

CHAPTER - II

Sex - Time - Death

The question of the origins and ends of existence plagued Thomas throughout his poetic career. This questioning is attended by pain and horror. Thomas seeks release from the process of existence by a clearer perception of the ultimates of life. Man is Thomas's metaphor with which he expresses the life-and-death process that binds man and external nature in one vital unity. The conception and gestation in the womb, birth, growth, and decay of human body, have their counterpart in external nature. The processes of man's inner life are inseparably connected with the processes of external nature. The body in its microcosmic form contains within it the macrocosmic processes. The contrary forces of birth and death, destruction and creation work through both man and nature.

Thomas experiences the truth of the flux of things. But this experience is painful. So in his early poems he constantly records his protest against this irresistible process, but the cruel truth always demands acceptance. In the face of the relentless process he stands bewildered, shocked, and pained. The area of process that centres on time is often studied by Thomas. Sex that initiates fresh process causes conflict in his mind. The poet is both fascinated and appalled by sex. He strives for the resolution of the conflict that sex involves in its creative and destructive role, to have a view of sex which is unattended by fear, pain, and horror.

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower (CP9)

holds a central position in Thomas's poetic world. The poet's awareness of natural process finds beautiful poetical expression in the poem. All human, animal, and vegetal life is subject to the same creative and destructive forces. The natural process of growth and decay links man and nature and the perception of the co-existence of life and death, or the unity of contrary forces, is the seed from which all the images of the poem arise.

The animating process in nature is identical with the animating process in man:

The force that drives the water through the rocks  
Drives my red blood;

the same process is subject to the same destructive force:

... that dries the mouthing streams  
Turns mine to wax. (CP 9)

"Wax" is 'a symbol of dead or mortal flesh, as opposed to oil, a life-symbol'.<sup>1</sup> The force that dries the streams sucks the stream of life, the blood in the veins. The identity of creating and destroying forces is seen once more in the third stanza:

The hand; that whirls the water in the pool  
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind  
Hauls my shroud sail.  
And I am dumb to tell the hanging man  
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

'The hand that whirls' brings the counter-suggestion of destructive whirlpool. 'quicksand' is an image that combines the quick and the

dead. The ship of life and the ship of death are subject to the same force. 'To rope the blowing wind suggests a binding, constraining force; while the hauling of the sail, shroud or no, is very active, gives the impression of a voyage under way. These echoes, seemingly subversive to the image containing them, really support these, the point that the life and death forces are the same.' 'Shroud sail' obviously refers to Theseus and Tristan and supports the thematic union of love and death. The 'hanging man' suggests an embryo, an executed criminal, and Christ on the cross. The fourth stanza introduces the image of sexuality on a cosmic scale. 'The lips of time leech to the fountain head' of Love. 'Love drips and gathers' has obviously a phallic reference. "In the image of 'the lips of time' that leech to the fountain head is symbolized the powerful yearning of all mortality to clasp and be impregnated by the life forces. Out of that yearning, with all its pain, man dreamed of a timeless paradise beyond death to console himself for his limitations of mortality: 'time has ticked a heaven round the stars'. The dream cannot, of course, be communicated to the rest of nature."<sup>3</sup> 'Leech' means doctor. Christ the doctor, 'all glory's sawbones' (CP 75), saves us from mortality. The 'fallen blood' has a sacrificial note which expresses the concept of life coming out of death. The poem ends with a phallic image:

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

"Worm" is both charnal and amatory. The worm in bed-sheet bears the sperm that perpetuates the cyclical process of life. The continuation

of life-cycles in man and nature never fails; and this unending process is generated by the power of love.

The poem, through its imagery, seems to register emotional resistance to the irreversibility of process. The poet seeks freedom within the self, a personal transcendence over this uncontrollable process. In the midst of personal doubts and despair, his constant probing into the ultimates of existence is a way of attaining freedom and establishing the significance of life. But the poet is 'dumb to tell' us anything convincing in logical terms since he is deeply aware of the contradictions involved in the very existence itself. The existential problem forces the poet to make a choice. The writing of the poem is an act of freedom and choice.

The awareness of the contradictions inherent in existence, of the duality of life and death, is also found in A process in the weather of the heart (CP 6). Every birth brings death —

... the womb

Drives in a death as life leaks out.

But an awareness of death is necessary for life without which it is incomplete.

