CHAPTER V

War

Thomas shows no romantic illusion about war. He views war with horror. War destroys the self-identity of man which Thomas constantly seeks to explore. Men are reduced to anonymous entities by war. By fire a child dies in London. A man aged a hundred is killed in the dawn raid. The child and the old man have no names. They are mere anonymity. War in its destructive role reveals itself as the annihilator of distinctive identity of man. War offers no scope for the display of heroism. The old man put on his clothes, stepped out, and died. War is no respecter of age or persons. Thomas shows his awareness of the inhumanity and ravages of war. But he suggests no radical change in the socio-economic structure of society that may put an end to war which puts an end to individual life so unceremoniously. On the contrary, he integrates death in war in his general vision of life and death.

The Second World War came as a shock to Dylan Thomas. He had not the slightest desire to fight for any undefined cause. The patriotic cause offered no inspiration to him; rather, war had a sickening effect on him. About the effect of war on his moral sensibility Vernon Watkins writes —

The advent of war filled Dylan with horror, and the war itself was a nightmare from which he never completely recovered. But for a tribunal at which he had to be a witness he would certainly have asked to be registered as a conscientious objector; but the attitude of the conscientious objectors
themselves had also impressed him: he would never, he said, object on religious grounds.

The appalling prospect of the war terrified him. Before the outbreak of the war, he wrote a letter to his father from Llangarne on August 29, 1939, which shows his state of mind at the time...

These are awful days and we are very worried. It is terrible to have built, out of nothing, a complete happiness — from no possessions, no material hopes — and a way of living, and then to see the immediate possibility of its being exploded and ruined through no fault of one's own. I expect you both are very anxious too. If I could pray, I'd pray for peace. I'm not a man of action; and the brutal activities of war appal me — as they do every decent-thinking person. Even here the war atmosphere is thick and smelling: the kids dance in the streets, the mobilised soldiers sing Zipperary in the pubs and wives and mothers weep around the stunted memorial in the front....

Two other statements made by him make clear his attitude towards war. One is made in the letter he wrote to Oscar Williams on July 30, 1945 from London:

War can't produce poetry, only poets can, and war can't produce poets either because they bring themselves up in such a war that this outward bang, bang of men against men is something they have passed a long time ago on their poems' way towards peace. A poet...
writing a poem is at peace with everything except words, which are eternal actions; only in the lulls between the warring work on words can be at war with men. Poets can stop bullets, but bullets can’t stop poets. What is a poet anyway? He is a man who has written or is writing what he, in his utmost human fallible integrity, necessarily communal, believes to be good poetry. As he writes good poetry very rarely, he is most often at peace with the eternal actions of words and is therefore very likely to be caught up in any bang bang that is going. When he is fighting, he is not a poet. Nor is a craftsman a craftsman. I think capital-lettered War can only in subject matter affect poetry.

The other statement he made in his broadcast on Wilfred Owen on July 27, 1946:

... We can see, re-reading Owen, that he is a poet of all times, all places, and all wars. There is only one war that of men against men.

In 1940 Thomas left Laugharne and during the war period lived in London with occasional short stay at Laugharne and New Quay. Thomas wrote a few poems about the war. A Refusal to Bourn the Deeds, by Fire, of a Child in London, Deaths and Entrances, Germany after a Fire Raid, and Dawn Raid. It is only the air-raids on London which affected him most. All the poems deal with this aspect, with the agonies which the civilians experience during air-raids. T.R. Jones observes that Thomas’s few war poems are “obstinately and magnificently
civilian". One of his war poems deals with the death of a child and another with that of an old man.

It is interesting to note what use T.S. Eliot has made of incendiary raid on London. In ‘Little Gidding’, IV, he writes —

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre —
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

The bomber’s discharge of incendiary bombs will burn out ‘sin’ and ‘error’. This gives the one possible discharge from our guilt. The incendiary enemy dive-bomber is related to the Holy Spirit. "The incendiary enemy dive-bomber ..., is ... the dove which brings the tongue of flame, to surge by burning. ... Homing plane and homing Dove leave behind a painfully cleansing fire."

