

I N T R O D U C T I O N

1. The thesis on 'Dylan Thomas : the theme and imagery in Thomas's poetry' has been revised under the scholarly guidance of Professor Michael Collie of York University, Toronto, Canada. In deference to his wish expressed in the forwarding letter to the Report submitted to the University on the original thesis, I wrote to Professor Collie with the permission of the University. In reply to my letter Professor Collie made some observations and gave some concrete suggestions which I am advised to follow while revising my thesis. Without his advice it would have been difficult for me to proceed with the work of revision. The relevant extract from the letter is quoted below:

I am not at all hostile to your main ideas, so see no reason for any drastic change in your over-all argument or in the structure of the thesis. As you already know, I do think that your critical observation and ideas are almost completely concealed by an overgrowth of quotation. Yes, you obviously wish to demonstrate in your thesis that you are aware of current criticism and don't wish to be vulnerable, later, to people saying "He hasn't read this" or "He seems never to have heard of that" ! But will you not reconsider the way in which you have incorporated this material, which at present constitutes such a large part of your work? In my opinion, there are several things you might do, including

- (1) giving your reader, at an early stage, some indication of which critics you consider particularly useful; (After all, they do not all agree with you.)

- (ii) making more of an attempt to avoid repetition, by identifying, the first time you mention a critic, what his overall approach is, so that some comments on individual poems could be abbreviated;
- (iii) placing some quotations from critics in the notes instead of the main text, especially when the quotation is being used to confirm an idea rather than to state it for the first time;
- (iv) having a brief Appendix in which you could summarize the present state of Dylan Thomas studies, so that the reader of your thesis could see more clearly why you think there is room for another major study i.e. yours.

2. The thesis makes a study of the theme and imagery in Dylan Thomas's poetry. Thomas's life-long effort was to find out the significance of life. Was life any meaning? From the moment of conception life begins its graveward journey. Life is a mysterious process limited by death. Life is created for death. This is a paradoxical situation which haunted the mind of Thomas. The fatality of man's being cannot be divorced from the fatality of his existential problem. Thomas seeks a solution of this problem. He has a wild longing in his heart for an understanding of the meaning of existence. There is a conflict between his need for clarity and the unreasonable silence of the world and the 'unminding skies' (CP 105). Reason and heart are baffled in their search for meaning. 'But heart, like head, leads helplessly' (CP 63).

Why east wind chills and south wind cools
 Shall not be known till the windvill dries

...

... and I know

No answer to the children's cry. (CP 53)

Thomas tells his son in 'This Side of the Truth' :

This side of the truth,
You may not see, my son.

(CP 105)

In his poetry Thomas struggles to come out of darkness into light. The thesis traces the poet's emergence into light, his quest for the meaning of existence, his assertion of life and love that embraces all men and animals, and his final reconciliation of life and death. Thomas seeks a release from the time-sex-death trap in which life is caught. As he grows older he comes to a greater understanding of the nature of love. He sings of light and love in the face of devastation caused by war. He attains a maturer harmony of existence through childhood memories. Thomas achieves a vision of the beneficent scheme of the universe. He perceives

We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.¹

Thomas struggles for light. 'Light' means the perception of unity in diversity, whatever else it may mean. Things become clear when they are perceived in their relationship and seen in a unified pattern. To ask for meaning is essentially to ask for unity. A nostalgia for unity is inherent in man. The mechanical nature of everyday life, 'the repetition of salutes,' 'the parting of hat from hair,' 'pursed lips at the receiver' (CP 164), the sense of time passing ('I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail/wearing the quick away' (CP 13), the feeling of isolation from others - all these induce a feeling of despair. Thomas is acutely conscious of

existential absurdity. Dostoevsky says, "I swear, gentlemen, that to be too conscious is an illness - a real thorough-going illness." Life is stricken with death. Thomas tells his father to rebel against death :

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (CP 116)

This note of revolt implies the value of existence. "Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully,"³ observes Camus. This is a vote for life, a refusal to be defeated. Thomas's struggle towards light through his poetic creation is one way of coping with existence. Nietzsche says, "The essential feature of art is its power of perfecting existence, its production of perfection and plenitude; and is essentially the affirmation, the blessing, and the deification of existence"⁴ The struggle gives significance to life. "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy,"⁵ says Camus. What counts is not the best living but the most living. So Thomas is against the Christian asceticism. "If there is a sin against life it is perhaps not so much despair about this life as hope in another which evades the inexorable grandeur of the here and now."⁶ Sin is in the turning away from the richness of physical existence rather than a full and spontaneous embracing of it.

I cannot murder, like a fool,

Season and sunshine, grace and girl,

Nor can I smother the sweet waking. (CP 66)

Death is the saggot no man can slay. Through doubts, conflicts, and sufferings, Thomas gradually becomes reconciled to death.

