' was nothing but the desires running counter to the movement of his higher self towards perfection. Here the notion that by what we fall we rise is exemplified! It is also perfectly clear that Thomas does not advocate repression, but immersion in the dark waters of the spirit's depths. His vision of man is complex, but its inclusiveness, its refusal to reject inconvenient facets of nature, renders it profoundly true.

"Lament" is simpler than either of the two preceding pieces and belongs to a different narrative genre. It is neither symbolic nor allegorical, but straightforward ethical fable. Stanford accords it high praise, saying, "It has that objectivity, that writing from outside the subject, together with the attention to form and close rhyming, which the French (Parnassian) school prescribed." In no other respects does it resemble a school of poetry distinguished, perhaps above all, for its fastidiousness.
Each stanza depicts a new stage in the rake's progress, which the poet charts most carefully. Here he presents the obverse of salvation through mystical sexual consummation, namely, the destruction of man enslaved to lust. The body rots and the spirit darkens. As the body gains increasing ascendancy over the spirit both suffer eclipse.

Ironically, reform is forced upon the roue, who complains:

Chastity prays for me, piety sings,
Innocence sweetens my last black breath,
Modesty hides my thighs in her wings
And all the deadly virtues plague my death!

His vices have reduced him to a state of such helpless inertia that, despite himself, he has returned to the fold. The world is full of unwilling prisoners of goodness and respectability. This specimen is not to be thought of as damned, simply as irascible; the fulminating of a goat relishing his fornications. But it would be wrong to underestimate the grim lining to the humour. The poet describes the disintegration with unmitigated incivility.

One of the simplest of his poems, it is also among the most powerful.

The next group we must consider contains some of the finest pieces of all. It comprises the great elegiac and pastoral odes: "Poem in October", "This Side of the Truth", "Fern Hill", "In country sleep", "Over Sir John's hill", "Poem on his birthday" and "In the white giant's thigh". Many of them exhibit an almost Proustian nostalgia for childhood, evoking its innocence, its joys, its promise, security and sheltered ignorance, free from the desolate cares of maturity. Looking back, as he feels from his autumn, he returns to his spring, which has become almost
unendurably beautiful.

"Poem in October" describes a little miracle, how the weather

. . . turned away from the blithe country
And down the other air and the blue altered sky
Streamed again a wonder of summer
With apples
Pears and red currants
And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's
Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother
Through the parables
Of sunlight
And the legends of the green chapels

These sudden irradiations are frequent in the later work, but where they occur retrospectively they are rendingly poignant, for, unlike summer, save in memory, childhood does not return. In the last three lines the poet captures the essence of the child's vision, which unifies all its experiences, whilst for man they exist as disparate fragments. Thus to grow up means a spiritual disintegration for which there are no compensations.

Though most of the work possesses a crystalline clarity, the last three lines have puzzled some critics:

O may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning.

Stanford quotes Treece's comment that the poet seems to be "praying for another year of life in the stability of the world he knows," but adds, "There may also be the idea present of aspiring to write only - in Keats's phrase - from 'the holiness of the heart's affections and the Truth of Imagination.'"

Both observations seem to me valid, but I do not think they exhaust the meanings the lines contain. I believe the poet
is expressing a fundamental paradox of his vision: that the word is in the world as the world is in the word. All existence is an image and the image is the whole of creation. He is also pleading that his inspiration may like the seasons renew itself and that he may thereby be mingled with them. The 'high hill' refers to both the heart and the hill where he is standing; it is the tabernacle of art as well as a summit crowned with memories. There is the further plea that his song may remain at this height in the coming year and, last, that it may endure as the hill.

The conclusion, which is by no means simple, looks to the power of the imagination to transform the future that his works may prevail over time. As he contemplates the past and considers himself in relation to a particular point in time and space, he throws the weight of his purely mortal affirmation onto his creations.

The central theme of "This Side of the Truth" is predestination. The poet's concern with the tragedy of existence apart from ethical solutions renders its tone chiefly existential. To be aware is to recognize that life is a death-sentence, though

... all your deeds and words,
Each truth, each lie,
Die in unjudging love... . . .

partially mitigates the fatalism. I do not think 'unjudging love' suggests the mercy of an indiscriminating arbitrator, but a vision to which all human conduct seems arbitrary. It is a mistake to envisage death as a judge separating the sheep from the goats. On the contrary, it reconciles those very problems which seem to cry out for arbitration.
The piece reveals another side of this affirmative period, which moves back and forward to escape an intolerable present. Death is a deliverance and childhood an escape. The grown man, like Tantalus, "sees the water of life receding before the hollow of his outstretched hand," living in a void, between radical innocence and final restoration. Intense abhorrence for his immediate existence redoubles the poet's affirmative utterances.