The few war poems of Dylan Thomas shows his progress towards light for which he strives. "he perceives the unity of all things. Death is no death, but an assurance of perpetual life in a cosmic eternity. For Thomas, "coming up for air raid meant coming up for air — and light. Deaths in London were his entrances."

In A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London (CP 101), published in 1946, Thomas refuses to mourn a child’s
death in a London fire raid while he actually mourns. The images of the poem come from the Bible. Darkness is 'mankind making', 'bird beast and flower fathering', and 'all humbling'. The poet will not mourn the death until the end of the world, until 'the still hour/is come of the sea tumbling in harness' (Stanza One). The child has entered again 'the round/Zion of the water head/And the synagogue of the ear of corn' (Stanza Two) to which all men return after death. 'Zion' and 'synagogue' give holiness to natural water and corn by their biblical reference. The poem shows Thomas's acceptance of death, of the inevitable processes of life. The death of the child is not to be mourned since her body has become part of the primal elements of existence. The water head and the ear of corn symbolize primal elements to which all forms of life must return. This elemental unity of all existence is sacramental in character. The poet, emphasizing circularity in 'the round/Zion of the water head', suggests the mortal cycle, from darkness to darkness. 'Salt seed' (Stanza Two) is an image of sterile tears. 'The mankind of her going' (Stanza Three) expresses the humanity of the child and the universal significance of her death. The child becomes the symbol of all mankind. 'Mankind is one with bird, beast and flower. The force through the green fuse drives them all through life to death.

The poet sees the child 'robed in the long friends' (Stanza Four). The generations of men preceded her and rejoined the natural forces of life. The child was long part of the natural elements of existence before she emerged into human form. 'There are also, in the image of 'long friends', associations with the worms through which the child returns to the first elements'. 'The grains beyond age'
Stanza Four states a form of existence beyond time and mortality. The water of the rising Thames is as 'unmournful' as the elegist by its acceptance of the natural processes of life and death. The Thames, a river of life, flows into the sea. The sea is an image in which all life terminates. 'With the death of the first man, the cycle of human and organic life was formed so that no further death occurs. The one dying partakes in the cycle of living nature, 'after the first death, there is no other.'

The occasion of the poem, Ceremony After a Fire Raid (CP 136-31), published in 1944, is the death of 'a child of a few hours' in a fire raid. The poet gives a vivid image of this painful death:

With its knavish mouth
Charred on the black breast of the grave
The mother dug, and its arms full of fires. (CP 139)

The child with 'its arms full of fires' holds death and the promise of future life. 'Darkness kindled back into beginning' (CP 139). The death of the child has put him into the original darkness of genesis. The birth of a child holds a long history of mankind, he holds the 'centuries' of mankind in him. The breaking of the 'star' in the explosion of a bomb puts an end to this history. The real tragedy lies in a father or a mother having been wasted. The child dies before contributing to the history of mankind. The poet, on behalf of all mankind, grieves the death of the child.

The miracles of divine conception and birth offer no consolation. The poet is so overwhelmed with grief that 'miracles cannot atone' (CP 139).
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Seed of sons in the loin of the black hawk left. (CP 130)

The poet prays for forgiveness and renewal of life 'In a great flood'.
'The blood shall spurt, and the dust shall sing like a bird' (CP 129).
'The child is beyond cockcrow' (CP 130). 'Myselfs the believers' (CP 129) 'by the fire-swathed/Street' 'chant the flying sea/In the body bereft' (CP 130). This hope of life in the burning child teaches that 'Love is the last light spoken' (CP 130) as it was the first.

The child sacrificed 'on the altar of London' (CP 130) is symbolical of all sacrificial victims; Adam and Eve, holy bullock, white eve, lamb, chosen virgin. Whatever may be the symbolic interpretation of the child's death, the poet believes in the myth of Adam and its culmination in the death of one Child on the Cross. This death foreshadows the victory of life over death.

    I know the legend
    Of Adam and Eve is never for a second
    Silent in my service
    Over the dead infants
    Over the one
    Child who was priest and servants. (CP 130)

Every child is an Adam or Eve. Generations of men and women are undone by the death of a child. Creation reverts to Chaos.