A darkness in the weather of the eye

Is half its light.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas's persistent questioning about the human condition, about the origin and end of life, as one way of attaining personal freedom over subjective despair, appears in poems after poems. "Sex-

time-death trap ... for Thomas epitomizes such of the human condition. In loving we reproduce, and in reproduction we prepare for our own death — this is the dilemma of the wanderer in the fallen world.<sup>5</sup> The poet seeks to defeat death and have a view of <sup>all</sup> which is free from inhibition. He strives to understand the role of sex in its true perspective. The theme of creation occupies Thomas in When once the twilight locks no longer (CP 4-5). The creator in the poem is God, father, or poet. His creature is the son, a son, or a poem. The creative instrument is word or phallus. The creation of a physical level often suffers from the inhibitory, life-denying asceticism which is death in life.<sup>6</sup> Creation begins when 'twilight locks' are no longer 'locked in the long worm of my finger'. The speaker's finger is both phallus and the poet's hand. The 'long worm' is the 'fathering worm' (CP 7), both creative and destructive.

I sent my creature scouting on the globe,  
That globe itself of hair and bone  
That, sewn to me my nerve and brain,  
Had stringed my flask of matter to his rib. 7 (CP 4)

Creation in Thomas's poetry is always mysterious and instinctive. The life-denying moral code and social customs and prejudices put a curb on this instinctive and natural urge for creation. 'He drowned his father's magics in a dream' (CP 4) and the dream sucks the sleeper of his faith in the vitalizing process in man and nature. The dreamer is pre-occupied with the horrors of death. 'The red-haired cancer,' 'the cataracted eyes', 'the bushy jaws' (CP 4) of the corpses, are the images which create the horrors of life. The tidal movement of time

brings the dead through transformations in different forms to light ('Who periscope through flowers to the sky'). The fact of death is not the only truth. The ascension of the spirits of the dead in new forms of life is equally significant.

I sent my ambassador to light;  
By trick or chance he fell asleep  
And conjured up a carcass shape  
To rob me of my fluids in his heart. (CP 5)

'Carcass shape' is an image of dead inhibitory religion which robbed man of his faith in vivifying blood. The last stanza exhorts the creature to live vigorously and abandon the morbid dream of death.

Awake, my sleeper, to the sun,  
A worker in the morning town,  
And leave the popped pick-thank where he lies. (CP 5)

The last line of the poem 'And worlds hang on the trees' is an image of a bright future that hangs like apples on the tree. Worlds of experience are yet untasted. Future depends on those experiences. They may involve sufferings, and even death.

Thomas regards the sufferings of Christ as general myth. Each man enacts the role of Christ in his birth, death, and suffering. Thomas's characteristic identification of man with Christ is seen in Before I knocked (CP 7-8). The physical procreation and the Crucifixion, birth and death, their union and conflict, are always

emphasized in Thomas's poetry. The protagonist of the poem Before I knuckled is a shapeless vital liquid who foresees the course of his life from birth to death. The amorphous seminal fluid 'with liquid hands tapped on the web' (CP 7) before assuming shape. It was conscious of the procreative process, of copulation, of 'fluid beneath my flesh's amour' (CP 7).

As yet was in a molten form,  
The loosed stars, the rainy humor  
Bung by my father from his dome, (CP 7)

The essential mystery of creation is preserved by Thomas even when he describes the physical aspects of sexual creation. The physiological function described is quite obvious. Metaphor is not used here to 'distance the intimate'. Metaphor works rather to imply the content of mystery within which the apparently straightforward sexual act is performed. The verse works by virtue of the tension that is set up between the physical 'facts' which can be rationalized and the fact of life itself which transcends reason.

The 'ungotten' liquid foresees and fore-suffers the crucifixion!

As yet ungotten, I did suffer!  
The rack of dress my lily bones  
Did twist into a living siphon. (CP 7)

The formation of physical organ -- bone, flesh, liver, brains -- is an agonizing process which gives a foretaste of death.

I melt the maggot in my stool, (CP 5)

In the sixth stanza the characteristic romantic image of a voyage is introduced. The child is born and begins his journey through life.

And time cast forth my mortal creature  
To drift or drown upon the seas  
Acquainted with the salt adventure  
Of tides that never touch the shores, (CP 6)

To Thomas an inscrutable, mysterious force causes life and controls the destiny of all creatures. No rational explanation can be given to it. So the poet is dumb and cannot tell whether the child born in time will 'drift or drown upon the seas' in his 'salt adventure' through the sea of life.

As vital fluid it was unaware of the mysterious cosmic forces at work!

I who was deaf to spring and summer,  
Who knew not as yet such by name, (CP 7)

but gradually became conscious of the physical universe, its seasonal changes and of death!

I knew the message of the winter,  
The darted hail, the childish snow,

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Ungetting I knowe night and day, (CP 7)

This is the child's gradual attainment of identity. The child, born in time, is a 'mortal creature'. The ups and downs of fortune, the

painful experiences of life, the ebb and flow of 'tides that never touch the shores' (CP 3), the infinite experiences of life, the unpredictability of things, are beautifully expressed in the voyage image.