D.S. Savage finds an "unexpected diffusion and prolixity" in "Fern Hill", "Poem in October" and "A Winter's Tale." Treece also comments unfavourably on the first-named piece, when he writes, "This 'botanical urge' is a reaction towards a vegetable state, one of inaction and earthy complacence, a contrast between the mutability of human personalities with their lies and deceits, and the static safety of the botanical world."

There may be some truth in what Savage says of it, though none concerning the two others he cites; Treece's statement, however, strikes me as perverse. The whole pathos lies in the poet's stinging realization that he cannot return to childhood. Were this lacking then we might well indict him for sentimentality, but there is nothing spineless or lachrymose in his astonishing recreation of a childhood scene, with such subtle understanding of a child's mind that each of us must surely exclaim, "Yes, I have been here too!" This the time when vision is magical and the imagination absolute, when the spiritual and natural worlds are one, as expressed in

And the sabbath rang slowly
In the pebbles of the holy streams.
But the figure of time looms always larger, persistent, increasing and quite ineluctable, until the child experiences over again the first Fall. In the last stanza its tragic consequences come home to roost:

> And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
> Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
> Time held me green and dying
> Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

Does the child flee the farm or the farm the child? Both! Man's chains are his physical existence, bounded by birth, death and physical finity. But his song is eternal. Perhaps it is the only consolation the poet knows to salve on its own terms his sterile cognizance of the earthly condition. He could not resign himself to the grave depression of Eliot, nor the weather-beaten wisdom of Frost, nor like Pound keep his faith in life intact by directing his energy against objects of hatred. His human vulnerability is omnipresent and, as the pressure of the present grows stronger, we feel the effort of the soul to free itself from its chains.

"In country sleep" is a prayer for the continuance of a child's protective faith. The poet tries to exorcise from her mind various terrors and comforts her with the reminder that Christ, here synonymous with the angel of death, will not fail her, for "this night he comes and night without end," not as a figure charged with vengeance and winged with terror, but as the hand outstretched to us from the heart of darkness. Above and beyond all Christ's mercy breathes.

The poem is less concerned with the innocence and freedom of childhood than with the other side of its imagination; its terrors. Its faith is itself a defence against chaos, but it requires divine magic to banish the black magic that assails the tender
Stanford complains that there is a "slackening of spiritual tension" and a "greater emphasis on descriptive, as opposed to expressive, writing. . . . and the cultivation of exterior surfaces, as distinguished from inner essences." I lack the time to answer this charge in detail, but I think it worth observing that it seems to me he misses the sheer vital proliferation and the relaxed delicacy of the lines. It is possible to maintain that Thomas evolved from writing the poetry of tension to the poetry of relaxation and that if the first suffers from coagulation the second is inconcise; however, to state certain tendencies as if they were the predominant traits is simply misrepresentation. We do not value people as if we were compiling a list of assets; nor do we derive much illumination from composing catalogues of an author's qualities as if he were a shopping list.

A much finer poem, "Over Sir John's Hill" is, according to Cid Corman, concerned "with the quality of mercy." But I prefer to follow Olson who says "the hill is called 'just' and the heron is called 'holy'. . . . these terms derive from Thomas's comparison of the events taking place to a trial and execution; the hill is just because it is a judge, and it is a judge because, like a judge pronouncing the death sentence, it puts on a black cap — in this instance a black cap of jackdaws. The hawk is seen as the hangman. . . . The heron is the chaplain or priest."
The poem might be described as an extended metaphorical analogy between human and natural justice, both of which are related to the divine jurisdiction which presides over them. The poet asks if it is possible to reconcile the world's anomalies with an ultimate tribunal. He shows that each entity acts as it must. So he is able to cry

All praise of the hawk on fire in hawk-eyed dusk be sung,
When his viperish fuse hangs looped with flames under the brand
Wing. . . .

for the hawk is no less a part of the order than his victims on whom the poet invokes mercy in

It is, the heron and I, under judging Sir John's elmed
Hill, tell-tale the knelled
Guilt
Of the led-astray birds, whom God, for their breast of whistles,
Have mercy on,
God in his whirlwind silence save, who marks the sparrows hail,
For their souls' song.

