Chapter 15: Man as Metaphor — The Poetry of Dylan Thomas

A crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures; and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love. — Francis Bacon.

Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost, love shall not,
And death shall have no dominion. — Dylan Thomas.

Can a poet like Dylan Thomas be considered a legitimate exponent of Symbolism? We should say no if we take Thomas' 'reality' and compare it with the Swedenborgian 'reality' of Baudelaire; but if we consider his psychological and linguistic exploits, he is definitely a symbolist. Like Valéry, whose claims to be called a symbolist have sometimes been doubted, he carries forward the work of the Symbolists, with his 'detached referents', the leitmotif use of symbols, the concern to fathom the nature of the human mind, and the quest for meaning.

Dylan Thomas' linguistic exploits are dazzling in their daring and power; but this brilliance is also responsible for the view that he is a verbal manipulator of genius. He has been charged with writing poetry 'whose content as well as form, is verbal — a poetry whose subject itself is words'. But though we feel in his poetry a sort of verbal compulsion which drives him forward, we should not forget that the flow of language is perfectly controlled. Even a critic like Mr. Robert Graves has considered Thomas as a poet who takes care of the sound and allows the sense to take care of itself. But this is

1 Derek Stanford: 'Dylan Thomas'.
2 Robert Graves: 'The Crowning Privilege'.
a statement which cannot be taken literally. In all Thomas' poems there is coherent meaning, and it is not always the same meaning. 'It is simply not true that he went on writing, with variations of form and imagery, the same archetypal poem over and over again; he grew and changed and at his death was still developing, in the direction of a wider and more human scope.' Like the mature Yeats who presented complex experiences in poems which have a direct, spontaneous appeal, Thomas too achieved a clarity and a lack of strain in his later poems which contrast strongly with his early efforts.

In all his poetry, the meaning is often missed by the reader who does not keep in mind Thomas' special attitude to language. Language for this poet is truly symbolic: it is not a tool of expression, but something deep and mysterious. Language symbolizes 'being': words are, to him, things, as Coleridge had once wished. He is intensely aware of the 'existence' of words as Mallarmé was, and experiences them as

the voice that, like a voice of hunger,
itched in the noise of wind and sun.

In his poetry, therefore, we feel almost the physical impact of language, rather than their referential force. That is, the words create their effects not so much by the thoughts they bring to our mind, but by their 'thinginess'; as for example in the lines:

her threadbare
Whisper in a damp word, her wits drilled hollow,
Her fist of a face died clenched on a round pain.

This is a more direct way of conveying experience than the conventional expression of poetic language. The poem instead of being a means which would lead on, through contemplation, to the experience that the poet wants to give,

becomes the experience itself. He tries to 'make his experience as poet in some way coexistent with our experience as reader'. This attempt to bring words and experience closer together gives Thomas' language the almost overpowering reality of a physical apprehension. It is perhaps this closeness of experience and expression that makes Thomas suggest: 'I ask only that my poetry should be taken literally'.

This directness is also partly responsible for the forcefulness of Thomas' images, which appeal directly to the senses. The sensuous immediacy of lines like,

And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold, And the sabbath rang slowly In the pebbles of the holy streams.

resists analysis. In such poetry, therefore we find that 'through the senses and only through the senses images are conveyed to the mind — no rationalizing process interferes with the immediacy of the communication'. Also, he makes use of language in such a way as to resist any direct attempt at intellectualization: in the early poems the rhetorical and incantatory qualities of his style serve this purpose, and in his later poems the same effect is achieved by means of close-packed imagery, or a 'sealed column of verbalized sensation'.

Once the resistance to reason is built up, the poems ought to have for us the direct impact of things. But actually the reader is rushed through with such speed among sensations, and there is such an intensity and such bewildering fullness of detail that the effect of a Thomas poem is almost like that of a nightmare. The variety and richness of lines like the following recall Rimbaud's eagerness to pack as many details as possible into his verses:

---

5 Quoted by Henry Treece, 'Dylan Thomas', p.17.
6 Giorgio Melchiori: 'The Tightrope Walkers'.
And the dancers move
On the departed, snow bushed green, wanton in moon light
As a dust of pigeons.  Exulting, the grave hooved
Horses, centaur dead, turn and tread the drenched white
Paddocks in the farms of birds.  The dead oak walks for love.