Light and dark are no enemies

But one companion.

(CP 66)

In his last poems he perceives the value of death in the scheme of the universe. "Every moment of life is valuable, and every capacity is valuable because of death (although for other reasons too). Once used up or passed by it is irrevocably past. Life is a scarce resource. In a rather special, perhaps strained sense, then, death has a positive effect on life plans. It makes life precious."

That the closer I move

To death, one man through his sundered hulks,

The louder the sun blooms

And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults. (CP 173)

To be reconciled to death is to be reconciled to existence. The participation in life is also a participation in death.

Green chickens of the bay and bushes cluck, 'dilly
dilly,

Come let us die'.

(CP 168)

Life and death are integrated in a unitive vision of life. Thomas's quest for meaning is also a quest for meaning is also a quest for happiness. Happiness is the harmony of the individual with his existence. Happiness follows from "a relationship in which the individual accepts the eternal antagonism between his desire for life and the inevitability of his death." ⁸ Pessimism and the tragic sense always

accompany man's search for happiness. "There is no love of life without despair about life."⁹ "By a sympathetic identification with the temporal process of the world, an identification which is the act of poetry, the poet can make himself a Noah's ark. He can save things from destruction by participating in their destruction. Such participation is, in the full sense of the word, "an affirmation of the beautiful and terrible worth of the earth." In this affirmation the poet affirms himself, the ark which contains all things. To affirm and rescue the earth is to affirm and rescue the self, which at no point in Thomas' experience can separate itself from the totality of the created world."¹⁰

We meet in Walt Whitman the sexuality and death that we find in Thomas. Whitman invites the readers to observe "a spear of grass." The "spear of grass" combines the two motifs of procreative urge and death in one symbol which appears throughout the poem, 'Song of Myself', until "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love" ('Song of Myself').¹¹ The line brings life and death into harmony, and asserts the eternal cycle which transcends the seeming flux and transitoriness of life, the permanence of endless renewal. ... The "spear of grass," moreover, has the appearance and the founding power of the phallus, which in turn is the source of life and art, ... and which in the sexual act repeats the life-death cycle."¹² To Thomas sex is not an end in itself. It is the instrument which defeats death by perpetuating the species through procreation. Whitman asserts the eternal sexual rhythm of life :

Urge and urge and urge, 13
Always the procreant urge of the world.

(Song of Myself)

Whitman rejects asceticism and uninhibitedly indulges in the delights of the body.

Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the Flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and
each part and tag of me is a miracle.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy what-
ever I touch or am touched from,
The scent of these ars-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the
creeds. ¹⁴ ('Song of Myself')

Copulation sets in the eternal cycle of life and death:

Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself,
In you I wrap a thousand onward years,
On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of
me and America,
The drops I distil upon you shall grow fierce
and athletic girls, new artists, musicians, and singers,
The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes
in their turn,
I shall demand perfect men and women out of
my love-spendings,
I shall expect them to interpenetrate with others,
as I and you interpenetrate now,

I shall count on the fruits of the gushing showers
of them, as I count on the fruits of the
gushing showers I give now,

I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life,
death, immortality, I plant so lovingly now. ¹⁵

('A Woman Waits for Me')

Thomas's sense of loneliness and his desire for relationship with others ('Bars in the Turrats Hear,' 'We living by seasand') reveal another aspect of his kinship with Whitman. Haviland Miller points out, 'Man's great problem is not the world's evils; it is the absence of relationships, or love. Man may think that he is troubled by the world's evils, but his greatest horror is of an emotional lack, of utter loneliness in an indifferent universe. For Whitman heaven or joy is relatedness, real or imaginary; hell or agony is its absence. And so Whitman dwells at length on the difficulties of becoming human through the establishment of what E.M. Forster calls "connections". Thus Whitman's poetic journeys lead from the ¹⁶ self to relatedness to nature and man, at least on the verbal level.'

"Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to human existence."¹⁷ Thomas takes a dialectical view of the universe. The thematic oppositions of life and death, creation and destruction, sexual attraction and repulsion, womb and tomb, have bred contradictory images in his poems. The poet is often involved in debates in his poems where he makes a study of the contrary views of a problem.

These debates are Thomas's probe into his mind which perceives the contradictions of life. The opposite views of life are expressed, for example, in the last section of I see the boys of summer (CP 1-3).

I see you boys of summer in your ruin,
Man in his maggot's barren. (CP 3)

Man in his fleshy body is subject to death and decay. But the boys have creative sexual potentiality.

I am the man your father was. (CP 3)

This is an appeal to traditional authority and hereditary continuity. But the boys assert,

We are the sons of flint and pitch. (CP 3)

According to the poet all contraries seem to be in agreement. This many-sided debate with himself is a source of human interest in Thomas's poetry as it is in Yeats's poetry.