To a cursory glance this may seem sour justice, for what is the 'guilt' of the birds? It is their hereditary legacy from a fallen order. Since this is a universal sentence, we cannot truly condemn the predators, for not only are they as surely doomed as their victims, but their acts of destruction are a condition necessary to the fulfilment of the natural law. Nature, the poet says, contains its own court. The pattern of nature's destruction is inevitable; it is not merely an expression, but an inherent part, of her existence. That this is so constitutes its justice. In a word, he simply reverses the question to provide the answer. Instead of asking if the natural order can be justified, he suggests that justice consists of the course existence follows.
In "Poem on his birthday" he explores the very heart of the negation from which his affirmation springs. He has now turned his back upon the past, seeking no longer a refuge in childhood whose brief respite but redoubled the subsequent pain of realization. Instead he has set his face towards death and eternity. His negation of any personal present has become intensified, the affirmation likewise has grown more magnificent. There are places in the poem where he comes close to achieving the crucified ecstasy of Rilke's *Duiniser Elegien*, where "thought ceases to be merely thought and poetry is no longer merely poetry. 'Song, trying to prove the glory, and thought, determined to dispel the illusion, are adventurers in the same heroic saga.'" By a stupendous leap of the imagination, Thomas reaches virtually the same state of sublime tension. The present, he finds, is illusory, but he cannot deny it with the facility of the Middle Ages, when man, having rejected life, was able to enjoy it. He cannot attain personal happiness through the act of rejection; this only allows him to proclaim the marvellous persistence of life as a whole.

He is acutely conscious of his own 'ruin' and the odour of death lies upon the whole piece. It is the work of an artist strongly conscious that he is moving towards his end. But, the closer the body moves towards death, the louder the spirit exults; or, the sharper his sense of personal disaster the more brilliant shines the sun of life.

In the kingdom of death there is peace, in

... his *nimbus* bell cool kingdom come
And the lost moonshine domes...
This is the land of the "Our Father", where the prayer is fulfilled. It is also a place of recovery, where man regains the light lost through the ever recurring Fall.

At the close he sails out 'out to die', with complete acceptance of his fate. He now embraces his death as a deliverer from the exile and darkness of life. This is the utterance of a man who feels that he has nearly reached the end of his own resources.

Death has become the servant of the Divine, and man though composed of

Four elements and five Senses

is also 'a spirit in love', who recognizes his doom, but transcends it, with a spiritual splendour which could not exist without the awareness of his fate. The soul's transcendence of its mortal limitations charges its defeat into a victory. Man is here more than the sum of his circumstances; he is the tragic protagonist, bestriding the ruins of his own nature. How superbly the poet captures here the isolation and heroism of man no longer immured in Gothic certainties, no longer swaddled in collective unisons, nor sheltered by Finites and Absolutes; but instead, alone, naked, vulnerable, confused, doomed, yet refusing to be pulverized into nihilism. The midwife of such an affirmation is anguish, but its being is radiant.

"In the white giant's thigh" is the last of this group. It completes one aspect of the poet's spiritual evolution and its vision unites the past and future within an eternal present.

Stanford considers it "a superb erotic poem. . . . A
fantasy which tells the truth concerning man's perennial sex-hunger and woman's perennial need for children. . . . a resplendent and fitting drop-curtain to the poet's persistent saga of sex."

Setting aside the vulgarism 'saga of sex', let us consider these statements. The poem is certainly erotic, in places almost extravagantly sexual. Moreover, it undoubtedly does focus upon the persistence after death of the procreative appetites, which it changes without destroying them. The statement omits, however, any appreciation of the strange conjunction the poet effects between ghostly and physical love or instinctual urge.

Though dead, the women retain their sexual desires,

Pleading in the waded bay for the seed to flow
Though the names on their weed grown stones are rained away. . . .

"Waded bay" refers both to the lake of death through which the newly dead must pass and to the womb itself, once impregnated with the seed. The association of 'seed' with life and 'rain' with death attests their loss, for whereas the former once filled their bodies, now only the rain beats down upon stones. Seen from this standpoint, death becomes an infinite night of longing and regrets, where the spirit remains acutely conscious of physical needs which are deprived of the satisfaction they enjoyed in life. The soul remains, but its existence centres round its physical losses. It is therefore still emotionally bound to its flesh.

