

THE INFLUENCE OF WILLIAM BLAKE ON THE POETRY AND PROSE OF DYLAN THOMAS

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the nature and extent of Dylan Thomas's artistic debt to William Blake. "Chapter I" of our study documents Thomas's professional interest in Blake, offering evidence that Thomas read Blake extensively and carefully. Further, evidence is presented of Thomas's admiration of Blake as a poet and his stated desire to emulate him.

"Chapter II" traces Thomas's direct borrowings from Blake in his 18 Poems as well as in a short story. Because Northrop Frye's idea of the importance of and significance of literary borrowing and literary allusion dictates the direction of much of our argument, our discussion attempts to show the significance of Thomas's borrowings; the implication is that Thomas's imagination shared certain archetypal similarities to that of Blake's. The method of investigation used throughout the thesis, then, has involved a detailed examination of the poems of both poets with the purpose in mind of indicating, where possible, the archetypal significance of the borrowing.

"Chapter III" attempts to establish Thomas's direct debt to Blake for many of his images and concepts in his "Altarwise by Owl-Light" sonnet sequence. Our implication is that Thomas was directly influenced in writing the sequence by his knowledge

of Blake's epics Vala and Milton. Evidence is presented, in fact, that Thomas borrowed certain of the images for his sonnets from Blake's epics.

The preoccupation of both Blake and Thomas with the sinister female will aspect of love in marriage is investigated in "Chapter IV"; our argument implies that Blake derived much of his attitude toward married love from Milton, and through both Milton and Blake, Thomas inherited a somewhat similar attitude. At all times, however, our chief concern is with the poetry resulting from these underlying tensions.

There emerges from our study evidence of a striking similarity in artistic vision between Blake and Thomas. Our tracing of literary archetypes (in Northrop Frye's definition) and analogues in the poems leads to the conclusion that Thomas saw the universe from a somewhat similar point of view to that of Blake. "Chapter V" compares Blake's Jerusalem with Thomas's last poems to establish a correspondence of achieved vision. The comparison is validated, and our argument proceeds to show that, while Thomas was attempting to move in a similar visionary direction to Blake in terms of art, Blake far outstripped the Welsh poet from the point of view of achieved total vision expressed through poetry.

Our conclusion follows that, while Thomas, throughout his artistic career, was influenced by Blake and borrowed from him, he found himself at a creative impasse out of which he attempted to work by turning to voice drama in the form of a dramatic and highly imaginative documentary called Under Milk Wood, and even this, his last work, is in some ways reminiscent of Blake's influence.



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## CHAPTER ONE-INTRODUCTION

Writers very often acquire what might be called a literary conscience or, better still, a type of literary guardian angel; a great writer from the past becomes a type of alter-ego that the present writer can look back to and even confer with. The earlier writer becomes the present writer's source of inspiration and "ideal". Boethius might be considered the literary conscience of Chaucer just as Virgil was for Dante and, in a sense, Keats was for F. Scott Fitzgerald. None of these examples is so famous as Blake's admiration of Milton and his use of Milton as a direct source of artistic inspiration (we will, in fact, refer again to this influence of Milton on Blake later in our discussion). Dylan Thomas, too, like the great writers mentioned above, also had his 'source' of inspiration and his 'ideal poet'. Thomas's literary 'guardian angel' was William Blake. Professor W. T. Moynihan, discussing Thomas's reading habits, makes this observation about the young Thomas:

In a letter to P.H.J. begun Christmas Day, 1933, Thomas makes these observations about his reading habits and the books available to him. He had received these as presents: Blake's complete works, the Koran, a 1923-33 anthology of poems by Mrs. Munro, and two pamphlets by James Joyce.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W. T. Moynihan, The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 16.

Later, in the same chapter of his book, still discussing the formative forces on Thomas, Professor Moynihan makes some comments that must be included here as they have a direct bearing on our discussion. Moynihan writes,

When one looks back from the vantage point of the complete work, Blake's influence looms large in Thomas's attempt to find fresh symbols for the old forms of Chapel and country. Although many of Thomas's ideas and attitudes--from anagrams to mysticism--could have been influenced by any number of poets, only Blake could have provided models for so many of Thomas's interests. It is Blake's name alone and Blake's words that one finds in the crucial formative years. ...Thomas evidently read Blake off and on throughout his youth and young manhood. In 1951 he could recall Blake as an "incomparable and inimitable" master. One of the first things he wrote to Pamela Hansford Johnson twenty years earlier was: I am in the path of Blake, but so far behind him that only the wings of his heels are in sight. Ruthven Todd supplies the rather unexpected information that Thomas not only read Blake deeply and intelligently, but that he also read S. Foster Damon's superb study of Blake's ideas and symbols.<sup>2</sup>

It is our task, in part at least, to trace the debt of Thomas to Blake and to suggest the extent of the influence. Our argument is, in fact, that Blake was the major influence (with the exception of the Bible) on the formation of Thomas's view of the world. Our problem, then, is to compare one poet with another and to suggest the extent of the influence of the earlier poet on the later.

To compare one poet with another and claim that the work of the earlier poet influenced the work of the later poet is to become involved in a task riddled with the self-evident, the

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<sup>2</sup> Moynihan, p. 33.

factitious and/or the unprovable. The devil's advocate might argue that all English poets have a great deal in common: they all are limited by the same language or nearly so; they all draw from many common sources (Ovid, Plato, Aristotle, The Bible, etc.). Indeed, in many cases their minds work in similar patterns and images so that, for example, we may trace the rose as a symbol of female human love from Jean de Meun through Yeats and beyond. An aspect of our argument will in fact be that the human mind seems to work in what Professor N. Frye terms archetypes.

A question closely related to our study is the question as to why one poet uses or draws from the work of another poet and what the later poet does with the material that he does borrow. How does he adapt and change the borrowed material and to what purpose? In answer to the question as to why one poet borrows from another, Mr. J. Isaacs, discussing the borrowings and literary allusions of T. S. Eliot, remarks:

The chief device which Mr. Eliot has taught modern poets, and which has become the standard device of modern poetry, is the method of incorporating a line from some other poet, or some other language, deftly converted, deftly conveyed, its license-plates so altered that its own proprietor would hardly recognize it. It is a device used not for mere decoration, or even wit, but to produce reverberations of meaning and above all of feeling.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Isaacs then uses Edith Sitwell's "Still Falls the Rain" in which she incorporated a line from Marlowe's Faustus to illustrate his point. And Marlowe in turn, Mr. Isaacs points out,

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<sup>3</sup> J. Isaacs, The Background of Modern Poetry, (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1952), p. 64.

incorporates a line from Ovid to reinforce and accentuate the feeling he is trying to express. Eliot, of course, was the master at this sort of thing; and while our discussion does not mean to suggest that Thomas indulged in borrowing to anywhere near the same extent (the fact is he did not), it does help to answer the question as to why one poet uses the work of another.

Northrop Frye, discussing the archetypal nature of symbols in literature, has this to say about literary borrowing:

Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels. Literature shapes itself, and is not shaped externally: the forms of literature can no more exist outside literature than the forms of sonnet and fugue and rondo can exist outside music. <sup>4</sup>

He then adds:

But any serious study of literature soon shows that the real difference between the original and the imitative poet is simply that the former is more profoundly imitative...The remark of Mr. Eliot that a good poet is more likely to steal than to imitate affords a more balanced view of convention, as it indicates that the poem is specifically involved with other poems, not vaguely with such abstractions as tradition or style. <sup>5</sup>

And finally on this point he remarks:

We can get a whole liberal education simply by picking up one conventional poem and following its archetypes as they stretch out into the rest of literature. <sup>6</sup>

What Professor Frye means by these statements may be debated. One might suggest that literature is shaped, at least in part, by external forces such as environment and the experience the

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<sup>4</sup> N. Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U. Press, 1957), p. 97.  
<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 98.  
<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

author wishes to convey. A favorite comment of contemporary poets is that the experience dictates the form. What these poets mean when they make this statement is, in our opinion, that their basic unit of construction, the linguistic phrase, varies according to the type of experience that is being recorded in the poem. In the genre of the novel, we cannot deny that the difference between Middlemarch and Desolation Angels is as much a part of external experience as any other factor. What Professor Frye means, then, is that all poets are limited to the medium itself and the most complex use of and most disciplined example of language is in literature, so that in the sense that no literature can go beyond language we agree that literature comes from literature; poems must grow out of other poems. This point, as we shall see, is as true of Thomas as it is of Eliot. Thomas, in fact is extremely archetypal in his imagery.

T. S. Eliot's well known remarks in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" might appropriately be recalled at this point as having a bearing on our argument. Writing of what he means by a poet being aware of his tradition, Eliot states:

...that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," The American Tradition in Literature, ed. Bradley, Beatty and Long (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1956), p. 1168.

And then Eliot adds:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists...The existing monuments (of art) form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the super-vention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered...<sup>8</sup>

Following Eliot's suggestions, then, we might argue that we are really examining Thomas's historical sense, his sense of "the timeless and temporal" in art. This sense of the timeless in art as Eliot means it is something quite unconscious on the part of the poet. This sense is simply part of being a great artist, it would seem. Blake's heavy debt to the Bible and Milton is an illustration of the same point.

The combining of the temporal and the timeless in art sets up a type of tension within the work which adds to its artistic quality. It has often been remarked of Thomas's poetry that when it was first published there was nothing else like it in English. Yet, as we will see, Thomas combines much of what is traditional in art; the most obvious example would be his many Biblical references. So to bear out Eliot's remarks, our argument suggests that the most contemporary of poets (when first published) is also traditional in Eliot's meaning of being gifted with an "historical sense". To grasp Thomas's complete meaning we must see him, as Mr. Eliot suggests, in relation to dead poets and artists.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 1168.

The final purpose of this study might be said to be an examination of how Thomas has assimilated his cultural heritage and ours, how his individual talent fits into the tradition in which he found himself. Part of assimilating one's tradition is the borrowing of ideas, symbols, attitudes and even lines themselves from earlier great poets within the same tradition. Blake's debt to Milton has been well documented<sup>9</sup> by Mr. Saurat and we, in turn, want to indicate something of Thomas's debt to Blake and through Blake to Milton as well.

A factor to be kept in mind at this point in our discussion is the concept of the archetype in literature. Professor Frye's definition of a literary archetype is useful here: "A symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole."<sup>10</sup> Or we might dwell on the first few lines of Miss Bodkin's book for a moment. She begins with the following comment:

Dr. C. G. Jung has set forth an hypothesis in regard to the psychological significance of poetry. The special emotional significance possessed by certain poems- a significance going beyond any definite meaning conveyed- he attributes to the stirring in the reader's mind, within or beneath his conscious response, of unconscious forces which he terms "primordial images" or archetypes. These archetypes he describes as "psychic residue" of numberless experiences of the same types", experiences which have happened not to the individual but to his ancestors, and of which the results are inherited in the structure of the brain, a priori determinants of individual experience."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>D. Saurat, Blake and Milton, (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1932), p. 113.

<sup>10</sup>Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U. Press, 1957), p. 365.

<sup>11</sup>M. Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 1.



Professor Frye's definition tells us what an archetype is while Miss Bodkin's remarks serve to explain why archetypal patterns occur at all. The significance for us is that Thomas's similarities to Blake are often archetypal and may not be always classed as borrowing or direct influence. We are aware at this point that the reason Thomas read and admired Blake and often sounds Blakean in his poetry may be because he was born with a Blakean view of the world and so was attracted to Blake. The "psychic residua" of both men may have been similar from the beginning. These points do not invalidate any such study as ours however because any archetypal connections between works of art simply add to the associative richness of all of art. So that if we point out the associations between Milton, Blake, and Thomas, or if we happen to see these similar patterns of image or notice the similar world view then we, the readers, are richer and better rewarded for the experience.

The task of 'proving' that an earlier poet influenced a later one must begin with evidence that the later poet actually borrowed from the works of the earlier poet. This evidence coupled with the admission on the part of the later poet that he was influenced by the earlier poet should serve as the beginning for a comparative study such as this. Even before we begin to document direct borrowing on Thomas's part from Blake, Moynihan, in his quoted comments in this chapter discussing Thomas's debt to Blake, gives us evidence of Blake's influence on Thomas.

While both poets are generally considered 'difficult', Blake presents more formidable initial difficulties because of

the kind of vision he had. A short digression which discusses something of the nature of Blake's visionary approach to reality will provide<sup>a</sup> useful basis for the argument which follows.

Because the discussion which follows requires some knowledge of Blake's mythic terminology and visionary concept of the world, it should be helpful at this point to offer some explanation of Blake's terms. The reader not wholly familiar with Blakean terminology may be somewhat confused when we attempt to explain Thomas's attitudes in Blakean terms. For this reason, then, what follows, however over-simplified and distorted, is an explanation of our understanding of the Blakean terms used in this discussion. In the remarks that follow, our debt to Foster Damon and Northrop Frye cannot be overestimated.

Blake's myth, in our understanding, is really his attempt to visualize and dramatize his ideas about human psychology. Blake, instead of explaining what he meant, chose to project his ideas about the nature of man in physical terms so that his ideas become characters in a huge cosmic drama that the reader may become involved in dramatically.

Blake's myth begins with the Fall and ends with the Apocalypse; the result of the fall was that man was divided into warring aspects of his former unified self. Man in Eternity was a harmoniously balanced unity of all aspects of himself, but the Fall resulted in the appearance of four 'characters' called Urthona, Luvah, Urizen and Tharmas, who, according to Damon, represent in that order the spirit, the emotions, the reason and the body or senses. Further divisions often follow

when, for example, Urthona (the spirit) divides into Los and Enitharmon. Los, a very important figure throughout Blake's works, represents poetry or the creative principle while Enitharmon represents the inspiration necessary to the artist. The Enitharmon aspect of Los, Blake calls Los's Emanation whom Los wishes to be united with to make him whole and as a consequence productive. When Los is divided from Enitharmon, which means when the artist lacks inspiration, Los constantly pursues Enitharmon, his Emanation, in a desire to be united with her, and Blake describes this union in sexual terms.

The first character involved in our discussion is Urizen. While our discussion clearly enough implies what Urizen represents, we might add that he is man's Reason who attempts to dominate all the other senses and emotions, so the reader associates him with tyrannical rules, laws, thou-shalt-nots, control and restriction. Urizen, then, opposes the imaginative freedom necessary to produce great art; Urizenic imagery involves snow, ice, rocks, barren spaces, things blighted and frozen. Much of the struggle in Blake's myth naturally centers around Los and Urizen.

Orc should be mentioned as well, for he is the son of Los and Enitharmon, and his role is that of the fiery boy full of revolution and revolt. The reader can see how Thomas, like many, many artists, can be said to have passed through his Orc stage into his Los stage of existence.

Another term used in our discussion is Albion. Albion is the white giant figure which, as Frye points out, has a long history

in literature and myth. Albion is the fallen form of eternal man, the earth, who in eternity holds all creation in his giant form. Man was and, Blake argues, will again be the whole of everything. Albion, of course, is also the name for England; Blake saw fallen man, like the island of England, surrounded by a sea of time and space. Thomas uses this same concept in his last poem in Collected Poems, while at the end of Jerusalem, Albion, united with all the divided aspects of man, rises into Eternity. Another term associated with the risen Albion that Blake uses is Golgonooza. As Frye explains,

All imaginative and creative acts, being eternal, go to build up a permanent structure, which Blake calls Golgonooza, above time, and, when this structure is finished, nature, its scaffolding, will be knocked away and man will live in it. Golgonooza will then be the city of God, the New Jerusalem which is the total form of all human culture and civilization.<sup>12</sup>

Golgonooza, New Jerusalem, may be seen as the ultimate goal of the artist.

Certain other Blakean terms should be mentioned here. Blake often refers to Spectre and Selfhood; these concepts seem to be forces and/or ideas which are hostile to the individual and which, if allowed to dominate the individual, will lead to misery, if not total destruction. Related to man's Selfhood is another concept Blake calls Error. Error is the result of viewing something in the wrong manner. This is possible because the earth and everything on it is covered with a shadow which Blake calls The Mundane Shell. This shell protects man, but it also results in error. This concept of a surface or veil

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<sup>12</sup> N. Frye, Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1947), p. 91.

which must be broken through occurs in Thomas's poems also and so is important for this reason.

Our discussion of the marriage poems of Thomas involve us in Blake's attitudes to sex and married love. (I think these attitudes are explained fully there without my mentioning them here.) An additional complication to Blake's myth is his idea of the four states of existence which these 'characters' that we have mentioned may enter. The four states in a descending order are: Eden (completely unified vision), Beulah (triple vision), Generation (double vision) and Ulro (single vision). Our discussion is mainly concerned with the Beulah state of existence and the state called Generation. When a 'character' leaves Eternity (Eden) because of lack of harmony he descends (the descent is seen as a type of death) into Beulah, which Blake describes as the moony existence of married love; for the eternal it is a fall, but for the 'character' in Generation, which is the state of existence in this world of work and care and pain, entrance into Beulah is a step toward Eden or Eternity. Ulro is the state of pure matter, a dead world of petrified forms, rocks, metal and disembodied spirits.

Thomas's struggle as a man and artist can be seen as an attempt to move from a world of Generation through Beulah into Eternity. With an apology to Blake for a gross oversimplification of his myth, we hope that the comments above will aid the unfamiliar reader to make his way through our discussion.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EVIDENCES OF BLAKE IN THOMAS'S 18 POEMS

Blake and Thomas share a number of superficial points. Both poets came from the lower middle class in a class-conscious society<sup>13</sup>. Both poets were in a large measure self-educated<sup>14</sup> and both poets were rejected by the Establishment. Furthermore, the work of both poets is considered to be difficult and obscure; both began writing poetry very early in their lives; both were preoccupied with early childhood. Moynihan, in fact, points out that Thomas wrote many imitations of Blake's Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience<sup>15</sup> in his early note books.

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<sup>13</sup>C. FitzGibbon, The Life of Dylan Thomas, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1965), p. 7. FitzGibbon explains that "the poets and preachers came, in general, from the shopkeeper or small farmer class, the class in fact from which Dylan Thomas was sprung, but there was no reason other than the basic educational one why a man from the humblest background should not gain local or even national fame through his talents as orator or bard."

<sup>14</sup>FitzGibbon, writing of Dylan Thomas's education remarks, "On the other hand, and in part because of his defective education and consequently somewhat restricted view of the world, certain English academics...have denied that he was an original and important poet at all, though he certainly was."

<sup>15</sup>Moynihan, p. 33.

On August 1, 1967, I had the opportunity to visit the Lockwood Memorial Library in Buffalo, New York, where Thomas's notebooks are housed. Although I had only a short time in which to examine the books, the librarian was kind enough to make them available to me.

I found that the first notebook, dated 1930, does contain poems that appear to be Blakean imitations. Poem number 11 in the notebook begins,

"The shepherd blew upon his reed  
A strange fragility of notes..."

Both Blake and Thomas have reputations as great lyric poets, and both Blake and Thomas are known as Romantic in a sense that requires some comment. While the term Romantic may mean nothing more than the investing of every day things with wonder and strangeness, it can be defined in many ways. C. M. Bowra in his study explains that the chief distinguishing feature of the Romantic poets as compared to the Eighteenth Century poets was the way in which they used their imagination<sup>16</sup>, and certainly Blake and Thomas, as we will see, share many similar imaginative qualities. It is the emphasis on THE IMAGINATION as opposed to THE REASON that chiefly distinguishes the romantic poet. For Blake and for Thomas THE IMAGINATION included all of one's faculties of perception and it was through the imagination that the artist reached out and ordered the world around him. It implies as well a trust in the senses and the romantic must carry

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The opening lines here seem a clear echo of the introductory lyric to Blake's Songs of Innocence. "Poem 11" is then carefully crossed out with pencil.

"Poem 12", again methodically scribbled out but dated June 17, 1930, is titled "The Shepherd to His Lass". Certainly these early imitations of conventional pastoral lyrics could show the influence of many poets, but in the light of our knowledge of Thomas's interest in Blake, it is at least reasonable to see them as the result of Blakean influences.

I did manage to examine some of Thomas's other early experiments in poems which resulted in certain interesting lines and couplets: as early as age 16 Thomas writes, "The actions of love are stale," indicating a rather early world-weariness! Then a rather plaintive couplet appears in "Poem 14" which states

"We are too beautiful to die;  
All our life is bound to the green trees."

Somehow these lines foreshadow the poignancy of "Fern Hill", for example. Poem 39 states "I, poor romantic, held her heel/ Upon the island of my palm." Even these meagre lines show the young Thomas with a rather precocious talent and indicate, however faintly, the pose he will adopt in years to come.

<sup>16</sup>C. M. Bowra, The Romantic Imagination, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 1.

with him a concept of the ideal as a state of existence. For Blake the world of the Ideal and the world of the Imagination become one, as we will show that they do for Thomas. For the Romantic the human imagination takes an active part in perceiving and dealing with the external world. As Blake says in A Vision of the Last Judgement,

This world of Imagination is the world of Eternity; it is the divine bosom into which we shall go after the death of the Vegetated body. This world of Imagination is Infinite and Eternal, whereas the world of Generation or Vegetation, is Finite and Temporal. There exist in that Eternal World the permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature. All things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the divine body of the Savior, the True Vine of Eternity, The Human Imagination."

Certainly for Thomas as well, the "True Vine of Eternity" was his very human imagination.

While we have been pointing out the many similarities between the two poets, we must concede immediately that both poets share, perhaps, as many differences, but as we are primarily concerned with the similarities, the differences will be given considerably less emphasis. Our real purpose here is to compare two visionary poets, for both Blake and Thomas were visionary poets who saw life and nature in somewhat similar terms. During this comparison we want to examine the nature of each poet's vision, as well as the degree of completeness of the vision; we must as well consider the method that each poet used to express his vision in his poetry, for method cannot be separated from the content of the poetry itself.

We can safely begin with the assumption that both Blake and Thomas were visionary poets seeking a total view of the universe



through which man could be fitted into the total process of nature. Professor Frye's distinction between the visionary and the mystic is worth noting at this point because both Thomas and Blake have been called mystics. Professor Frye writes:

...mysticism...is a form of spiritual communion with God which by its nature is incommunicable to anyone else, and which soars beyond faith into direct apprehension. But to the artist, qua artist, this apprehension is not an end in itself but a means to another end, the end of producing his poem. The mystical experience for him is poetic material, not poetic form, and must be subordinated to the demands of that form.

A visionary creates, or dwells in, a higher spiritual world in which the objects of perception in this one have become transfigured and charged with a new intensity of symbolism. This is quite consistent with art, because it never relinquishes the visualization which no artist can do without.<sup>17</sup>

Both Thomas and Blake, particularly in their later poetry, exhibited this visionary quality of perception. Again and again in their poetry the objects of perception have become transfigured into symbols glowing with a divine aura, and as Professor Frye has pointed out, this visionary experience is material for poetry.

Many critics, in fact, have noticed a process of increasing intensity of vision in both Blake and Thomas as their poetry matures. Mr. Munro writes in his thesis on Thomas,

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. By process is here meant the machinations of conception, embryonic growth, development and formation into the adult capable of seeing a vision.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup>C. Munro, *Existentialist Void and Divine Image*, Thesis, U. B. C., April, 1962, p. 3.

Although Mr. Munro makes no mention of Blake, he well might have pointed out that Thomas's concept of the Divine Image could have been taken straight from Vala. "Night the Second" gives us the following lines: "For the Divine Lamb, Even Jesus who is the Divine Vision,/ Permitted all, lest Man should fall into Eternal Death;"/: while Blake's vision was more completely worked out than Thomas's, their artistic purpose was similar. This similarity in purpose and world view in fact can often be seen in the manner in which both poets handle their images.

The type of imagery used by Blake in "The Book of Urizen" - such things as "vast clouds of blood rolling down the rocks of Urizen" - might be compared to much of the imagery in Thomas's early poems. The last few lines from Thomas's "In the Beginning" are very Blakean in imagery: Thomas writes "Before the veins were shaking in their sieve,/ Blood shot and scattered to the winds of light/ The ribbed original of love." This use of blood imagery and anatomical imagery is persistent in both poets. Both poets tend to see the world and its various aspects in human form or forms, so that Blake and Thomas describe the genesis of the external world in terms of the creation of a human body; for both poets as well, the external world in its fallen form is seen in terms of a giant sleeping body. In short, Thomas has assimilated much of Blake's myth both from reading Blake on his own and from reading Foster Damon's pioneer discussion of Blake's myth. Going a step further, we can argue, after having presented indisputable evidence that Thomas read

Blake and borrowed from him, that Thomas adopted and adapted to his own purposes Blake's ideas and images and used them to express his own world view.

Our next concern is the indisputable evidence that Thomas even read Blake. We might assume that Thomas had read Blake as a matter of course, since most major writers are well and widely read. The evidence that Thomas did read Blake follows along with a discussion of his influence on Thomas. In a talk before a poetry reading, Thomas remarked about his early reading in "my father's brown study, before homework" that:

I wrote imitations of whatever I happened, moon-and-print struck, to be goggling at and gorging at the time: Sir Thomas Browne, Robert W. Service, de Quincey, Henry Newbolt, Blake, Baroness Orczy...<sup>19</sup>

Still discussing the early period in Thomas's development, Fitzgibbon, commenting on the influence of Dan Jones on Thomas, has this to say:

In Dan Jones' home, Warmley, Dylan found the most modern literature of the day, Joyce, Stein, Eliot, Pound, the Sitwells, as well as those rediscovered writers of the past who were exerting a strong influence on young poets, Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins, the minor Elizabethans.<sup>20</sup>

Fitzgibbon makes yet another reference to Thomas and Blake:

After addressing the Cambridge literary society, where he had a passage with a don, the don said angrily that he had been reading Blake before Dylan was born and to whom Dylan replied: 'And I shall be reading him after you are dead'.<sup>21</sup>

The statement implies not only that Thomas read Blake but that he read him with admiration. In this same chapter, Fitzgibbon

<sup>19</sup>C. Fitzgibbon, The Life of Dylan Thomas, (Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1965), p. 41.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

discusses whether or not Thomas was a Christian in any orthodox sense and comes to the conclusion that he remained an agnostic all his life "though at times perhaps a reluctant one".<sup>22</sup>

Fitzgibbon then concludes the chapter with a comment from Vernon Watkins, a long time friend of Thomas's and a firm Christian. After discussing the nature of Thomas's religious belief, Watkins concludes with the following comment: "I would call Dylan a Blakean Christian but even that would only be an approximation."<sup>23</sup> Watkins' phrase "Blakean Christian" must be dealt with when we are discussing the actual poems. What he might have meant was that Thomas, like Blake, found all of nature holy; the color and glory and holiness of every creature impressed Thomas, as it did Blake, and perhaps, like Blake he saw all of this beauty as a manifestation of God in the universe. Blake's statement "Everything that lives is Holy" is equally Thomas's cry. We do not think that Thomas necessarily learned this attitude toward nature from Blake (it may be a Welsh attitude, as G. M. Hopkins certainly possessed it) but Blake's attitude may have been one of the factors which attracted Thomas to him in the first place.

Again FitzGibbon, writing of his own acquaintance with Thomas during the war years in London, remarks:

Sometimes Dylan and Theo and I, and occasionally Caitlin, would be alone together after the pubs closed. We then usually read poems. ...Lawrence he read, too, and Ezra Pound's "In Kensington Gardens", and Blake's "London" as well as much else, ...Apart from Cowper, Burns, Smart and above all Blake, I do not recall him reading any eighteenth century poet.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>24</sup>FitzGibbon, p. 269.