Rimbaud is perhaps more colourful and exotic, but there is the same abundance of details in lines like the following, from 'Le Bateau Ivre':

Glaciers, soleils d'argent, flots nacreux, cieux de braises
Echouages hideux au fond des golfees bruns
Où les serpents géants devorés des punaises
Choient des arbres tordus avec de noirs parfums.

We have almost the feeling of words rising instantaneously from the flow of consciousness, but with this difference: that the nightmare is inchoate and formless while Thomas' poem is ordered. A form is imposed by the poet on the stream of sensations: he creates a structure of carefully controlled tensions.

This structure of tensions has been described by the poet himself in a finely critical passage:

... it ... is not my method to move concentrically round a central image.... A poem by myself needs a host of images, because its centre is a host of images. I make one image — though "make" is not the word; I let, perhaps, an image be "made" emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical forces I possess — let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time. ... The life in any poem of mine cannot move concentrically round a central image; the life must come out of the centre; an image must be born and die in another; and any sequence of my images must be a sequence of creations, recreations, destructions, and contradictions. ... Out of the inevitable conflict of images — inevitable, because of the creative, reproductive, destructive and contradictory nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war — I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem.

The complicated structure of conflicting images is carefully constructed, for Thomas speaks of applying 'intellectual and critical forces' to his images, and of imposed 'formal limits'. Tension or 'contradiction' is what gives the

7 'Icebergs and silver sums, pearl waves and brazier skies/ And where in deep brown gulfs the stranded horrors lurk,/ Where the gigantic serpents, preyed upon by lice,/ Crash down from twisted trees, amid black-smelling mirk!'
8 Quoted by Henry Treece, 'Dylan Thomas', p.37.
force of movement to the poem; and by 'contradiction', here, the poet perhaps means the bringing together of images which seem to have no natural affinity, or of images which do not seem to make for consistency of impression.

The way that the method works can be seen in a fairly typical poem like 'In Memory of Ann Jones'. This poem, written on the death of the poet's cousin, has much greater complexity than we would normally expect of an elegy. Neither the event nor the poet's sorrow seems to occupy a central position in the poem, yet the poem is undoubtedly a coherent whole. The poem gathers force as the poet takes one image, that of the actual dead woman, and places against it a conflicting image, that of the monumental figure that he has made out of her life and death. These images are allowed to come into conflict, and the poem moves backward and forward between the Ann of real life and the mythical Ann of the poet's artifice. The conflict is also brought out by the opposition of such images as 'her scrubbed and sour humble hands' and 'These cloud-sopped, marble hands'. The tension is kept up by other images, like the natural, homely cottager and the religious object she has become. This is a contrast which comes out through a number of suggestive touches: we have, for example, 'hearth' or 'ferned and foxy woods' on the one hand, and on the other the calling of the 'seas to service' and the 'hymning heads'. Sometimes the contradictory elements are brought together and resolved in a single phrase like 'wood-tongued virtue', or the suggestion both of natural freedom and Christian humility in phrases like 'Bless her sparrow bent spirit with four, crossing birds', or 'That her love sing and swing through a brown chapel'. By the end of the poem, these word-symbols are merged into each other, and thus the fox becomes something like a fern ('The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry love'), and the fern becomes something like the fox ('And the strutting fern lay seeds...').
This poem is remarkable in many ways. It is not a formal elegy written in an objective manner: for instance even in a poem like Yeats's 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory, the 'distance' between the poet and his subject is considerable. Thomas' poem, on the other hand, is something personal, and it has a certain intensity of passion that makes it more real than Yeats's poem. From the poem emerges a monumental symbolic figure —