Thomas' poems show his struggle to be himself. To attain self-identity he faces multiple inner and outward obstacles which he endeavours to overcome. One obstacle is his sense of parental domination. He struggles hard to overcome this influence for the realization of his independent self. He equally struggles for free poetic expression liberating himself from the influence of previous writers. He suffers from moral, poetical, and religious uncertainty. He gropes for a vision which synthesizes all contradictions of life. He is painfully conscious of the conflict between flesh and spirit, reason and passion, of social taboos and conventional religious practices

that prevent free self-expression and petrify impulses. He longs for productive relationships with others to overcome the sense of alienation and thus to achieve independence and mature self-realisation. The poet yearns for greater self-awareness. Puritanical conscience and sex-inhibition stand in the way. The assertion of sex is a sign of independence and maturity. Masturbation also in a way brings greater self-awareness. To deny sex is to go against the universal creative process. The question of time and death torments the mind of Thomas. Time relentlessly brings everything to an end. If death be the end of life, what is the significance and purpose of life? The writing of poetry then loses its relevance in life.

The poet struggles through doubts and fears, through the consciousness of sin in sex, social taboos, dead conventional ideas, physical and sacrificial love, to attain a vision that will show existence purposeful and significant and art relevant in life. Towards the end of his poetic career the poet achieves a vision of life in which he integrates sex and death. The different phases of Thomas' poetic career show his struggle for an all-comprehending vision of life. Different phases are not logically connected and show no logical development. The struggle is the reality in his creation, the connecting thread running through different phases. The vision that he ~~xxxxx~~ attains at the end, though not intellectually satisfying, at least gives him some degree of emotional peace, however short-lived it may be. It is to be realised that the poet arrives at the unitive vision of life ~~instinctively and~~ not through a ratiocinative process. It is an ~~instinctive~~ intuitive perception, and not an

intellectual conviction logically arrived at. To seek logic in the gradual development of the poet towards this vision will be futile. Each phase of his struggle is significant because it brings greater understanding of the world and self. He intuitively perceives a vision which helps him to attain an emotional poise, however dubious it may be, in the last phase of his poetic creation. He is reconciled to the processes of nature. Death and sex are perceived to be an integral part of the scheme of the universe. He ~~instinctively~~ perceives a unity in the whole of nature, and finds a resolution of the conflict between the self and the world. Death is no death, but an immersion into the cyclical process of life and death. Death through resurrection, sex through procreation ensure immortality. He achieves a resolution of the problem of sex-time-death. The poet perceives a meaning in a seemingly purposeless world. The truth he attains is not logically convincing but emotionally satisfying. Even this emotional satisfaction is shot through with scepticism. Thomas' whole poetic career shows his struggle for light.

3. Thomas's first volume of poems, 18 Poems, was published by Sunday Referee & Parton Bookshop, London in 1934. The second volume of poems, Twenty-five Poems, was published in 1936 by J. M. Dent, London. His third volume of work, The Man of Love, London : J. M. Dent 1939, contained sixteen poems and seven short stories. With the publication of Deaths and Entrances, London : J. M. Dent 1946, Dylan Thomas emerged as a major poet. Thomas's last volume of poems, In Country Sleep and Other Poems A New Directions Book was published in

1952. Collected Poems 1934-52 London : J. M. Dent was published in 1952. All references to this particular edition appear in parenthesis (CP) in the thesis. The number given in the parenthesis indicates the page number.

The penetrating critical studies of Dylan Thomas made by W.T. Hoynihan, Clark Esery, and W. K. Tindall have greatly helped me in the understanding of Thomas' poetry. I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to other critical studies as well. In preparing the thesis I have been greatly helped by the National Library, Calcutta, Calcutta University Library, Jadavpur University Library, and most of all by the North Bengal University Library, American Library: USIS - Calcutta, and the British Council Library, Calcutta. I express my gratitude to Professor Michael Collie of York University, Toronto, Canada, for his valuable suggestions and necessary guidance. His generous and inspiring guidance has sustained me throughout my work.

R E F E R E N C E S.

1. W. B. YEATS, *The Collected Poems*, London (Macmillan) 1961, p. 267.
2. Margaret Chatterjee, *The Existentialist Outlook*, Orient Longman 1973, Cited, p. 95.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
6. John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the literature of revolt, A Galaxy Book*, New York (O.U.P.) 1960, p. 32.
7. Charles Fried, *An Anatomy of Value*, Harvard University Press 1970, p. 167.
8. Cruickshank, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
10. J. Willis Miller, *Poets of Reality*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1968, p. 215.
11. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, (Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley ed.), University of London Press Ltd. 1966, p. 89.
12. Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1968, p. 88.
13. Walt Whitman, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
16. Edwin Haviland Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
17. J. Bronowski (ed.), *William Blake : The Penguin Poets - Penguin Books* 1958, p. 94.