Yet one more statement that supports our argument. Jirina Haukova, who was Thomas's escort when he made his one visit to Prague on March 4, 1949, wrote a letter to FitzGibbon telling him about the visit. She writes "I took him home, where came some good friends and we spoke again about poetry. He said Blake was the greatest poet and he read us his poems."<sup>25</sup>

We have ample evidence, then, from Thomas himself and from his friends and acquaintances of two things: that Thomas certainly read Blake and that he admired Blake immensely as a poet, at one point going so far as to call him the greatest poet. We could compound this list of evidence that Thomas was influenced by Blake at considerable length, but a few more illustrations should suffice.

Professor Moynihan, who had the opportunity to examine Thomas's early notebooks at the Lockwood Memorial Library in Buffalo, states:

The first clear signs of Blake's influence appear sometime between 1929 and 1931. In the 1930 Notebook there are journeyman imitations of the "Songs of Innocence." The fifteen-year-old Thomas wrote of the shepherd blowing upon his reed and of all the creatures in the forest that feed on the music of golden throats. In the 1933 Notebook there are more polished imitations, including one that uses such Blakean images as lepers and lambs, babes and dams.<sup>26</sup>

Thomas's early poetry shows a strong Blakean attitude in the sense that Thomas insists man is an identity of body and spirit and as such he should examine the universe through the senses

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<sup>25</sup>Moynihan, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

enlightened by poetic insight. Blake's statement that we should see through the eye, not with the eye, that man must seek to achieve total perception through all the doors of the senses to understand the puzzle of his universe, can be traced again to one of Blake's famous statements in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell": "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." Thomas's poetry is permeated with the idea that man, in a sense, becomes the universe and the universe becomes man. In certain poems this attitude is carried to the point where the universe becomes a projection of the imagination of the poet. This artistic perspective toward the external universe might be considered another similarity between the two poets. It stems in fact from the Romantic concept of the universe.

One more example of Thomas's familiarity with Blake must be mentioned before we examine some of the works in detail. Maud, in his book, lists a stage appearance by Thomas in a reading of Blake's "An Island in the Moon" produced by Eric Capon on February 16, 1950.<sup>27</sup> This is a valuable piece of information in that it indicates Thomas was reading Blake off and on over many years.

Besides the superb lyric quality of Blake's verse, which would attract Thomas, he found as well Blake's approach to the universe attractive and useful, his technical accomplishment worth studying, and his handling of images worth copying. Thomas

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<sup>27</sup>R. Maud, Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry, (New York: Book Craftsmen Associates, Inc., 1963), p. 141.

may even have been influenced in his surrealistic imagery through Blake. Moynihan suggests that Blake's "London" contains a rudimentary form of surrealistic imagery in the lines,

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every black'ning Church appalls;  
And the hapless Soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

Moynihan says "It is difficult to see how anyone could visualize such an image before the surrealists."<sup>28</sup> But here we have Blake anticipating a type of poetic technique many years before it was 'invented'. Much of the discussion over whether or not Thomas was a Surrealist<sup>29</sup> might be resolved by tracing the influence of the surrealistic type of Blakean imagery on Thomas, something which we intend to do to some extent in this study.

We must now turn to the direct evidence of Thomas's borrowing from Blake. In a short story of Thomas's titled "The Visitor" there is a direct quotation from Blake's "The Book of Thel". The borrowed line is, "She read until the worm set upon the lilly's leaf." Before suggesting the significance of the quotation, we must briefly outline the story.

The central figure in the story is a dying man named Peter who is being attended by a woman named Millicent (changed to Rhianon in a later draft) and visited by a very unusual character named Callaghan. It is unclear at the outset whether Peter is dead or dying, for we have these lines: "Millicent was attendant on a dead man, and put the chipped edge of the cup to a

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<sup>28</sup>Moynihan, p. 112.

<sup>29</sup>H. Treece, Dylan Thomas, Dog Among the Fairies, (London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1949), p. 22.

dead lip. It could not be a heart that beat under the ribs."<sup>30</sup> Then we are told that "Millicent had cut open his chest with a book-knife, torn out the heart, put in the clock." But as Peter lies in bed, he thinks "People will say, 'There walks the ghost of Peter, a poet, who was dead for years before they buried him.'" Peter cannot believe that after each night and its sleeping "life would sprout up again like a flower through a coffin's cracks."

We learn that someone Peter loved very much (his wife Mary) has died. "His child killed her in her womb." Here we have a faint echo of the "Thel" motif of the unborn soul. There is considerable crucifixion imagery present as well, which is interesting in that it anticipates the crucifixion imagery in the "Altar-wise by Owl-Light" sonnet sequence, to be discussed later. Peter remarks, speaking of Millicent, "Such a woman with cool and competent fingers that touched on the holes like ten blessings, washed the body after it had been taken from the tree." This remark is an obvious allusion to the Crucifixion of Christ at the moment of Christ's death while the Mary becomes his wife and the mother of Christ and Mary Magdalene. It is significant that Thomas is emphasizing the crucified Christ, rather than the risen Christ which is given emphasis in later poems such as "Vision and Prayer". The above quoted remark from the story suggests a subliminal Christ which quickly becomes a central figure even in Thomas's early poems.

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<sup>30</sup>D. Thomas, Best Short Stories-1935, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), p. 206.



Peter then asks Millicent to read to him, and at this point in the story Callaghan appears and asks Peter where they shall go tonight. Callaghan picks Peter up and, both naked, races through the night. Peter asks why they are naked and Callaghan replies "Are we naked? We have our bones and our organs, our skin and our flesh. There is a ribbon of blood tied in your hair. You have a cloth of veins around your thighs." These lines are significant in that they are Blakean in their imagery, recalling "The Book of Urizen" for example; more important, the lines are Blakean in the sense that they imply a similar world view. Blake's figures are often naked because of his belief that body and soul are one, hence a glorious body means a glorious soul. Here we have Thomas writing that the characters in his story are 'clothed' in their bodies, suggesting that the soul radiates through the body and is part of it. Just how Blakean Thomas's ideas are here may be gathered from the following: FitzGibbon, explaining about Thomas's general disregard for material possessions, writes "The outer display was only a manifestation, like clothing, of the inner reality. And he was beginning to realize, even as early as 1936 if not before, that this was true of poetry too. Adventures In the Skin Trade was envisaged as the story of a man who peels off layer after layer of what lies without until at last only the naked man is left, the truth established, the absolute achieved." (p. 206) The reader can see how directly this applies to the story under discussion. The source of this idea is Blakean, we argue, in the sense it postulates a unity of body and spirit; if one peels off

all extraneous matter and still has left the person himself, then what is peeled off is not the real self.

The extent of Thomas's debt to Blake for this idea may be judged from Harold Bloom's comments on a passage of Milton.

Bloom writes,

If there is a single central image in Milton, it is the garment, from the weavings of Enitharmon's looms... The whole of Milton's heroic testimony is concentrated in this multiple image, for the garment that must be put off is revealed as only an "Incrustation over my Immortal Spirit," to be cleansed from every human face by self-examination. To cast off the false garment is to become free... (P. 358.)

Mr. Munro remarks of Thomas, "His peculiar cast of vision recalls Blake and to a lesser degree Hopkins; the former in substance, the latter chiefly in language."<sup>31</sup> In what is a description of creation, from "The Book of Urizen", we notice how Blake handles similar images:

In a horrible, dreamful slumber,  
Like the linked infernal chain,  
A vast spine writhed in torment  
Upon the winds, shooting pain'd  
Ribs, like a bending cavern;  
And bones of solidness froze  
Over all the nerves of joy.<sup>32</sup>

The image in Blake is grander and much more powerful; however the visual representation of thought in the case of each poet is similar. In "The Book of Urizen" Blake is dealing with the problem of how life and consciousness spring out of a dead world; this is one of Thomas's concerns in "The Visitor". Thomas was

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<sup>31</sup>C. Munro, Thesis, U. B. C., 1962, p. 55.

<sup>32</sup>Keynes, ed., Blake's Poetry and Prose, (London: The Nonesuch Library, 1961), p. 225.

All subsequent quotations in this thesis will be from this edition.

in his "womb-tomb period", as many critics put it, during the time of this story and this theme is evident in the story. Further we find that one of Thomas's favorite images in his earlier poetry is what we term the anatomical image. Callaghan carries Peter to Jarvis Valley and there, as ghost-like figures, they witness a regenerative nightmare as they see animals die, sink into the earth, become dust, and then "flowers shot out of the dead and the blades and the roots were doubled in their power." There is certainly something of Blake here in his concept of birth into this life being a dying from a higher plane of existence, while dying in the world of Generation is birth into the world of Eternity. This early story of Thomas's shows his firm grasp of this Blakean idea, although, he does not employ Blakean symbols in which to express it. As dawn approaches, Callaghan rushes Peter back home before the cock crows. The story ends with Peter back in bed calling for Millicent to come and hold his hand; Millicent enters and Peter asks "Why are you putting the sheet over my face?"

The significance of the story for us is that it seems to be the *Thel* theme worked out in prose rather than poetry. *Thel* feared descending into life through death, while Peter fears to descend into death, to pass through Beulah and into Eden. Frye, explaining "Thel", comments: "But as, according to Blake, nothing achieves reality without going through physical existence, the descent must be made (into Generation). The failure to make this descent is the theme of Thel. "*Thel* is an imaginative seed;

she could be any form of embryonic life, from a human baby to an artist's inspiration, and her tragedy could be anything from a miscarriage to a lost vision."<sup>33</sup> Peter's wife, we recall, died because of complications during childbirth, while Peter seems to be a poet with a still-born vision.

In a later version of "The Visitor" appearing in Adventures in the Skin Trade, Thomas quotes three complete lines from "The Book of Thel" beginning "Ah! gentle may I lay me down..."; these are the last three lines of the second stanza of the poem. When Thomas writes, "She read on until the worm sat on the Lilly's leaf", he means that Rhianon, in the earlier version, read to Peter until she reached this point in Thomas's poem which occurs at the end of part II of the poem. The significance of this is that Thomas must have known the poem extremely well to employ it in the fashion that he did.

A further point to note here is that both "The Visitor" and "Thel" are products of an early period in the canon of each author's work. We see these two poets struggling with a similar theme in their early works as they move toward a comprehension of their respective world views.

"The Visitor" might or could have been written at the same time as the "Altar-wise by Owl-Light" sonnet sequence, for Thomas was twenty-one when he wrote The Sonnets (Milton was twenty-one as well when he wrote 'The Nativity Ode', an observation which is not irrelevant) and "The Visitor" was published in Best Short Stories-1935. We mention this because both pieces contain many

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<sup>33</sup>N. Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 233.

similar themes and images which we will refer back to when discussing The Sonnets. The similarity in imagery that we have in mind might be illustrated by the following lines from "Sonnet VIII" of the Sonnet sequence:

This was the crucifixion on the mountain,  
Time's nerve in vinegar, the gallow grave  
As tarred with blood as the bright thorns I wept;  
The world's my wound, God's Mary in her grief,

These lines, it seems to us, express very well Peter's position in "The Visitor"; we recall that Peter's dead wife's name was Mary as well.

Thomas's poem "Before I Knocked" contains another example of his direct borrowing from Blake. Here Thomas uses the name of one of Blake's characters, Mnetha, from "Tiriël". Thomas's lines are:

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

Mnetha brings us back to the question of literary borrowing which has been discussed earlier. When poets deliberately borrow as in this case of Thomas, they are working within a tradition given great respectability by the comments of T. S. Eliot quoted earlier. Thomas, when he consciously borrows from Blake here, would be aware of the well established tradition to which he is conforming.

Thomas's use of the name Mnetha is evidence that he had read into Blake's minor prophecies at least and, as our argument shows, Thomas read the major prophecies as well. Mnetha in "Tiriël"

is the aged nurse of Har and Heva; Frye explains:

But "Tiriel" is so obviously the complement to "The Book of Thel"...that some consideration of it belongs here. Thel fails to achieve physical existence in infancy and Tiriel fails to achieve spiritual existence in senility.<sup>34</sup>

"Thel" ends with a shriek from the virgin as she refuses to enter the world of Generation, and so chooses to retreat into the Vales of Har; Tiriel wanders into the Vales of Har as well and

Har and Heva, like two children, sat beneath the Oak: Mnetha, now aged, waited on them and brought them food and clothing.<sup>35</sup>

Damon comments that "Tiriel" is an early version of "The Book of Urizen" and he goes on to explain that Har and Heva "symbolize poetry and painting in a degraded state while the name Mnetha is almost an anagram of Athena. She represents the intelligence which preserves poetry and painting, though she does not understand them well enough to know their degradation."<sup>36</sup> Now this comment by Damon throws a very interesting light on Thomas's meaning, particularly when we have evidence that Thomas did read Damon's comments on Blake. Frye remarks that "Tiriel, as an individual, is a man who has spent his entire life trying to domineer over others and establish a reign of terror founded on moral virtue!" Frye explains, treating the poem at its narrative level, that Har and Heva "are a couple of hideous imbeciles, senile children, eternally old..."<sup>37</sup>. Both Damon and Frye, then, essentially agree on the meaning of the poem, for we can see that

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<sup>34</sup>N. Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 241.

<sup>35</sup>W. Blake, Works, Ed. G. Keynes, p. 151.

<sup>36</sup>Damon, William Blake, His Philosophy and Symbols, (Mass: Peter Smith, 1958), p. 306.

<sup>37</sup>N. Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 243.

if Har and Heva symbolize poetry and painting in a degraded state as Damon suggests, then Frye is consistent when he sees them as "imbeciles, senile children". Now to return to Thomas's poem, we find that there is an area of agreement among critics about the meaning of "Before I Knocked". Tindall remarks in A Reader's Guide,

The speaker is an undifferentiated vital liquid before it has assumed shape as sperm cell; yet this blind mouth foresees. Foreknowledge of life and death and man's condition is the theme of this poem. ...since Christ is all men in one sense, especially, according to poets, all poets, this liquid mouth identifies itself with Him.<sup>38</sup>

Jacob Korg in his text states:

"Before I Knocked" has as its theme this interlocking of natural and spiritual worlds... The speaker of the poem, the unborn Jesus, begins by declaring his kinship with the processes and elements of nature.<sup>39</sup>

John Ackerman, while in essential agreement with the above comments, adds further insights but fails to mention Mnetha at all or Blake. He says, in part:

In this poem Thomas characteristically identifies man with Christ, a device related to the seventeenth-century poets' use of Christian mythology and symbol. ...By assuming this identity, Thomas in his early poems is seeking to define the relation between immediate reality and archetypal religious symbols... Here (the poem) the poet is speaking of existence before it takes the form of human life. Thomas assumes, as so often, the role of ambassador: here, an ambassador between the life that begins with conception in the womb and previous existence in nature. He sees all life as part of an organic whole; existence is a unity which is broken when life is conceived, but to which the body returns at death. ...Here Thomas speaks in the person of Christ, who, in terms of the Virgin Birth was in a real sense born of the flesh and ghost.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Tindall, A Reader's Guide, p. 36.

<sup>39</sup> J. Korg, Dylan Thomas, (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 58.

<sup>40</sup> J. Ackerman, Dylan Thomas, His Life and Work, (London: Oxford U. Press, 1964), pp. 46-47.

We have quoted Mr. Ackerman at length here because his comments are valuable and his explanation of the poem, without apparently his being aware of it, makes the poem Blakean in concept. Here we have Thomas expressing Blake's idea of the four levels of existence, death being a type of life while being born into existence (Generation) becomes a kind of death. We suggest, knowing how familiar Thomas was with Blake's poetry and Damon's discussion of Blake, that Thomas was purposely using ideas he had learned from Blake in this poem.

That the speaker in the first part of the poem is Christ is made clear by the lines: "Long breath that carried to my father/ The message of his dying Christ." The poem is, as well, rich in images quite original with Thomas such as "The rack of dreams my lily bones" suggesting Christ suffering on the cross as well as his purity and his conception as the lily. The expression "lily bones" carries with it the meaning of delicacy and fragility as well as a perennial quality. This is merely one example of Thomas's first-rate use of richly associative words, which is, of course, one of the qualities of all great poetry.

But we must return to the problem of Mnetha. What do the lines "Was brother to Mnetha's daughter/ And sister to the fathering worm" mean in Thomas's poem and what, if anything, is the relation to Blake's poem from which the name Mnetha comes? Of the many critics of Thomas, Tindall gives us the most satisfactory explanation:

'Mnetha' puzzling William Empson, is from Blake's "Tiriel", a prophetic book. An old nurse, Mnetha,



serves as mother to senile Heva. Being brother to Mnetha's "daughter" unites senility and youth. Since Mnetha seems a combination of Athena and Memory, her daughter could serve as Muse of poetry. That our speaking liquid is not only her brother but father's sister indicates the androgynous state of vital fluid before sperm fixes sex.<sup>41</sup>

Now if we go back to Damon for a moment and remember that Mnetha could represent an intelligence that preserves the arts although that same intelligence doesn't fully understand them, then Thomas may mean, not denying the idea of the androgynous state, that Christ becomes the embodiment of the visionary principle and the custodian of it. He is brother because he is male; Mnetha suggests as well the futility of the custody because Mnetha did not have a daughter; if one is brother to nothing one must be nothing himself. More simply, Thomas may mean that Christ, as a source of artistic endeavour as a prophet and visionary, is only dimly aware of this as one of his functions. We must remember here as well that religious belief often replaces art in a person's code of values. If one sees one's duty as to love, serve and know God, art as a central concern may or can be dispensed with. Or again, because Christ was "brother to Mnetha's daughter" he contains within himself the source of inspiration, regeneration and so becomes, in a sense, a source of artistic inspiration, yet this is not his primary role on earth.

The speaker in the poem is "...sister to the fathering worm" in the sense that Christ is the asexual source of life; this idea seems to work if we see the worm as phallic, which it

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<sup>41</sup>Tindall, A Reader's Guide, p. 37.

very often is in Thomas. It could as well be the destructive worm of the grave, for Christ taught eternal life only through death. The worm image must not be neglected, as it is important in understanding Thomas as well as in appreciating his similarity to Blake, for the poems of both poets are full of worms and serpents. Thomas's worm here anticipates the "crooked worm" of "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower", where we find that the "crooked worm" comes directly from Blake's destructive worm in "The Sick Rose".

There are many critics who make no mention of Mnetha in Thomas's poem or simply prefer not to discuss the name. Mr. Munro, in his thesis, seems to be unaware of the source or the importance of the name in the poem. He does quote Olsen about the line containing the name Mnetha; Olsen seems to be equally unaware of the source... Olsen writes, "He (Thomas) is merely saying that Jesus, as yet unconceived, was utterly formless and had every and no relation to everything and everybody."<sup>42</sup> An additional and important meaning to the poem is added with the knowledge of the source of Thomas's borrowing, because this awareness throws the emphasis on the importance of art in the life of all men.

Blake's "Tiriel" belongs to a group of poems which Frye calls the Orc cycle and which are all visions of tragedy and failure; one of this group is The Book of Urizen. Much of the imagery employed by Thomas in his early poems which are concerned with mortality and death is very Urizenic in impact and intention. In the poem under discussion, there are threatening

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<sup>42</sup>E. Olsen, The Poetry of Dylan Thomas, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 99.

Urizenic images in such phrases as "The leaden stars, the rainy hammer" which the reader associates with gloom and destruction, implying a threat to man's imagination. For Thomas, in his early poems at least, as for Blake, stars are usually sinister.

These images in Thomas's early poems become Urizenic in meaning and, we can be fairly certain, having established Thomas's debt to Blake, in origin as well. Almost at random, lines from Urizen may be selected for the purpose of comparison:

For Eternity stood wide apart,  
As the stars are apart from the earth.

...  
The Eternal Prophet heav'd the dark bellows,  
And turn'd restless tongs, and the hammer  
Incessant beat, forging chains new and new,  
Numbering with links hours, days and years.

...  
A time passed over: the Eternals  
Began to erect the tent  
When Enitharmon, sick,  
Felt a Worm within her Womb.

Notice that in Blake we have the threatening stars and the hammer which forges the chains to bind the creative forces in man. Blake's line, "Felt a Worm within her Womb", (a worm which becomes a serpent) has distinct echoes in Thomas's "I smelt the maggot in my stool." The worm-maggot-serpent image is, as we will see, a persistent one in both poets. That Thomas was attracted to The Book of Urizen is not surprising when we remember how often Thomas must have felt bound by the chains of Urizen preventing him from exercising his creative forces to their fullest extent, for the Urizenic aspects of Thomas's society very often frustrated the Los within him. The extent to which Thomas had absorbed Blake's Urizenic imagery may be judged from the following quotation from a letter of his to Pamela H. Johnson:

Thomas writes "Therefore the description of a thought or action- however abstruse it may be- can be beaten home by bringing it onto a physical level. Every idea, intuitive or intellectual, can be imaged and translated in terms of the body, its flesh, skin, blood, sinews, veins, glands, organs, cells, or senses." (p. 296, FitzGibbon) What Thomas has described is Blakean in the extreme as an examination of The Book of Urizen will show. Blake created a whole race to house and express his ideas and Thomas, in his attempt to express his ideas in physical terms, was moving in the same direction.

The meaning of "Before I Knocked" can be stated as follows: the speaker is an unformed vital liquid before it has assumed shape as a sperm cell. As Tindall says, foreknowledge of life and death and man's condition is the theme of this poem. Through Christ, death is engendered in the poem as it is in any begetting, hence the great word 'doublecrossed' in the last line of the poem.<sup>43</sup> Now if we examine the meaning of Urizen we will be able to establish an interesting link between the two poems here.

Damon, discussing the meaning of Urizen, writes:

It deals with the problem of evil, which is the problem of Creation (or the Fall). It must be interpreted in two ways: first as appearing in the creation of the world, about 4004 B.C.; and secondly, as recurring in the life of every man. The Macrocosm is repeated in the Microcosm. The Fall from Eternity into Matter is mirrored as the Fall from Innocence into Experience.<sup>44</sup>

Thomas, whose metaphors throughout 18 Poems carry with them this idea of Macrocosm mirrored in Microcosm, could well again have

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<sup>43</sup>Tindall, A Reader's Guide, p. 37.

<sup>44</sup>Damon, p. 116.

been given the initial idea from a reading of Blake and Damon. Even the title of certain of his early poems carries with it this metaphor; such a title as "A Process in the Weather of the Heart" is as good an example as any. But to return to the relation between the two poems, the connection is this: Christ's birth was a fall from innocence into experience with the purpose of man's redemption in mind. If we see the poem in this light then Blake's meaning and Thomas's meaning are similar. The cumulative effect of the imagery in the poem Urizen is to give the reader a sense of limits, bounds and geometrical shape to what was first described as chaos and void. This, of course, is the effect Blake wished to achieve, for the Creation is seen in Blake's myth as a means of giving limits to the Fall; it is an act of mercy just as Christ's descent into this world in "Before I Knocked" becomes an act of mercy toward man, including Thomas. Thomas, who shows consistent interest in Christ throughout his poems, sees in Christ the incarnation of the artistic creative principle linked with the redeemer and, most important, for Thomas man can be redeemed through art. If Urizen deals with the problem of evil in the world which was a result of the Creation then "Before I Knocked" is an attempt to answer the question posed by Urizen. So we see that Thomas's relation to Blake becomes more and more intimate as we continue our examination. Further, knowing that Thomas read Thel, we are tempted to see Christ in "Before I Knocked" completing the action begun by Thel. Thel refused to be born into Generation so that she might achieve eternity; Christ is willing to make the descent knowing that his action can mean eternity for all men.

While we do not have incontrovertible evidence that Thomas actually read The Book of Urizen, we do mean to suggest that through Thomas's choice of images as well as his meaning in "Before I Knocked" coupled with his preoccupations in 18 Poems we have strong circumstantial evidence that Thomas was familiar with this poem of Blake's.

Jacob Korg, discussing possible influences on Thomas, writes:

The most significant name on this list, as Thomas implicitly acknowledges, and his critics have often pointed out, is that of Blake. Thomas shared with Blake an hallucinatory commitment to the concreteness of what he imagined, and the sort of cosmic awareness that generates myth. Though Thomas's cosmos is far more fragmentary than the one found in Blake's prophetic books, it has some of the same energies, gigantic deities, and above all, the same 'fearful symmetry' of balanced patterns formed by opposing forces.<sup>45</sup>

While this is a very useful comment for our argument, we cannot agree with Mr. Korg's use of the word 'hallucinatory' because the word carries with it a distinct pejorative flavor. The usual definition of the word might run "perception of objects with no reality... arising from disorder of the nervous system."<sup>46</sup> This is exactly the sort of statement that would infuriate both poets. For both Blake and Thomas, their mythic conceptions, their metaphors, their images were 'real' in every sense of the word. All poets deal in the concreteness of what they imagine because this is the source of the artistic image. The only way that Blake, Thomas, Shakespeare... can deal with the universe about them is to see it in concrete terms. Metaphor is at the

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<sup>45</sup>J. Korg, Dylan Thomas, p. 180.

<sup>46</sup>Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, (Springfield, Mass: G.&C. Merriam Co., 1963), p. 375.

centre of all poetry and the great gift of metaphor is that it makes the abstract concrete so that we see the meaning. Blake's great figures and forms, while they are abstractions made concrete, do exist and are not hallucinations. The artist cannot, by his nature, deal in the abstract (Blake is not alone in being unable to tolerate a dead universe), so, of course, both Blake and Thomas believed in the concreteness of what they imagined.

Frye makes an interesting comment in this regard about The Book of Urizen:

When we read that Los attempts to embrace Enitharmon but that she is jealous and goes over to the embraces of Urizen, it is neither very helpful nor very interesting to translate that as: 'Time or Prophecy attempts to overcome space but Space falls under the domination of Reason'. Continuous translation of poetic images into a series of moral and philosophical concepts is what usually passes for the explanation of allegory. Now a construction of a poem in abstract nouns is not necessarily a false interpretation of part of the meaning. But it is a translation, which means that it assumes the reader's ignorance of the original language.<sup>47</sup>

Frye's point is central here for we must always remember that the poem is a totality of sound, image and sense which are included in its total form. Mr. Korg is being exceedingly myopic if he means to censure Blake and Thomas for believing in the literalness of their universe. In fact Thomas has often insisted that his poems be taken literally and he meant just that; one must deal with the poem as a series of concrete images and not translate the images into the abstractions that they might represent.

A point in Mr. Korg's favor is his statement that Thomas's cosmos "has some of the same energies, gigantic deities, and,

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<sup>47</sup>Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 185.

above all, the same fearful symmetry" as the cosmos of Blake. We will encounter many similar energies and deities when we compare Thomas's "Altar-wise by Owl-Light" sonnet sequence with Blake's Four Zoas. That Thomas used Blake's ideas and concepts throughout his poetry even to the conception of an Albion-like sleeping human form in "The White Giant's Thigh", a late poem of Thomas's, will become clear as we examine his poems.

At this point in our study we have accumulated ample direct evidence that Thomas read Blake and understood him. When we are comparing two poets, we must consider other things as well. We must examine such things as similarities in tone, point of view, and preoccupations with certain themes as well as total vision, completely achieved or only partially, as in the case of Thomas. We must not neglect the very great differences between the two poets as well. Certainly Blake seems to have had no influence on Thomas's syntax, but we can discover how he influenced him in his use of imagery and metaphor.

In relation to similarities, we have seen then that Blake and Thomas see the universe in somewhat similar terms; they both interpret the external world in terms of human anatomical imagery which ultimately leads to a completely subjective world view. We have seen as well that they are concerned with similar problems: the problem of man's fall and his redemption through Christ, the interlinking of birth and death, destruction and creation and the concept of childhood innocence and adult experience. We have pointed out as well that both poets see a unity of personal existence in the sense that man dies from Eternity



into this world (the world of Generation) while death in the world of Generation is birth into Eternity. This concept is explicit in the poems of both poets.