this skyward statue
With the wild breast and blessed and giant skull
— but there are also suggestive touches in the poem which bring out some of the homely, human aspects of the real Ann. The poet remembering 'her scrubbed and sour humble hands' and her 'threadbare Whisper' is an assurance to us about the reality of the person he is speaking about. All this gives a peculiar power to the poem, because it is not Ann who is the centre of the poem: the poet is more concerned with the stir that the death of Ann has made in his 'inmost being' than with Ann herself. The figure of Ann has become a part of the poet's own experience, which he is symbolizing: this is also his justification for the complex structure of pure images that he raises as her memorial. At the end of the poem Ann, the fox and the fern, all have become one, and they take on the quality of life. Humped and humble Ann is seventy years of sculptured stone, but the Ann of the poem is ageless: she lives on in our memory. Also the monument that Ann's bard has created is a thing of joy. The poet experiences the joy that comes of understanding the meaning of a whole experience, and it is this joy which he gives in the poem. Thomas does not show any metaphysical inclinations like either Eliot or Yeats: he creates a great poem about Ann's death without any philosophizing. The direct acceptance of life as it is, the attempt to evaluate experience in
purely poetic terms, make Dylan Thomas so different from a poet like Eliot. Eliot always tried to put his symbols in the context of a tradition; Thomas is concerned wholly with the impact of an event on the poetic sensibility, and the experience contains its own value. This is perhaps what enabled Thomas to communicate a certain warmth and love of life to his readers; there is in him neither the cynical indifference to life of the early Eliot nor the mystical aloofness of the later Eliot. 'He was a poet of affirmation, where T.S.Eliot was a poet of negation'. Thomas' acceptance of life is reflected in the wealth of imagery and physical detail that we find in a poem like 'In Memory of Ann Jones'. The theme of the poem passes through four phases: the burial, the feast, the character, and the homage. The organically inter-related images unite all these phases, and relate them to death, her home and her character. The mention of the typical furniture in her room, which comes early in the poem ('In a room with a stuffed fox and a stale fern') gives a physical setting to the poem similar to that provided by the schoolroom and the children in Yeats's 'Among Schoolchildren'. The image dominates the poem, and makes a brilliant reappearance at the end of the elegy to suggest the quality of her love which might even breathe life into the dead:

\[ \text{The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry Love} \\
\text{And the strutting fern lay seeds on the black sill.} \]

The poem is thus given a heavy body of incident and illustration which supports and strengthens the feeling and the experience of the poet.

It is significant that the poem closes on a note of joy. The main inspiration of Thomas — who in this respect is unlike Eliot and Yeats — is not tragedy but the joy of life. In the introductory 'Note' to the volume of his 'Collected Poems', Thomas has said: 'These poems ... are written for the love of Man and in praise of God'. He brings a new sense of wonder and a glowing passion to the 'Glory be to God' theme of Hopkins. But it seems
Hopkins could keep that joy within ecclesiastical bounds: with Thomas, it becomes an intoxication, almost wild in its intensity. He pours out the joy in abundant imagery:

... I, a spinning man,
Glory also this star, bird
Roared, sea born, man torn, blood blest.
Mark: I trumpet the place,
From fish to jumping hill!

His poetry indeed pleases by a fine excess, which he puts to service in the celebration of mankind. He sees man in the image of God: but the implications of this is not theological, but intensely physical. He gives all importance to the temporal, fading flesh, which he regards as the guardian of the impaled, immortal spirit. The poetry of Thomas does not seem to be concerned either with intellectual or spiritual matters. 'It is a renaissance of voluptuousness that gives to his work its sensual, deceptively unintellectual surface'. The unassailable reality of Creation, in all its physical manifestations, comes to him as a vision; or, to put it in another way, he sees the world as body. In this vision, the element of sex predominates. In his earlier poetry, the concern with sex amounts almost to an obsession, in his later poetry it is universalized. He locates the human sexual process against a cosmic background which repeats the sexual pattern. To him, the universe is sexually dynamic, frighteningly active and alive: bird, beast and stone share the same sexual life with man. Even death itself appears to him not as a negation but a dynamic force as old as Adam. He makes death, not life, the measure of time:

A worm tells summer better than the clock,
The slug's the living calendar of days,

because the worm keeps company with the dead body. To Thomas, life and death are equally real because they are aspects of the great reality of Creation.