    Beginning crumbled back to darkness
    Bare as the nurseries
    Of the garden of wilderness. (CP 131)
The child includes Christ who is of endless service to Thomas. Christ is 'sun' or 'Son'. It the sun that brings hope to the 'garden of wilderness' and to 'man and woman undone' (CP 131).

The magic at the end of the ceremony affirms life. Everything is burning in the fire raid: cathedrals are 'luminous', weathercocks 'molten', 'dead clock burning', novel and slim on fire, pavements 'golden' and 'laid in requiem' (CP 131), Eucharistic bread and wine burning. "To put the fires of destruction out and make way for the fires of life the creative waters of 'the infant-bearing sea' erupt like a volcano". Genesis thunders over death. The glory of life, and love is affirmed ultimately.

War is a destructive force that defeats the purpose of matrimony. In *On a Wedding Anniversary* (CP 124), the poet celebrates his wedding day, 'This sagred annistory of two/Who moved for three years in time/Down the long walks of their vow' while an air-raid is creating havoc. Marriage brings two individuals together and their act of love is in accord with the creative act of the universe. Bombing destroys the purpose of matrimony. 'Death strikes their house'. The two are torn asunder. True rain from the cloud fertilizes the earth. But the 'wrong rain' from the 'crater/Carrying cloud' separates the loving couple and defeats the ends of matrimony. The purpose of matrimony is procreation, mutual emotional satisfaction. In matrimony the claims of the individual and of society are reconciled. War is the enemy of all that matrimony stands for.

*Holy Spring* (CP 158), published in 1945, is another war poem. Thomas says that the 'bed of love' is the 'immortal hospital' for the
cureless counted body." It is through love that the mortal body attains immortality. The poet gets out of this bed at dawn to greet the war in which he has no 'heart'. But to this dark war he owes his light of awareness.

That one dark I owe my light. (CP 168)

For his emergence into light he is indebted to the shattering darkness of war. After the 'god-stoning night' the poet stands in the war's debris 'as lonely as a holy macker by the sun.' "The sun of morning becomes an image of light, life, sex and poetry, all of which, like spring itself, renew the dark world of death."

Spring as 'ali/ubriel,' announces divine birth and brings renewed life to the earth. The sun renews the day after darkness; the shrubbery grows radiant 'as the morning, green joyful.' 'My arising prodigal,' as a sexual image, renews life. Burning London is like the renewing 'pyre' of the phoenix. But no praise is to these agents of renewal. 'But blessed be hell and upheaval' of air-raid. The destruction of war keeps alive the hope of ever-recurring life and inspires the poet 'to stand and sing/Alone in the husk of man's home' if only for the last time, for to-morrow he may die. War gives the occasion to the poet to sing of undying hope and light in the midst of ruins.

REFERENCES.

1. Constantine Fitzgibbon writes, "when the war broke out, on 3rd September 1939, Dylan Thomas had achieved a measure of happiness and even a sort of equilibrium. He was happily married with a home and a baby. His third book had just been published, and he enjoyed a considerable fame, if only in a restricted circle."
1. Contd............

"Now, as he realized immediately, all was threatened. Not only were the little magazines faced with immediate extinction, and with them his small income, but he himself was liable to be called up. The prospect was excessively gloomy. Meanwhile he continued at Laugharne, and completed the volume of short stories that was to appear next year, as the "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog." (Selected Letters of Dylan Thomas, London 1966, p. 236)."

5. Dylan Thomas, Quite Early One Morning, London (Cont.) 1964, p. 98.

7. Alder Olson points out that Thomas in his poetry "is capable of immense emotion for another, but he cannot stand in another's skin. As we read him, we are shaken by what he feels for another, not by the sufferings and the feelings of that other. Moved by grief for a burned child, nobly and powerfully moved as he is, he does not suffer imaginatively the experience of the child, does not share in it in the least; he sees the pain and the horror from without, and the resolution he reaches is a resolution for him, not for the child. This curiously external view is revealed in one of his least successful poems: the death of a hundred-year-old man provides him matter for a string of fantastic conceits... He can enter into worm and animal, but he will look out through his own eyes. He can create worlds; but he creates his worlds in his own image, and remains the center of his own thought and feeling". (The Poetry of Dylan Thomas, Chicago 1964, p. 23.)

13. Tindall, op. cit., p. 239.