As we are primarily concerned at the moment with evidence of Blake's influence on Thomas, we might examine Ralph Maud's book Entrances to Dylan Thomas's Poetry. Maud tells us that,

Answering some questions in 1951, Thomas recalled what first led him to love language and want to work in it and for it: "nursery rhymes and folk tales, the scottish ballads, a few lines of hymns, the most famous Bible stories and the rhythms of the Bible, Blake's "Songs of Innocence" and the quite incomprehensible magical majesty and nonsense on Shakespeare read, heard, and near-murdered in the first forms of my school.<sup>48</sup>

Shortly after this, Maud remarks,

The question of source is worth taking up because the negative answer supports what we instinctively feel about Thomas's poems; they are new and unique, that no one ever wrote poems like this before, and that readers of Thomas have to begin without preconceptions.<sup>49</sup>

Now, while we are in essential agreement with Professor Maud's statement above, we must insist that although Thomas's poems were "new and unique" they are, as we have been showing, firmly related to the great tradition of English poetry and firmly related through William Blake as we have demonstrated. To return to an earlier point for a moment, we will see that what literary borrowing and literary allusion does do is preserve a vital historical continuity from writer to writer and age to age. When we come to discuss Thomas's marriage poems we will find that Thomas's concept of married love, gained in part through Blake

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<sup>48</sup>R. Maud, Entrances, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

can be, in turn, related to the Miltonic concept of sexual love and married love. Once the link between one poet and another is established, an understanding of the earlier poet will clarify the meaning of the later poet.

Maud himself uses two quotations from Blake to introduce chapters in his book on Thomas. He introduces "Chapter One" with a quotation from a letter of Blake's to Rev. Trusler: "The wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too explicit as the fittest for instruction, because it rouses the faculties to act." This statement fits both poets so well that the reason for Maud's choice is obvious. Neither Blake nor Thomas was explicit if explicit means easy or requiring no effort, but both poets are capable of rousing the faculties to act in trying to understand the poetry with considerable rewards resulting from such action. Maud uses a second quotation from Blake, the title page of Milton, "Book Two"; "Contraries are Positives."

To return to our immediate problem here, we can find further direct evidence of Blake's influence on Thomas's imagery in Thomas's poem "I See the Boys of Summer", the first poem in Collected Poems. The following three lines from the second stanza bear examination:

There in the sun the frigid threads  
Of doubt and dark they feed their nerves;  
The signal moon is zero in their voids.

While we are primarily concerned with the images in the lines, we might first suggest what the lines mean in terms of abstract concepts, Professor Frye notwithstanding. The theme of the poem is similar to "Before I Knocked". Without working to a tedious degree of explication, let us agree that the theme is

one of sterility and lack of fulfillment. Such words as 'ruin', 'barren', 'freeze the soils', 'winter floods', 'moon is zero', all suggest the theme even before the poem is closely examined.

Maud remarks about this poem,

Any attempt to justify the ways of God to man, even one by so young a poet as Thomas at the time this poem was written is interesting. What Milton wanted to justify, and what Thomas here faces, is, in its simplest terms, the existence of death.<sup>50</sup>

Tindall says of the same poem,

Man's condition and his fate emerge as theme; but verbal play and gaiety of language prove life good, however bad. Whatever our fate, poetry is fun, and this poem proves it by example.

...  
Probably these boys are all men- in their aspects of sperm cells, embryos, and adolescents. That they are also Welshmen, driven from mine, factory, and home by the depression of 1931 (the year Thomas left school) and ruined in London, is not altogether unlikely. These boys are victims of time. Temporal process suggested by sun and moon, is established in four stanzas by the four seasons, autumn, winter, spring and summer in this order.<sup>51</sup>

We see that working from images a fairly consistent meaning from the poem can be established. We notice how Thomas in his early poems attempts to convey his ideas through the direct use of images which carry the meaning. An interesting difference between this poem and Urizen, with which we wish to draw certain comparisons, is that Thomas allows his images to carry the meaning of the poem so that the images themselves become, in fact, the narrative, while Blake constructs an exciting narrative in the more traditional sense of the word; that is, the movement of Blake's narrative is traditional, certainly not the individuals within it. Both poets, Blake to a far greater extent, finally create a type of dramatis personae for their poems.

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<sup>50</sup> Maud, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> Tindall, A Reader's Guide, p. 29.

The difference as far as effect is concerned is that with Thomas we must discuss the poem at the level of image and puzzle over the narrative at which it hints, while with Blake we can usually discuss the characters such as Urizen, Enitharmon, Los and often follow the action without too much difficulty. What it all means is quite another question. We might describe both Blake's and Thomas's method with a line from Milton, "Book The Second": "There is a place where Contrarieties are equally True."

Notice the number of contraries that Thomas has set up in his poem. The worm becomes a maggot (from the phallic worm to the burial worm); summer...freeze; winter...heat; sour...honey; birth...death; deserts...tides. There are, of course, many more contraries which Thomas has chosen to work out his theme. We might compare whole lines such as "A muscling life from lovers in their cramp," and "Here love's damp muscle dries and dies." These two lines suggest more of a result than a contrary. The 'cramp' could be the position of love and the muscle is the phallic muscle so we realize that Thomas is describing one of his favorite ideas which is that the act of creating life is a kind of death and that the birth of a child is the beginning of the death of the parents. We are not so taken with the uniqueness of the idea, for of course it isn't unique, as we are with the manner in which Thomas expresses his idea.

Moynihan sees this poem as an encounter poem which attempts to examine the human predicament; through these encounters Thomas, Moynihan argues, was attempting to discover for himself his own

God, having rejected the God of tradition.<sup>52</sup> The encounter in the poem is between youth and age, criticism and rebellion. Comparing Blake's Urizen to this poem, we find similarities in image and theme. Blake tells us that

A void immense, wild, dark and deep,  
Where nothing was: Nature's wide womb;  
And self balanc'd, stretch'd o'er the void,

These lines of Blake carry a similar intention to those of Thomas in the sense that they too are expressing concepts of sterility, lack of fulfillment and death. Both poems involve concepts of revolt and struggle between youth and age, reason and passion and both poems involve themselves in part with sexual images. In Thomas the sexual question raised is to be understood literally, while in Blake the sexual passage is a metaphoric expression of something else.

The lines in "I See the Boys of Summer" which carry the idea of masturbation and/or homosexuality are the following: "The jacks of frost they finger in the hives;" and "Divide the night and day with fairy thumbs;"...Whatever meaning one wishes to impose on such lines, whether it is Tindall's who remarks,

Playing with words (Jack Frost) and with themselves, they finger 'jacks of frost'. As the honey-boiling womb holds curdling, frost death, so the penis.<sup>53</sup>

and

As adolescents, they try 'fairy thumbs'. Such suggestions of masturbation and homosexuality, noted by most commentators, serve the theme of sterility and death.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Moynihan, p. 182.

<sup>53</sup>Tindall, p. 29.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

or whether we see it as does Jacob Korg,

What the children are doing as they 'Split up the  
brauned womb's weathers/ Divide the night and day  
with fairy thumbs," is analogous to the destruc-  
tive work of Blake's Urizen: "Times on times he  
divided and measur'd/ Space by space in his nine-  
fold darkness."<sup>55</sup>

we argue that the sexual images used by Blake in Urizen offer  
a type of analogous meaning. In "Chapter VI" of Urizen we have  
the following lines:

Eternity shudder'd when they saw  
Man begetting his likeness  
On his own divided image.

A time passed over: the Eternals  
Began to erect the tent,  
When Enitharmon, sick,  
Felt a Worm within her Womb

What Blake's passage means or can mean is that the union  
of poetry with pity produces revolt and what the lines of Thomas  
with the sexual allusions might mean is that one must not tam-  
per with natural processes and change, that one cannot fix time  
at the moment of pleasure. One cannot help but recall Thomas's  
early life in London when reading the above gloss on Blake's  
lines. If we see Thomas as poetry, then when he received pity  
and adulation, he revolted from this type of treatment often in-  
cluding excessive drinking as part of this revolt. In Thomas's  
life and in the poem under discussion, we see that any altera-  
tion of natural processes will have a destructive effect on the  
entire natural process.

Urizen is a type of Selfhood who worships his own desires  
and sees Creation as still in a state of chaos which he must  
bring to order. So he attempts to restrict the universe with

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<sup>55</sup>Korg, p. 65.

limits and laws and, of course, restricts creativity in the process. Blake did not believe that reason was evil in itself; it was the domination of the reason over the spirit of inspiration that Blake feared. Blake, as becomes evident in "Visions of the Daughters of Albion", also feared the rigidity of laws which no longer fit the situation. These ideas are related in two ways to Thomas. We cannot help but think that if Thomas, in his personal life, had been able to allow 'Urizen' to have more dominion over his emotions, Thomas might have lived longer. Secondly, Thomas's poem "The Hand that Signed the Paper" is a condemnation of all tyranny from the dictator to God. Like Blake, Thomas detested tyranny in any form and in the last stanza of his fine poem he gives us an image which is in fact somewhat reminiscent of Blake's "London". Thomas's lines are

The five kings count the dead but do not soften  
The crusted wound nor stroke the brow;  
A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven;  
Hands have no tears to flow.

The "five sovereign fingers" in Thomas's poem which become "The five kings" of the last stanza suggest Blake's use of the word 'charter'd' in the first two lines of his famous lyric. The ideas are identical or nearly so in the sense that the words 'sovereign' and 'charter'd' both imply dominion, control by law, rights or privileges granted by authority. These concepts were repellent to both Blake and Thomas. Thomas's protest against the irresponsibility of the tyrant so well expressed in "The Hand that Signed the Paper" may have been prompted or influenced by a recollection of Blake's Urizenic figure, for we must not

forget that Thomas, about this time, was reading Blake and Damon's book on Blake. We see then Blake and Thomas working on broadly similar lines with the use of similar images to express these ideas.

Before leaving these two poems, we might comment on the frequent occurrence of the worm image in both. A persistent image with both poets, the worm image is used to express somewhat different ideas at different times with Blake and with Thomas. Ralph Maud has made a count of the occurrence of the image in Thomas. Maud calls 'worm' a process word, stating that it occurs in no less than ten of 18 Poems, Thomas's first published book. Thomas uses the word in many different ways: a) charnel, b) parasitic, c) phallic, d) glow-worm, e) umbilical cord, f) Satan. We could chronicle almost as many uses for Blake. We have mentioned that "Enitharmon felt a worm in her womb" and as "Night the Ninth" of Vala ends one of the Eternals speaks and says "Man is a worm..." The worm image becomes an archetypal image in the definition of Northrop Frye given earlier in the sense that it is a recurring image around which certain concepts have grown.

An excellent example of an archetypal worm image used by Thomas which can be traced directly to Blake is found in his poem "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower". The pertinent stanzas are,

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower  
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees  
Is my destroyer.  
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose  
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

...

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



Both in imagery and in theme this poem of Thomas's apparently has its origin in Blake's poem "The Sick Rose":

O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy,  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

We can move even closer to Blake's poem with Thomas if we examine an earlier draft of the poem which Ralph Maud quotes from Thomas's August, 1933 Notebook. The earlier draft follows:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower  
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees  
Is my destroyer  
And I am dumb to tell the eaten rose  
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm,  
And dumb to holla thunder to the skies  
How at my cloths flies the same central storm.

Maud states that in this earlier draft we still have something of Blake's howling storm in the 'central storm'. He writes "The worm is split from the 'rose'; but Blake's image now spans the poem and the connection is telling."<sup>56</sup> Maud's comment is very valuable here because it assures us Thomas was reading Blake and using Blake in his early poems as well in his later ones. The image of the crooked worm that Thomas uses can really be considered an example of direct borrowing rather than simply influence. We can easily imagine Thomas reading and rereading Innocence and Experience as he was working on his own poems.

Now Blake's superb lyric occurs fittingly in "Songs of Experience", for the howling storm in the poem is a Blakean

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<sup>56</sup>Maud, Entrances, p. 67.

symbol for materialism. The meaning of the poem is self-evident, yet because it is pure metaphor the penumbra of meanings cannot really be exhausted. The rose is an almost universal symbol for human love while the worm, as we have seen in both Blake and Thomas, is a symbol for the corruptible flesh. As Damon comments,

Therefore this poem means then that Love is destroyed  
by the concealment of sin or the gnawings of conscience;  
It means ultimately that love, which is of the spirit,  
is corrupted by the flesh, in this age of Experience.  
For the worm comes only in the night of experience...<sup>57</sup>

We will find that in Thomas's marriage poems, "I Make This in a Warring Absence", "Into Your Lying Down Head" and "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait", the core idea in this lyric of Blake's is expanded and explored at great length. For just as Blake was concerned with the problems of married love, so was Thomas.

Both poets then use the worm image to represent the flesh, and both poets employ the rose image as a symbol of human love. In "The Force" Thomas is concerned with the fact that creation and destruction are linked, that love which creates life also is the sentence of death; these concerns and variations on them, with few exceptions, make up the only themes of 18 Poems. In the above poem the speaker sees that he is victim to the same forces as are natural objects. The crooked rose of stanza one has become the crooked worm of the last stanza. Blake's metaphor then spans the poem; the manner in which it does is worth comment because it points up a truth about the workings of metaphor.

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<sup>57</sup>Damon, p. 281.

We have seen that the themes of both poems are similar: life and death are natural processes or parts of a natural process which links man with what surrounds him. In fact this awareness on the part of the young poet, the continuity of natural processes, is what leads to the conception of the microcosm-macrocosm attitude. Thomas argues that if he is a continuous aspect of nature and not in any way different in kind from other natural objects, then the same processes that occur in the external world must take place within his and everyone else's body so he can write, describing the situation in the mother after the birth of a poet, "When the galactic sea was sucked/ And all the dry seabed unlocked,"; the line employs images from the external world to describe a condition in the mother: the dry seabed is a description of the womb after birth while, as Tindall points out, "galactic" is a portmanteau word uniting the idea of galaxy and lactic. However let us return to the crooked worm metaphor. To leave the explanation at the point we did gives no credit to either poet. As Thomas once remarked "You can say that God is love and Love is God and leave it at that. Go out and play golf." With this attitude one is many, many miles from "the valley of its saying where executives/ Would never want to tamper..."<sup>58</sup>

Both poems involve growth and corruption; we can see that. But the interesting thing is the way Thomas can expand an already perfect metaphor, thanks to Blake. Being aware of the source

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<sup>58</sup>W. H. Auden, Modern British Poetry, ed. L. Untermeyer, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.), p. 441.

of the image adds to the meaning of Thomas's poem from the reader's point of view; being ignorant of the source does it no harm. This test is, of course, a central test of all good poetry. A poem must be able to stand on its own two feet and communicate to some extent with no additional props except that of a sensitive reader. We began our discussion with the thesis that literary borrowing and literary allusion are an essential and inseparable aspect of all great literature and Thomas's use of Blake's metaphor is further support of our thesis.

For Thomas as for Blake, the metaphor is the thing, it is the idea so that in Thomas's poems we are often witness to a furious struggle between the poet and the language. Thomas often seems to be attempting to burst the barrier of language completely (this is not the case in "The Force" however, where he organized a finely controlled poem) by torturing and twisting the syntax; but the language resists, the metaphor survives and we are left with a glittering poem.

Professor Frye has a worthwhile comment on Blake's use of metaphor which could just as well be applied to Thomas:

Further, all things are identical with each other. A man feels identical with himself at the age of seven... This is the view of things that can only be expressed poetically through metaphor. The metaphor in its radical form is a statement of identification: the hero is a lion; this is that; A is B. When the hero is metaphorically a lion, he remains a hero and the lion remains a lion. Hence a world where everything is identical with everything else is not a world of monotonous uniformity, as a world where everything is like everything else would be.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>The Divine Vision, ed. De Sold Pinto, (London: Victor Gollanez, 1957), p. 107.

This statement brings us back to what Thomas meant by the literal meaning of his poems and his view of the world. For Thomas as for Blake, the metaphor is not merely a convenience, a device to express what they mean; the metaphor is, literally, what they mean. "The Green Fuse" is just that; it is metaphorically the flower; it is metaphorically the phallus; it is metaphorically the vascular system in the organism that carries the life fluid. So when Thomas says that his poem must be read literally, he means just that. What he means parallels what Frye means above. The metaphor is not a device, raisins added to the bread, the metaphor is the poem and carries the meaning. Viewing metaphor in this manner, we are rewarded with a multiplicity of meanings for, as an example, notice the possibilities in the last line of "The Force", "How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm." The sheet could be a winding sheet, a shroud, a bed sheet; the worm in the same line could well be an earth worm, coffin worm, and phallus as well as an archetypal echo of the great worm in The Garden of Eden. With Thomas it is all these things and more.

We must say more about Thomas's world view but his famous reply to a kind paraphrase of his first "Altarwise" sonnet by Dame Edith Sitwell gives us a valuable clue to how he did see his world. Miss Sitwell's paraphrase of the lines "The atlas-eater with a jaw for news,/ Bit out the mandrake with to-morrow's scream" brought the following comment from Thomas:

(It) seems to me very vague. She says the lines refer to "the violent speed and the sensation-loving, horror-loving craze of modern life." She

doesn't take the literal meaning: that a world-devouring ghost creature bit out the horror of to-morrow from a gentleman's loins.<sup>60</sup>

What finally occurs to us both about Thomas and Blake in regard to how they see the external world is that the metaphors and images that they employ to explain to us what and how they see are not merely a convenient method of explanation but they are the world. The images and metaphors are what exist in the external world. Further, this way of seeing existence comes, we think, from seeing the universe in terms of man which brings us to the concept of an Albion-type vision. The microcosm of man does contain the same parts and the same ingredients as the macrocosm. We must return at this point to the two poems under discussion and leave our final remarks about Thomas's manner of viewing the world until we have examined more of his poems.

Both "The Force" and "The Sick Rose" are structurally superb. "The Force" is one of Thomas's most tightly organized poems in terms of structure. The poem consists of four stanzas of five lines and a last couplet with the end rhyme on the couplet depending on assonant sounds rather than on complete rhyme. The first line of each stanza begins with 'The', while the last line of the last four stanzas begins with 'How'. The second line of the first three stanzas is stopped with a semi-colon marking a distinct caesura in the line. The stanza is stopped at the end of the third line and then the fourth and fifth lines form one thought with no punctuation at the end of the fourth

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<sup>60</sup>Maud, p. 21.

line. We notice as well that the stanza moves from a first line of eleven syllables to a third line of four. This pattern is repeated in the first four stanzas with no real end rhyme but a great many assonant sounds echoing throughout the poem. The dominant sound in the poem appears to be a variation on the (o), (u), (ow), (oo) vowels which in turn form a regular pattern throughout the poem; there are eleven of these sounds in the first stanza alone. What this type of analysis of a poem proves is that Thomas was a meticulous craftsman indeed.

Blake's structure in "The Sick Rose" is simpler less ornate but just as meticulous. Blake uses two quatrains rhyming a, b, c, b, d, e, f, e. Here we have a very simple structure, fittingly, to carry the meaning of this perfect lyric. The syllable count varies between three, four, and five at the most. A close examination of this poem is worthwhile because the delicacy of the lyric belies the careful structure.

There is a further similarity between the two poems as well, other than that of theme and image. Thomas seems to have borrowed something of Blake's sound pattern from this poem as well. "The Sick Rose" gives us the following sound variations: from (o) to (ou) to (or) to (or) to (ou) to (oy). What we see is that Thomas, like Blake, employed variations on the basic vowel sound of 'worm', and this series of sounds complements the meaning of the poem.

The entire canon of Thomas's poetry (here we mean Collected Poems, which Thomas tells us in his introduction contains all the poems he wished to preserve to the time of publication) abounds

with Blakean borrowings, echoes and archetypes; we will see in our next chapter that the voyage archetype which he could have borrowed from Vala is used by Thomas in "The Altar-wise by Owl-Light" sonnet sequence. At present we wish to examine more of the 18 Poems for Blakean overtones.

"A Process in the Weather of the Heart" has a similar theme to "I See the Boys of Summer" and "The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower". In "A Process in the Weather of the Heart" again Thomas depends on similarity of sound rather than conventional end rhyme. We notice that the (o) sounds move through 'tomb', 'worm', 'womb', 'out', 'bone', 'ghost' as they do in "The Force". The structure of "A Process" as well is somewhat similar to "The Force" in the organization of stanzas. "A Process" consists of five stanzas of varying length and slight variation in syllable count. And like "The Force," each stanza begins with the same sentence structure: article, noun, prepositional phrase. The poem is balanced as well between contraries; it is almost as if, during this period, Thomas keeps remembering Blake's line, "There is a place where contraries are equally True;/ This place is called Beulah. It is a pleasant lovely shadow."<sup>61</sup> Thomas, as it were, is anticipating a Beulah existence, for he had not even attained that at this point in his development. He is, as Maud suggests, still in the world of process. Thomas's world of process is a world for him where light and dark, life and death, cold and warmth, all the contraries exist equally. He does not attain the moony rest of

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<sup>61</sup>Blake, Works, p. 415.



Beulah until his marriage poems and then this rest is continually disrupted by the Spectre of the Sinister Female Will as is Milton in the opening passages of Blake's Milton, but we will reserve further comment on this until a later chapter. Let us return to Thomas's world of warring contraries.

We notice in "A Process" such contraries balanced as "damp to dry", "the golden shot"/ Storms in the freezing tomb", "Turns night to day", "A process in the eye... blindness", "the fathomed sea... unangled land." And so the poem works its way to a conclusion. The theme, the processes that link man with his outer world, is similar to the one Thomas has been working throughout these poems. As we keep remarking, these external processes in nature are not only reflected but reproduced in man's inner world; the macrocosm, for Thomas and we believe for Blake, is reproduced in the microcosm. So we have Thomas using the word 'weather' to reflect man's inner world.

"If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love" is a poem that must be examined briefly for its own excellence as well as for its treatment, with a difference, of the "Thel" theme. Of this poem Jacob Korg remarks:

Olsen, in his persuasive reading of this poem in "The Poetry of Dylan Thomas" describes its speaker as a "modern Hamlet" whose feelings about such fundamental aspects of life as birth, growth, love and death are agonizingly divided between desire and fear. In the last stanza he decides to arm himself against these doubts by limiting himself to the human and the actual.<sup>62</sup>

Similarities immediately apparent between the two poems, Thel and "If I Were Tickled", are that they are both excellent

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<sup>62</sup>J. Korg, D. Thomas, p. 69.

examples of each poet's skill and that they are products of an early period of poetic creativity.

Discussing "The Visitor" we remarked that the theme of Thel is the failure of a vision; it is the failure to achieve fulfillment in this life whether it be maturity, adulthood or some sort of creative failure. Thel feared to enter physical existence which included disease, old age and death and without entering physical existence she could not finally enter paradise. Thel refuses to accept the conditions of the real world and this is essentially the question that Thomas is wrestling with in "If I Were Tickled".

The use of the rhetorical question in the structure of "If I Were Tickled" is reminiscent of Thel, for compare these two lines, one from Thel and one from Thomas's poem:

Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy?  
 Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?  
 to  
 And what's the rub? Death's feather on the nerve?  
 Your mouth, my love, the thistle in the kiss?

Here we see the similar use of the hortatory device, the device of asking the puzzling question which teases the reader to search for an answer. The technique just mentioned, the use of the riddle, makes both poets very fine gnomic poets; perhaps Blake is the better gnomic poet of the two, although certainly Thomas shares this quality with his master.

Returning to the two poems, we notice as well that the lines from Thel contain the phrase "a little curtain of flesh" which reminds us of Thomas's line in "A Process": "Pulls down the shabby curtains of the skin". Although the image has been

somewhat degraded in Thomas by his use of the two words 'shabby' and 'skin' in place of flesh (this degradation, incidentally, seems purposeful on Thomas's part), the close similarity between the two phrases, after what has been established about Blake's influence on Thomas, seems more than a coincidence.

Thomas's poem is a rich, well-constructed and completely successful poem from any point of view. The suggestiveness of his diction is at its best here with such words as 'tickled' and 'rub' which carry such a host of meanings. Tickled, for example, suggests both being physically stimulated in an erotic manner as well as being simply pleased as in the phrase 'tickled pink'. The word 'rub' is suggestive of even more meanings, all of which appear to be valid in the poem; it suggests a gentle tactile stimulation, an impediment, an annoyance, and a difficulty; all of these connotative meanings of the word seem to work within the context of the poem.

The speaker in the poem, not unlike Thel, appears to be an undefined liquid, in the first three stanzas of the poem at least; beginning in the fourth stanza, the speaker becomes an adolescent considering the terrors of adult life. The second stanza of the poem opens with the line "Shall it be male or female? say the fingers" suggesting, of course, an undefined state in the womb. This is followed by the line "And drop the plum like fire from the flesh". This line is very fine in its sound suggesting as it does in the word 'Plum' particularly, the redness and heat of birth as well as the idea of purgation by birth and fire.

The speaker in "If I Were Tickled" works through a number of fears which include sin (the apple), punishment (the flood), execution (the gallows), the demands of physical love (the muscling-in of love) to eventually arrive at the conclusion that he, the speaker, unlike Thel, will risk entry into the real world. We find in the last three stanzas that the speaker has become an adolescent considering the promises and fears of the real world, for he remarks "This world is half the devil's and my own." Thomas may mean here that although the world is half evil, the other half very likely is holy as it belongs to God. Further, the speaker decides to risk entry into this evil holy world when he remarks "I would be tickled by the rub that is:/ Man be my metaphor."

The speaker means by the above line that he wishes to face 'is', to come to terms with reality and not, as did Thel, retreat back into a Beulah existence. The last four words of the poem, "Man be my metaphor", carry with them the microcosm-macrocosm concept which is so prevalent in Thomas's early poems and which is Blakean in the sense that it suggests that man, through dynamic vision organizes his universe for himself and this universe must parallel man as an organism. Man becomes the metaphor through which all of creation is artistically explained.

"If I Were Tickled" differs from Thel then in that Thel gives a shriek and refuses to enter the world of generation: "Fled back unhindered till she came into the vales of Har." The speaker in "If I Were Tickled" chooses to enter the adult world and take his chances. This meaning may be inferred from the

phrase "the rub that is" which occurs in the second-to-the-last line of the poem. The speaker is willing to accept all the 'rubs' that do exist in life rather than remain in a prolonged pubescent "Beulah". Finally, when man becomes the metaphor, he has established a type of identity between two disparate things. If man becomes the metaphor for the artist, he must see the universe, the often unorganized, often inanimate world of nature in terms of man; it is through man's point of view that he will attempt to understand the universe resulting in a humanization of the universe. The artist seeks a type of artistic salvation through man and man's work.

Further Blakean influences on Thomas can be found in his early poem "In the Beginning", which Professor Tindall examines and makes some useful comments on. Once having been alerted to the influence of Blake on Thomas, the sensitive reader can find many Blakean overtones in this poem.

"In the Beginning" opens with the first words of The Gospel of St. John: "In the beginning" but Thomas follows that famous phrase, not with the word, but with a series of puzzling terms: three-pointed star, smile of light, bough of bone, burning ciphers. These terms might all be seen as substitutes for 'the word'. Tindall suggests that the 'three-pointed' star might stand for the three-personed God because the word was God according to the Gospel. The smile of light might well be the smile of illumination through the word; the 'bough of bone' by the same type of analogy becomes the creative arm of the writer while the 'burning cipher' becomes the written word of the poet.

The poet's words burn with a message; they are, as well, a cipher in the sense of a puzzling, thought-provoking utterance. Now, Tindall states of this poem that,

... the creative 'smile of light', is from Jacob Boehme (by way of Joyce?) or some other occulist.<sup>63</sup>

Tindall does not mention that Thomas very likely became aware of the writings of Boehme through Blake and Foster Damon's commentary on Blake which we have established that Thomas owned and read. Certainly the creative smile of light could have come from such an obvious place as Blake's poem "The Tyger". In the first two lines of the poem, then, we find a Blakean overtone, but there are many more in this rather congested poem.