Dylan Thomas did not make the mistake common to most of the Symbolists, of going away from life in quest of Reality. Baudelaire, after a long Swedenborgian sojourn, returned to actual life as the dwelling-place of reality; Dylan Thomas started his quest from that point. It would be wrong to say that he had no philosophy or that he did not go further in search of Meaning; but the philosophy, as in Yeats's last poems, grows out of his direct dealings with life. The poetry is his whole-hearted response to the glory and greatness of life: Thomas is troubled by no 'dissociation of sensibility'. In his love of Creation, Thomas becomes religious, though not in the sense that Eliot is religious. A poem like 'In Memory of Ann Jones' is fundamentally religious —

But I, Ann's bard on a raised hearth, call all
The seas to service that her wood-tongued virtue
Babbling like a bell buoy over the hymning heads,

— but there is nothing doctrinaire about the religious feeling here. Thomas is much nearer Blake than Eliot in his religious inspiration. Perhaps nearer Donne, but also dangerously near the Rimbaud of 'Les Premières Communions'.

Though Thomas makes use of Biblical symbols, he does not seek the support of Christianity to give meaning to his symbols: nor does he specifically refer to any other tradition or system of philosophy as a basis for his symbolism. Even Yeats had tried to appeal to an external 'system', though of his making: Thomas felt no such need. Thomas, when faced with the problem of meaning common to all modern poets, found a purely poetic solution.

The problem of the meaning of life was of central importance to all Symbolist poets. In earlier literature, like, for example, that of the Renaissance period, there was no such problem: the religious or mythological tradition and the literary tradition mutually supported each other. The poet of those times could exploit the tension between personal experience and the tradition to give meaning to what he wrote: but that tension is no longer valid for modern poets. The great problem of the Symbolists had been to find a valid tradition.
against which personal experience could be measured. Eliot had solved the problem by accepting Christianity, and by distilling a mood in the light of which the religious position became meaningful, if not logically demonstrable. But Eliot's solution could not be repeated. Yeats had tried to meet the problem by building for himself a private, imaginative 'system': this was a dangerous thing to do, for there could hardly be any tension between the poet's experience and a system built out of the same material. Yeats's system, however, worked because it was based on the perpetual merging of opposites. Dylan Thomas used a technique which would enable him to create and maintain a state of tension between the different explanations of the human situation given by religion, science and folklore. He opposed or balanced against each other the different aspects of knowledge of which the modern world had made him aware. Such an attitude was perhaps possible because Thomas had no antagonism for science or religion. Thomas is essentially symbolist in that he used this knowledge not to explain or explain away problems, but to make us aware of the fundamental mystery of existence. He organized diverse perceptions and experiences into a total vision of man and his relation with ultimate Reality.

Thomas' achievement can be seen if we compare his way of handling symbolism with Eliot's. A good example of this difference is provided by the symbol that is suggested to both by the raiding enemy planes spreading fire in the city of London during the second world war. Both poets use the symbol of the dove, and find in it an analogy for the plane: but the effects suggested by the symbol are widely divergent. In a section of 'Little Gidding', Eliot speaks of the dawn

\[
\text{After the dark dove with the flickering tongue}
\]
\[
\text{Had passed below the horizon of his homing,}
\]

Eliot takes up and develops the symbol in a later section of the poem, where he speaks of an air-raid:

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 flaming dove suggested by an enemy plane becomes a symbol of redemption.

It brings to the poet a vision of the descent of the Holy Ghost bringing the Pentecostal fire. The idea of death is transformed into that of purification. The Christian emphasis here is characteristic of Eliot, and it is this which gives his symbol its full meaning and value.