The second part of the poem resolves the riddle, moving from the sexuality of life to its transformation through death. In describing the first, the poet gives free rein to an unbridled celebration of abundant instinct, where he writes:
Or with their orchard man in the core of the sun's bush
Rough as cows' tongues and thrashed with brambles their buttermilk
Manes, under his quenchless summer barbed gold to the bone...

Body, landscape and season are admirably interlaced in a harmony, glowing with the sheer vitality of animal life. But the mood changes abruptly with

Now curlew cry me down to kiss the mouths of their dust. ... where, looking forward to death, the poet asks the curlew to sing his requiem and perhaps nuptial rites in the multiple consummation he envisages. He also begs the dead women may initiate him into the second kind of love in

Teach me the love that is evergreen after the fall leaved Grave. . . . implying a love, unknown to the living, which blossoms after death. The close of the poem reinforces this suggestion, with

. . . to these
Hale dead and deathless do the women of the hill
Love for ever meridian through the courters' trees

And the daughters of darkness flame like Fawkes fires still.

The reconciliation he effects is by now familiar: after the disintegration of death a reintegration occurs, by which the elements of life coalesce into a new pattern of existence.

Nonetheless, the piece is unsatisfactory, because the philosophical synthesis of the ending simply fails to convince the intellect that death can surpass life upon the latter's physical terms. Here death remains a night which does not banish the sweet recollection of life's summer, with its lusty, fertile exuberance. Granted that his attempt to discover a timeless fleshly and spiritual harmony represents a further stage in
his evolution, I feel the result is so vastly inferior to the
superb affirmation of the preceding poem as to disappoint the
reader. Though written before it, philosophically this piece
represents the ultimate point in the development of the poet's
vision, which in a muted close at last reconciles the body and
soul, life and death, time and eternity.

Three poems still remain to be discussed: "The Hunch­
back in the Park," "In my Craft or Sullen Art" and "Author's
Prologue". None belongs wholly within the groups examined so
far, but each seems to me sufficiently important in the poet's
total evolution to warrant its inclusion.

In common with many modern writers, Thomas expends
much love on the victims of birth and society, but, unlike some
of his contemporaries, he avoids the mistake of turning them
into symbols on which to drape archetypes. Instead, he paints
a very touching contrast between this man's physical deformity
and the beauty of his imagination, which creates 'from his
crooked bones' an ideal of surpassing loveliness. The essential
fact in his predicament is his total isolation, a loveless,
friendless existence, whose needs can only express themselves
through fantasy. At night he goes to bed

To his kennel in the dark.

But his spirit rises above the injuries and infirmities chance
has inflicted upon him. Stanford's assertion, the cripple "does
not stand up to things" strikes me as false. His physical de­
fects do not, I think, symbolize a spiritual spinelessness, since
the essence of the whole piece lies in the contrast between
the body's malformation and the beauty of this poor creature's spirit. His imagination is as beautiful as its projection! Like "The hand that signed the paper", it indicates a direction the poet did not take in his verse. Curiously, both pieces are favourites with anthologists, though the later at least, despite its admirable qualities, does not seem to me one of Thomas's most powerful works. Both are in a sense more conventional than most of his poems in their readily comprehensible outlines and their relative simplicity. Both, moreover, share not only thematic objectivity, but a high degree of self-detachment on the part of their creator. The piece considered above, however, shares with certain other later works a striking characteristic: the affirmative power of the imagination triumphing over the existential order. As in Keats, it seems charged with a divine immanence, a sanctity, a sacramental wonder.

"In my Craft or Sullen Art" manifests the poet's attitude towards his art and reveals his purpose in communication.

It defines his purpose mostly by exclusion, each verse concluding with a positive statement. In the first stanza he disclaims commerciality and exhibitionism and tells us he writes on behalf of the lovers,

... for the common wages
Of their most secret heart. ...

namely, for love. He proclaims himself as the lovers' voice, and therefore as the champion of the elemental and the universal: the unchanging human heart.

In the second stanza, he disclaims any interest in
addressing himself to the intellectual élite, the self-appointed high-priests of art and thus to all those who stand apart from their fellow-men and women, as detached observers in the wings of destiny. Nor does he write to outshine or emulate the great dead, as an imitator or vain aspirant to immortality,

But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art.