The last line of the first stanza of "In the Beginning" reads "Heaven and hell mixed as they spun." Tindall's comment on this line is,

Blake's 'heaven and hell,' above and below, "spun" in the original mixture of chaos as they spin, co-operating, in the new world.<sup>64</sup>

Having established Blake's influence on Thomas, we suggest that the above line indicates that Thomas read The Marriage of Heaven and Hell and his line from "In the Beginning" is his cryptic way of indicating this. Any number of Blake's proverbs from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell apply to Thomas. Take for example:

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.  
Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth.  
Exuberance is Beauty.  
Improvement makes strait roads; but the crooked roads  
without improvement are roads of Genius.

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<sup>63</sup>Tindall, p. 61.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

and one could continue finding proverbs that would describe an aspect of Thomas but written by Blake. Certainly "Exuberance is Beauty" becomes almost a coda of Thomas's when we recall the way he conducted his personal life. Blake's line, "but the crooked roads without improvement are roads of Genius" becomes a type of gnomic explanation of Thomas's personal life, for we can interpret the line as meaning that Thomas's type of genius ignores the 'crooked roads' of his personal life- such things as the details of household budgets and time payments- to concentrate on his art. The irony of this is that FitzGibbon argues that financial worries and personal stresses helped to kill Thomas as much as his drinking.

The imagery and intention of the last stanza of "In the Beginning" is Urizenic, indicating a further influence of Blake:

In the beginning was the secret brain.  
The brain was celled and soldered in the thought  
Before the pitch was forking to a sun;  
Before the veins were shaking in their sieve,  
Blood shot and scattered to the winds of light  
The ribbed original of love.

Thomas's poem is about creation and about the creation of man in terms of the creation of the world; man becomes a metaphor for the world in this poem. Showing tight structural organization again with the identical phrase starting each stanza and each stanza containing six lines, the poem deals with concepts such as the passing from chaos to shape and order of the world: "Before the pitch was forking to a sun." It carries the idea of the passage from darkness to light: "Blood shot and scattered to the winds of light." There is, as well, the very Blakean anatomical image of the veins "...shaking in their sieve".

Blake's The First Book of Urizen and Thomas's "In the Beginning" deal with similar concepts of void, chaos and creation: "Earth was not: nor globes of attraction;". For the moment we are more interested in the first two lines of Thomas's stanza which contain the images 'the secret brain' and 'celled and soldered', for the lines show a startling similarity to certain lines in Urizen.

Urizen is described as "Self-closed, all-repelling: what Demon/ Hath form'd this abominable void". We see that both poems carry the idea of the secrecy and cunning of human thought, dark plots and stricture. Thomas's second line is particularly Urizenic in the two words 'celled' and 'soldered'. Both words have connotations of restriction, tight-bonded, metallic restrictive form. Blake's poem, in fact, contains the lines "And heated his furnaces, and pour'd/ Iron sodor and sodor of brass." Here we have an example of both poets employing the same type of imagery to describe the creation of the human brain. Blake's character Los (his characterization of poetry) in Urizen also "inclos'd/ In an orb his [Urizen's] fountain of thought." This is just what Thomas does in his poem. Notice how close these next lines are to the type of anatomical image that we keep encountering in these early poems of Thomas's:

In harrowing fear rolling round,  
His nervous brain shot branches  
round the branches of his heart.

The branches in this stanza suggest a veinous or arterial system, particularly in the context of the rest of the poem which emphasizes so strongly the physical anatomy. The above lines



from Urizen contain the same type of blood and vein imagery so common in these early poems of Thomas's and which Tindall describes as "spaghetti in a seive".<sup>65</sup> The image in Thomas is more like spaghetti strands covered with tomato sauce held aloft by some trembling hand.

To this point we have seen, not that Thomas copied Blake--far from it--but that he was powerfully influenced in image and idea by reading Blake's prophecies. This influence suggests that Blake and Thomas shared a similar view of the world and attempted to render that view into art in a somewhat similar fashion as our discussion of Urizen and "In the Beginning" suggests.

We know that Urizen, etched in 1794, when Blake was 37, is in part a parody of Paradise Lost and in part Blake's account of The Fall and Creation, showing how man and the world ended up in their present very imperfect condition. As Damon remarks,

The Macrocosm is repeated in the Microcosm. The Fall from Eternity into Matter is mirrored as the Fall from Innocence into Experience.<sup>66</sup>

Here we have Foster Damon suggesting something in Blake which many Thomas critics have insisted about Thomas. Thomas often explains and describes human emotions in terms of external forces such as weathers and tides so repeating the Macrocosm in the Microcosm, in a sense just as Blake is doing here.

While we have pointed out the striking similarity of the use of the word 'soldered' to describe the formation of the brain by both poets, there is another noteworthy parallel phrase.

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<sup>65</sup>Tindall, p. 62.

<sup>66</sup>Damon, p. 116.

Thomas writes that "The brain was celled and soldered in the thought" while Blake writes "Forgetfulness, dumbness, necessity,/ In chains of the mind locked up." The accumulation of such evidence of similar statements found in Thomas and Blake more and more convince us that Thomas knew The First Book of Urizen well and dipped into it for poetic images.

Another early poem of Thomas's offers us further evidence of Blakean influence. "I Dreamed My Genesis", which appeared in 18 Poems, is straightforward enough in meaning and structure. The theme, involving another crucial step in Thomas's development, is well stated in the first lines of the poem: the speaker describes his dream of death and re-birth in terms of machine and war imagery. The voice tells us that he is 'breaking' through the rotating shell towards a final vision (of Jerusalem?) by means of a "motor muscle on the drill"; this device enables him to drive "Through vision and the girdered nerve". The rotating shell which has a sinister presence about it certainly suggests the mundane shell of Blake which in his myth represents the present universe that must be overcome or broken through to achieve the final vision. We note Urizen's actions in "Chapter III" of the poem described in the following lines:

And a roof vast, petrific around  
On all sides he fram'd, like a womb,  
Where thousands of rivers in veins  
Of blood pour down the mountains to cool  
The eternal fires, beating without  
From Eternals;

Thomas's rotating shell and Urizen's vast roof are really the same concept of enclosure and restriction which must be overcome

by the artist. In fact Los's role in Urizen in many ways parallels the speaker's role in Thomas's early poems.

"I Dreamed My Genesis" contains such images as 'the girdered nerve', 'irons in the grass', 'metal of suns', 'night-gear'd man' which are all drawn from machines and a mechanical universe. This use of machine imagery by Thomas is not meant to equate man with some unthinking machine but rather, in our opinion, Thomas's means of making his images as graphic and striking as he possibly could. Just as Blake is an extremely visual poet in that he attempts to illustrate his ideas graphically so that the reader 'sees' what he means, so Thomas attempts the same things in his poems.

"I Dreamed My Genesis" describes a return to a type of physical death into the womb of conception and a final re-birth towards a vision of a new man: "Stale of Adam's brine until, vision/ Of new man strength, I seek the sun." Thomas's poem then is Blakean in its fusion of the organic with the mineral at the level of the image; in fact Thomas's poem closes with a promise of the New Jerusalem-vision of Blake's. We see that both Blake and Thomas were interested in a redeemed man and how man may be redeemed.

Thomas's fondness for images drawn from machinery, metal and what we term black-smith imagery is well illustrated in "I, In My Intricate Image". The first stanza follows:

I, in my intricate image, stride on two levels,  
 Forged in man's minerals, the brassy orator  
 Laying my ghost in metal,  
 The scales of this twin world tread on the double,  
 My half ghost in armour hold hard in death's corridor,  
 To my man-iron sidle.

Thomas here joins the two ideas of metal and mineral in the phrase 'forged in man's minerals' as if the speaker in the poem had been moulded in some blast furnace or steel foundry. In the same stanza he speaks of 'ghost in armour' and 'man-iron sidle' continuing this metaphor of man being forged in the foundry. The stanza deals with the poet as person and writer. His intricate image is himself or the 'armour' that he hides behind and as a poet his other image is set in printer's type. So in a very literal sense the speaker is forged in metal. Again we note the similarity between Thomas's imagery here and what we term the black-smith imagery of The First Book of Urizen.

"Chapter IV" of Urizen which describes the changes of Urizen contains many black-smith images; in fact the basic image is that of the forge, the hammer and tongs. Los, significantly, is seen forming nets and gins or snares as he binds the dark changes in "rivets of iron and brass"; Los hammers his rivets and works his bellows. With hammer and tongs he forges time in hours, days and years while old Urizen sleeps on. This section of the poem is then followed by a graphic account of the creation of the human body. First a roof encloses a fountain of thought, the head. A description of the spine and ribs follows, then a description of the heart, and finally the formation of the eyes, ears and nose. About this section of Urizen Mr. Mills Harper writes:

It is well known that the ancient tripartite division of man into head, heart and belly or bowels to represent intellect, passion and materialistic desire originated for Western culture at least, in Plato's "Timaeus".<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>G. Mills Harper, The Neoplatonism of William Blake, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 194.

Thomas, then, may have gathered some Platonic thought from his study of Blake as well as the idea for many of his images. While we could continue to search Thomas's poetry for the blacksmith image which abounds in his early poems, and which we are tracing back to Blake's influence, we consider that our point has been made with the above examples.

There is another similarity of interest between the two poets that should be mentioned in this chapter: that is the fascination on the part of the two poets by childhood innocence. While Blake's use of the state of innocence is considerably different from Thomas's, this interest does constitute a similarity. Childhood innocence might be traced as a theme in both poets. Even in Thomas's later poems we find evidence of his nostalgic remembering of childhood and his echoing of Blake. "Poem in October", published in 1945, gives evidence of this. The poem celebrates a nostalgic return to childhood in memory. The last stanza in the poem follows:

And there could I marvel my birthday  
 Away but the weather turned around. And the true  
 Joy of the long dead child sang burning  
     In the sun.  
 It was my thirtieth  
 Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon  
 Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.

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

The key word in this stanza is 'joy', the joy of long lost childhood remembered against the 'October blood'. Thomas's lines bring to mind Blake's "Infant Joy" where the child cries,

Joy is my name.  
 Sweet joy befall thee!

This line of Blake's corresponds to a moment in Thomas's poem when the poet for an instant stands in the 'summer noon' of his childhood and cries out at the joy of it, the fine joy of innocent childhood. A major difference between the two poems is that Blake's "Infant Joy", part of The Songs of Innocence, is told from the child's point of view so that it does have an innocent, naive air about it; from the side of experience, which is the side from which Thomas's poem is narrated, the tone of Blake's lyric is almost pathetic, for this is the way that experience views this sort of statement of innocence: "I have no name;/ I am but two days old." Thomas does not risk the same thing in "Poem In October".

"Poem In October" is embellished with a Keatsian richness in its imagery that sets it apart from Blake's unadorned lyric completely; these lines will serve to illustrate our point.

It 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.

The warmth of this stanza certainly recalls the second stanza of Keats' "Ode To a Nightingale". Both Thomas and Blake in the above poems are risking a great deal, but both poets manage to accomplish what they attempt. Blake's is an utterance of the actual child as it were, while Thomas's is an attempt to charm us back to the childhood state. Thomas skirts the edge of

sentimentality and moves, for a moment, toward the maudlin, but his art holds firm with the result that the poem is highly successful in its warmly emotional recollection of childhood joy. There is a plaintiveness in Thomas's tone which is absent in Blake because of the difference in point of view taken by the artists. The aura of Thomas's poem is one of holiness; for Thomas, the recollection of childhood pleasure and innocence makes everything that lives holy; the poem becomes a celebration of childhood. Thomas's attitude to the subject reminds us of certain lines in Vala:

Arise, you little glancing wings and sing your infant joy!  
 Arise and drink your bliss!  
 For everything that lives is holy; for the source of life  
 Descends to be a weeping babe;  
 For the Earthworm renews the moisture of the sandy plain.<sup>68</sup>

In Blake's lines above we have Thomas's intention stated- "everything that lives is holy" -with the line "sing your infant joy". The lines contain as well an allusion to Christ as the source of life becoming an infant babe. For Thomas, too, by the time he was writing "Poem In October", Christ was occupying a central place in his cosmology.

Blake's illustration to "Infant Joy" in Songs of Innocence could well serve as a graphic reproduction of a central image for Thomas. The illustration shows a large blossom containing a young woman balanced on her toes, bending toward a mother holding a new born baby in her arms. The young woman, balanced, has butterfly wings attached. We know that the butterfly is generally a symbol of resurrection while the flower of love is the chalice

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<sup>68</sup>Blake, Works, ed. Keynes, p. 277.

of the womb itself. The child is fully formed which suggests that conception and generation have taken place. The same enclosing blossom could represent, as well, a tomb if we consider the theme of failure in Thel. The illustration reminds us of Thomas's image of the worm of the flesh awakening in the womb of existence.

To this point in our discussion, we have found evidence in Thomas's short story "The Visitor", in his poems "Before I Knocked" and "The Force That Through the Green Fuse" and "In the Beginning" that Thomas borrowed directly from Blake. We have gathered evidence, as well, that Thomas knew Blake's poetry extensively (as well as Foster Damon's exegesis of it), that Thomas admired Blake's poetry, and that he was profoundly influenced by it.

This chapter in our argument, then, contains evidence, not only of Thomas's direct borrowing from Blake, but also evidence of Thomas's open admiration of Blake and his similarity to Blake, as pointed out by other critics. Both Professor Tindall and Professor Korg point out Blakean overtones in the poetry of Thomas; we have gone to some length to illustrate that these overtones occur in image and theme. The many occurrences of 'Urizenic' imagery in Thomas's 18 Poems, including the concept of Urizen's 'Mundane shell' occurring in Thomas's "I Dreamed My Genesis", establish, for our purposes, that Thomas read The First Book of Urizen carefully and borrowed ideas and images from it.

We have seen, in the material discussed, that Thomas was fond of expressing his ideas in terms of anatomical images that,



as mentioned above, can be traced to Blake's Urizen. The use of anatomical imagery by both poets suggests a type of glorification of the human form which is a first necessary step to the glorification of the universe.

We have seen, as well, both Thomas and Blake concerned with the question of chaos, processes of development of life (to the extent in Thomas that his early poems have been called process poems by Ralph Maud), and man's function in the universe. For both poets man is the centre of their attention and concern, including the role of physical love between man and woman and its role in salvation. Thomas's concern with the sexual act in 18 Poems reflects both fascination and fear, while in Blake's Urizen physical love acts as a bond between Los and Enitharmon but causes The Eternals to shudder as it results in a further splitting of human nature. Physical love, for both poets then, becomes something to be feared and mistrusted although for Blake it remains a door to eternity.

Having established to this point Thomas's direct debt to Blake in the form of literary borrowing and less directly in the form of ideas and themes, we now want to extend our investigation to the similar world view of both poets and to the similar way that they gave poetic expression to this world view. As we continue our study, our discussion will imply that Thomas was, in fact, familiar with the bulk of Blake's works including "An Island in the Moon".

### CHAPTER III

#### THREATENING IMAGES

The remarks that follow will be neither definitive nor exhaustive but rather selective and indicative of tendencies in both poets. Our task will be to trace further similarities between Blake and Thomas and to show where, in our opinion, Thomas has been clearly influenced by Blake.

The "Altar-wise By Owl-Light" sonnet sequence, which Thomas used to conclude 25 Poems is rich in Blakean images and overtones and in certain points corresponds to what Blake was saying in Vala and Milton. These correspondences center around each poet's handling of certain experiences in their art as well as in their aesthetic approach to this experience. While we cannot 'prove' that there was any direct borrowing from Blake on Thomas's part when he was writing the "Altar-wise by Owl-Light" sonnet sequence, we do wish to point out certain similarities in imagery and preoccupations in theme between the two poets which suggest that Thomas could well have been reading Vala and Milton while he was working out these densely packed sonnets.

Certainly the form of the two poems differs in that Thomas's poem consists of ten tightly wrought sonnets, while Blake's Milton is an epic of sorts engraved on fifty plates. Thomas

wrote his sonnet sequence when he was just twenty-one and moving into the second phase of his poetry, while Blake's Milton was etched between the years 1804-1808<sup>69</sup> when Blake was nearing fifty.

Thomas's sonnet sequence has been interpreted in many ways; Peter Revell sees it as "a kind of triumphant affirmation which makes him henceforward the poet of deaths and entrances. They become the holy sonnets of the new made Adam."<sup>70</sup> Mr. Revell adds,

The progression of the poem is from the mortal, fallen finite world of evil and death to the timeless, infinite, external world of goodness and mercy, in which sexual division ceases to exist, progression like that in Blake and Dante.<sup>71</sup>

The last four lines of "Sonnet X" do suggest a conclusion similar to the concluding lines of Milton. Both poems end with garden-like images of promise and fulfillment. Comparing the last line of Milton--"To go forth to the great harvest and Vintage of the Nations"--with the last few lines of Thomas's tenth sonnet which are "Green as beginning, let the garden diving/ Soar, with its two bark towers, to that Day/ When the worm builds with the gold straws of venom/ My nest of mercies in the rude, red tree.", we do note a similarity in imagery implying a similar purpose.

In Thomas's lines we have the two trees of Eden somehow united among several puns, the one on 'rude' being the most obvious. This pun appears to be a play on the word rood while carrying with it the meaning of primitive; the line itself has a tone of mercy and forgiveness about it and seems to promise

<sup>69</sup>Keynes, Works, p. 375.

<sup>70</sup>P. Revell, "Altarwise By Owl-Light", Alphabet, (London, Ontario), p. 42.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

eternal life. Just how these poets arrived at this similar tone in their very different poems must be briefly mentioned. While we have followed Thomas's development from his early process poems to this sonnet sequence, we have not, perhaps, said enough about Blake in this connection. A brief look at Blake's Vala seems in order then before we consider Milton and its correspondences to the sonnet sequence.

Vala might be outlined in the following manner:

"Night the First" deals with the first confusion of the Fall; the separation of the senses from the Earth Mother, and the birth and early life of the Poet and Inspiration. "Night the Second" describes the triumph of Reason. "Night the Third" narrates the casting out of Pleasure and the further Fall of the body. "Night the Fourth", however, allows the fallen Body to triumph. "Night the Fifth" follows with the inevitable birth of Revolt. "Night the Sixth" describes Reason's vain attempt to invade the realm of the Spirit. "Night the Seventh", the psychological seventh, begins the return toward Truth with the outbreak of Revolution and the Poet's first perceptions of divine reality. "Night the Eighth" is concerned with the triumph of all errors in the Crucifixion (the necessary preliminary for the Millennium). "Night the Ninth" ends the whole with the triumphant destruction of error and the welcoming of man to his place in Eternity... the making of the Bread and Wine of Eternity, and the dawn of the ultimate Sabbath.<sup>72</sup>

Damon's summary suggests both the similarities to the sonnet sequence and the many differences. Thomas gives us ten sonnets while Blake gives us nine nights; both are packed with meaning and present many difficulties on a first reading. However, the poems offer analogies and correspondences which are central to our argument.

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<sup>72</sup>Damon, p. 155.

"Night the First" states the theme of the whole poem and describes man's fall into warring aspects of himself. The reader meets such personalities as Tharmas, Enitharmon, Enion and Los. According to Foster Damon, we can assign abstract concepts to these characters so that Enion represents the generative instinct, Enitharmon represents spiritual beauty and Los represents poetry.<sup>73</sup> We can turn directly to Vala to discover just what happened at the fall. Blake tells us that,

Four mighty ones are in every man; a Perfect Unity  
Cannot Exist but from the Universal Brotherhood of  
Eden, The Universal Man, To Whom be Glory Evermore."

Then follows that statement of the theme of the entire poem:

Daughters of Beulah, Sing  
His fall into Division and his Resurrection to unity:  
His fall into the Generation of decay and death, and his  
Regeneration by the Resurrection from the dead.<sup>74</sup>

In spite of or beyond the distinct echoes of the opening lines of Paradise Lost, these lines also may be read as the theme of Thomas's sonnet sequence. Just as "Night the First" describes the fall of man into generation and "the early life of the poet and inspiration," so does Thomas's "Sonnet I." Professor Maud's comments on the first sonnet are revealing here:

In the castration image proper, the agent is the 'atlas-eater', whom Thomas describes as a 'world-devouring ghost creature'. Let us take him up on that word ghost, and postulate the Holy Ghost, who certainly is a 'wizard's heel-chaser' (i.e. 'a dog among the fairies') in the sense brought out in Milton's "Nativity Ode", one of Thomas's favorite poems, the pagan gods fleeing before Him.<sup>75</sup>

Now let us return to the opening lines of Vala for a moment. We find the lines "... he his emanations propagated,/ Fairies of

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<sup>73</sup>Damon, p. 156.

<sup>74</sup>Blake, The Works, p. 252.

<sup>75</sup>Maud, p. 99.

Albion, afterwards Gods of the Heathen." Blake's line combines three ideas: a central idea in Milton's "Nativity Ode", Thomas's dog among the fairies, and one main idea Thomas is attempting to express in his first sonnet. In the "Nativity Ode" Christ's birth defeats the pagan gods as it is expressed in stanzas XIX through XXV. Milton's idea begins "The Oracles are dumb," and ends with the lines "Our babe to show his Godhead true,/ Can in his swaddling bands control the damned crew." If Maud's interpretation is valid, then we have a triple literary analogue in the idea of Christ's birth causing the pagan gods to flee. As we have illustrated the idea in Milton, Blake and Thomas, the sequence of borrowing would, reasonably be from Milton to Blake and then from Blake to Thomas. However, Thomas may have taken the idea directly from Milton because we know that the "Nativity Ode" was one of Thomas's favorite poems.

The meaning of "Sonnet I" approximates the meaning of "Night One" of Vala. While there have been many differing explications of the sonnets, there has been general agreement as to at least part of what the sonnets mean. "Sonnet I", most critics agree, describes the birth of Thomas and the early life of the young poet which corresponds with the birth of Los in "Night One" of Vala. Thomas's "half-way house" is the womb, while the "furies" have a definite Blakean ring about them. Thomas then is describing his own birth, and as Tindall points out, since a son's birth is the death of the father<sup>76</sup>, Thomas's father is the gentleman that "lay graveward" or, since birth is the beginning of death,

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<sup>76</sup>Tindall, A Reader's Guide, p. 129.

Thomas's lines also convey this idea. The next line, according to Maud's quotation above, might refer to the Holy Ghost as well as carry autobiographical overtones; the line is "The Atlas-eater with a jaw for news"; Thomas as a young boy worked on a newspaper in Wales.

The sonnet continues describing the poet's fall into Generation, in Blake's terms, and his beginning struggle to achieve his lost unity, lost in his fall from Eternity: "The night of time under the Christward shelter." The phrase "Christward shelter" introduces the ultimate redemptive figure into the sonnet and the lines imply that the poet must seek both inspiration for his work through a Christian view of life and through Christ find an answer to decay and death. That there is a correspondence between the statements in Thomas's "Sonnet I" and Blake's "Night One" becomes clear from the above statements. Both poems describe the need of a "Divine Image" through which salvation will be achieved; and both poems end on a threatening note. Thomas speaks of "That night of time" while Blake's poem describes "Urizen, with darkness overspreading all the armies"<sup>77</sup>. Finally, Blake perhaps describes the purpose of both poems best when he writes,

.... for One must be All  
And comprehend within himself all things both small and great.<sup>78</sup>

In contrast to our remarks above, Elder Olsen wishes to interpret the entire sonnet sequence in terms of the relation of the constellation Hercules to the other constellations. This

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<sup>77</sup>Keynes, Blake, The Works, p. 266.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

interpretation, while ingenious and interesting, is finally unsatisfactory because it moves the sonnets away from Thomas the poet who was the subject of almost all of his poems. Olsen argues that there are six levels of symbolism which he lists as follows:

1. A level based on the analogy of human life to the span of a year, which permits the use of phenomena of the seasons to represent events of human life.
2. A level based on the analogy between the sun and man, permitting the attributes of each to stand for those of the other;
3. A level of Thomas's "private" symbolism.
4. A level based on ancient myth, principally Greek, representing the fortunes of the Sun in terms of the adventures of the sun-hero Hercules;
5. A level based on relations of the constellation Hercules to other constellations and astronomical phenomena; and
6. A level derived from the Christian interpretation of levels four and five.<sup>79</sup>

Olsen then adds "borrowing his symbols from these astronomical conventions, he works out a meditation on the fate of man, to reach a conclusion which seems to settle the problems of his early poetry."<sup>80</sup> The first phase of Thomas's thought as seen in his poetry ends with the sonnet sequence and, as our argument has been suggesting, Thomas's settlement corresponds to Blake's conclusions in Vala.

Olsen's interpretation of "Sonnet I" is worth examining if only to see how it differs from our interpretation. Olsen sees "the half-way house" as referring to Hercules declining in the

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<sup>79</sup>E. Olsen, The Poetry of Dylan Thomas, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 65.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 66.



west "followed by Scorpius (the scorpion), Draco (the dragon), and the Serpens Caput (Head of the serpent in Ophiucus, the Snake Holder); these are his furies as he goes "graveward".<sup>81</sup> This type of interpretation, while interesting, is less attractive than the more autobiographical and visionary one that our argument suggests.

Olsen's exegesis of "Sonnet II" is valuable as it may lead us toward Blake once more. Olsen states:

In this sonnet Thomas is apparently musing, or addressing the sun symbol. Anything is a metaphor for death, since death is the only reality and therefore illustrated by all things.<sup>82</sup>

Olsen's statement, while not precisely Blakean, does suggest the Blakean idea that death is the only reality or, more accurately, a movement toward the only reality because, in Blakean terms, one must die out of Beulah into Generation to achieve Eternity which is the ultimate reality. While this idea is essentially subliminal in the sonnet, the main idea suggests a continuation of the growing and maturing of the artist. Tindall sees the poem in terms of "Climbing to light or growing up means death, but death, in nature, means resurrection, according to the "hollow agent" (womb, tomb, skull, phallus)."<sup>83</sup> Here we return to the Blakean solution to the problem which must be found through Christ who is the unfragmented man. The idea of climbing the light suggests, as well, something of "Night The Second" in the sense that Urizen, who is the subject of most of the book,

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<sup>81</sup>E. Olsen, The Poetry of Dylan Thomas, p. 68.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>83</sup>Tindall, A Reader's Guide, p. 130.

is known as the Prince of Light yet he is a false principle and if followed ultimately leads to death while the only death that will lead to Eternity is the death through Christ. "Book the Second" opens with the following lines:

Rising upon his couch of death Albion beheld his sons.  
Turning his Eyes outward to Self, losing the Divine Vision,  
Albion call'd Urizen...

An interesting interrelationship of poet to poet to critic occurs in "Book the Second" which links Thomas, and Blake with Elder Olsen's commentary on the sonnets. "Book the Second" is the account of the division of man into warring aspects of self caused by the Fall. Urizen is described building his Golden Hall and bounding the universe by stars to place a limit to the Fall. In Blake we find that the altar in Urizen's Golden Hall "stood on twelve steps nam'd after the names of her twelve sons/ And was erected at the chief entrance of Urizen's hall". Now a commentary on this line by Damon states that the twelve sons of Urizen represent the signs of the zodiac,<sup>84</sup> so Olsen's astrological interpretation of Thomas's sonnet sequence is, in a sense, Blakean, or, turning the argument around, Olsen's criticism implies that Thomas had a zodiacal scheme in mind in the sequence while our argument suggests that Thomas could have borrowed the structure of the sonnet sequence from Blake, so we have a linking of poet to poet to critic.

Throughout the sonnet sequence, Thomas was attempting to say something that was similar to Blake's statements in Vala and later in Milton. Blake in "Book the Second" tells us that "the

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<sup>84</sup>Damon, p. 372.