With Thomas the same symbol appears in quite a different context and brings other suggestions. Even in her sleep, the beloved cannot get out of her head the idea of the enemy planes spreading destruction:

Into her lying down head
His enemies entered bed,
Under the encumbered eyelid,
Through the rippled drum of the hair-buried ear;
And Noah's rekindled now unkind dove
Flew man-bearing there.
Last night in a raping wave
Whales unreined from the green grave
In fountains of origin gave up their love,
Along her innocence glided
Juan aflame and savagely young King Lear,
Queen Catherine howling bare
And Samson drowned in his hair, ...

Here the imagery is complicated so as to get the maximum of suggestive effect.

At first, the poet explores the contrast between the war-bringing enemy aircraft and the dove, a messenger of peace. The contrast is brilliantly summed up in the line: 'And Noah's rekindled now unkind dove'. That dove who had been saved from destruction by Noah has now itself become the symbol of destruction. The phrase 'man-bearing' in the next line while making the image of the air-craft
more evident, introduces a complex double meaning. It suggests an allusion to the Conception of the Virgin, with the Holy Ghost traditionally represented as a dove, man-bearing, the bringer of Christ, man-God. The idea of conception introduces a series of sexual images with psycho-analytic suggestions, finally identifying the image of the dove with 'Juan aflame': the phrase once again brings back associations with the flames of the Holy Ghost and the fire of the aircraft. The Biblical reference is in this way related to an act of rape, while counterpointing the religious and Freudian implications of the dove-symbol. Eliot, starting from the same point as Dylan Thomas, presents one consistent religious interpretation of the dove-symbol. Thomas brings together the dove of Noah from the Old Testament and the dove of the Pentecost from the New Testament, gives them a Freudian interpretation, and finally connects the dove with the enemy aircraft and the rape of the country. The references to Catherine, Lear and Samson give the whole passage a sense of universality: the particular incident of the air-raid is given a timeless quality.

The complex structure, the allusiveness and the compression we find in Thomas' poems have earned him a reputation for obscurity. In an age in which poetic obscurity is the norm rather than the exception, Dylan Thomas appears to be the most obscure. This is strange because he had no desire to be obscure or esoteric; this is made evident by his symbols which draw on the Bible and on universal folklore for their meaning rather than on obscure late classical writers or Jessie Weston's 'From Ritual to Romance'. His poetry is difficult because of the compressed language and the novel imagery rather than because of subject matter or allusion. The tendency towards compressed language is common in modern poetry ever since Hopkins became known, but with Thomas it has become a habit: it comes naturally to him.
His images often have a shock-element, thereby making us concentrate more on what he is saying, and deepening our awareness of the reality that the poem presents. The effort involved in this, on the part of the reader, is often rewarding, because it gives him a sense of discovery.

The crowded imagery in Thomas' poetry creates an effect of simultaneity: all things are present on the instant. Past, present and future are seen as parts of a cyclic process rather than a sequence. This conception comes out in several poems, but most simply perhaps in the poem, 'I see the boys of summer'. The first section is concerned with birth and growth; in the second man's decline, his inevitable decay, are stressed. In the final section, the two aspects are brought together in a synthesis: summer and ruin, the maggot and the womb, flint and soft pitch, and he concludes:

O see the poles are kissing as they cross.

In another fine poem, Thomas sees time as a creative-destructive continuum:

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.

Time, affecting nature and man alike, is responsible both for growth and destruction. Time and change are preoccupations with the poet, and so, man as the image of mutability becomes his chief concern in poetry: 'Man be my metaphor'. A poem which symbolizes this attitude to time most clearly is 'The Hand that signed the paper'. Here the poet has a vision of an object or action in all its states or senses of time, of the continuity of time and place. Future and present, usually kept distinct in our mind, are juxtaposed by the poet; he sees an action and its consequence simultaneously:

The hand that signed the paper felled a city;
Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,
Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country;

which in its simultaneity and compression compares with Yeats's lines in 'Leda
and the Swan',

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Here, we find, a poetic vision which makes 'cause and effect abut upon each other with a sharp realization'. There is also a sense of irony in Thomas' poem, when he says,

The mighty hand leads to a sloping shoulder,
The finger joints are cramped with chalk ...