According to Erasm, human generation and the generation of the world are analogous in their origin. The underlying principle of creation finds metaphoric expression in In the beginning (CP 23-24). It gives a description of creation based on metaphors of the "primordial principle" "the three-pointed star", "the pale signature", "a three-eyed, red-eyed spark", "blood shot."

In the beginning was the three-pointed star. (CP 23)

The Gospel of St. John begins with 'In the beginning'. The 'three pointed star' is a sexual image. The Trinity and the male creative principle are both suggested by three points. In the beginning gives a sexual account of creation in religious terms. 'The ribbed original of love' is an image of love viewed in its creative function. This is the 'one touch of bone across the rooting air' (CP 23). 'One mile of light across the empty face' (CP 23) is the beginning of creation. 'The substance forked that narrowed the first sun' (CP 23). The essence of God forked to produce the sun and the sea. Creation proceeds through dependence of one substance on another, and through opposition. It is a compound of good and bad; it is "heaven and hell mixed" (CP 23). The gushing, exploding and impelling force of life finds expression in the imagery of these lines:

Life rose and sprouted from the milling sea,  
First in the roots, pumped from the earth and rock  
The secret oils that drive the grass. (CP 33)

'The blood that touched the cross-tree and the grill' (CP 22) refers to the sufferings of Christ and shows the sacrifice involved in creation. All creation is an emergence from darkness into light, 'the pitch ... working to the sun' (CP 23) or sun.

The theme of the poem, I (dressed my corpse) (CP 23-24), is the evolutionary progress of man through birth, death, and rebirth. 'Limbs ... had the measure of the worm' (CP 23). Limbs begotten by the phallic worm take the hereditary shape in the womb, and in the tomb acquire the dimensions of the charnel worms that consume them. Besides man's natural death there is death from war and poison as found in the history of war. The images showing death from war are seen in stanza four:

I dressed my corpse and died again, stamped  
Bored in the marching heart, hole  
In the stitched wound and clogged wind, muffled  
Death on the mouth that ate the gas. (CP 23)

Man's evolutionary progress through death continues, there man's 'second struggling from the grass' (CP 23) with blood 'tempored' upon the examples of previous sacrificial deaths. This constant renewal and persistence of life can be seen in the rising of the skeleton and 'working of the naked ghost' (CP 23). Full mankind is attained through recurring sufferings.

... Method

Spit up from the reified pain, (CP 23)

Unvanquished, man's endless search for full-blooded life and light makes the poet say

\*\*\* vision

Of new man strength, I seek the sun, (CP 22)

Death is the major obsession in Thomas's poetry. He seeks a way to defeat death. Nothing avails, neither sexual act ('The knobbly ape that swings along his sun', CP 10) nor love, 'Six/Foot in the rubbing dust' (CP 12) is the only sub that tickles, 'Death's feather on the nerve' (CP 13) is an image of the presence of death in the body, 'The thistle in the kiss' (CP 13) is an image of attraction and aversion.

Though death is a major obsession in Thomas's poetry, in the question of life and death there is a feeling in favour of life which over balances the fear of death. When once the waters of your face (CP 10) ends with a hymn to life.

Dry as-ash, your coloured life  
Shall not be latched while magic glides  
Sage on the earth and sky;  
There shall be corals in your beds,  
There shall be serpents in your tides,  
Till all our sea-faiths die, (CP 10)

The 'coloured life' will not latch the magic of evocation that glides through the earth and sky.<sup>11</sup> The sea-faith in life is conformed by the suggestion of corals whose skeletons form the reefs. Thomas is thinking of the natural process that brings about the miraculous transformation of life through death.

My world is pyramid (CP 30-32) is a meditation on the physical child and the 'secret child' which is the eternal and indestructible life force, since the first section of the poem gives a description of the birth of the physical child or of human genesis, the images used are mostly sexual,

Half of the fellow father as he dabbles  
His ear-sucked Adam in the hollow milk,  
Half of the fellow mother as she dabbles  
To-morrow's diver in her honey milk,  
Blasted shadow on the thunder's bone  
Salt for the salt unborn,

This gives a description of union of father and mother, of sperm and egg in the 'hollow milk', 'Honey milk' is sexual secretion, and 'to-morrow's diver' is the unconceived child thought of as diving into the future. The third stanza gives another copulatory image:

The broken halves are followed in a cripple,  
The crutch that narrow taps upon their sleep,  
Limp in the street of sex, \*\*\* (CP 32)

Man and woman are cripples because they cannot create alone. There is a dependence of man on woman, sperm on egg, male cell on female cell. So all the halves are imperfect in themselves in creation. St. Thomas said in In the beginning, "The substance forked that narrowed the first man" (CP 32). Human generation proceeds by the union of opposites. Thomas shows a sense of disgust with human generation in the following lines:

The patchwork halves were cloven as they gauded  
 The wild pige wood, and slime upon the trees,  
 Sucking the dark, kissed on the cyanoide,  
 And loosed the braiding adders from their hairs!  
 Rotting halves are howling as they drill  
 The arterial signal. (CP 30)

Sperm and egg are the 'directed shadows on the thunder's bone/bolt for  
 the salt unborn' (CP 36). Sex produces 'the arterial signal' (CP 30)  
 which is a union of flesh and spirit. Pin, needle, thimble, piercing,  
 drilling, honing, sawing, suggest images associated with copulation  
 involved in human generation.