Divine Vision appear'd in Luvah's robes of blood" which could mean that the Divine Vision must be pursued through the emotions and artistic inspiration that is through the flesh and blood and not through separated Reason. The next step is to build the mundane shell which is this earth or this existence, a means of protecting man from a further fall but also preventing him from perceiving directly the Divine Vision. Now, at this point in "Book the Second" there are three happenings which coincide and are vital to our argument. After a long descriptive passage, Blake writes "Thus was the Mundane shell builded by Urizen's strong Power". Then we have the following lines:

For the Divine Lamb, Even Jesus who is the Divine Vision,  
Permitted all, lest Man should fall into Eternal Death;<sup>85</sup>

And finally,

Thus were the stars of heaven created like a golden chain  
To bind the Body of Man to heaven from falling into the Abyss.  
Each took his station and his course began with sorrow and  
care.

What has happened is that Urizen has bounded the physical world from heaven--"Urizen beheld Heaven walled round"--causing Jesus to descend in the flesh and forming a link or anchor "like a golden chain" to hold the physical world to Heaven and prevent it from falling into the Abyss. The above passages are related to Thomas's "Sonnet II" in the sense that the mundane shell corresponds to Thomas's pavement while man, through Jesus's intercession, must "Jacob to the stars". In both poems the idea is that the Divine Vision and the lost unity of man will be achieved through Jesus. Both poems contain the concept that the creation of the world

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<sup>85</sup>Blake, The Works, p. 274.

established limits to the fall, but man's next problem is to achieve the stature that he lost in his fall. While Thomas's cryptic lines, "Jacob to the stars" and "Over these groundworks thrusting through a pavement" are, from the narrative point of view, less satisfying and certainly less expansive; they do correspond to Blake's statements in the passages cited.

Blake, in "Book the Second", continues his personified description of the function of the stars, referring to them as Urizen's sons and daughters and then writes a passage full of geometric and pyramid images which Thomas very well might have used for the imagery in certain of these same sonnets. The following lines are of particular interest:

And measure, mathematic motion wondrous along the deep,  
In fiery pyramid, or Cube, or unornamented pillar square  
Of fire, far shining, travelling along even to its destin'd  
end;

...

Such the periods of many worlds.  
Others triangular, right angled course maintain. Others  
obtuse, Acute, Scalene, in simple paths; but others move  
In intricate ways, biquadrate, Trapeziums, Rhombs, Rhomboids  
Parallelograms triple and quadruple, polygonic  
In their amazing hard subdu'd course in the vast deep.<sup>86</sup>

Blake is describing here the paths of the stars which bind the world. Because this Urizenic world is purely geometric, it is unattractive to Blake and finally threatening.

"Book the Second" closes with Los dying when he is deserted by Enitharmon but reviving when he hears her song (Enitharmon's) which contains the passage referred to earlier about 'infant joy'. Enion laments of her sufferings in the world of experience while Ahania hears the lamentation and rises up from Urizen so that

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<sup>86</sup> Blake, The Works, p. 275.

Urizen is further separated as his emanation broods over him. A translation of this passage might be that Enion (the generative instinct) has been misdirected and abused so that any genuine pleasure to be associated with generation or procreation is divorced from it with the result that man's natural instinct to find pleasure and joy in generation (procreation) is stifled, condemned and restricted by Urizenic laws and Thou-shalt-Nots.

Now, while both Thomas and Blake shared these similar ideas so that we can say that their ideas correspond, they used radically different methods to give expression to the ideas. In the two poems being compared, we have seen that both poets express a desire to move from a mortal, fallen world to a timeless, infinite world of complete unity. Mr. Olsen, quoted above, describes Thomas as moving toward some sort of settlement of the problems in his earlier poetry which shows such a preoccupation with death, decay, birth and ageing. Both poets then seek an answer to the impasse with which life itself confronts one. That both Thomas and Blake were centrally concerned with the problem of sexual love in marriage and the difficulties involved in marriage as part of this impasse will become apparent in our discussion of Thomas's 'marriage poems' and Blake's Visions of the Daughters of Albion.

Mr. Kleinman offers a very detailed and equally ingenious while more attractive exegesis of the sonnet sequence in his book The Religious Sonnets of Dylan Thomas. Kleinman, as well, sees the sequence as,

...a deeply moving statement of religious perplexity concluding in spiritual certainty. They reflect

the wonder, awe, doubt, and faith of a young poet who could not reconcile the capacity of divine pity with the necessity of human sacrifice.

...  
It is in the eighth sonnet that Thomas's doubt wrestles with faith as he sees in the Crucifixion the triumph of eternity over pain. The ninth sonnet wavers between weariness and expectancy. In the tenth sonnet Thomas's soul is brushed by an angel's wing, and in the last lines of the poem prophecy and credo ring plangently of the green garden and the everlasting mercy. The poem begins with a sonnet mocking the descent of the Word; it concludes in a spiraling ascent of faith.<sup>87</sup>

Here, then, are three critics, Revell, Kleinman and Olsen, who agree that the sonnet sequence is one poem and ought to be treated as such; further, they agree that there is a movement in the poem which approximates the movement that we have suggested and indicated can be found in Blake's Vala.

Although our argument does not mean to imply that there is a parallel between each sonnet and each night of Vala, there is a progression in each poem that must be discussed in further detail. Certain of Mr. Kleinman's remarks on "Sonnet I" are worth examining here for their bearing on Blake.

The phrase "Old cock from nowwheres" occurring in "Sonnet I," suggests the Ancient of Days to Kleinman,<sup>88</sup> the "old chief or boss". Kleinman here draws the reader's attention to what he considers a clear Blakean allusion. Although Kleinman does not mention Blake at this point, the reader naturally associates the Ancient of Days with the Urizen figure of Blake or God the Father of Milton in Paradise Lost. Kleinman, still discussing "Sonnet I,"

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<sup>87</sup>H. H. Kleinman, The Religious Sonnets of Dylan Thomas, (University of California Press: Los Angeles, 1963), p. 11.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

remarks that "The zodiacal signs are always used metaphorically by Thomas. In the last line they foretell the career of Christ, who is born in December, near enough to the twenty-first of the month to place him in Capricorn..."<sup>89</sup> Kleinman, too, sees Thomas employing the signs of the Zodiac in these sonnets just as Olsen did, although Kleinman does not make nearly as much of it. This brings us back to the point that Thomas may have been given the idea of using the signs of the Zodiac from reading Vala.

Kleinman does make some direct references to Blake in his discussion of the sonnets, particularly in his comments on "Sonnet III." Kleinman says of lines seven, eight, and nine of the sonnet which follow:

Rip of the vaults, I took my marrow-ladle  
Out of the wrinkled undertaker's van,  
And, Rip Van Winkle from a timeless cradle,  
Dipped me breast-deep in the descended bone;

that

This image of God the Father seems to have been fashioned out of Washington Irving's Sketch Book and Blake's illustrations from the Book of Urizen and "Song of Los".<sup>90</sup> The time has come for God to beget himself as his Son...

Kleinman, like Jacob Korg, points out the echoes of Urizen but does little with them. There are many other Blakean echoes in the sonnet sequence, some of an incidental nature, some central to our discussion.

"Sonnet IV" suggests a curious relationship to Blake's "Auguries of Innocence". Kleinman, in his discussion of this sonnet makes the obvious point that the sonnet is largely a series of questions

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<sup>89</sup>Kleinman, The Religious Sonnets, p. 22.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

and riddles for which no answers are given, although the answers are often implied in the questions. Thomas's method here is reminiscent of Blake's "Auguries" then as a few lines will illustrate. Blake writes,

A Robin Red breast in a Cage  
 Puts all Heaven in a Rage.  
 A dove house fill'd with doves and Pigeons  
 Shudders Hell thro' all its regions.

...  
 The Bat that flits at close of Eve  
 Has left the Brain that won't Believe.

The thing to be noticed here is the similarity of method between Thomas and Blake. Both poets ask questions which tease and taunt the reader; the result is that the sensitive reader is forced to search further in the poet's work for possible answers to these gnomisms. What is the unprepared reader to make of such lines of Thomas's as "What is the meter of the dictionary?/ The size of genesis? the short spark's gender?" Blake is not using the same method of interrogation here as Thomas but we know that the use of interrogation was a favorite method of Blake's. The first line of Thomas's "Sonnet VII," "Now stamp the Lord's Prayer on a grain of rice" is very suggestive of the first lines of "Auguries" which reads "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower." Again the reader is reminded of just how rich Thomas is in Blakean echoes.

Finding echoes of Blake in Thomas's "Sonnet VI," Kleinman explains that the imagery of the sixth sonnet recalls "the subterranean furnaces and mountainous seas of Blake's prophetic books."<sup>91</sup> Although he does not give us an exact reference for

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<sup>91</sup>Kleinman, p. 74.



the comparison, we can easily find one in Vala. Compare these lines from "Night the Second":

Then seiz'd the Lions of Urizen their work and  
 heated in the forge  
 Roar the bright masses; thund'ring beat the hammers,  
 many a pyramid  
 Is formed and thrown down thund'ring into the deeps  
 of Non Entity.  
 Heated red hot they, hissing, rend their way down  
 many a league.

Thomas does speak of 'lava's light', 'burned seas silence', 'the fats of midnight' and again 'Old cock from nowheres' which in Thomas's idiom carries the idea of "the deeps of Non Entity". Thomas's sonnet, while not nearly as noisy as Blake's passage nor as overpowering in the imagery, does have something of the same destructive tone to it as well as a mood of the darkness-before-creation. The phrase with which Thomas's poem opens "the tide-traced crater" suggests something of Blake's lava-spewing, primordial volcanic furnaces.

Still discussing the sixth sonnet, Kleinman points out that Thomas was familiar with Blake's poems, but perhaps more important, he suggests that Thomas, like Yeats, became very interested in the esoterica written by Arthur E. Waite. Kleinman then points out that Denis Saurat's Literature and the Occult Tradition which was published in England in 1930 deals with Blake's interest in cabalistic lore.<sup>92</sup> Kleinman mentions this because he argues that the first section of the Zohar, which is a comment on Genesis, suggests a parallel with the sonnet sequence. Our interest in this is that his argument links Thomas, Blake

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<sup>92</sup>Kleinman, p. 75.

and Milton and moves us toward a necessary discussion of archetypes in literature, for Kleinman points out that Blake, Yeats and Milton all show the influence of the Cabala. It is intriguing to speculate that Thomas may have read Mr. Saurat's book at the time when Thomas was writing his early poems and undergoing such crucial artistic development. "Sonnet VI" then offers us further proof of the close relationship between Blake and Thomas. Certainly both poets share a similarity of total vision. Another way of stating our point might be to say that the minds of both poets worked in similar archetypes which would account, in part, for the many, many similar image patterns which we have been finding in both poets.

Kleinman points out a further similarity to Blake in "Sonnet V." Explaining that the medusa image was used by Ovid as a symbol of female absorption in whose tentacles male identity is crushed, he states:

Blake in a similar passage (image) illustrating the procreative and annihilating quality of the female will speaks of... 'a vast Polypus/ Of living fibres down into the Sea of Time and Space growing/ A self-devouring monster Human Death Twenty seven fold...' <sup>93</sup>

This passage is from "Plate 38" of Milton in which four states of humanity in repose are being shown to Ololon while the sight just described is seen in Ulro. As Frye describes Ulro in A Commentary on Milton, it is "the pure state of Nature of which Blake took so low a view...nothing but suggestions of indifference, mystery, inscrutable fate, a relentless fight to survive, and loneliness." <sup>94</sup> This comment really serves to describe much

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<sup>93</sup>Kleinman, p. 70.

<sup>94</sup>Frye, The Divine Vision, p. 111.

of the world that we meet in Thomas's early poems as well as the worlds of the sixth and seventh sonnets, for in both sonnets we have lines referring to the destroying furies, the Polypus, the sinister female will: Thomas writes "The bagpipe-breasted ladies in the deadweed/ Blew out the blood gauze through the wound of manwax." And "Time's tune my ladies with the teats of music/ The scaled sea-sawers, fix in a naked sponge." At this point in the sonnet sequence, the speaker or traveller is still in a hellish world of dark forms, sinister shapes and evil intentions; a method of redemption has not arrived yet but is immediately to appear in the eighth sonnet which Kleinman and Revell see as the climax of the sonnet sequence. Kleinman, in fact, argues that the entire sequence moves toward the eighth sonnet in a steady ascent. The first seven sonnets deal with Crucifixion, Burial, and Resurrection while the eighth sonnet describes the poet breaking through the agonies and conflicts of the earlier sonnets into a timeless universe where opposites are reconciled much as Blake describes the process in the opening lines of "Book the Second" of Milton:

There is a place where Contrarieties are equally True:  
This place is called Beulah. It is a pleasant lovely  
Shadow. Where no dispute can come, Because of those  
who Sleep.

Thomas's "Sonnet VIII" describes the Crucifixion in the first two lines of the poem: "This was the crucifixion on the mountain,/ Time's nerve in vinegar, the gallow grave/ As tarred with blood as the bright thorns I wept;" and then continues with a description of Christ's sacrifice for man's ultimate redemption. Christ becomes "all glory's sawbones" in the sense,

perhaps, that he is the divine surgeon healing the ills of man. Kleinman's statement about the poem is explicit: "This is the climax of the poem. The first seven sonnets move toward this mountain in a steady ascent".<sup>95</sup> He then adds that "All the drama and agony of the Passion are concentrated in this single sonnet. The prophecies in the preceding sonnets have now been fulfilled."<sup>96</sup>

Our interest here is to show how closely Thomas's sonnets "VIII," "IX," and "X" parallel the last two nights of Vala. "Night the Eighth" deals with the triumph over all errors in the Crucifixion which is a necessary preliminary to the Millenium. "Night the Eighth" opens in Eternity: "Then all in Great Eternity Met in the Council of God/ ...The limit of Contraction now was fixed and Man began/ To wake upon the Couch of Death;". Next appears the Divine Vision in the form of Jesus, and as Damon explains:

Again we reach a confusion of symbolic figures, blurred for the purpose of being more subtly definite. Jesus (Love), Luvah (the Passions), and Orc (Revolution) are at the same time three<sup>97</sup> aspects of the same Eternal State, and coexist in time.

As the Night continues, Urizen and Los battle while the Shadowy Female appeals to Urizen to release Luvah (the Passions). Then the reader learns that Enitharmon "nam'd the Female, Jerusalem the holy./ Wondering, she saw the Lamb of God within Jerusalem's Veil". So early in the "Night" the entire scheme moves toward a type of resolution.

Blake attempts to resolve the conflicts and contradictions in the poem through a final Divine Vision which restores fallen

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<sup>95</sup>Kleinman, p. 94.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>97</sup>Damon, p. 384.

man. Thomas was attempting to find a similar resolution in his sonnet sequence, how successfully we will see shortly, and our argument is that Thomas's idea for the final resolution is Blakean and in fact was suggested by Thomas's reading of Blake's major prophecies, for there is a startling similarity between Blake's "Night the Eighth" and the final sonnets of this sequence. A related question, of course, is the question of which of the two poets was the more successful artistically in achieving his end. As Frye explains, Thomas had less time to work out his symbols and ideas clearly:

These sonnets make very tough reading, and I think one reason why they're so obscure is that the shape of the central myth of literature broke in on Thomas suddenly at a certain stage of his development, and that it broke with such force that he could hardly get all his symbols and metaphors down fast enough.<sup>98</sup>

As "Night the Eighth" moves through its narrative which includes some lyrical passages of great beauty, Los and Enitharmon begin to pity man which is the first step to redemption and we are told that the Lamb of God must give up his vegetated body "that the Spiritual body may be Reveal'd." A description of the Crucifixion follows: "Jerusalem saw the body dead upon the Cross". And the "Night" moves to a close with Enion's reply from "The Caverns of the Grave". As the "Night" ends with Los and Enitharmon taking the body down from the cross and placing it in a sepulcher, and Satan divided against Satan, we are prepared for the Redemption of man through the Lamb of God.

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<sup>98</sup>Frye, The Educated Imagination, (Toronto: C. B. C., 1963), p. 47.

The events of "Night the Eighth" then, parallel almost exactly the chief event of Thomas's eighth sonnet; further, the purpose of each part, "Night the Eighth" and "Sonnet VIII," is similar in that it prepares us for the final step which is the redemption of man through Christ.

In a crucial passage in "Night the Eighth" Los (Poetry) tells Enitharmon (Inspiration) that:

Pitying, the Lamb of God descended thro' Jerusalem's  
gates, To put off Mystery time after time; and as a  
Man Is born on Earth, so was he born of Fair Jerusalem.

...  
He stood in fair Jerusalem to awake up into Eden  
The fallen Man, but first to Give his vegetated body  
To be cut off and separated, that the Spiritual body  
may be Reveal'd.<sup>99</sup>

This is one of the high points of the poem before the poem drops again as the "Night" ends with Christ's Crucifixion. The last two lines of the above quotation express the desire of both Blake and Thomas. Thomas's struggle was certainly to put off his mortal, corruptable body so that his Spiritual body might be revealed through his art. For Thomas, like Yeats, the only meaningful type of spiritual salvation was a salvation which resulted from the permanence of art.

Olsen's comments on "Sonnet VIII" strengthen our argument:

But the Cross Cygnus goes down like all else. This is the true crucifixion "on the mountain", for it occurs in the heights of the sky; and the "gallow grave", the depths of space...

After Cygnus sets, Virgo, the Virgin, "God's Mary", rises in the east; the constellation appears "bent like three trees."<sup>100</sup>

Olsen suggests that this is the low point in the sequence; Christ appears to be defeated and there is no promise of resurrection

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<sup>99</sup>Blake, The Works, p. 338.  
<sup>100</sup>Olsen, p. 78.

or redemption of any sort. This is equally true of the corresponding point in Blake's "Night the Eighth", for both the sonnet and the "Night" mark the psychological low point in the sequence in the sense that the promised redeemer is dead and man must wait three days for any sign of a resurrection.

"Sonnet IX," which carries the burial motif in terms of Egyptian symbols and references then fits into the scheme logically because the Redeemer is dead. Blake's use of geometric and pyramid imagery in "Night the Second" is echoed by Thomas again here and could be a source of Thomas's imagery. In fact, a line in "Sonnet IX," "World in the sand, on the triangle landscape" is reminiscent one again of Blake's "Auguries of Innocence".

Kleinman's discussion of "Sonnet IX" is excellent but will be left to the curious reader to be examined for himself. Kleinman does answer the question, better than other critics, as to why Thomas introduced a sonnet involving Egyptian burial customs into a Christian sonnet sequence. He quotes a passage from The Golden Bough to help explain the question of Thomas's intention:

Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead, In name and detail the rites varied from place to place; in substance they were the same.<sup>101</sup>

Kleinman's point is that the Osiris myth becomes an archetype of all dead and reviving gods so Thomas, whose mind worked archetypally, picked up and employed this fact in his verse.

Olsen's comments on "Sonnet IX" are not nearly so satisfying here as some of his previous comments. He explains the Egyptian

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<sup>101</sup>Kleinman, p. 117.

motif as follows:

The Egyptian atmosphere of the sonnet is based upon the presence in the heavens of Cepheus, king of Aethiopeia, whom Thomas now treats as "Pharaoh", Caasiopeia, Cepheus' queen, now "the queen in splints", and Ophiucus."<sup>102</sup>

Tindall's remarks on this sonnet are more valuable than Olsen's at this point for he continues to see the sonnet in strictly biographical terms. He tells us:

With the boys of "Should Lanterns Shine" and "My World is Pyramid", we visit Egypt to inspect mummies, which serve the poet now as images of printing. When set in books, the poems he has written with all the pains of crucifixion are mummies of themselves. They are embalmed; yet publishing them is a kind of resurrection.<sup>103</sup>

Professor Tindall's comment reminds us that no one interpretation of any poem is the 'correct' one. Good poetry can tolerate many differing interpretations even though the comments are contradictory, for poetry like Beulah, is a place where contrarities are equally true.

Our primary concern now is a study of "Sonnet X" and Blake's "Night the Ninth". Even before looking at any interpretations of "Sonnet X," we find many obvious meanings and echoes from the previous sonnets so that the conclusion that this sonnet does form a type of last chapter to and summary of the preceding sonnets seems valid.

"Sonnet X" opens with a request "Let the tale's sailor from a Christian voyage/ Atlaswise hold half-way off the dummy bay". The traveller here refers to the preceding sonnet sequence as his 'tale' just as if Thomas's poem were as narrative like Blake's Vala. The voyage motif is introduced again to remind the reader

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<sup>102</sup>Olsen, p. 80.

<sup>103</sup>Tindall, p. 141.



that the speaker has undergone his own strange odyssey; it is, furthermore, a Christian voyage. This is followed by an echo of the title of the sequence in the word "Atlaswise". Present as well in the sonnet are "a ship-racked gospel", "the first Peter", "a rainbow's quayrail", "fish", "the bible east", a "flying garden" that is "green as beginning" and finally "two bark towers", a "nest of mercies" and a "rude, red tree". These images in themselves are enough to suggest a type of triumphant or near-triumphant Christian conclusion and reconciliation of the whole sequence.

Elder Olsen, although he persists in his astronomical explanation throughout the entire sequence, does come to a similar conclusion to ours above, that the sonnet sequence is an account of a journey in which a very great problem is considered and weighed. Olsen remarks:

In any case we have two "voyages", real or fancied: the Christless one reported in Sonnets III and V, running from winter solstice to winter solstice, and the Christian one from autumnal equinox to the following Easter.

Whatever view be taken, the sonnets are the Apocalypse of the heavens: and as in Rev. 21:23, the mortal sun is exchanged for the Son: "And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof."<sup>104</sup>

Olsen's comments here support our argument on the similarity of the sonnet sequence to the meaning and intention of Blake's Vala.

Kleinman's summary of Thomas's intention in the sonnet sequence is as clearly stated as any summary could be and affords further evidence as to the similarity of intention on the part

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<sup>104</sup>Olsen, p. 86.

of Blake and Thomas. Kleinman states:

The prayer with which the poem concludes rises with the hope that the flying garden, green as Eden, submerged for so long, will now rise to the surface of the sea. In the prayer there is a vision. The two trees ("the two bark towers"), Adam's tree and Christ's tree, will rise and become one tree around which the serpent once more will coil, bringing not venom but golden straws to build a "nest of mercies" for the Dove. And this nest will be woven in the rude, red tree of ignominious death upon which the Dove was once transfixed. Here, at last, the covenant will be redeemed, the promise fulfilled, innocence restored, death banished. The poem ends in a hymn of faith, a prayer of hope, and a vision of love.<sup>105</sup>

Before examining how closely this description of the conclusion to Thomas's poem fits Blake's epic, we should note that Professor Tindall too, after mentioning the personal and sexual meanings of the last sonnet, concludes that "The ending, like the beginning, of this sequence is obscurely magnificent in sound and shape."<sup>106</sup>

Thomas's "Sonnet X," although similar in intention, has nothing like Blake's scope or grandeur as seen in "Night the Ninth". "Night the Ninth" is subtitled "Being the Last Judgement" and it offers the reader a magnificent description of Apocalypse. Briefly, the action of the "Night" might be outlined as follows: the Night opens with Los ripping the sun and the moon from the sky,

...his right hand, branching out in fibrous strength, Siez'd the Sun; His left hand, like dark roots, cover'd the Moon, And tore them down cracking the heavens across from immense to immense.

This is a fascinating passage in that it seems to describe the artist's attempt to humanize the universe. Both Thomas and Blake

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<sup>105</sup>Kleinman, p. 156.

<sup>106</sup>Tindall, p. 143.

struggled to explain the universe through the metaphor of man, so here we might imagine Los, the poet, as achieving what all poets wish to achieve. As the "Night" continues, Rahab and Tirzah (the abandoned life and the repressed life) are consummated, the dead arise and the reader is given a fine description of the moment of Apocalypse:

He cease'd for riv'n link from link, the bursting  
Universe explodes. All things revers'd flew from  
their centres: rattling bones To bones Join:  
shaking convuls'd, the shivering clay breathes:  
Each speck of dust to the earth's centre nestles  
round & round In pangs of Eternal Birth:

After this passage, one of the finest in terms of visualization in the "Night", the Son of Man appears, fallen man arises and we are told that Eternal man is risen. Then follows a long lament by Vala for Enion; what this means is that there is now an effort on the part of fragmented nature to return to a lost unity and balance. Vala is Blake's name for nature or natural beauty while Luvah is the characterization of the Emotions and a harmony between these two is now desired. Tharmas, whom Harold Bloom describes as the parent power of the other faculties, the body's unity,<sup>107</sup> appears as a child with Enion and both are cared for by Vala; again what Blake means is that Vala (nature) is enforcing a protective unity on Enion (the generative instinct) and Tharmas (the body or senses). The four mighty ones in every man begin to be reunited.

Man's highest faculties are not something imposed from above by a greater power but humanity's highest endeavour, or

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<sup>107</sup>H. Bloom, Blake's Apocalypse, (New York: Doubleday & Co., Garden City, 1963), p. 195.

so we learn from the following passage: "Attempting to be more than Man We become less", said Luvah? As he arose from the bright feast, drunk with the wine of ages." Then the wine presses of Luvah operate in a passage that amounts to a great description of human passions; evil is consumed and Los and Enitharmon are united in Urthona which is their unfallen form, the human spirit.

Finally this great Apocalyptic Night ends with a new order created, "One Earth, one sea beneath" and Man is completely unified within himself and with his universe: "The Expanding Eyes of Man behold the depths of wondrous worlds!" So the poem ends with a great vision of the perfectly balanced and harmonious man:

Urthona is arisen in his strength, no longer now  
Divided from Enitharmon, no longer the Spectre Los.  
Where is the Spectre of Prophecy? where is the delusive  
Phantom?/ Departed: & Urthona rises from the ruinous  
Walls/ In all his ancient strength to form the golden  
armour of science/ For intellectual War. The war of  
swords departed now,/ The dark Religions are departed  
& sweet Science reigns.

Thomas's conclusion to his sonnet sequence and "Night the Ninth" of Vala correspond in the intention of the statement. Both poets envision a type of regeneration out of a period of struggle and chaos and fragmentation and in both cases the rebirth is a Christian rebirth. Thomas has his "Green as beginning" and "two bark towers", suggesting as they do the two trees in Eden as well as Christ's cross. Blake's conclusion is both more emphatic and more vivid partly, at least, because of his poetic method.

Blake's epic narrative method which involves the casting of conflicting human states as characters in a gigantic struggle and dramatic adventure allows the reader to follow his argument dramatically even before he must decide what it all means. Thomas,

in contrast, really only hints at a narrative and so forces the reader to struggle along at the level of the image and the metaphor. While Blake's method is expansive, Thomas's method is that of distillation to the point, at times, of obscurity.