The sovereign powers of the politician are shown as vested in the fingers alone: with these he signs nation-shaking documents; but for the rest of the man there is nothing kingly or impressive. There is also the implication that the men who declare war or make treaties are mere tools or objects through which the process of time works; the hands of the politician are like the hands of a clock, not human members in contact with a heart:

Hands have no tears to flow.

This attitude to Time connects Thomas with the great Symbolists, who found the concept of linear time unacceptable.

Thus, like the 'motivating centre' of a Thomas poem, Time is 'destructive and constructive' at the same time, so that life and death imply each other. Man reflects this dualism in himself in the conflict between flesh and spirit.

In the poem, 'I, in my intricate image, stride on two levels', the poet represents the 'man-iron' (body) and 'ghost-in-armour' (soul) as equally aggressive elements and the triumph of the body is the death of the spirit. One consequence of the full acceptance of all the implications of Time as process, is that Time instead of being the pursued becomes the pursuer. This relation between Time and man, as pursuer and victim, is brought out in lines like,

When, like a running grave, time tracks you down ....

which recalls Marvell's 'Time's winged chariot'. There is also the more
exuberant expression of the idea in the lines:

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

It is interesting to note here that the moon is used as a symbol for the apparent transcendence of time by the poet, the lover and the Christian. The moon also suggests imaginative power: a similar use of the symbol had been made by Yeats. Another symbol for the conquest of time is the 'carved bird', an eternal artifact. These symbols come together in a passage which directly recalls and rejects the Byzantium of Yeats's artifice:

Moonfall and sailing emperor, pale as their tide-point
Hear by death's accident the clocked and dashed-down spire
Strike the sea hour through bellmetal.

The idea of art and faith as illusion comes out in the poem 'The Spire Cranes':

... Its statue is an aviary.
From the stone nest it does not let the feathery
Carved birds blunt their striking throats on the salt gravel ...

The aviary, contrived and confining, is the 'artifice of eternity' as it appears to Thomas.

Finally, we have the idea that time can be conquered only through full acceptance, recalling Eliot's discovery that 'only through time time is conquered.' It is through time that the poet can have a vision of 'corridors oubliés depuis l'enfance', the paradise of childhood innocence. It is this vision that the poet symbolizes in one of his greatest poems, 'Fern Hill'. About this poem, Henry Treece has written:

It is Thomas's final poetic statement. He has found his refuge in childhood, always his most convincing territory. When the rushing years have winnowed the harvest he left behind him, we shall find no doubt that his truest talent was that of the Innocent Eye, which showed him unerringly the microcosm of the child. Like Rimbaud, Thomas is also able to capture the pure, unalloyed sensations of childhood: 'Fern Hill' is a complete evocation of innocence, in pastoral (free)

13 Henry Treece: 'Dylan Thomas', p.112.
surroundings. Nostalgic recollection of a child's holiday in the farm is the starting point for the poet, but as the poem proceeds we find that the farm gets invested with a light as radiant as the unforfeited Garden, and the innocence of the child makes him happy as Adam. Time is as irrevocable as God's excluding angel. Though the poem has the form of an elegy for lost childhood, in actual poetic terms we experience the states of innocence and eternity.