He is the force, then, that articulates the secret silences of mankind's heart. He speaks for and to those who can never hear him precisely because they are the mass of suffering, toiling humanity, but though their lives may be most dumb, they are also the most human. They enshrine the truths that time and fashion do not corrode or tarnish.

He emphasizes the paradoxical nature of his art; its aim is universality, but the more closely it approximates to this condition, the further removed it becomes from its audience, for the good reason that the most universal of all audiences is the least literate. But he means more: he implies that the object of his art is to rend the veils of the mystery of life, to give tongue to those great dumb depths which lie below and beyond language and form the eternal truths of existence.

The artist himself is isolated. Though he is the race's spokesman, his unique function marks him off from his fellow men and women. Though immensely revealing artistically, the piece is not entirely satisfying. It is a little too rhetorical; its disclaimers just a trifle grandiose.
Our analysis of the poet's development concludes with "Author's Prologue," a hymn to creation, where he asserts his communion with all other life, defining his relation to it in various ways; in terms of time (season), place (Wales) and nature (body and soul), both as man and artist. It is in a sense an apologia, a final statement:

At poor peace I sing
To you strangers (though song
Is a burning and crested act,
The fire of birds in
The world's turning wood
For my sawn, splay sounds) . . .

He here contrasts the state of the artist with the nature of song. He himself is poor in peace, but his art is a burning bird flaming out of the darkness of the world's wood in which he carves his language.

The act of poetic creation takes place in the temporal cycle, but transcends it. Poetry aspires to eternity, and stretches up towards the Divine. It sets the poet alight with the fire of deathless being and therefore constitutes a kind of salvation for him.

The driving force behind the inspiration is the tension that exists between man-as-artist, who stands for love, and the artist-as-man, who represents:

. . . the fountainhead
Of fear, rage red, manalive,
Molten and mountainous to stream
Over the wound asleep
Sheep white hollow farms

To Wales in my arms.

His human fear and rage are changed by art into love, which spreads across the land and extends its embrace to include the whole earth.
The first part of the poem describes the poet's world; in the second part he himself becomes integrated with the objects of his vision. As a result of this metamorphosis, the macrocosm and microcosm blend as he describes the twofold journey which, as man and artist, he undertakes:

My ark sings in the sun
At God speeded summer's end
And the flood flowers now.

Both the 'ark' and the 'flood' are multiple symbols, whose associative ranges are too self-evident to require comment. The world or human life may be seen as a flood through which the human ark floats to safety, for after the time of tribulation and wandering the sign of the rainbow shall be set upon the forehead of the sky.

We have seen that time and again the poet stresses that the solution is not **that** as opposed to **this**, but both. One act of transformation dissolves the contraries, resulting in the brief suspension of conflict, when past and present recede for one moment of eternity in a magical pause when the universe suddenly stands still in perfection.

Heller quotes Rilke's criticism of modern man:

... Aber Lebendige machen
all den Fehler, dass sie zu stark unterscheiden.

(First Elegy)²

He continues, "But this is an elegiac understatement of the real denunciation implicit in Rilke's mature work, which is that our traditional way of distinguishing is false throughout the whole range of our fundamental distinctions between transcendence and immanence, God and man, man and things, external
reality and inwardness, joy and suffering, communion of love and separation, life and death." Thomas too tried to obliterate the distinctions which make chaos of life's meaning and much of his obscurity resides in the strangely correlative character of his vision. We, who are so used to tabulations, are sometimes blind at integrating things.

We have attempted to record three main stages in the poet's evolution, in each of which he tried to attain that miraculous moment of peace, though he continually changed his world by altering its perspectives, moving first through the dark waters of the lower mind, emerging to light and to the darkness over the face of the earth and finding both terrible, and thence into the realm of magical transformation, which reconciles life with death.

Each period contains its own defects and limitations. A number of the poems fail to unify their matter; there are signs too that certain compulsive moods clamoured for reiteration; his exploration of sexual process is sometimes indiscriminate; the apocalyptic vision may become an almost automatic solution to the fear of life; and at times landscape seems used rather to evoke a mood than to concentrate one.