These digressions nature of the life force. The 'secret  
 child' resides in all bodies and, though suffers constant extinction,  
 is never subdued. Life force maintains its unimpeded course though the  
 world is Egypt's pyramid or 'oppression' which symbolises the graveyards.  
 Plagues, burial, death in war in 'an English valley', sacrificial  
 death of young men crying 'Hail to the king' (CP 30), can never res-  
 train its course.

I scrape through resin to a starry bone  
 And a blood parhalien.

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I piece my flesh that rattled on the yards  
 Red in an Austrian volley. (CP 30)

Life rises out of death, like 'corrosive spring out of the iceberg's  
 creep' (CP 30).

My grave is watered by the crossing Jordan,  
The Arctic scut, and basin of the South,  
Drip on my dead house garden.  
Who seek me landward, marking in my mouth  
The straws of Asia, lose me as I turn  
Through the Atlantic corn. (CP 31)

Grave is animated by the life - giving waters drawn from all the corners of the world. Waters 'drip on the dead house garden'. 'Dead house garden' is womb. Sperm awakens life in the womb 'Jordan' suggests the life of Christ whose death is life. The life force never dies. Dead in one corner, it is alive in another part, since it is deathless and creative.

Thomas examines the question of life, death, and immortality. What is the nature of life?

Who blows death's feather? What glory is colour? (CP 33)

Life asserts itself by blowing away 'death's feather'.

I blow the staminal feather in the vein. (CP 32)

'Staminal feather' suggests asceticism which is a negation of life. 12

The loin is glory in a working fallow.  
My clay unsuckled and my salt unborn,  
The secret child, I shift about the sea  
Dry in the half-tracked thing. (CP 32)

The loin is glory. It is through sex that life is perpetuated. The life force impels the sperm to egg, gives life to mortal things which

achieved immortality through sex.

Paul Ferris, Thomas's biographer, observes, 'The early poems steam with sexual energy. Their death-symbols, the maggots and ghosts, are entwined with sex-images -- the "rainy hammer" of his father's penis against the womb, or the boy who masturbates, "rehearsing heat upon a raw-edged nerve". The act of masturbation is implicit in several poems, reflecting Thomas's sexual experience at the time. The style in which he was writing may have been contrived for maximum effect, but there is no doubt that he is describing what he feels, what he is. He was trying to encompass (in powerful "poetic" language as befitted his vocation) what it meant to be his particular man or boy at the age of nineteen.'

13

I see the boys of summer (CP 1-3), the first poem in the 1968 edition of Collected Poems 1934-68, London (Dent), states certain basic ideas that run through his poems, especially his early poems.

(a) The body is a microcosm. The physiological processes in the body have their counterpart in the processes of external nature. The body is identified with the external world. "... the flesh that covers me is the flesh that covers the sun, that the blood in my lungs is the blood that goes up and down in a tree."

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(b) The poet's mind is engaged in tracing the processes of growth from pre-natal conception to death. The incessant becoming is a source of uncertainty of the earthly life. Each stage has its doubts, conflicts, apprehensions, and anguish.

(c) Since all processes of growth are in time, they are doomed to decay. This is a death-ridden world.

(d) Since death is inevitable, there is a defiance of it in the assertion of life through sex and procreation.

(e) Thomas has a pathological dread of sex. Sexual attraction and repulsion involve a conflict in the poet.

(f) Moral or physical negation of life is death. The poet attempts to have a greater understanding of his self through his awareness of the ambiguity of life. Adolescent masturbation is self-abuse, but it is also a way to self-discovery. The discovery of the self is also the way to the understanding of the world.

(g) Growth is through division and opposition of forces. There is an interdependence of life and death. Birth of a child involves the death of parents. The creative and destructive forces are identical. A mysterious life-force is working through all. The poet's understanding of himself is his understanding of the world. He is aware of the dynamic and conflicting nature of the inner self and the world.

15

I see the boys of summer portrays the interdependence of life and death, growth and decay, and the disparate images of the poem symbolically express its central life - cycle theme.

I see the boys of summer in their ruin  
Lay the gold tithings barren,  
Setting no store by harvest, freezes the soils.