Before leaving this aspect of the discussion, we should be aware of Northrop Frye's comment about the last line of Vala. Frye writes:

The last line of The Four Zoas, describing the final emancipation of man, reads: 'The dark Religions are departed & sweet Science reigns.' By 'Science' he means what he means elsewhere when he says: 'The primeval State of Man was Wisdom, Art and Science.' That is wisdom consists in the mental war which is art and the mental hunting which is science, and these constitute the eternal life of a Man who is God. Art is human but it is also divine because God is a Creator.<sup>108</sup>

Blake certainly seemed to entertain the idea that man is God and God is man so that when man is occupied with his greatest work which would be the creation of forms of art, he is acting as God. Although Thomas was not as explicit as Blake on this point, I believe that Thomas shared a somewhat similar idea which can be detected in his poetry. The only meaningful salvation for Thomas would be an artistic salvation, while a failure to achieve this salvation through the creation of great works of art would and perhaps did lead to the artist's death. As our topic will soon be Thomas's last poems, a comment made by Professor Brinnin is worth noting here. Brinnin writes:

While Dylan's intellect was great, his indifference to ideas limited its exercise; while his moral discipline was amply demonstrated in his craftsmanship--a point never to be under-estimated--it was apparent

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<sup>108</sup>Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 271.

almost nowhere else. To foresee Dylan in middle and later life was to pose two questions, each of which answered itself: Would he continue, year by year, to be the roaring boy, the daimonic poet endlessly celebrating the miracle of man under the eyes of God? Would he by some reversal of spirit, some redirection of his genius, become the wise, gray and intellectually disciplined poet moving toward an epic summation of lyrical gifts? It was my sense then, as it is now, that the term of the roaring boy was over, and that the means by which Dylan might continue to grow were no longer in his possession. I was convinced that Dylan knew this and, whether or not he comprehended the meaning of his actions, that the violence of his life was a way of forgetting or avoiding the self-judgment that spelled his doom. Poetry itself had become, as he said, "statements made on the way to the grave."<sup>109</sup>

The point that Brinnin raises is an essential one to our argument. The point is, did Thomas find, even partially, a way out of his apparent impasse through his last poems including Under Milkwood? Considering the fact that Brinnin's statement was made about a year before Thomas's death, we must try to answer the question as to which of the two poets, Blake or Thomas, fulfilled the visionary ideal for which they were striving. I personally feel that one reason for Thomas's attraction to Blake's poetry was that Thomas detected a type of resolution in it which he would have liked to achieve himself. Both poets were of the same visionary company but Blake was able to complete a cosmology that Thomas only began to move toward.

Included in our discussion of the sonnet sequence must be the strongly circumstantial evidence that Thomas may have borrowed images and even ideas from Blake's second epic Milton. It is Mr. Kleinman who mentions this relationship between Blake and

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<sup>109</sup>J. M. Brinnin, Dylan Thomas in America, (New York: Avon Books, The Hearst Corp., 1966), p. 181.

Thomas when he is discussing "Sonnet VI" of the sequence. He states, "That Thomas was familiar with Blake's poems and Goethe's Faust I have no doubt".<sup>110</sup> In this statement, Kleinman gives us further supporting evidence for our central argument; he then adds in connection with the Medusa image from Milton:

The imagery in the rest of the sonnet (Sonnet VI), is a fusion of marine biology, Greek mythology, literary analogues, and cabalistic legend. "Medusa's scripture" is primeval, as old as the "book of Water", reminding one of a Blake illustration called Hecate, in which he depicts Vala (The Four Zoas) as an incarnation of the female will, with the serpentine book of good and evil open at her feet.<sup>111</sup>

Now the fact that Thomas borrowed the Medusa image from Blake and used it to represent something similar to what it represents in Blake, the sinister female will, leads the discussion to a consideration of the aspect of the sinister female will in both poets.

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<sup>110</sup>Kleinman, p. 69.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Sinister Female Will

We are all in a particularly vulnerable position in relation to the person that we admire and respect and who, in our opinion, is our superior. This fact becomes even more apparent when the person that we admire is a member of our own profession or craft. Because the person is a fellow craftsman, our respect for his achievements is heightened while it remains a more valid admiration than that of the mere layman's. The more that we admire the master craftsman, the more profound is his influence over us likely to be. If our master craftsman to whom we pay the craft-compliment, is also a great and original thinker, we are apt to be powerfully influenced in our attitudes and point of view by our 'master'.

What has been said above is demonstrably true in Blake's influence on Thomas and in Milton's influence on Blake in many areas but in one area in particular. Milton's concept of the sinister female will which is a central theme in his poetry from "L'Allegro" and "IL Penseroso" through Paradise Lost to Samson Agonistes helped to form Blake's attitude toward female sexual love, and, in turn, helped to determine Thomas's attitude toward female sexual love as well. The supporting evidence for this statement will be found in the poems to be discussed in this chapter.



Our comments above help to explain why Thomas employed Blake's image of the Medusa in his "Sonnet VI" referred to previously. Professor Kleinman argues that the medusa image for Thomas was a "metaphor of primal sexuality, sin, and the eternally dangerous female".<sup>112</sup> Now, the medusa is commonly associated with paralytic power and sticky suffocation. One thinks of the animal's prey becoming entangled in the filaments of the medusa, which, biologically, is a predatory animal suffocating and destroying its victim. It does serve as an excellent metaphor for one aspect of female love. For Milton, and for Thomas as well, this aspect of female love became distorted into the main aspect.

Professor Kleinman points out the qualities of the medusa and Blake's use of it in Milton:

The imagery of marine life seems to have fascinated Thomas, a fascination shared by other poets. In his story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, Ovid describes a polpus (from which the medusa is an evolved form) as a symbol of female absorption in whose tentacles male identity is crushed. Blake, in a similar image, illustrating the procreative and annihilating quality of the female will speaks of

... a vast Polypus  
Of living fibres down into the Sea of Time & Space  
growing/A self-devouring monstrous Human Death  
Twenty seven fold./ Within it sit Five Females &  
the nameless Shadowy Mother,/ Spinning it from  
their bowels with songs of amorous delight/ And  
melting cadences that lure the Sleepers of Beulah  
down/ The River Storge (which is Arnon) into the  
Dead Sea.

Milton, "Book II", Plate 38

A general gloss of Blake's passage above is that the sinister female will is or can be destructive to man's highest spiritual and creative powers. Beulah which is the moony existence of

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<sup>112</sup>  
Kleinman, p. 77.

married love can be lost to the unwary artist and replaced by "the Dead Sea", a place of sterility and annihilation.

Now the specific lines of Thomas's which contain the medusa image borrowed from Blake follow:

Pluck, cock, my sea eye, said medusa's scripture,  
Lop, love, my fork tongue, said the pin-hilled nettle;  
And love plucked out the stinging siren's eye,

...  
The bagpipe-breasted ladies in the deadweed  
Blew out the blood gauze through the wound of manwax.

Thomas's lines certainly have a sinister ring about them, similar to Blake's passage above, even before we enquire what they mean. Critics generally agree on this sonnet that Thomas is reworking the theme of Genesis although the imagery gives the poem an ugly and revolting visualization. Kleinman points out that the "pin-hilled nettle" is another name for the medusa. In the poem, the medusa is asking to have her forked tongue lopped off so that she will be unable, as a siren, to lure her prey; this is followed by what appears to be a type of primeval orgy.

"Sonnet VI" includes as well the tower of wax and an 'I' who seems to be the chronicler of the tale at this point. The witch-like "bagpipe-breasted ladies" force some sort of creation (blood gauze) through the wound of manwax which appears to be a reference to Christ. The sonnet ends in the darkness before creation with a defeat of Christ, the creative light of the world. Immediately following the passage from "plate 38" of Milton quoted by Kleinman, Los, the poetic aspect of man's spirit is described as attempting to enclose the Polypus:

Around this Polypus Los continual builds the Mundane Shell.  
Four Universes round the Universe of Los remain Chaotic.

What Blake means here is that man's artistic nature, his highest spiritual aspirations must overcome the debilitating effect of the sinister female will represented by the polypus image in both Blake and Thomas.

Two related aspects of our argument must be discussed at this point to clarify our main thesis and to help our understanding of Thomas's marriage poems. If Milton's attitude toward woman influenced Blake and if Milton and Blake's attitude influenced Thomas, then Milton's and Blake's view of female sexual love must be made clear so that the reader might better understand Thomas's somewhat ambivalent attitude.

Our study suggests that Blake may have derived much of his attitude toward married female love from Milton's attitude as expressed in Samson Agonistes. Blake, we know, was accused of saying that Milton believed that the pleasures of sex arose from The Fall (see Crabb Robinson's comment). Milton, of course, argued nothing of the kind as a reading of "Book IV" of Paradise Lost will show. An interesting possibility presents itself here for consideration. Blake, possibly, read Milton's Samson Agonistes very early in his life because there is a poem called "Samson" in Poetical Sketches which is dated by G. Keynes between 1769-1778, making it Blake's earliest printed book.

If Blake in fact did read Samson Agonistes and there is no reason to think that he did not, then he could likely have been strongly influenced by Milton's violent attack on women in the poem. This attitude in turn may have been passed on to Thomas both through Milton and Blake. Milton and Thomas, as well, shared a somewhat similar Calvinistic background.

The plot of Samson Agonistes is simple enough. The poem opens with Samson, blind, and betrayed, a prisoner of the Philistines, his enemies. The first scene is before the prison in Gaza as Samson says, "A little onward lend they guiding hand/  
To these dark steps, a little further on". Brooding on his past injustices and present situation, Samson expresses the attitude that concerns our discussion. He ponders: "...Dalila,  
That specious Monster, my accomplit snare." This line marks his first real outburst against the woman who betrayed him. Then he thinks "But foul effeminacy held me yok't/ Her Bond-slave'." How closely this line expresses Thomas's own feelings in his marriage poems we shall see. Samson is approached by Manoa, his father, and then by Dalila herself as she continues to tempt Samson. His replies to her various suggestions are important here. At one point he cries:

Out, out Hyaena; these are they wonted arts.  
And arts of every woman false like thee;  
To break all faith, all vows, deceive, betray,  
Then as repentant to submit, beseech,  
And reconciliation move with feigned remorse,  
Confess, and promise wonders in her change.<sup>113</sup>

Still later he shouts "And love hath oft, well meaning, wrought much woe,/ Yet always pity or pardon hath obtain'd." Finally, after Samson has definitely spurned Dalila, he gives forth his famous denunciation of women which follows:

Is it for that such outward ornament  
Was lavish't on their Sex, that inward gifts  
were left for haste unfinish't, judgement scant,

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<sup>113</sup>J. Milton, Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed., M.Y. Hughes, (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), p. 569.

Capacity not rais'd to apprehend  
 Or value what is best  
 In choice, but ofttest to affect the wrong?

Seeming at first all heavenly under virgin veil,  
 Soft, modest, meek demure,  
 Once join'd, the contrary she proves a thorn  
 Intestine, far within defensive arms  
 A cleaving mischief, in his way to virtue  
 Adverse and turbulent, or by her charms  
 Draws him awry enslav'd  
 With dotage, and his sense deprav'd  
 To folly and shameful deeds which ruin ends.<sup>114</sup>

Milton's passage here contains so much general truth about how men feel, at times, about women that it is not surprising to find a similar point of view expressed by Blake and Thomas. Certainly Thomas found female love something of a snare very often and it is common knowledge that Thomas could not adjust to the monogamous state that marriage demands. As far as Blake is concerned, it is not surprising that a sensitive young man reading Samson Agonistes at an impressionable age would be profoundly influenced by the very biased and bitter attitude expressed by Milton. This attitude could have been strengthened by the fact that the person speaking was a noble warrior and great hero, now a somewhat pathetic figure; finally, the whole passage would be memorable because of the quality of the verse.

Blake would have been aware, as well, of the somewhat autobiographical nature of the plot of Samson Agonistes. Just as Samson was blind and a captive held by his enemies, so was Milton; just as Samson had apparently been defeated, so had Milton and just as Samson was a hero, so was Milton. Milton's concern about the temptations of the flesh and the disastrous consequences of

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<sup>114</sup>Milton, Complete Poems, p. 576.

succumbing to these temptations are personified in a sense in Samson Agonistes. Seeing the poet he most admired expressing such powerful views on women, Blake could hardly prevent being influenced by Milton's attitude.

Blake, however, would be aware that Milton's attitude toward women as expressed in Samson Agonistes was only one extreme point of view as he recalled Milton's remarks about Eve in "Books XI" and "XII" of Paradise Lost. Adam, addressing Eve in "Book XI", remarks:

...Whence Hail to thee,  
Eve rightly call'd, Mother of all Mankind,  
Mother of all things living, since by thee  
Man is to live, and all things live for Man.<sup>115</sup>

Then in Michael's final words to Adam in the closing lines of "Book XII", the reader finds the following lines:

...go, waken Eve;  
Her also I with gentle Dreams have calm'd  
Portending good, and all her spirits compos'd  
To meek submission

...  
The great deliverance by her seed to come  
(For by the Woman's Seed) on all Mankind,  
That ye may live ...<sup>116</sup>

Blake would be aware that no greater compliment could be paid to women than what Milton has written above so Milton's attitude cannot be completely determined by his attitude to Dalilah in Samson Agonistes.

Blake's attitude to female love was equally ambivalent. He did feel that sexual love was one door to the imagination; this idea is coupled with the fact that artistic creativity and human

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<sup>115</sup>Milton, Complete Poems, p. 436.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., p. 467.

love are very closely bound. A few lines from "Earth's Answer" in Songs of Experience suggest one attitude he held toward freedom of love between man and woman:

Selfish father of men!  
Cruel, jealous, selfish fear!  
Can delight,  
Chain'd in night,  
The virgins of youth and morning bear?

Does the spring hide its joy  
When buds and blossoms grow?  
Does the sower sow by night,  
Or the plowman in darkness plow?

Break this heavy chain  
That does freeze my bones around.  
Selfish! vain! Eternal bane!  
That free love with bondage bound.

In the above lyric, the Earth is replying to the voice of The Bard who asks it to rise from her slumbery mass. Earth's reply includes the lines "Starry Jealousy does keep my den;/ Cold and hoar,/ Weeping o'er". Blake, contrary to certain misunderstandings, is not suggesting sexual promiscuity here but rather that the impulse to love and be loved both spiritually and physically should not be stifled by a "heavy chain" that "freezes" one's bones around. Just as spring is joyous and the plowman must work during the daylight hours, so there is a time in life when people need and must give love and, Blake argues, these people must not be restricted by arbitrary laws and bonds; love itself will demand and give love and respect. Blake, then, ends his lyric with a cry for free love because he felt that this was the most immediate road to eternity. Night in the above lyric might refer to the absence of spiritual light or the true understanding of the role of physical love in the complete psychology of the

individual. Damon suggests that Blake was not appealing for free love here but only objecting to the foul doctrine that hid what might be called essential love for the survival of the individual within his social milieu. Comus's statement suggests something of the same attitude when he says to The Lady,

'Tis only daylight that makes Sin."

Certain lines of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell imply a similar idea to the one being discussed:

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing  
would appear to man as it is, infinite.  
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things  
thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

The "Narrow chinks of his cavern" may be interpreted as meaning that man has so encompassed himself with social restrictions and "rules of social procedure" that he can no longer indulge his natural instincts to sexual expression in an effort to fulfill his most intimate needs. Damon's comment on the quoted passage from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell follows:

Free indulgence in love was to open the senses; such an opening would reveal the infinite in everything, and destroy the material world simply by exposing it as a delusion... The indulgence in love would lift the body from its material aspect, elevating the whole of man at the same time.<sup>117</sup>

While the idea as expressed by Damon is true, everyone is aware, including Blake, that the attempt at successful physical love can end in an agony of despair as it often did with Thomas.

Because Blake's views on sex are basic to our discussion, Damon's interpretation of Blake's views are worth discussing at

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<sup>117</sup>Damon, p. 93.



this point. Damon comments in part:

Sex, involving the profoundest instincts of man, is rooted in eternity; He [Blake] was among the very first to celebrate the decency- the holiness- of sex.

...

Believing that every man was entitled to the ideal union, and following his beloved Milton in condemning marriage which might hinder such a union, Blake taught and wrote, as emphatically as he could, that couples should live together and separate at pleasure. Even a plurality of paramours was not to be condemned.<sup>118</sup>

Blake's argument that everyone is entitled to the ideal union reminds us of Raphael's account of love between the angels which appears at the end of "Book VIII" of Paradise Lost and which well could be the source of Blake's concept of ideal love even though he attempted to correct Milton's error in his Milton. Raphael says:

To whom the Angel with a smile that glow'd  
Celestial rosy red, Love's proper hue,  
Answer'd. Let it suffice thee that thou know'st  
Us happy and without Love no happiness.  
Whatever pure thou in the body enjoy'st  
(And pure thou wert created) we enjoy  
In eminence, and obstacle find none  
Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars:  
Easier than air with air, if spirits embrace,  
Total they mix, Union of Pure with Pure  
Desiring; nor restrain'd conveyance need  
As Flesh to mix with Flesh, or Soul with Soul.<sup>119</sup>

To put this Miltonic idea in Blakean terms, we might argue that once man has broken through the mundane shell of his existence he will be able to achieve an ideal union in an ideal existence, an ideal union in the sense of the spiritual blending of two souls. Milton's description above is intriguing in that it exactly describes the perfect physical union. Such a description

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<sup>118</sup>Damon, p. 99.

<sup>119</sup>Milton, Complete Poems, p. 377.

of Milton's which expresses a universal psychological ideal for all men could not help but influence both Blake and Thomas.

Milton's ideas on married love found in his The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce may have had a formative influence on Blake's ideas as well. Given the odds that Blake read this pamphlet of Milton's, he could not help but be influenced by the following lines:

The cause of divorce mentioned in the law is translated "some uncleanness" but in the Hebrew it sounds "nakedness of aught, or any real nakedness", which by all learned interpreters is referred to the mind as well as to the body. And what greater nakedness or unfitness of mind than that which hinders ever the solace and peaceful society of the married couple? And what hinders that more than the unfitness and defectiveness of an unconjugal mind.<sup>120</sup>

This passage contains some of the basic ideas contained in both Blake and Thomas as well as many other writers. Very simply, Milton is arguing for a "marriage of true minds", or inversely, if this marriage of true minds does not exist then such a condition should be sufficient cause for divorce. Now Blake argued specifically in Visions of the Daughters of Albion that the factors which often prevented such ideal unions were the jealousy of the lover, the hypocrisy of the beloved, and the persecution of the lovers by society. These factors and not the sex impulse are the true crimes, the real causes of suffering.<sup>121</sup>

Damon points out in fact that Blake believed that in Eternity the lover and beloved are literally one (the idea just seen in

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<sup>120</sup>Milton, Complete Poems, p. 706.

<sup>121</sup>Damon, p. 101.

Raphael's account). Damon lists various supporting statements for his assertion but does not mention Raphael's passage quoted above. Finally he adds:

But even though in Eternity there is no sex, yet here in this world sex has a very important function. It not only keeps man's senses open, his imagination stirred, and his Selfhood in abeyance: it is actually a way into Eternity, the only way left open to the man who has no creative power in poetry, painting or music!<sup>122</sup>

Reading Damon's comments on Blake's ideas on the role of sex in life, one cannot but recall Thomas's attempts at sexual promiscuity which seemed to be a symptom of his artistic frustration. To put Thomas's dilemma in Blakean terms, we might see it as follows: for Blake Eternity was the world of the imagination, artistic creation. It was this type of Eternity that Thomas wished to achieve and which Blake did achieve. In Blake's myth, Eternity is surrounded by Beulah which, seen from Eternity, is a type of moony sexual slumber but as seen from the mundane shell, the state of Beulah, married love, is a condition which must be passed through to reach Eternity; sexual love offers a door to Eternity, if it is successful; if it is unsuccessful, it damns the person to a nightmare of frustration. The reader might see Thomas then as attempting to achieve a Blakean type of Eternity in artistic creativity but because he could not achieve a satisfactory Beulah existence, a step toward Eternity, his life became a misery of frustration. As Blake explains in Milton, and even more clearly in Vala, the Fall was a series of divisions of man's powers and aspects, and redemption then must

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<sup>122</sup>Damon, p. 102.

involve a recovery of this lost union with the redeemed man being a perfect unity of all attributes. Because sexual intercourse is such an intimate union, Blake sees the act as the first step to Eternity. If this first step is a failure, as it often was with Thomas, a failure in the sense that it did not lead to a more intimate and rewarding marital union which in turn would have led to greater artistic creativity, then the first step to Eternity is blocked.

Blake explains his attitude to marriage further in his poem Visions of the Daughters of Albion (etched 1793), which Frye sees as the second act to The Book of Thel. A significant difference between the two poems is the location of the action; Thel takes place in the moony shades of Beulah while Visions is acted out in this world of Generation. Damon states the plot of the poem simply:

Oothoon, Blake's Magdalen of Eternity, is violated by Bromion, though Theotormon is her true mate. Custom forces her to marry Bromion, since Theotormon, for all his anguish, will have none of her.<sup>123</sup>

The introductory lyric to the main body of the poem is spoken by Oothoon, who represents Blake's concept of the emancipated female spirit, where she explains that she has "plucked Leutha's flower" meaning that she has dared to enter into a sexual experience. (Leutha appears again in "Plate 12" of Milton) Oothoon has dared to do what Thel could not bring herself to do with the result that Oothoon is permanently altered and both suffers and rejoices in what she has learned. Frye comments on the poem:

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<sup>123</sup>Damon, p. 106.

Oothoon has engaged in an extramarital amour, apparently with Bromion, and has inherited the jealousy of her husband and the thunderous denunciations of her lover. In order to horrify Bromion into calling her a harlot it is not necessary, of course, for Oothoon to do more than find pleasure in sexual experience.<sup>124</sup>

The poem presents a conflict between the tyranny of convention and an emancipated female's demand for free love.<sup>125</sup>

While critics give slightly differing accounts of the actual plot of the poem,<sup>126</sup> they do agree on Blake's meaning in the poem which is our main interest; that is to see its relationship to Thomas's ideas in his marriage poems. Having presented evidence earlier that Thomas had not only read The Book of Thel but also borrowed directly from it, our argument will imply that Thomas read and was influenced by Visions as well.

In Blake's poem Bromion (moral indignation) thunders his censures at Oothoon while Theotormon (male jealousy) sulks and broods "Upon the margin'd ocean conversing with shadows dire." The bulk of the poem consists of Oothoon's laments and her expressions of her newly acquired knowledge. She first attacks

<sup>124</sup>Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 239.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>126</sup>Bloom, p. 107.

Harold Bloom states "Bromion's morality is familiar to us because it is our own; the morality of a slave-driving society that first rapes and then condemns the exploited victim as being far gone in harlotry. But Blake makes it quite clear that Bromion's monstrous morality is engendered by his bad conscience ... Bromion blusters his conscience away in an accusation of harlotry and a taunting invitation to Theotormon, Oothoon's betrothed lover:

The uneasy violence of Bromion has its sexual origins in the sadism of a slave-owning morality and the inverted sensuality of debased Puritanism that Lawrence was to call "sex in the head".

Urizen with the cry,

How can one joy absorb another? are not different joys  
Holy, eternal, infinite? and each joy is a love.

This statement is a clear answer to Bromion's question "And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox?" Oothoon's argument is that society cannot sanction some joys and condemn others on a completely arbitrary basis. The gates to Eternity must not be blocked by convention and in Blake's view, the greatest door to Eternity was successful sexual love so his argument is simply that if this door is not found in married love, then it must be sought elsewhere. Thomas's experiences in this quest, as our argument will show, become a tragic corollary to Blake's argument. However, certain aspects of Visions must be dwelt on first.

It would be an unpardonable omission on our part to discuss this poem and not mention the very high quality of the verse while we trace Blake's arguments. A passage of great exuberance and lyrical beauty that bursts with Oothoon's new knowledge is her cry;

The moment of desire! the moment of desire! The virgin  
That pines for man shall awaken her womb to enormous joys  
In the secret shadows of her chamber: the youth shut up  
from The lustful joy shall forget to generate & create  
an amorous image  
In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his  
silent pillow.<sup>127</sup>

Part of the beauty of this passage stems from the great daring of the poet. The image Blake employs of the womb awakening to enormous joys is startling at a first reading because it hovers on the edge of the grotesque for just a moment while at the

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<sup>127</sup>Blake, The Works, p. 199.

same time shocking the Puritan element in us. Then, the power of the passage and the sincerity of the lines carry us along and we are left with admiration, anew for Blake's forthrightness and lyrical excellence. Much of the power of the passage lies in such words as 'womb', 'enormous', 'joys', 'secret shadows'. The combination of image and sound in such lines is superb. While enjoying the passage for its daring and power, the reader cannot help but be reminded of Thomas's early sexually tortured poems by Blake's lines "...the youth shut up from/ The lustful joy shall forget to generate & create an amorous image/ In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow." The aspect of Thomas's growth described by these lines has been discussed in relation to his 18 Poems.

Oothoon has another fine passage in reply to Bromion's question "And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox?" Representing the wronged and oppressed female who has suddenly taken the initiative toward freedom, she chants:

I cry: Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free  
as the mountain wind!  
Can that be Love that drinks another as a sponge  
drinks water,  
That clouds with jealousy his nights, with weeping  
all the day,  
To spin a web of age around him, grey and hoary, dark,  
Till his eyes sicken at the fruit that hangs before  
his sight?<sup>128</sup>

Oothoon's long lament ends, of course, with her statement which sums up her discovery, "for every thing that lives is holy!" The passage just quoted above is again excellent in the quality of the verse. The reader hears the strong stress which Blake

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<sup>128</sup>Blake, The Works, p. 199.

enjoyed so much measuring the first line of the quoted passage. The passage then moves to the interrogative asking the unanswerable questions of Theotormon, for to answer such questions would admit Oothoon's point of view and her conclusion. There can be no better statement of the possessive type of love which ultimately destroys real affection than Blake's lines above. Blake's passage is both true and terrifying containing as it does the quintessence of Blake's philosophy of sexual love. The greatest danger of excessively possessive love is expressed metaphorically in the line "Till his eyes sicken at the fruit that hangs before his sight?". The consequence of this type of possessive and demanding love is to destroy the desire to love completely and so shut off what for most of us is the one door to Eternity. That Thomas was not immune from such pangs of jealousy will be clearly seen in his poems "I Make This a Warring Absence" and "Into Her Lying Down Head".

Blake's attitude to women or the sinister female will aspect of women is further expanded in his poem Milton and in a section of Jerusalem. Professor Kleinman, mentioned earlier, suggests that the Polypus image used by Thomas in his "Altarwise by Owl-Light" sonnet sequence may have its source in Blake's Milton. Our argument, then, is that Thomas, through his reading of Blake and Milton, was influenced in his attitude toward women and female love by the attitude of these earlier poets whom he admired. Blake's idea of Milton's attitude toward women becomes important to our discussion and Blake's concept of Milton's 'error' is the subject of Blake's poem Milton.



The sub-title of Milton is, of course, the theme of Paradise Lost, "To Justify the ways of God to Men". Unlike Vala which has an extended narrative, Milton deals with a moment of revelation, really, when Milton returns to this world so that he might consolidate his errors and so rest in Eternity. The poem opens with Milton "Unhappy tho' in heaven ... Viewing his Sixfold Emanation scatter'd thro' the deep/ In torment-". Damon remarks that the "Sixfold Emanation" is Milton's three wives and three daughters with whom Milton failed to achieve a unity; this ultimate unity mentioned earlier includes sexual harmony with his wives. From Blake's point of view Milton could not have achieved this sexual harmony or sexual freedom because Milton had been corrupted by "the black cloud of Puritanism spreading over Europe".<sup>129</sup> As Damon explains,

Outwardly, Puritanism had involved England in a series of wars such as would have been impossible under the pacifistic policy of Elizabeth; internally, it had brutalized the people with a cruel system of impossible ideals. Chief among these were the conceptions of absolute chastity for the unmarried, and perfect fidelity for the married. And who was responsible for Puritanism? The answer must have been unexpected even to Blake: it was his beloved Milton!<sup>130</sup>

Blake seems to have fixed on Milton's attitude toward women that was discussed earlier in connection with Samson Agonistes and which we indicated ran through all of Milton's poetry. This attitude was one of a basic distrust of pleasure and, in particular, physical pleasure. Samuel Johnson's description of Milton's attitude to his first wife supports our suggestion that Milton hid a basic fear of women behind a certain aloofness: Johnson after explaining that Milton brought Mary Powell back to town

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<sup>129</sup>Damon, p. 172.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid., p. 172.

with him as his bride, writes:

He brought her to town with him, and expected all the advantages of a conjugal life. The lady, however, seems not much to have delighted in the pleasures of spare diet and hard study; for, as Philips relates, "having for a month led a philosophic life (after having been used at home to a great house, and much company and joviality), her friends, possibly incited by her own desire, made earnest suit by letter to have her company the remaining part of the summer, which was granted, on condition of her return at Michaelmas or thereabout."<sup>131</sup>

Everyone knows too well that John Milton did not get his wife back for some time. In any case, Blake in his poem Milton fixes Milton's difficulties with his wives and daughters on Milton's failure to overcome his Selfhood. By Selfhood, Blake means the personal prejudices that surround one in life and result in what we would term a break-down in communications. Blake sees much of Milton's 'error' as involving jealousy and distrust, the result of Puritanical clouds perhaps, the same spectres that will haunt Thomas as well. "Plate 25," then, of Milton gives us the following information, Los speaking:

I recollect an old Prophecy in Eden recorded in gold  
and oft  
Sung to the harp, That Milton of the land of Albion  
Should up ascend forward from Felpham's Vale & break  
the Chain  
Of Jealousy from all its roots

...