I think it is true that in Thomas the dynamic and expressive elements developed to the detriment of the artist's receptive capacity, resulting in an imbalance in the work. It appears he possessed immensely powerful inner resources, but was somewhat slow to absorb experience poetically. He exploits the former to the full, but rarely does he seem to have achieved
neutral receptivity. This is the weakness of the artist who can give out, but cannot well take in. It defines a certain kind of personality and art. It also explains the failure of certain pieces to integrate, since the result of a low degree of interaction between the dynamic and contemplative elements in composition tends to be uncoordinated violence. Eliot embodies the opposite extreme: too strong a reliance on his receptive capacity at the expense of dynamism, accounting for a lack of vitality, growing continually more palpable. Whereas he inclines to murmur, Thomas tends to shout.
CHAPTER IV

PART 2

Though by far the least maculated, the style of the last period is not entirely unblemished. It contains some unsurmounted defects and in places adds some new ones. In order to conclude my discussion of the poet's style, I wish to examine a number of conflicting statements which seem to me crucial.

Marjorie Adix quotes from a conference held by Dylan Thomas with students at the University of Utah, in the course of which he was asked if it was ever fair deliberately to confuse the reader. This is what he answered:

I thought someone would take me up on that.
No - it is a deliberate avowal of your own inefficiency. It is impossible to be too clear... At first I thought it enough to leave an impression of sound and feeling and let the meaning seep in later, but since I've been giving these broadcasts and reading other men's poetry as well as my own, I find it better to have more meaning at first reading.

Myself, I do not think this adequately explains the changes the later poetry reflects. Public recital and broadcasts may have encouraged the poet to aim at clarity, but unless they had fostered an impulse already present within him, I doubt if they would have influenced him so strongly.

I reject Olson's claim that his "obscurity ... is a device; and one obvious use of it is to force the reader to give a poem the close attention it requires." To suppose a poet would employ obscurity simply to exact the maximum concentration from the reader is to isolate the obscurity from the poetry,
as if, had he wished, the author might well have expressed the whole thing in readily comprehensible language. But the result would not have been the same poem in another form, but an entirely different work. The only justification of obscurity is that it is necessary to the composition.

There are two main causes, in my opinion, for Thomas's obscurity; first, the real peculiarity of his vision and concomitantly its expression, and second, his failure in a number of the poems to impose order upon chaos. There are places, as in "Now", where he resorts to obfuscation, but this is not the result of attempting to manipulate the reader's response, simply a woeful absence of an inspirational nucleus. Most certainly, he is inefficient when he lapses into a limbo of half-creation.

Corman maintains he runs the risk of "a fixed rhetorical saying;"^82 Gibson complains that "the craftsmanship is merely concerned to revolve on its own axis;"^83 Merwin that "the style of these earlier poems is often egregious and turgid - a thing is said with devious novelty merely to avoid saying it in any other way; as though the words came first and the subject as it could;"^84 Olson, in contrast, claims "In the last period terseness is supplanted by verbosity. . . . Despite the enchanting imagery, one has the feeling that eloquence is something strained. The early work had presented a multiplicity of ideas and emotions in a very small compass; the last poems stretch a single thought or emotion to its utmost limits, and perhaps beyond. Curiously enough, he never achieves lucidity; the obscurity wrought by his early terseness slips into the obscurity wrought by his final verbosity."^85 In one respect Horan and
Savage are at one with Olson. The former observes: "His manner has been increasingly, not towards simplicity... but towards concentration, which is the subtler and more meaningful choice;" the latter that his development "takes the form of an accession of intensity... an introversion and not an expansion." Shapiro remarks that "Thomas did everything in his power to obscure the dialect of the tribe... He had a horror of simplicity - or what I consider to be a fear of it." He also charges the poet with resorting "to riddle, the opposite of metaphor." Porteus, however, goes further, saying he "invented an idiom, consisting of a few tricks of verbal and metaphorical violence."

Here, then, are various views, some of which are irreconcilable. Let us attempt to answer them so far as space permits. We can dismiss the charge that his craftsmanship revolves on its own axis, since we should hardly wish it to do so on someone else's. That he did not become verbose is less easily shown, but I think we can refute the pejorative element in the charge that in the later poetry he carries a single notion to its utmost or beyond, by pointing out that this is precisely wherein its strength lies; unlike much of the early work, which teems with chaotic life, most of the later achieves a congruous variety. It certainly did not become introverted, however, for we are never more aware of the manifold abundance of life than in the poet's last period. That he never became simple is not, properly speaking, as derogatory a statement as Shapiro intends it, since there have been many extremely great poets who never shook off complexity, though they may have become increasingly lucid:
Shakespeare is one and Donne another who never became precisely simple. Herrick and Houseman are both simple poets, but neither is the equal of the tortuous, complex Donne.