The 'boys of summer' symbolise fertility and sterility, life and death, creation and destruction.

The jacks of frost they finger in the hives;

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The signal moon is zero in their voids. (CP 1)

The moon, a symbol of fertility, is made zero by the boys. The 'jacks of frost', a sexual image, the boys finger in the womb. They symbolise the sterile and destructive act of the boys.

I see the summer children in their mothers  
Spit up the browned womb's weathers,  
Divide the night and day with fairy thumbs. (CP 1)

The weathers of external nature have their corresponding weathers in the browned muscular womb. Changes occur in the womb:

There in the deep with quartered shades  
Of sun and moon they plant their dams  
As sunlight paints the shelling of their heads. (CP 1)

The birth of children paints their dams with marks of age. Process and mortality are suggested by sun and moon. The child's birth is the death of parents.

I see that from these boys shall men of nothing  
Stature by seedy shifting,  
Or lose the air with leaping from its boats;  
There from their hearts the dogdayed pulse  
Of love and light bursts in their throats. (CP 1)

The boys of summer, now fully grown, come to nothing.

O see the pulse of summer in the ice. (CP 1)

The excess of amatory heat 'bursts in their throats'. The boys are of summer and are in their ruin. 'Seedy' and 'bursts' are ambiguous. 'Seedy' implies both fertility and decay while 'bursts' implies creation and destruction. 'The pulse of summer in the ice' also suggests life in death and death in life. Through vividly felt concrete particulars the poet establishes the abstract thematic oppositions of life and death, flesh and spirit, youth and age, attraction and repulsion. The complex totality of consciousness is ordered through images that express these contrary states.

Thomas has a profound, tragic sense of the processes of the world. 'What is the meaning of all song?' Keats asks himself, and answers, 'Let all things pass away'.<sup>16</sup> The realization of the truth is itself an achievement, though it does not solve the mystery of the world.

The process of growth is a movement towards death. Sex initiates this process. Thomas is reconciled to the eternally recurrent process, to the objective activity of nature, in the last poems written between 1947 and 1952. But before that his description of this process is attended by dread and agony. Later he achieves a vision of life in which he finds all creatures bound by one cyclical process of life and death. The animal world pursues its grievous and inevitable ends while the poet himself goes towards his own end. The closer he moves towards death, the louder he sings. He realizes that destruction is no destruction but a guarantee of perpetual life in a cosmic cyclical process. 'And

death shall have no dominion' (CP 68) is the thought that triumphantly rings in Ceremony After a Fire Raid and A Refusal to Mourn.

Time is a destroyer. It carries our lives to their destined ends. We die in every moment. In sonnet 60 Shaker takes a sweeping view of man's life from birth to death, and identifies the process of time with death.

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end;  
Each changing place with that which goes before,  
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.  
Nativity, once in the main of light,  
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,  
Crook'd eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,  
And time that gave doth now his gift confound.

Death itself is not a single event, but a continuous process. In Worms in this spring (CP 45) the movement of time is expressed by Thomas in an image of voyage: 'years'/Slow rounding of four seasons' coasts'. Time's sermon that living is a dying is proclaimed by the worm and the slug. Worm-time or slug-time speaks of time that brings an end to everything. Clock-time and calendar-time tell of abstract time but 'the slug's a living calendar of days.' Summer is known from the leafy trees and spring from cuckooing. But the worms tell of 'the winter's storms/Or the funeral of the sun'; the slug speaks of destruction. Worms, phallic or charnel, are recurrent, and, in this sense, timeless.

What shall it tell me if a timeless insect

Says the world wears away?

(CP 45)

'Insect' in Thomas is an image of Jesus or poem. In To-day, this insect (CP 41), the insect gives the certain promise of death. Jesus and poem give the intimations of mortality, and the uncertain note of ending probably gives suggestion of immortality.

Like a running grave, time tracks you down. (CP 18)

In Hold hard these ancient minutes in the cuckoo's mouth (CP 49) Time is again imaged as a country hunter chasing 'my man, my children', 'over the vault of ridings with his pound at heel'. 'The green blossoms ride upward, to the drive of time'. The whole world is the quarry of the hunter time.

Down fall four padding weathers on the scarlet lands,  
Stalking my children's faces with a tail of blood,  
Time, in a rider rising, from the harnessed valley.  
(CP 49)

Time drives forth blooming life silently. The horns of the hunter 'in the sound of shape, / Summon your snowy horsemen'. 'Snowy horsemen' are blossoms. Glasgorgon's Hill is like a four-stringed instrument. The pulsation of sprouting life on the hill is like the vibration of music that 'over the sea-gut loudening, sets a rock alive' (CP 49). Time leads everything to death. The silent destruction of plants is imaged by the report of a rifle, the falls, rocks, the breaking of steel.