Six thousand years are pass'd away the end approaches  
fast:<sup>132</sup>

Blake identifies Milton's error as the Chain of Jealousy (the same chain mentioned earlier in "Earth's Answer".) and further adds that Milton's moment of Truth or reunion with his emanations

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<sup>131</sup>S. Johnson, Lives of the English Poets, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1964), p. 65.

<sup>132</sup>Blake, The Works, p. 403.

will occur in an apocalyptic instant in time. "Plate 44" of the poem describes the movement towards the apocalyptic moment:

Suddenly around Milton on my Path the Starry Seven  
Burn'd terrible; my Path became a solid fire, as bright  
As the clear sun, & Milton silent came down on my Path.

Let the Four Zoas awake from Slumbers of Six Thousand  
Years.

The apocalyptic moment in Milton actually begins with "Plate 41" when Ololon (the eternal form of Milton's six-fold emanation) descends to Blake's garden in Felpham. Ololon enquires "Knowest thou of Milton" as Blake sees Milton descend in a cloud extending from Heaven to earth. Satan then confronts Milton as Milton states:

.... I come to Self-Annihilation.  
Such are the laws of Eternity, that each shall mutually  
Annihilate himself for others' good, as I for thee.

This is followed by Milton's cry for Albion to awake from his slumber of six thousand years, for the apocalyptic moment is at hand. The narrator continues his account which includes a statement of the real threat of the sinister female will:

Rahab Babylon appear'd

Glorious as the midday sun in Satan's bosom glowing,  
A female hidden in a Male, Religion hidden in War.

The true nature of the female, stated here, is related to state religions in whose names societies both murder and allow the sinister female will to rage. What this means is that war becomes an aspect of sexual perversity, so that Milton explains to Ololon that "All that can be annihilated must be annihilated/ That the children of Jerusalem may be saved from slavery."

"Plate 48" continues to explain that one must bathe in the

waters of life to wash off "the Not Human" while "the Sexual Garments, the Abomination of Desolation" must be done away with, resulting in Raphael's description of sexual unity.

The poem ends with Ololon blending into the form of Jesus with Milton, and to the sound of trumpets "Immediately the Lark mounted with a loud trill from Felpham's Vale." In "Plate 40" Blake has explained that the lark is a mighty angel. (Blake's use of the lark here has an interesting correspondence with Thomas's use of the heron image in "Over Sir John's Hill".)

Milton concludes at the moment of apocalypse with Milton having seen the source of his 'errors' as a confusion of the true role of sex in the total life of man, a confusion aggravated by Puritanical doctrine. Certainly in Milton Blake has, in terms of a completed vision, gone beyond anything Thomas could achieve in this manner. While our discussion will return to this point, at present there are other passages in Milton which must be briefly noted.

Blake's polypus image in Milton merits further comment as, according to Mr. Kleinman, quoted earlier, it is the likely source of Thomas's similar image in "Sonnet VI" of his "Altar-wise by Owl-Light" sequence. In "plate 26" of Milton Los speaks of "A Polypus of soft affections without Thought or Vision/ Must tremble in the Heavens & Earths thro' all the Ulro space." In Ulro, the lowest form of existence, man can be ensnared by female sexuality in a totally biological manner. Blake, following this, states one of his quite beautiful ideas:

And every Generated Body in its inward form  
Is a garden of delight & building of magnificence.

Thus all men, like Milton just descended, may reveal their inward beauty once they have accomplished Generation.

The passage which concludes "plate 30" must be mentioned for its own merits as well as for the idea it contains concerning time: "A moment equals a pulsation of the artery." Thomas in his handling of time exhibits something of this attitude. The passage which follows the quotation beginning "And between every two Moments stands a Daughter of Beulah" and continuing for the next eleven lines is very fine in itself and acts as an answer to those critics who feel that Blake's organization was chaotic.<sup>133</sup> This particular passage has excellent organization, repetition, balance and dazzling imagery. Although this passage may not have influenced Thomas specifically, had he read it, he would have admired it for its organization because Thomas as well was a precise craftsman.

The following lines from "plate 39" explain as explicitly as possible the relation between the Polypus, sexual contact and final apocalyptic redemption:

So spake Ololon in reminiscence astonish'd, but they  
Could not behold Golgonooza without passing the Polypus.

Golgonooza, which is the eternal city of art and man's final visionary goal, can only be reached by passing through the Polypus and having one's Selfhood annihilated. Once this occurs, man is capable of achieving the fourfold vision. This passage concludes,

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<sup>133</sup>K. Raine, William Blake, (London: Longman's Green & Co., 1951), p. 27.

Miss Raine states, "Of Blake's longer Prophetic Books little can be said within the scope of this essay. They are great mythological compositions, formally chaotic, but containing magnificent passages which may be enjoyed in isolation."

For Golgonooza cannot be seen till having pass'd  
 the Polypus  
 It is viewed on all sides round by a Four-Fold Vision,  
 Or till you become Mortal & Vegetable in Sexuality,  
 Then you behold its mighty Spires & Domes of ivory  
 & gold.

As the passage states man must become "Mortal & Vegetable in Sexuality" as Milton does, to enter the eternal city. Here we have as explicitly stated as possible the relationship of sexuality to achieving the Four-Fold vision.

Harold Bloom in his discussion of Milton remarks,

Milton's selfhood must perish: the Spectre must vanish if the Emanation is to reveal herself. The Spectre in Milton is everything that impeded his lifelong quest to achieve a societal and artistic form that would unify man in the image of God.<sup>134</sup>

Now, just as Milton's Spectre involved a false doctrine of sexuality which impeded his final achievement (according to Blake), so Thomas's Spectre as well not only impeded but finally destroyed the artist in him, preventing him from achieving an artistic form that would unify man in the image of God. Our next task, in fact, is to examine the record of some of these sexual tortures that he suffered as they are poetically developed in his marriage poems. Before examining Thomas's marriage poems however, we must remember that Milton's error in Blake's poem is not simply one of misguided sexual instinct. Rather as Bloom explains:

Blake is not attempting to break through into the Eden of finality in this poem. The inmost form is grasped in Jerusalem, which is Blake's testament of total statement. The recovery in Milton is a restoration of Innocence in its second or 'organized sense', and is therefore associated with sexual union,

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<sup>134</sup>Bloom, p. 309.

with Blake's version of the Divine Marriage in the tradition initiated by the Song of Solomon and Isaiah.<sup>135</sup>

Thomas's visionary development corresponds to Blake's at this point in the sense that we see both poets attempting to reconcile their existence in Beulah to enable them to move out and up to a final unifying vision which includes a unification with God. An interesting comment in the light of Bloom's statement above is Mr. Munro's remark about the vision in Thomas's later poems. He writes that such poems as "Poem in October", "Fern Hill", "In Country Sleep" and "Over Sir John's Hill" "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."<sup>136</sup> If we accept both statements as valid this would mean that Thomas, instead of moving from the type of innocence described by Bloom, "innocence in its second or organized sense", toward a total reconciliation, turned back, artistically, to evoke an earlier state described by Munro above.

Our problem at present is to examine Thomas's marriage poems. Unlike Blake, who apparently had a serene and happy marriage for the most part,<sup>137</sup> Thomas's marriage to Caitlin was, to say the least, tempestuous. FitzGibbon, discussing the clash of Caitlin's personality with Thomas's Welsh Puritanism remarks,

...but Puritanism has always been far more harsh when dealing with the weaknesses of the flesh, and particularly with sexual ones, than with castigating sins of the spirit.

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<sup>135</sup>Bloom, p. 341.

<sup>136</sup>Munro, *Thesis*, p. 99.

<sup>137</sup>T. Wright, *Life of Wm. Blake*, (London: C.J. Farncombe & Sons, Ltd., 1929), p. 55.

...  
 One explanation of this may be that Puritanism was concerned with, and primarily practiced by, men and women of limited education, little leisure, and thus with few means of self-expression. (Spiritual arrogance, cynicism or sloth are hardly likely to be their besetting sins.) For such people, as for almost everyone else, their manner of making love is their prime means of communication with others- indeed for them it may almost be the only means. Without pretending to any deep understanding of the forces involved, I would guess that one reason why the "Celt" and the Anglo-Saxon accepted Puritanism so easily is to be found in the basic human wish of men, and perhaps of women, to be protected from the lawlessness of their own and others' passions. And in a simple society that passion is, in the first place, lust, while the second most prevalent of the deadly sins is gluttony in the form of drink.<sup>138</sup>

FitzGibbon here offers an insight into both how Thomas felt about sex and how he wrote about it in his poems. It is no mere poetic admiration that Thomas had for Milton; rather he detected many of the same tensions in the work of the older poet that he felt within himself. Certainly Thomas's reaction to the tensions was unMiltonic, although he undoubtedly detected much of Milton through Blake and this alone would distort Milton. As late as 1947, through October and December of that year, Thomas was giving a series of impressive readings from Paradise Lost for the British Broadcasting Corporation. One thing that a Puritanical background did for both Milton and Thomas was to instil a deep and permanent sense of guilt about anything that is pleasurable and, in particular, related to the flesh or fleshly. These points help the reader understand the tortured nature of Thomas's marriage poems as well as his attraction to Blake's doctrine of sexual freedom. The emotional 'pull' resulting

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<sup>138</sup>FitzGibbon, p. 8.



from these two polarities gives to Thomas's marriage poems much of their tension, for Blake's doctrine of sexual freedom was a reaction to Milton's attitudes (or what he thought they were) while Thomas's attraction to Blake's doctrine was a similar reaction to Miltonic Puritanism as it had filtered down into the Welsh chapels of Thomas's youth.

In Milton's poetry the question resolves itself into the conflict between the life of the scholar and the life of the pleasure-seeking man as expressed in "Il Penseroso" and "L'Allegro" as well as in Comus; the pertinent passages in Samson Agonistes we have already discussed. The entire question resolves itself into a choice between restriction and control in relation to physical passion and sensual freedom, desire and self-denial. While Milton, Blake and Thomas experienced similar tensions brought on by somewhat similar circumstances, granted the obvious differences in time and background, they each reacted to the tensions in vastly different ways. Thomas's reaction to the sexual problem of marriage as expressed in his marriage poems is our next concern.

Thomas married Caitlin on July 11, 1937, in Cornwall where Wyn Henderson had opened a guest house at Mousehole.<sup>139</sup> With the Protestant Puritan strain of Thomas mixed with the passionate Irish strain of his wife, aggravated by her stay at the Augustus John household, it is little wonder that tortured poems were the result. Apparently Caitlin had a violent and uncontrollable temper as she herself admits:

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<sup>139</sup>FitzGibbon, p. 207.

But these fights which were an essential part of our everyday life, and became fiercer and more deadly at each onslaught, so that you would have sworn no two people reviled each other more; and could never, under any fabulous change of circumstances, come together again: were almost worthwhile because, when the reconciliation did take place, according to how long we could stick it out, it was doubly, trebly, quadruply sweet, and we could never have ventured to conceive of such a thing happening again.<sup>140</sup>

The point should be made here, perhaps, that according to FitzGibbon Thomas was vigorously heterosexual during his Soho youth and as a young man of twenty, to the degree of having his share of affairs even after he had met Caitlin. He did, unfortunately, carry this attitude toward or approach to women into his thirties and, as FitzGibbon points out,<sup>141</sup> often with rich and famous women so that the consequence was often a difficult and awkward situation. The point of these remarks is that Thomas's whole attitude toward female love seems to have been badly twisted and snarled, reflecting some sort of deep-seated disturbance within himself.

The first of Thomas's marriage poems, "I Make This in a Warring Absence", was first published in February, 1938, in Twentieth Century Verse. On a first reading, the poem appears congested and difficult. Externally the poem has a very carefully controlled form divided into stanzas of eight lines and seven. The first line of the poem, "I make this in a warring absence", anticipates the last line which reads "Yet This I make in a forgiving presence." Between these two lines are extremely complex metaphors involving oceans, sailing and tides;

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<sup>140</sup>FitzGibbon, p. 186.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid., p. 190.

the poem does reveal that it is about love in the line "stone-necked minute of love's season". This line, combining the theme of the poem with a sinister image suggests the idea of being drowned with a millstone around one's neck and ties in nicely with the chief metaphor in the poem. The poem continues the nautical metaphor mixed with phrases such as 'proud' and 'pride is last' with such obvious Blakean images of destruction and enclosure as 'hand of five assassins', 'cinder-nesting columns', 'cast in ice', 'uneating silence', 'cold flintsteps', a 'ring of summers' and 'locked noons'. Recalling Blake, the reader might see Thomas describing his Beulah where "contraries are equally true" for Thomas states in this poem "These are her contraries" and then begins the list we have selected from above.

The third stanza of the poem is explicit enough so that the reader detects that the poem is about a man rejected by his lover. Such phrases as "She makes for me a nettle's innocence" (linking back to the "pin-hilled nettle" which was another term for the medusa image borrowed from Blake's Milton and representing the suffocating female will), 'closed pearl' and 'Proud as a sucked stone' add to the tone of bitterness, disappointment and rejection on the speaker's part.

If the poem is viewed as somewhat autobiographical and seen as a disguised comment on a problem that Thomas faced in his own marriage, as some critics claim,<sup>142</sup> then we have Thomas

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<sup>142</sup>Holbrook, Dylan Thomas and Poetic Dissociation, (Illinois: Southern Illinois U. Press, 1964), p. 83.

David Holbrook petulantly remarks about this poem "Later in the poems there is a conflict between the poet's self-exploring

dealing with the same theme as Blake in his Visions of the Daughters of Albion. Thomas, in the poem, may be seen as a Los figure who combines in himself the anguish of both Bromion and Theotormon. Because of his background and temperamental bias, Thomas, while attempting to live the role of the ideal Blakean lover, was caught in social convention combined with a Calvinistic distaste for sexual intercourse. Moynihan's comment adds further insight into the poem:

"I Make This in a Warring Absence", for example, is a cosmic experience described in sexual metaphor. The poem tells of a wife's denial of marital favors, the husband's anger, his persistence, "conquest", and finally the release and reconciliation following the consummated act. Thomas here sees a domestic occurrence as having immense implications. The universe is involved in the actions of the couple, and the couple is involved in the actions of the universe.<sup>143</sup>

In this very clear paraphrase of the poem, Moynihan suggests that Thomas has reversed Blake's usual method in dealing with

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honesty about his sexual difficulties in adult relationship, and his attempt to disguise these difficulties from himself and us. Such conflict appears in "I Make This in a Warring Absence".

We can make little of this except that the poet has quarreled with his love, goes off to sulk and is full of hate of her, cools down and goes back for forgiveness. The process is not delineated in such a way as can be followed in our nerves and senses. There is no felt rhythm.

All we can add to this deplorable critical comment is that the employment of metaphor is not disguise surely. And that when Holbrook says that the process is not delineated in such a way as can be followed in the nerves (whatever that might mean) he is only speaking for himself.

Jacob Korg comments of this same poem,

"The prose sense of "I Make This in a Warring Absence" is a chronicle of spiteful rivalry. Deserted by Caitlin for reasons of 'pride', Thomas experiences a complex of feelings that include nothing more profound than remorse, self-righteousness, and erotic desire. He releases his feelings to her in an orgy of hostility which leads to self-reproach, to the recovery of a sense of proportion, and finally to a reconciliation, undertaken with the full knowledge that future conflicts are likely. (Korg, p. 101)

<sup>143</sup>Moynihan, p. 67.

the cosmos in human terms. We have seen Blake time and time again turning the above method around and explaining human psychology in terms of gigantic cosmic figures so that Los, the spirit of creativity, becomes an individual in a definite drama. Blake projects upward and outward on the 'wide screen' of his epics while Thomas forces cosmic forces into human terms in his intense domestic dramas.

The last stanza of this poem which brings the struggle to some sort of resolution carries an echo of "Night the Eighth" of Vala in the line "Now in the cloud's big breast lie quiet countries."; in Blake we have "the dark shadowy female, brooding over." The shadowy female is Vala in her fallen form who is Nature in the world of Generation waiting to be reunited in Eternity with the other aspects of Albion. When Thomas images his hostile female in a Blakean archetype as spiritually divided from himself and brooding over him, he is consciously employing a Blakean concept to express his personal emotional dilemma. The reader sees Thomas attempting to deal with the sexual aspect of the sinister female will which caused both Blake and Milton such concern. As Moynihan points out discussing Thomas's marriage poems:

Regarding marital sex, for example, his poetry provides an almost continuous argument against more traditional views of romance and monogamy.

Sexual intercourse is a cruel necessary and inevitable part of existence.<sup>144</sup>

These two statements support our argument that Thomas held a view towards marital sex similar to that of Blake discussed in

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<sup>144</sup>Moynihan, p. 192.

connexion with Visions of the Daughters of Albion. This similarity of view may be further traced in the next four marriage poems which Professor Maud says were written within a year or eighteen months of each other; they are: "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait", begun in 1940 and finished in 1941; "Into Her Lying Down Head", written in March and June of 1940; "Love in the Asylum", possibly written in the summer of 1940;<sup>145</sup> "Unlucky For a Death", written in 1939.

"Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait", done entirely in the metaphor of fishing, deals with Thomas being lured by Caitlin and finally caught. The fifth stanza of the poem describes a girl "alive with hooks through her lips". She is to be used as bait but just as the fisherman catches the fish so does the fish catch the fisherman. That the whole poem becomes a metaphor for physical love becomes apparent with such lines as "She nipped and dived in the nick of love,/ Spun on a spout like a long-legged ball.", the spout here being clearly phallic. Stanza sixteen returns the reader to a theme of Thomas's early poems ("The Boys of Summer") with the lines "Good luck to the hand on the rod,/ There is thunder under its thumbs!" Thomas here may be offering himself a solution to the problem of masturbation.

The meaning of the poem becomes clearer in the eighteenth stanza when Thomas writes:

Oh the bulls of Biscay and their calves  
Are making under the green, laid veil  
The long-legged beautiful bait their wives.

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<sup>145</sup>Maud, Entrances, pp. 135-136.

The words 'making' and 'laid' carrying the meaning that they do in the vernacular indicate that these lines are celebrating physical love. The poem attests then to the joys and pleasures of married love, but this is a somewhat unusual note in Thomas. Tindall writes:

In other words, Thomas meant this poem to be a narrative of the wantoning that leads to the sobrieties and responsibilities of marriage. A happy boy becomes an adult with mixed feeling. The catcher is caught.<sup>146</sup>

Throughout our discussion of Thomas's poems, in particular his marriage poems, we should keep Blake's statement from Jerusalem in mind "For All Things Exist in the Human Imagination", for the location of many of the happenings in these poems is in Thomas's imagination. He, like Blake, persistently projected in physical terms abstract concepts as he does in "Into Her Lying Down Head". In contrast to "Unlucky For a Death" this poem, still about marriage, has remarkable clarity and is strikingly Blakean in imagery. The giant figures in the poem can be traced directly to Blake. Thomas begins the construction of the giant forms with the line "The colossal intimacies of silent/ Once seen strangers or shades on a stair;". Blake-like imagery continues in the line "Man was the burning England she was sleep-walking, and the enamouring island/ Made her limbs blind by luminous charms." Here the lover takes on the proportions of an Albion-like figure where the lover becomes an enamouring island. The lover-giant image is extended in the second stanza with the lines "A furnace-nostrilled column-membered/ Super-or-near man." This image carries both

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<sup>146</sup>Tindall, p. 248.

Albion and Urizenic overtones. Finally the lover becomes an "Oceanic lover alone". The particular Blakean idea that Thomas is working with here is best expressed in the introduction to the second chapter of Jerusalem titled "To the Jews"; the lines follow:

You have a tradition, that Man anciently contain'd  
in his mighty limbs all things in Heaven & Earth.

Thomas seems to mean that man as lover is moving toward a union which, if it could be continued, would result in a giant form containing all things including the sinister female will. In fact Moynihan discussing Thomas's final poems under the title "Regeneration" argues that the majority of these final poems have "perpetuity and regeneration" as a theme. He then states,

The anguish of creation whose end is decay, and of  
a fallen world characterized by a fatal marriage to  
sex and time and by the opposition of flesh and  
spirit, becomes reconciled in a gigantic body which  
creates and recreates deathlessly.<sup>147</sup>

This statement of Moynihan's in a sense anticipates our own conclusions which include an examination of Jerusalem and Thomas's attempt, incomplete though it was, in "The White Giant's Thigh" to work out fully this concept of the giant form.

The line beginning the third stanza of "Into Her Lying Down Head" which reads "Two sand grains together in bed" is a distinct echo of lines 15 and on of "plate 41" of Jerusalem where Blake writes,

There is a Grain of Sand in Lambeth that Satan cannot find,  
Nor can his Watch Fiends find it; 'tis translucent & has  
many Angles,  
But he who finds it will find Oothoon's palace; for within  
Opening into Beulah, every angle is a lovely heaven.

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<sup>147</sup>Moynihan, p. 264.



Knowing that Beulah is the dreamy heaven of married sexual love, the reader sees that Blake's image, superb in itself, carries the idea that even a grain of sand is complete if viewed by the liberated imagination and can contain within itself worlds of its own. The interesting thing is how Thomas has taken the two aspects of Blake's image, the grain of sand and married love, and used them in his own marriage poem. Thomas here not only uses Blakean concepts but also the ideas that they stand for, although he does tone down the image considerably.

"Love in the Asylum", another in the sequence of marriage poems, first describes married love as a refuge and then continues the description in metaphors of clouds and sea such as we encountered in "I Make This in a Warring Absence" and "The Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait". The cloud image is of interest in this poem for it reminds us of the sinister female will of Milton and Blake which was described as brooding and suffocating. This poem however does end on a note of triumph which carries with it something of the visionary Beulah about it;

And taken by light in her arms at long and dear last  
   I may without fail  
 Suffer the first vision that set fire to the stars.

"Unlucky For a Death" belongs with Thomas's marriage poems in that it attempts to discuss a sexual problem in marriage which is perhaps so close to Thomas that he had to leave the poem as obscure and difficult as it is. The cloud encountered in the previous poem appears again here in the second stanza, "Under the cloud against love". Sinister as it is, it continues to suggest the abortive sinister female will of Blake. Another

Blakean echo in this poem occurs in the first line of the third stanza: "I see the tigrion in tears/ In the androgynous dark". Tindall remarks of these lines,

But, like Blake's tyger and the phoenix, this noon-maned beast, "striding to holocaust" by night will burn bright in love's regenerating fire.<sup>148</sup>

Supported by Tindall, our argument is that here is yet another Blakean echo in Thomas. Still another line in this difficult poem that recalls Blake is the following: "Nor walk in the cool of your mortal garden/ With immortality at my side like Christ the sky.". The concept of the body as a garden recalls Albion's remark in Jerusalem "I was a garden planted with beauty" while the theme of this poem and the other marriage poems as well might be expressed in the illustration to "plate 81" of Jerusalem: "In Heaven Love begets Love but Fear is the Parent of Earthly Love: And he who will not bend to love must be subdued by Fear.". These lines from Blake express, perhaps, as well as any, Thomas's concern in his marriage poems. Like Milton, he could not achieve unity with his wife's sinister female will and like Blake he found society's idea of monogamous marriage intolerable.

The preceding discussion shows that Thomas, who borrowed Blake's medusa image, representing as it does possessive primal sexuality, sinful and dangerous to the male, for his own sonnet sequence was, for the most part, unable to view his relations with his wife in any other terms. For Thomas, as Blake states, love engendered fear in many forms; sex remains something evil bound in fears of jealousy and possessiveness. Blake could say that Thomas was unable to overcome his Selfhood, like Milton in Eternity, so he remained unhappy and nowhere near heaven.

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<sup>148</sup>Tindall, p. 196.

## CHAPTER V

### The Failure to Achieve Total Vision

Although it should not be necessary at this point in our discussion to further establish Thomas's debt to Blake for images and concepts in the former's poetry, the reader will, nevertheless, find that through Thomas's last poems, which do have a thematic unity,<sup>149</sup> there are persistent Blakean overtones, echoes and even borrowings. Our present task is to demonstrate the correspondence between Blake's Jerusalem and Thomas's last poems. The validity of this comparison will become apparent as our argument proceeds, for Thomas did consider his last poems parts of one long poem and had often expressed the desire to write a long poem. On Blake's part there is no doubt that Jerusalem is his final poetic achievement in which many of his earlier themes, images and preoccupations are reworked as our brief summary below will indicate.

Blake states the theme of the poem in the following lines:

Of the Sleep of Ulro! and of the passage through  
Eternal Death! and of the awaking to Eternal life.

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<sup>149</sup>Moynihan, p. 218.

Moynihan states "Although it appears to be a miscellaneous collection of lyrics, Thomas's Collected Poems is a remarkably unified body of work.

...  
In one sense the symbolic unity of Collected Poems is accidental ...For the repetition and close relationship between images can reveal associations in the mind of the poet that even he may not be aware of. Symbolic unity reveals psychic as well as thematic preoccupations."

Our main concern with Jerusalem here is not to become involved in any prolonged discussion, but rather to merely indicate the extent to which Blake was able to complete his myth and to discuss the sections that concern our argument. That Jerusalem is a summation of and a completion of many of Blake's themes and arguments there can be no doubt. Damon remarks:

The plot of Jerusalem is at once broad and vague. It is simply that of the Fall and its delusions, ending with the awaking of Man from Error, and his final entrance into Eternity.

But though the plot is so simple, Jerusalem is the obscurest of the three epics. Almost all of the characters which Blake invented live in the subliminal consciousness of this poem.<sup>150</sup>

Still in connection with the inclusiveness of Blake's final epic, Harold Bloom writes,

All the themes of Jerusalem are sounded in these intense lines, from the identity of God and awakened man in their mutability of love through the imaginative fibres that must bind man to man if England is to be liberated from the vegetative fibres that form the chains of selfhood and jealousy.<sup>151</sup>

Jerusalem opens at a low point in the drama with Los and his Spectre sharing much of the action. In "plate 2" of our edition Los struggling with his Spectre utters the lines,

I must create a system or be enslaved by another Man's  
I will not reason and Compare: my business is to Create.

Los's statement here articulates both Blake's artistic desires as well as Thomas's, and it is our task to show that Blake succeeded in achieving Los's desires more than did Thomas. To even begin to discuss the riches that this poem offers would take

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<sup>150</sup>Damon, Blake, p. 185.

<sup>151</sup>Bloom, p. 369.

us far beyond the limits of our present task, so that our intention is to present the merest summary of major movements and concepts in the poem. "Plate 13" of the poem, for example, offers an absolutely beautiful description of Golgonooza (the city of Art and the ultimate goal of all artists) and the reader who still thinks of Blake as a chaotic poet might refer to this passage to see precise artistic organization and development of concept. One point which should be noted here is that Golgonooza is surrounded by the world of Generation while the achieving of Golgonooza requires the development of the four-fold vision on the part of the artist.