I view Thomas's development as a gradual conversion from a Dionysiac rage and frenzy, in which he gave free rein to disordered perception and distorted perspectives, to a more Apolline vision, of light and repose and contemplation. Both are to some degree evident at each stage of his development, but the total pattern reveals a voyage through the irrational, extra-conscious, uncreated, decreated, half-created, the disintegrating forces in our being clamouring for utterance, towards the reasonable, the supernatural, the re-created, and the miraculous and softening power of love. Thus, if each period shows certain defects, each also possesses certain especial excellences. If this is true of the matter, it is equally true of the style.

Light and clarity are strongest perhaps in the pastoral poems, certain elegies and in "A Winter's Tale," in some ways the most accomplished and tender piece he ever wrote. Take, for instance, the first two stanzas:

It is a winter's tale
That the snow blind twilight ferries over the lakes
And floating fields from the farm in the cup of the vales,
Gliding windless through the hand folded flakes
The pale breath of cattle at the stealthy sail,

And the stars falling cold,
And the smell of hay in the snow, and the far owl
Warning among the folds, and the frozen hold
Flocked with the sheep white smoke of the farm house cowl
In the river wended vales where the tale was told.

These lines are almost perfect. Their continuity is both leisurely
and emphatic, as if the poet were inviting us to settle down comfortably and simply enjoy ourselves. The rhythm and mood are confident and relaxed, bespeaking the assurance of the 'master-singer'. There is, moreover, a curious stillness, a resonant silence behind the words, so that we almost seem to hear the silence of snowfall.

In richness and repose, the poem recalls "The Eve of St. Agnes," but I should hesitate to say the former is quite the latter's equal. By comparison, it is a trifle splayed, less brilliantly defined and not as intense. Nonetheless, it is a marvellous poem.

There are places where volatility comes to the rescue of a tenuous substance, as in

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
And playing, lovely and watery
And fire green as grass. . . .

which is admittedly fulsome. The reiteration of 'lovely' I find particularly disturbing, since it reveals a reliance on vague gesticulation, instead of attaining the weight and resonance of good poetry.

I doubt if he ever achieved the infinitely flexible neutrality, which I take to be the ultimate mastery of style, and his work remained somewhat erratic. Furthermore, the eccentricities which begin by delighting become tedious, for, if bizarrrerie never fails to capture the eye or ear, it can hardly hope to retain them. But these are faults which exist chiefly as tendencies in the work; they do not predominate in the bulk of it.
At the other extreme stands a poet such as Graves; who is full of stone-cold sobriety and sparse deliberation. Auden and Empson can both, especially the latter, be at times coldly clever. All three represent the very antithesis of the faults we can discover in Thomas. He used violence to blast the language out of its emotional torpor; in doing so, he enriched it immeasurably, but, like Hopkins, he has left no useful precedents, for he is not simply dangerous, but quite fatal as a model. If we wish to study his defects, we can see them best exemplified in the work of his imitators, but for his qualities, which are many and great, we need but look into our hearts, for it is to the human heart that above all he writes.
A final evaluation of a poet's living works is perhaps a contradiction in terms. If the poetry be alive, then nothing we say can be final, since there will remain more and yet more to be expressed of it. Nonetheless, though nothing we say of good poetry should ever attempt to be definitive, time has a way of forming some kind of a pantheon, leading us to affirm there is more to be experienced and more therefore to be said of one poet than another. In this way we are able to reach certain conclusions, such as the obvious truth Shakespeare is a greater poet than T.S. Eliot. There is no object in trying to arrange poets in order of merit, as if we were compiling an honours' examination class list, but it is sometimes useful to examine why we regard, say, Webster as a greater dramatist than Tourneur. Some of us may not, but, since the general consensus of critical opinion over a long period of time has preferred the former, if we reject this view, the onus of proof rests upon us. There are still critics and scholars who deplore certain great masterpieces. I have even heard of a Classical scholar refusing to teach the Iliad on the grounds it is merely a butcher's shop. To most, however, it is one of the greatest poems in the world. As for Milton, it seems likely he will remain a critical battlefield for the rest of time - if he lasts.

Thomas's reputation is still very much in the melting-pot. Critics disagree not only about the quality of his work as
a whole, but differ sharply in their estimates of the relative value of each stage of his evolution.