Birdles and guns and railings, as the boulders heave,  
Crack like a spring in a vice, ... (CP 49)

Death is inevitable. So 'Hold hard, my country darlings' to 'the

summer's game' for 'a hawk descends'.

A mysterious force causes life and controls its destiny. The creative and destructive forces working through the human, animal, and vegetable world, establish the oneness of the processes of biological life. A compulsive force urges phallus to vagina for the creation of the 'tall tower'. Father and mother co-operate for the creation of son.

Do you not father me, nor the erected arm  
For my tall tower's sake cast in her stone?

(Do you not father me, CP 46)

The new entity, 'the lovers' house', becomes in turn 'love's house', the source of life and love.

Am I not father, too, and the ascending boy,  
The boy of woman and the wanton starrer  
Marking the flesh and summer in the bay? (CP 46)

The life-force urges 'The ascending boy' towards creation. As creator-creature he is one with father, brother, sister, bird, shell, and all life on the sea-shore and subject to the same controlling force.

Am I not all of you by the directed sea  
Where bird and shell are babbling in my tower? (CP 46)

The force is as creative as destructive.

Up rose the Abraham - man, mate for my sake,  
They said, who hacked and hounded, they were mine.  
(CP 46)

Father is a destroyer, an "Abraham - man", intent on destroying what he has created. The literal Hebrew meaning of Abraham is "father of many". "Those who hack down the tower, who crucify Christ, are like Abraham, the people of God, fulfilling God's will and at the same time preparing the way for future generations."<sup>17</sup>

I am, the tower told, felled by a timeless stroke.

(CP 46)

The life force compels all life to death, and out of death life arises again.

For man-begetters in <sup>18</sup>dry-as-paste,

18

The ringed-sea ghost, rise grimly from the wreck.

(CP 46)

In A Grief Ago (CP 54-55) grief is time. In Grief thief of time (CP 67) grief is the thief that steals off youth. Grief deadens the pain of past years and the sense of time. The old sailors forget the 'cries', 'lean time on tide', rough wind, of 'the seafaring years' (CP 67). They forget 'the grief, /back of the cough, the hanging albatross' (CP 67), their disease and their sense of guilt. Age blunts the keen edge of grief and sweetens memories. This is the general condition of human life. In their actions and in their faith in themselves, the sailors once humbled time, 'blew time to his knees'(CP 67). Now they live in the memory of the past. They are 'salt-eyed', full of memories of the 'seafaring years' and of the ship who 'tossed the high tide' and now 'timelessly lies loving with the thief' (CP 67).

In the second stanza Thomas draws our attention to the thief.

The metaphor of thief is elaborated. The thief is 'the time-faced crook,/Death flashing from his sleeve' (CP 67). 'The time-faced crook' is not only the clock but the 'crooked worm' (CP 9) or phallus. The thief steals off testicular vitality, 'swag of bubbles in a seedy sack' (CP 67), but buries it in the grave where 'stallion' years of vigorous youth are buried ('sneak down the stallion grave', (CP 67). Sexual impotence frees 'the twin-boxed grief' (CP 67) that attended the virile years. It is useless to peep through the 'sumach crack', like Susanna's impotent elders, at the 'stolen bubbles' (CP 67). Let 'No third eye probe into a rainbow's sex/That bridged the human halves' (CP 67). Susan life is bound by a mysterious force, and in life and death follows the universal scheme of nature. Nothing is lost.

All shall remain and on the grave-ward gulf  
Shape with my fathers' thieves. (CP 67)

The sea is the source of life to which it finally returns. Life itself is a 'grave-ward gulf' of womb and tomb where all takes shape.

And Death shall have no dominion (CP 68) emphasizes the continuity of life in different forms that defeat death. The thematic line 'And Death shall have no dominion' comes from Romans 6:9. But in Thomas it has nothing to do with the Christian concept of the eternal life of the soul. The poem is an affirmation of the indestructibility of matter.

Though they be sad and dead as nails,  
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies. (CP 68)

The life in the individual endures, though it changes its forms through death.

In It is the sinner's dust - tongued bell (CP 83-84) Time is pictured as a "sulphur priest" with "torch and hourglass" (CP 83) conducting a service. Time is painted as a spirit of evil. Time's "coral saint" is slow-growing life and time brings "salt grief" or the sufferings of life. "Time's coral saint and the salt grief drown a foul sepulchre" (CP 83). Time relentlessly multiplies life to defeat death; but the ever new life is the source of ever new grief.