The poem makes a symbolic journey from innocence to experience: with the state of grace is associated grace and unity, and with experience is associated corruption and dissolution. One of the most striking features of the poem is the way in which the growing presence of experience, corruption and dissolution is expressed in the 'chilling of imagery'. The first two stanzas are full of effects of sunlight, but in the third nocturnal objects enter. We hear 'the owls', 'All the moon long' 'bearing the farm away'. In the last stanza, this chillness grows rapidly. The child finds that Time takes him

\[
\text{Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of (his) hand,}
\text{In the moon that is always rising.}
\]

About the last stanza, Derek Stanford comments thus:

The eeriness of the first line, with its suggestion of an evil presence or a mysterious double in the flickering movement of the shadows, and of the ghostly appearance of the swallows in the dim lights of the loft, distills a feeling of sin and death. And now "the sun born over and over" (which assured us in the fifth stanza) yields to "the moon which is always rising" — a symbol of the growing cold: that of a contracting imagination and heart. By the light of this moon the happy day-time vision of the farm vanished, and when the light returns it is to discover

\[
\text{The farm forever fled from the childless land.}
\]

The poem ends with a pathos and an acceptance of reality that is most moving:

\[
\text{Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,}
\text{Time held me green and dying}
\text{Though I sang in my chains like the sea.}
\]

Though he continued, in his chains, to sing endlessly and naturally like the sea,
he could not help being aware of "the inevitable binding to the sad situation of the world, by which the child at last must lose his carefree innocence."  

"Fern Hill" is one of the greatest poems of the present century: it has achieved, with rare technical mastery, almost a ritual of celebration. In the sense of wonder and awe at the greatness of Creation, in its purity of feeling, it becomes almost religious expression of the highest order. Thomas, who in his early days had come to be regarded as a mischievous boy frolicking with words, had proved that he had grown up to attain the deepest truths. He had regained for poetry something of the mystery and power it had in the old days. He had achieved the Symbolist ideal of pure incantation, and by this quality bridged the gap between poet and public which had been ever widening for more than half a century. With him, poetry left the ivory tower and the coteries to come out and win the masses through love and music.

Thomas has also been one of the positive influences in modern poetry. He has successfully "resisted the literary traditionalism of the Eliot school" and given us a poetry in which is symbolized a personal and impassioned questioning of the ultimates of existence. Absorbing all that is best in symbolism, he makes the lyric the archetype or essence of poetry, but lyric with all the intensity of drama and something of the power of religion. Without theorizing or philosophizing about it, he has done something which marks a turning point in poetry. He has brought poetry closer to Reality in a new way, by symbolizing

... the human condition itself, not ... the condition of man in his personal relationships or natural or social environment, nor even, as some have thought, his merely racial and biological origins and ends, but the essential or fundamental 'existential' human state, which is also the cosmic state, the condition of being itself. Taking his stand within concrete, particular

---

existence, Thomas places birth and death at the poles of his vision. His viewpoint is at once individual and universal — 'I' is also, and without transition, 'man', and man is microcosmic.

This larger vision gives Thomas a place among the great poets of the world, and vindicates the poetry of our century in an age of science and propaganda.

If, however, we think of the influence that Thomas may have on the future of English poetry, it is his linguistic achievement that is of prime importance. Neither Yeats nor Eliot made any innovations in the language of poetry; Thomas imparts a freshness and vigour to the language that is remarkable. In the bold way he handles language he can be compared only with Hopkins. Apart from his suggestive inventions, such as 'man-iron,' 'bonerailed,' 'sea-struck' and 'pin-hilled,' we have deliberate 'montage' of words, like for example 'gallow' for 'shallow' + 'gallows'. The exciting rhetoric of his poems is the result of a rich and profuse word-sense. In his early poetry, a certain obscurity and strangeness comes from the 'dislocation' of words so that they do not fit into a scheme. But in the later poems we find he has evolved a composite language that reveals rather than hides. The element of surprise is still strong, but the beauty and suggestive power have increased. Expressions like the 'star-gestured children' and 'the thickets antlered like deer' show that Thomas was attentive to sense as much as sound. The sound-element is of course important, and this has led people to think of the Welsh 'cynghanedd' (consonantal melodies): he has also something of the assonantal and alliterative effects we find in Hopkins. But there is also an almost palpable quality in his language that reminds us of Keats, as for example when he speaks of

My busy heart who shudders as she talks
Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words.

Perhaps, the best way to sum up Thomas' achievement, is to say that he creates something of the effect evoked by his lines: 'I build my bellowing ark/

To the best of my love!'