I have made clear my belief that the later work is the most passionate, the most profound and the most moving, and detect only here and there the shadow of sterility.

He has been called a neo-romantic, a demi-surrealist, a disciple of Hopkins and many other things. Francis Scarfe remarks, "The dominant points of contact seem to be James Joyce, the Bible and Freud;"91 to Shapiro he is predominantly Freudian, to Merwin, religious. If the truth be told, he is surely not simply this or that, but many things. Sometimes surrealistic, sometimes Freudian, sometimes romantic, sometimes metaphysical, sometimes pantheistic, sometimes Biblical and sometimes Jacobean, whatever he is, he remains always himself. In common with many other writers, he laid the onus of exploration on his own personality. Perhaps he did not consciously choose to do so, but then in this age I doubt if the powerful recreation of a world of collective certainty is possible.

Derek Stanford likens him to Gray, but, I think, quite wrongly. From first to last Gray remained an occasional poet and very rarely rose above accomplished competence. His innate temperamental bias, furthermore, precluded him from any real development. Thomas evolved enormously and his work reveals a much greater emotional and intellectual range than we find in the other's works. Furthermore, as an artist, the melancholy, sombrely wistful Gray could hardly be less like the tempestuous, volatile Thomas.
Treece thinks Hart Crane influenced the poet, though personally I doubt it. Certain resemblances may exist between them, but Crane seems to me as a whole infinitely further removed from the world than Thomas and very rarely does he achieve that active concentration which in the latter is so frequently present.

Most would deny him the stature of Eliot and Frost. It is commonly said that his work lacks the objective magnitude and intellectual depth of theirs. The statement looks correct and yet, if we examine the works of the first two, I wonder how much we shall find that is great: places in Eliot, a few pieces of Frost, but surely not a great deal more. At their best, they do attain a poised and sagacious maturity which Thomas did not. I am prepared to concede them the laurel, but not by so very much.

He remains an isolated figure in relation to his age, in which respect he resembles both Blake and Hopkins. As the former's his poetry seems anti-academic; like the latter, he husbanded his sources to an almost dangerous degree and in common with both his work reveals a furiously active libido.

There are degrees in greatness and I should not rank Thomas with the highest, but I believe that he has left no mean number of poems that could justly be described as great and that in his development from the darkness of the lower mind's depths to a vision of consummate repose, he has left a complete and satisfying record of one man's entire spiritual evolution.
FOOTNOTES


5. Stanford, p. 38.


8. Olson, p. 91.

9. Stanford, p. 44.

10. Olson, p. 92.

11. See footnote No. 3.


13. Treece, pp. 72-84.


17. Stanford, p. 147. Quoted from a letter by Dylan Thomas to Treece.

Footnotes

19. Treece, Quoted from a letter by Dylan Thomas to Treece, pp. 47-48.
22. Olson, p. 5.
23. Ibid, p. 11.
24. Olson, p. 5.
29. Stanford, p. 65.
30. Ibid, p. 69.
32. Olson, p. 99.
33. See footnote No. 19.
34. Stanford, p. 69.
35. Treece, p. 85.
38. Olson, p. 64.
Footnotes

40. Olson, pp. 84-85.
41. Ibid, p. 86.
42. Treece, p. 149.
43. Stanford, p. 82.
44. Geoffrey Moore, Dylan Thomas, ed. Tedlock, p. 250.
46. Ibid, p. 165. Quoted from Dylan Thomas.
47. Ibid, p. 165.
50. Ibid, p. 274.
51. Stanford, p. 93.
53. Stanford, p. 94.
55. Stanford, p. 120.
59. Merwin, ed. Tedlock, p. 244.
64. Treece, p. 114.
65. Stanford, p. 139.
Footnotes

66. Treece, p. 119.
67. Stanford, p. 106.
69. Savage, ed. Tedlock, p. 146.
70. Treece, p. 127.
71. Stanford, p. 130.
74. Olson, pp. 57-58.
75. Heller, p. 155.
76. Stanford, pp. 142-143.
78. Heller, op. cit. p. 130.
81. Olson, p. 47.
84. Merwin, ed. Tedlock, p. 240.
85. Olson, p. 21.
86. Horan, ed. Tedlock, p. 139.
87. Savage, ed. Tedlock, p. 146.
88. Shapiro, ed. Tedlock, p. 274.
91. Scarfe, ed. Tedlock, p. 96.

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