Moonfall and sailing emperor, pale as their tide - print,  
Near by death's accident the clocked and dashed-down  
spire  
Strike the sea hour through bellmetal. (CP 83) 19

"Sailing emperor" (CP 83) is the sun engaged in the creative process with the moon which controls the tide. They hear "by death's accident" the birth of a new life. New life sounds the death-knell of the living. "Grief with drenched book and candle christens the cherub time" (CP 83). "Cherub time" is embryo. The ritual of exorcism is introduced in the first stanza: "Grief with dishevelled hands tear out the altar ghost" (CP 83). In the third stanza grief baptizes the coming child. Time is the source of "urchin grief". Time is sexual act and time is the child, cast out and shaped for death.

I mean by time the cast and curfew rascal of our  
marriage,

At night break born in the fat side, from an animal bed  
In a holy room in a wave. (CP 84)

E. Glyn Lewis says that in the poem "time is identified with the sexual act which, holy in itself, is translated by consciousness of time into

an abhorrent experience".

The release from sex-time-death trap comes through the persistence of life through the universe in varied forms. A Winter's Tale (CP 119-123) is the tale of rebirth told by nature in the dead of winter. Nature tells the man 'torn and alone' (CP 119), 'the believer lost and the hurried outcast of light' (CP 120), in answer to his prayer, about the life that ceases and comes back alive in different forms. The poem was written during 1944-45, when Thomas lived under the constant threat of death from bombing during Second World War. A sense of loneliness and guilt haunted his mind. Moreover, it was during this time Thomas's father was seriously ill. He wrote to Watkins on 28 March 1945 —

"My father is awfully ill these days, with heart disease and uncharted pains, and the world that was once the colour of tar is now a darker place".<sup>21</sup>

So the man in the poem, 'Torn and alone in a farm house in a fold/of field's' (CP 119), 'forsaken and afraid' (CP 120), resembles the poet as well as his father.

The man, estranged from his kind, seeks fulfilment of life through death. His participation in life comes from his complete immersion in the process of life through death. Death is not complete annihilation. It is decomposition in the earth which the dissolved body fertilizes.

The old man prays for death to be relieved of the 'crest of grief' (CP 120). Death is not terrible. It is 'the bride bed

forever sought' (CP 120). Death as a bride is sought in love. Death comes to the man as a transcendent, transforming love. The whole of nature is moved by love. The man kneels, weeps and prays to the 'veiled sky':

Deliver him, he cried,  
By losing him all in love, and cast his need  
Alone and naked in the engulfing bride. (CP 120)

In answer to his prayer comes, 'A she bird rose and rayed like a burning bride' (CP 121). She is the mystic bride and symbolises death and fulfilment. The poem, like Keats' Hymn of St. Agnes, is built on contrast between hot and cold, light and dark, fire and snow. The contrasting states are epitomised in the she - bird. She is process. The man's death is his entry into natural process.

The man has a vision of life in which nature reveals the significance of death. The vision of awakened nature shows that the dead are preserved in the snowy seed and wait 'till trumpeting dawn' (CP 123) for miraculous resurrection. This is the winter's tale that nature tells. The dead will come back to life again. In the vision of rejoicing, awakened nature the poet asserts it.

... The minstrels sing

In the departed villages. The nightingale,  
Dust in the buried wood, flies on the grains of her  
wings  
And spells on the winds of the dead his winter's tale.  
The voice of the dust of water from the withered  
spring

Is telling. The wisened  
Stream with bells and baying water bounds. The dew rings  
On the gristed leaves and the long gone glistening  
Parish of snow. The carved mouths in the rock are wind  
swept strings.  
Time sings through the intricately dead snow drop. Listen.

. . .

Look. And the dangers move  
On the departed, snow bushed green, wanton in moon light  
As a dust of pigeons. Humbling, the grave hooved  
Horses, centaur dead, turn and tread the drenched white  
Paddocks in the farms of birds. The dead oak walks for  
love.

The carved limbs in the rock  
Leap, as to trumpets. Calligraphy of the old  
Leaves is dancing. Lines of age on the stones weave in a  
flock.  
And the harp shaped voice of the water's dust plucks in a  
fold  
Of fields. For love, the long ago she bird rises. Look.

(CP 121)

The whole of nature is actuated by the spirits of love. 'The dead oak walks for love.' 'For love, the long ago she bird rises'. The she - bird makes the life of the forsaken old man meaningful by

leading him to immortality which he seeks. 'He ran like a wind after the kindling flight' (CP 122). He is united with the bird in death. He 'lay bedded/In a chair of wings, as though she slept or died' (CP 123).