Jerusalem (containing Golgonooza) represents what man ought to love and strive for through his creations. When man, instead, comes to love what he has already made and neglects the possibilities of further creation, then he substitutes Vala "the possessive love of a fixed natural order, for Jerusalem".<sup>152</sup> Jerusalem, absorbing Golgonooza, becomes the ultimate artistic goal toward which the creative person must strive. The extent of this achievement on the part of Blake and Thomas is, of course, our final topic.

Bloom comments about the first chapter of Jerusalem that Blake's having divided up Britain between the sons of Jacob "prepares the way for stating a belief in literary archetypes",<sup>153</sup> pointing out that every fundamental story exists in the Bible, so Los's struggle in "chapter one" with his Spectre who wishes to negate him and his Emanation who through her sinister female will

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<sup>152</sup>Bloom, p. 378.

<sup>153</sup>Ibid., p. 385.

wishes to dominate him becomes an archetypal struggle, for as our discussion of Thomas's marriage poems has pointed out Thomas describes this same struggle.

"Chapter one" of Jerusalem then begins by describing Albion in the sleep of Ulro and gradually explains how he fell into that state of existence. In the second chapter the reader sees Albion take on Urizenic characteristics: "Cold snows drift around him, ice covers his loins, A Tree of mystery shoots up underneath his heel." "Plate 40" continues the pattern while describing an attempt on the part of Los to awaken Albion:

Los shuddered at beholding Albion, For his disease  
Arose upon him pale and ghastly, and he call'd around  
The friends of Albion...

Albion will not be awakened until the final plates of the poem so that the conflict between Los and Albion continues through plates 41 to 44. In "plate 43", Los addresses a great speech to the four Zoas with the lines,

why stand we here trembling around  
Calling on God for help, and not ourselves, in whom God  
dwells,  
Stretching a hand to save the falling man? are we not  
Four  
Beholding Albion upon the precipice ready to fall into  
Non-Entity?

"Plate 56" of "chapter II" contains an idea important to our argument in the sense that Blake further develops his ideas on the sinister female will. The significant lines are,

What may man be? who can tell! But what may woman be  
To have power over Man from Cradle to corruptible grave?

...  
We Women tremble at the light, therefore hiding fearful  
The Divine Vision with Curtain & Veil & fleshly Tabernacle.

The lines mark a low point in the epic, for the female will has the Divine Vision locked within the sexual tabernacle. The

above lines are significant as well for their articulation of Blake's fear concerning women, Thomas's and Milton's. These lines, in fact, state more clearly than Thomas does, Thomas's fears.

"Plate 62" of the poem marks the triumph of the shadowy female will as the great Polypus of Generation that was associated with the female absorption of the male and which Thomas employed in his sonnet sequence, appears again in the middle of "plate 67". Plates "67" through "70" offer the reader a quite incredible account of the results of war and jealousy and possessiveness. Although we must leave the pleasures of this poetry to the interested reader, there are two lines in "plate 68" which are of particular interest.

Embraces are Cominglings from the Head even to the Feet,  
And not a pompous High Priest entering by a Secret Place.

The significance of the lines is that they echo exactly Milton's account of angelic love described in "Book VIII" of Paradise Lost and quoted earlier in this paper in connection with ideal love toward which all men aspire.

Plates 70 and on show the poem darkening and becoming more troubled as a prelude to Apocalypse. "Plate 77" gives us an explanation of Blakean Christianity in the lines "I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination, Imagination, the real & eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow..." Blake continues to explain that the artist will continue to dwell in the eternal imagination after

"these Vegetable Mortal Bodies are no more". Here, perhaps, we have the source of Thomas's Christianity.

As the poem moves toward Apocalypse, Los remains very much the hero as he continues his labors to awaken Albion and bring about the New Jerusalem. For a beautiful and highly lyrical description of "The New Jerusalem descending out of heaven" the reader is referred to "plate 86."

Plates "94" and "95" begin the Apocalypse with the awakening of Albion by Britannia and the final union of all divisions. However, as late as "plate 94", Albion still lies cold on his rock, but his ear is pierced by Britannia's voice at the beginning of "plate 95" and the final moments of the poem begin. The action in the drama is as follows: Britannia enters Albion's bosom; Jesus appears as the Good Shepherd; Jesus says to Albion that "This is friendship and Brotherhood: without it Man is Not."; Jesus is in the likeness of Los which unites Jesus the redeemer with the artist; this idea was encountered in our discussion as early as "Before I Knocked".

"Plate 96" brings together the lost unity; then Albion throws himself into the furnaces of affliction and finds that the flames become "Fountains of Living Waters"; finally, "Urizen & Luvah & Tharmas & Urthona arose into/ Albion's Bosom..." Here the reader is given the ultimate union of the Four Zoas which we have been awaiting through Vala, Milton and Jerusalem. We are presented with the concept of all of creation contained in the figure of the divine man (the human imagination), for Blake writes that all forms "walked To & Fro in Eternity as One Man."



Then all forms are united in Albion, and Albion is united with his Emanation, Jerusalem.

This very brief summary of Jerusalem, inadequate as it is, does show that Blake did complete his vision and his myth as well perhaps as vision and myth can be completed. This chapter was introduced with the statement that Thomas's poems formed a unified body of work or as Moynihan says, Thomas's poems have a symbolic unity. In contrast to this, our discussion has involved enough of Blake's myth to make it apparent that Blake's poetry shows both a consistency of meaning and a continual development and clarification of mythic and archetypal significance.

Our final task is to measure the extent of Thomas's mythic development against that of Blake's. The extent of Thomas's development, as far as total vision is concerned, may best be seen in his last poems discussed below.

The tranquility and drama of "Vision and Prayer" mark a change in Thomas's poetry indicating a movement toward a visionary resolution. Certainly the poem is more dramatic in the sense that there is the direct first person account of an incident which is by its nature tense and dramatic. A listener poised by a wall "hearing the moan/ Of the mother hidden/ And the shadowed head of pain" cannot help but be involved dramatically in the happening. To borrow a line directly from Blake, we see that Thomas is discussing in this poem "the spill'd blood of mercy's Lord".<sup>154</sup> As Thomas describes the occurrence in the poem, the event is bloody, as birth is, but it is merciful to all involved, as birth is.

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<sup>154</sup>Blake, The Works, p. 499.

A striking aspect of the poem is both the gyre structure and the metaphor. It is possible, particularly after the evidence that we have presented, that Thomas, when writing this poem, had Blake's "plate 17" of Milton in mind where Blake gives a quite fantastically delineated description of the vortex of Eternity. Blake writes:

The nature of infinity is this: That everything has its  
Own Vortex, and when once a traveller thro' Eternity  
Has pass'd that Vortex, he perceives it roll backward behind  
His path, into a globe itself infolding like a sun,  
Or like a moon, or like a universe of starry majesty,  
While he keeps onwards in his wondrous journey on the earth,

As a correspondence, we have Thomas writing of Christ's birth in this manner:

In  
The spin  
Of the sun  
In the spuming  
Cyclone of his wing

The relationship between these two statements becomes clear once we remember that a cyclone has the shape of a vortex particularly if one were inside the whorl of the cyclone running up the vortex as Thomas is in the sense that he is moving into another phase of perception and resolution and see the voyage as being carried forward in a whirlwind of salvation.

Two things are worth noting about the first stanza: first we see that Thomas continues to employ some of his most skillful verbal gymnastics in such phrases as "the heart print of man". Fine phrases continue through the poem as the reader encounters the following lines in the third stanza of the poem: "Of the dazzler of heaven/ And the splashed mothering maiden/ ...In the

caldron/ Of his/ Kiss." suggesting the influence of Hopkins here. The phrase "To dumbfounding Haven" occurring in the fourth stanza of the poem suggests a type of refuge after the turmoil of his voyage through the vortex of experience.

Stanza five finds the speaker "Crouched bare/ In the shrine/ Of his blazing/ Breast..." The vortex image is then picked up again as Thomas writes "O spiral of ascension/ From the vultured urn/ Of the morning/ Of man..." These are interesting lines which imply that the speaker is again moving out of his experience in the world of Generation through the gyre toward eternity. There is joy in the passage, for the speaker says "...joy has moved within/ The inmost marrow of my heart bone." Then stanza nine of the poem reminds us of Blake's rock of ages on which Albion is stretched as we read "Endure the stone/ Blind host to sleep/ In the dark/ And deep/ Rock." The poem becomes a prayer as the last two stanzas express the attitude that the speaker has become united with the Divine Vision, achieving a measure of peace and security much like the idea in "plate 96" of Jerusalem as "Jesus appeared standing by Albion." Thomas's last stanza begins, "I turn the corner of prayer and burn/ In a blessing of the sudden Sun." then "I/ Am found./ O let him scald me and drown/ Me in his world's wound."

While Thomas may appear to be moving toward a rather orthodox Christian resolution here, our opinion is that he could only consider the type of Christianity that Blake described in "plate 77" of Jerusalem quoted earlier. In brief, his Christianity is the liberty to exercise the Divine arts of the imagination which

results in the feeling of the holiness of everything. Tindall, discussing Thomas's Christianity as expressed in "There Was a Savior", remarks,

Here, for those who think Thomas a Christian poet, is the plainest statement of his position: that of an unbelieving ex-believer, with charity for all- except believers.<sup>155</sup>

The use of the Christian imagery in the above poem is simply explained when we see that Thomas is using Christian metaphor to celebrate a type of birth which for him is holy because everything that lives is holy.

There is in "Vision and Prayer", as well as in many other poems, a blending of or association of the artist, Thomas himself, and Jesus; the three entities form a type of creative principle very much like Blake's Los concept. Los, who is very much the hero of Jerusalem, is seen throughout Blake's poems as the blacksmith, a traditional role in which to see the artist. As one reads through Thomas's poems after having read Blake, one is struck by how often Thomas seems to see himself in terms of a Los concept, the artificer. In "Vision and Prayer" there is a suggestion of Orc as well in the first stanza as Thomas writes "Blessing on/ The wild/ Child", and as the poem moves to its conclusion in the last stanza, the wild child desires to be drowned in Christ's wound, just as Los is united with Jesus at the close of Jerusalem.

"Holy Spring" (1945) is more Blakean in some ways than "Vision and Prayer". Thomas here works the idea of achieving a second innocence through having passed through a type of Hell fire in the form of an air raid on London.

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<sup>155</sup>Tindall, p. 217.

Here the poet arises "Out of a bed of love" to celebrate the body's procreative power, the power of artistic creation and earthly regeneration. The speaker sees himself as a "holy maker" struck by the sun into creativity, like Los at his furnaces. The second stanza has a joyous mood conveyed by such phrases as "spring time", "radiant shrubbery", "grows joyful" and "infants of pure fire". The poem then does move toward a type of Apocalypse with such phrases as "blessed be hail and upheaval", "the toppling house" while the speaker "sings alone" "of the holy spring" praising the three types of creativity here, human procreation, artistic creation and earthly regeneration. The joyousness of this poem is only partial as the movement falters with the apocalyptic imagery and disappears with the last phrase in the poem "If only for a last time". There is no promise of a New Jerusalem here.

The last four poems to be examined present, as far as comparisons are concerned, a corresponding body of work to Blake's Jerusalem. These poems, while not comparable in scope or size, do correspond in the sense that they are the last poems of Thomas and do form an artistic fulfillment to Thomas's vision, at least to this point in his development. That Thomas did not have the equipment to develop further artistically is suggested by Professor Brinnin in the quotation used earlier from his book Dylan Thomas in America. That this implied artistic stalemate is perhaps unjust should become clear in the following discussion.

"Fern Hill", one of Thomas's best known poems, does present, nevertheless, certain problems in interpretation. With this most famous of Thomas's poems, one is tempted to indulge in

eulogistic praise, for his poetic line is fine here, loosely rhymed and beautifully cadenced. The organization of the poem is not at fault, for Thomas links the two differing states in the poem, innocence and experience, in the last line of the poem as he writes "Time held me green and dying/ Though I sang in my chains like the sea." As Tindall remarks,

Not how it feels to be young, the theme of "Fern Hill" is how it feels to have been young.<sup>156</sup>

As in "Holy Spring" there is an attempt to achieve a second innocence after having passed through the Blakean world of Generation. The two obvious key words in the poem are 'green' and 'golden', green carrying with it the concept of innocence while 'golden' has all the connotations that the same word has in Sidney's line, "Her world (Nature's) is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden."<sup>157</sup> This is the permanent world of the artificer, the worker in language, which Blake himself describes in "plate 27" of Jerusalem titled "To the Jews". Blake here describes the golden age of innocence with such phrases as 'pillars of gold', and 'golden pillars high', and 'those golden builders' all of which connote such concepts as treasure, value, preciousness, permanence and Sidney's golden world of the poet. Fine poem as it is, "Fern Hill" represents no movement towards any unifying vision but rather, with its easy rhythm and suggestive diction, a nostalgic return to the mood of Songs of Innocence and of Experience in adult life. The theme of the

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<sup>156</sup>Tindall, p. 268.

<sup>157</sup>Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology For Poetry", The American Tradition in Literature, ed. Bradley, Beatty and Long, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1965), p. 427.

nostalgic recollection is the most obvious Blakean influence; however there are many specific Blakean echoes in such phrases as "wanderer white" and "it was Adam" suggesting as they do Blake's Albion figure which Thomas recalls specifically in "The White Giant's Thigh". Certainly Thomas's phrase in the poem "the lamb white days" could well be a direct echo of Blake, particularly if the reader recalls Thomas's early imitations of Blake.

Tindall, discussing the phrase "I ran my heedless ways" which occurs in the fifth stanza, states "Even the sunflower is weary of time at times." Tindall refers here directly to Blake's poem "Ah! Sun-Flower" the first line of which is "Ah, Sun-flower weary of time." Tindall's remark is useful to our argument in that it shows Thomas, perhaps unconsciously, echoing a Blakean idea and having a sensitive critic like Tindall detecting the echo.

"In Country Sleep", published in February of 1952, part of a proposed trilogy of poems, gives evidence of Thomas returning to traditional Christian images to carry his ideas. The impression created by such phrases as 'an angel', 'saint's cell', 'sanctum sanctorum' and the 'rain telling its beads' is that the poem is devoutly and orthodoxally Christian. But Thomas, like Blake, often used Christian imagery as metaphors for secular topics. Again the poem celebrates the holiness of creation in Blake's sense of "Everything that lives is Holy"; such a line as "On the lord's-table of the bowing grass" carries this Blakean idea. Again Tindall explains what the poem is about when he writes:

The argument is simple: In the house at Laugharne, Thomas has read his daughter to sleep with folk and fairy tales. However terrible these tales, he says fear no more. Have no bad dreams of wolves, pigs, ganders, or witches; for these are natural or fictive. Fictions are harmless, boys are boys, nature is holy and the house secure.<sup>158</sup>

More important, perhaps, for our discussion of final correspondences between the work of the two poets is Thomas's own statement he made about a planned long poem:

These three poems ["In Country Sleep," "Over Sir John's Hill" and "In The White Giant's Thigh"] will, one day, form separate parts of a long poem which is in preparation; that is to say, some of the long poem is written down on paper, some of it is in a rough draft in the head, and the rest of it radiantly unworded in ambitious conjecture.

What can I say about the plan of a long poem in preparation-

The poem is to be called "In Country Heaven". The godhead, the author, the milky-way farmer, the first cause, architect, lamplighter, quintessence, the beginning Word, the anthropomorphic bowler-out and black-baller, the stuff of all men. scapegoat, martyr, maker, woe-bearer- He on top of a hill in Heaven, weeps whenever, outside that state of being called his country, one of his worlds drops dead, vanishes screaming, shrivels, explodes, murders itself.<sup>159</sup>

Enough of Blake's ideas have been discussed at this point for the reader to detect just how Blakean this explanation of Thomas's is. The "Anthropomorphic bowler-out and black-baller" suggests Blake's Urizen or Los, one of the immortals who weeps when one of his worlds disappears. As in Blake, Urizen weeps when chaos results from his attempt to become god and rule all creation as his rule always results in chaos instead of unity.

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<sup>158</sup>Tindall, p. 275.

<sup>159</sup>D. Thomas, Quite Early One Morning, (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 179.



"In Country Sleep" concludes with the lines "And you shall wake, from country sleep, this dawn and each first dawn,/ Your faith as deathless as the outcry of the ruled sun." These lines addressed to his daughter and all daughters carry the idea that a child's faith in the holiness of nature which must remain steadfast is, nevertheless, ruled or limited by a Urizenic principle in nature.

Mr. Munro says that:

Thomas has given meaning to the human predicament, 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.<sup>160</sup>

Professor Yeomans states, like Mr. Munro, that "it is possible to see a unified, overall poetic vision emerging, one which exists in its own right- without translation." While Professor Yeomans is mainly concerned with the mythopoeic and literal aspects of Thomas's vision, he does mention the similarity between Thomas's "If My Head Hurt a Hair's Foot", and Blake's The Book of Thel.<sup>161</sup> Having alluded to the unity of Thomas's poems earlier, we wish to point out here that Munro's "all containing form" corresponds to Blake's Albion although in Thomas it is not as clearly defined because his myth remains in an embryonic form. Unlike Blake, Thomas, while developing his lyric powers to the highest degree, was unable to combine these great lyric powers with a total and completely developed myth as did Blake.

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<sup>160</sup>Munro, Thesis, p. 27.

<sup>161</sup>W. E. Yeomans, "Dylan Thomas: The Literal Vision" Bucknell Review, XIV:1, (1966), pp. 103-115.

Although Thomas was unable to develop a complete myth, he did attempt to explain how everything that lives can be holy when everything must include victim and predator. This explanation is the theme of "Over Sir John's Hill", part of Thomas's trilogy, and very Blakean in certain images. The poem contains the hawk on fire who preys on the sparrows while the holy herons look on. Thomas reconciles these conflicts by seeing both predator and victim as essential parts of the natural cycle. The execution imagery of the first stanza is enough to make the theme clear. We note that the sparrows "sqawk/ To fiery tyburn" as "the noosed hawk/ Crashes". The name tyburn has distinct Blakean echoes, for Blake refers to Tyburn as the site of the gallows in "Night the Second" of Vala. Combined with this clear Blakean echo are the images of 'night' and 'stone' used by Thomas in the concluding two lines of his elegy. Fry explains that "The stone as a symbol of the death-impulse meets us frequently both in the Bible and elsewhere."<sup>162</sup>

Beyond these clear Blakean images, "Over Sir John's Hill" offers a useful comparison to a passage in Milton running from "plate 39" through "plate 40" in which Blake describes the lark as a messenger of Los and later tells us that "the Lark is a mighty Angel." Blake's passage is fascinating because of what he does with the image of the lark which could well be the most common bird image in Romantic poetry. Interestingly here, it is Blake's detailed organization of his image that is fascinating. The sort of thing Blake does here recalls the depth of detail

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<sup>162</sup>Frye, Symmetry, p. 224.

one associates with the engraver. Blake writes:

...& the Lark is Los's Messenger.

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When on the highest lift of his light pinions he arrives  
At that bright Gate, another Lark meets him & back to  
back  
They touch their pinions, tip tip, and each descend  
To their respective Earths & there all night consult with  
Angels

...  
Inspired & at the dawn of day send out another Lark  
Into another Heaven to carry news upon his wings.

The above passage immediately precedes Ololon's descent to Milton on earth in order to be united with him and lead toward the consolidation of his error. Clearly here the lark acts as a messenger of inspiration from Heaven to give man visionary insight, in this case Milton. The lark is Los's messenger in the sense that it marks the reception of inspiration by the Los aspect of all poets. Tindall compares Thomas's reference to "the sparrows hail/ For their soul's song" with Shelly's skylark, while our point is that, like Blake's lark, Thomas's herons become both holy and inspiring thus, like the lark, becoming birds of artistic inspiration as they are in this poem. Further, just as Blake chose the lark which he observed in his garden at Felpham, so Thomas chose the "holy stalking heron/ In the river Towy" as his sacred messenger of inspiration.

The herons are still with Thomas in "Poem on His Birthday" (1951) as the poet sees himself in "This sand grain day" while the "Herons spire and spear". The sand grain image recalls Thomas's poem "Into Her Lying Down Head" where he used the image to convey the Blakean meaning of eternity in a grain of sand. The present poem is important here because it has a tonal quality,

not of apocalyptic triumph, but of elegaic reconciliation; the reader detects too much death and too little resurrection. The fifth stanza of the poem is, however, distinctly Blakean in the lines "Terror will rage apart/ Before chains break to a hammer flame/ And love unbolts the dark". We have here a number of Blakean concepts gathered: Orc's chain of restriction, Los's hammer and furnaces of creativity, and love which can be a door to inspiration.

Unlike Blake who moves from the above point to a tremendous final vision of unity, Thomas hesitates but does employ apocalyptic imagery in stanza eight of the poem: "Who knows the rocketing wind will blow/ The bones out of the hills,/ And the scythed boulders bleed, and the last/ Rage shattered waters kick/ Masts' and fishes to the still quick stars." As the poem progresses this movement is stifled by more sinister images which suggest an impasse. While the final stanza of the poem does contain such images as "the dew larks sing" echoing Blake's statement that "the Lark is a mighty Angel", and Thomas's "hills/ Grow larked and greener...more spanned with angels ride/ The mansouled fiery islands!", the poem drops again as the last line states "As I sail out to die". The tone of elegy and lament overcomes any hint of spiritual triumph or apocalyptic grandeur.

The unrestrained notes with which Blake's Jerusalem ends are only suggested at times in Thomas's last poems. In Thomas the reader hears the overture, the beginning movement, but it is quickly dropped almost as if the musician were not capable of handling such a grand theme.

Our comments above are equally true of the last poem in Collected Poems. "In the White Giant's Thigh", a very Blakean poem in image, lacks as well any triumphant sustained chord progressions of apocalyptic thunder indicating a final unity and triumph. The story behind the poem is well enough known as Tindall explains,

This elegy is for barren women, whose tombstones, on which even 'the names...are rained away', tell where they died and suggest how they lived, doing their best. A primitive design on the side of a hill, cut through turf to the chalk beneath, like the famous White Horse of England, the White Giant is supposed to confer fertility.<sup>163</sup>

What this poem is about, then, is clear enough as are the themes of most of Thomas's last poems; the poem is a lament for women who, wishing to become pregnant, remain barren. The images, however, are what chiefly interest us here. The grain image appears again in the fifth stanza connecting with the phrase "their dust was flesh"; rock becomes sand which becomes dust which is from whence we come.

The "bagpipe breasted ladies" of the "Altarwise" sonnet sequence, happily, have become women "their breasts full of honey"; unfortunately there is no "mouthing babe to the veined hives/ Hugged and barren and bare on Mother Goose's ground/ They with the simple Jacks were a boulder of wives". The poem concludes with the daughters of darkness flaming in desire, forever unfulfilled.

Our interest in the poem, other than admiring the excellent lyrical quality of the piece and being spell-bound by Thomas's absolute verbal mastery, is to indicate the imagistic correspond-

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<sup>163</sup>Tindall, p. 293.

ences to Blake. Thomas has used Blake's Albion image here in his conception of the White Giant. Just as Albion lies asleep on his rock of ages with Jerusalem wailing her lament, so we have Thomas working essentially the same concept in this poem.

Any number of passages in Blake would give us the correspondence, but "plate 34" of Jerusalem is more immediate to our argument. The parallels between the two passages are striking indeed. The situation in "plate 34" is as follows: Vala (Natural beauty) is mourning over the fallen form of Albion, with whom she should form a balanced part in Eternity. She moans "I was a City & a Temple built by Albion's children./ I was a garden planted with beauty". Her lament ends with a cry to Albion that she is love: "Elevate into the Regions of Brotherhood with my red fires." And Albion replies that "all manhood is gone!" As is the case in Thomas's poem "In the White Giant's Thigh", Albion is covered with a robe of death and fear. Now, the key lines for our comparison follow: Albion states in reply to Vala, "Art thou Nature, Mother of all? ... "In Eternity they neither marry nor are given in marriage./ Albion, the high Cliff of the Atlantic, is become a barren land." ... Albion frowned in anger/ On his Rock..." In Blake's passage the reader can trace Thomas's white giant, the lament of the sterile women (Vala), the red fires of desire (fox fires of Thomas), and the barren rock (Thomas's "barren as boulders"). At the level of image and general intention, then, these two passages are quite similar. The last line of Thomas's poem, "And the daughters of darkness flame like Fawkes fires still", may be validly interpreted in Blakean terms as Vala and Jerusalem; the difference is that Blake's daughters do not remain in darkness.

## CHAPTER VI-Concluding Remarks

Any attempt to form some concluding remarks about our discussion invites the consideration of literary archetypes and myth, a consideration further encouraged by Northrop Frye's criticism. While enough has been said of Blake's myth in the preceding discussion, a comment of Miss Ghent's, made in connection with her explanation of The Beat movement, serves, in part, to explain Thomas's insoluble artistic dilemma with which he struggled during his last years. Miss Ghent writes "Without myth passion has no focus and dies. Action and voice are impossible."<sup>164</sup> The cause of the tone of reconciliation, tranquility and even elegy in Thomas's last poems, then, may not have been so much an awareness of personal death as an awareness of an artistic one.

There is no question that Thomas failed to develop a large enough or consistent enough mythic structure to carry him artistically. He had worked out nothing comprehensive enough or well enough structured to push forward into new concepts, as did Blake. A major difference between the two writers is that Blake's mythic structure was sufficiently large.

The direction of our discussion has been dictated, to some extent, by an interest in Miss Bodkin's "a priori determinants

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<sup>164</sup>Van Ghent, D. A Casebook on the Beat., ed. T. Parkinson, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1961), p. 213.

of individual experience" and in part by Frye's definition of a literary archetype as "A symbol or image which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience."<sup>165</sup>

In view of the above remarks the worm image in Thomas's "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" can be seen as archetypal as can the anatomical imagery so common to both poets; even the voyage motif traced in the "Altarwise by Owl-Light" sonnet sequence and connecting with Los's voyages can be seen as archetypal. The medusa image representing the sinister female will, the stone images (Albion's stone and Thomas's stone in "Over Sir John's Hill" and "In the White Giant's Thigh") may be seen as archetypal in the sense that they link and connect and add to the associative richness of literary works. The implication here is clear enough: the minds of both Blake and Thomas had a similar caste of vision causing the two poets to interpret the world in a similar manner.

A last point to be mentioned is the possibility of determining the artistic direction in which Thomas was headed at his death. To answer this, the interested reader must look to Under Milk Wood. While more attention has been given to this play than it deserves from an artistic point of view, Thomas here is still able to dazzle us with his fine verbal gymnastics, his puns and sound tricks, but the significance of what he is doing in terms of completed vision remains. Under Milk Wood is warm in tone, humorous, slightly bawdy at times, always clever, but

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<sup>165</sup>Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 99.



but finally indulgent in the author's attitude toward his characters. There is a factual fondness in character delineation which tells the reader that Polly Garter will never become diseased much as she tumbles in the moss with her many fond lovers nor will Miss Myfanwy Price be anything but "neat as a puff-bosomed robin"; she remains forever insulated from the town's lechers. There is a hint however faint in this, Thomas's last work, of Blake's "An Island in the Moon": both are voice dramas; in both the characters have outlandish names; both are in a sense critical of the characters depicted; both suggest a fondness for the characters although in Blake's work the criticism is much closer to satire than is Thomas's and in this sense "An Island in the Moon" is highly reminiscent of Swift. In Under Milk Wood, then, Thomas's wit is softened by nostalgia for his own countrymen in this play that he was writing at his death, and had he lived, Under Milk Wood might have been the first of many warmly humorous dramas that would mark the point at which Thomas turned away from any further attempt to construct a comprehensive myth through which he might have interpreted his world to some degree of personal satisfaction. In this new direction that Thomas seemed to be moving, the reader can see no promise of an "epic summation of lyrical gifts," although it must be conceded that he has moved many leagues from the sterile world of process described in his early poems.

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