And the wings glided wide and he was hymned and wedded,  
And through the thighs of the engulfing bride,  
The woman breasted and the heaven headed

Bird, he was brought low,  
swinging in the bride bed of love, in the whirl —  
Pool at the waiting centre, in the folds  
Of paradise, in the spun bud of the world. (CP 123)

There is sexual consummation with the bride. Here is the mystical union of love and death. The man who snelt, wept, prayed, 'by the spit and the black pot in the log bright light' 'at the point of love' (CP 120), dies both sexually and physically. This death promises future birth. "The wedding rite between man and death is concluded, and the reality of the marriage state — attritional but fecundating decomposition — succeeds."<sup>24</sup>

R E F E R E N C E S.

1. Elder Olson, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas*, Chicago 1967, p. 101.
2. R. N. Haud, *Entrances to Dylan Thomas's Poetry*, (Scorpion Press) 1963, p. 69.
3. M.L. Rosenthal, *The Modern Poets*, A Galaxy Book, O.U.P., 1965, p. 210.

4. "As light without darkness is undifferentiated, unshaped -- which is to say that, without darkness, light is characterless -- life without the fact of death and an awareness of the fact is, ... an immensely diminished thing." (Clark Smery, *The World of Dylan Thomas*, London 1971, p. 272.)
5. W. T. Moynihan, *The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas*, New York 1966, p. 267.
6. Sider Olson says that the poem is "a meditation on the origin of the idea of death, terminating in the decision that life is to be lived, vigorously". (Op.cit., p. 36).
7. Lita Hornick thinks that both the speaker and 'creature' are identical, and the 'creature' appears to be at once the speaker's phallus and his son. "The speaker is saying that he sent his phallus or his son (this is a timeless act of sex in which father and son are involved at the same time) 'scouting' upon the body of the staminal ave, that very womb ('that globe itself') in which the speaker (God or the father) was at one time attached when in the foetal state." (*The Intricate Image: A study of Dylan Thomas*, New York 1968, p. 103).
8. Derek Stanford finds sexual imagery dominating in the poem. 'Periscope' in the fifth stanza, according to him, "indicates the upward movement of the male organ". 'My ambassador ... fell asleep' is an image of resting "after the effort of sex by which a child was conceived". 'the popped pickthank' of the last stanza is "the tired male member", 'popped' suggesting "its colour and its sated condition", and 'pickthank' "one who affects an entry and is thanked for so doing". (*Dylan Thomas*, London 1964, p. 46).
9. Walford Davies (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: New Critical Essays*, London (Dent) 1972, p. 124.
10. S.W. Tedlock (ed.), *The legend and the poet*, (Mercury Books) London 1963, p. 174.
11. 'Throughout his poetry, Thomas associates "magic" both with creative activity of all types and with faith, because it has to do with the unknowable, the intentional, the inexplicable'. (Moynihan, op.cit., p. 204).
12. 'Death's feather is a "staminal" feather, Thomas says. But staminal is an undergarment of linsey - woolsey (usually dyed red) worn by ascetics. Asceticism is death's agent. What colour is glory? It is the red radiance of eternity, in the blood of a living man'. (Smery, op.cit., p. 307).
13. Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas* (Hodder and Stoughton) 1977, p. 98.

14. Selected Letters, p. 87.
  15. Tindall says, 'Probably these boys are all men -- in their aspects of sperm cells, embryos, and adolescents .... these boys are victims of time'. (A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas, London 1962, p.39). According to Ralph Haud, 'the boys of summer personify the basic forces of growth and decay seen by Thomas operating everywhere in the universe'. (Entrances to Dylan Thomas' poetry, Scorpion Press 1963, p. 19).
  16. W.S. Yeats, The Collected Poems, London (Macmillan) 1961, p. 286.
  17. Moynihan, op.cit., p.82.
  18. W.S. Marvin says -- Such a poem as 'Do you not father me' carries both the subject of the individual's continuity in man's continuing creation, which Dylan Thomas had first developed in 'Before I knocked', and the subject of 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower' a stage further by identifying man the creature -- creature with all other mortal creatures. (Tedlock, op.cit., pp. 241-42).
  19. "From the 'dashed - down spire' of the sunken and sexual cathedral, a bell strikes the 'sea hour', like a ship's clock, through the metal of a diving bell .... This familiar imagery of womb and tomb suggests embryo and poem". (W.Y. Tindall, A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas; London 1962, p. 166).
  20. Tedlock, op.cit., p. 176.
  21. Dylan Thomas, Letters to Vernon Watkins, London (Dent/Faber) 1967, p.156.
  22. She "combines the symbolic red and white of fulfillment, perfection, the ideal state." (Moynihan, op.cit., p. 288).
  23. 'She is earth and sun. As earth, she engulfs; as sun, she rises "flowering in her melting snow". As earth, she is woman - breasted; as sun, heaven - headed. ... She is process, and neither moral nor purposive, but holy in the Huxleyan sense.' (Emery, op.cit., p.265).
  24. Emery, op.cit., p. 264.
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