

The Secularization of Christian Imagery in Dylan Thomas's Poetry

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Abstract

The present paper is concerned with a characteristic strategy in Dylan Thomas's Poetry, i.e., the secularization of Christian imagery through which he takes scriptural symbols and ceremonies out of their ecclesiastical context and applies them to profane human experiences and types. The Bible is the richest source of reference Thomas drew upon. This strategy is intended to perform a double duty in his poetry which is to withstand the crisis of belief in the twentieth century by bringing such divine elements into a humane level on the one hand, and endowing casual life aspects with a sacred hue on the other hand. A number of Thomas's poems are analyzed to shed light on this poetic practice and see what implications it has for the modern man.

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) belongs to a group of highly individual poets who called themselves "The Apocalyptics" and whose enigmatic lyrical poetry was a direct reaction against the propagandist, political poetry of the "Auden Generation." The Apocalyptics, also including David Cascoyne and George Baker, were primarily influenced by the Surrealist movement which became very popular in England after the first international exhibition that was held in 1936. Thomas is the best representative of this group of poets who did not argue about politics but wrote in a highly lyrical, enigmatic style on themes far away from politics such as sex, religion and death which formed Thomas's major domain to the end.¹ Though Thomas adopted no formal religion, his poetry reveals a constant influence of a strong religious background in which the evangelical preaching of the Welsh "Bethel" plays a great part. Yet religion in Thomas is

always fused with sex, and his Biblical allusions are usually characterized by rebellion rather than conformity.²

Thomas defined poetry as "the rhythmic movement from an over clothed blindness to a naked vision. "Giving a Freudian defense of his art, he also stated that his aim is to "strip the individual darkness, which must inevitably cast light upon what has been hidden for too long, and, by so doing, make clean the naked exposure; my poetry is the record of my individual struggle from darkness toward some measure of light." This view of the act of writing as a kind of "catharsis" springs from Thomas's assimilation of Freud who believed that "if a psychiatrist's patient could be helped to reveal the memories buried in his subconscious, he would recover peace of mind." The Surrealists also believed that if "the poet derived a miscellany of images from his unconscious, he would produce a work of art that would have a therapeutic

effect on himself and his readers." Much of Dylan Thomas's imagery is formulated by free association and hence is capable of such therapy.³

John Press writes that "Thomas's achievement as a poet and his personality as a man were so inextricably linked that we can scarcely understand the one without understanding the other." This is perfectly true since Thomas's Bohemian, hedonistic style of living was of an organic relation and important relevance to his literary creeds. Moreover the pattern of his emotional development was dictated by his golden childhood experiences which are frequently shown in Biblical "Pre-lapsarian" terms. He was especially obsessed with three of such experiences : birth, death ,and sex which constituted the most striking features of his work⁴.He always emphasized the body as a fact that should not be ignored since it is the source of endless vitality and life. His aim was to "translate ideas in terms of the body, its flesh, skin ,blood, sinews, veins, glands, organs, cells, and senses," as C. B. Cox stated.⁵

The dominant source of reference for Thomas's poetry is James Joyce , the Bible, and Freud. Joyce's influence is mainly a linguistic one; Freud's pertains to the emphasis on the instinctive drives ; while the Bible offered a rich source of symbolism and allusion for him. The Genesis, Eden, The Creation, The Fall, Adam, The Original Sin, Cain, Job , Jacob, Abraham, Lazarus, Christ, and Mary embody the bulk of Thomas's allusion.⁶ The Biblical element, however, is entirely fused with the physical or sensuous element in a perfect union.

"Fern Hill" is often considered Thomas's finest poem, which invites comparison with Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality from

Recollections of Early Childhood." It dramatizes the innocent, carefree life of the child-poet on his aunt's farm, presenting a deeply nostalgic visions and recollections of childhood:

*Now and as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb*

Golden in the heydays of his eyes,

*And honored among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
Trail with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the windfall light.⁷*

The idea of Eden in Thomas is related to those " Edenic" states rarely experienced by man such as childhood innocence, solitude in nature, and brief moments of trance brought by love. These states of powerful happiness Thomas expresses in startling, deviant imagery and language: "Green was the singing house", "Happy as the grass was green," "prince of the apple towns", and "once below a time" which are strikingly novel.

Thomas joins words in a highly original way to picture the joyful exhilaration of he the child .He restored to the language of English verse new vigor and freshness after it became hackneyed over centuries .The magical landscapes of the poems recreate the freshness and wonder of the child's vision, but at the same time they express the adult poet's interpretation of his childish experience. This is not forced on the reader in the form of direct moralizing or

overt comment but through concrete imagery.⁸

And I was green and carefree, famous among the barns

About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,

In the sun that is young once only

Golden in the mercy of his means

Time let me play and be

Golden in the mercy of his means

And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman,

The calves sang to me , the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold.

And the Sabbath rang slowly

In the pebbles of the holy streams

Though Thomas is aware of the effect of time which makes the Fall inevitable ,yet, instead of becoming melancholic, he sees the joy of his remembered childhood as "something to be thanked and as part of the wonder of all creation." While Wordsworth moves away from the actual towards an experience of mysticism beyond the world of the senses, Thomas's sense of wonder emanates from participation in life itself as revealed through the senses.⁹ The most striking thing about "Fern Hill" is the virgin way of using the language which gives the sense that the poet himself is a child toying with words. The highly musical alliterative utterances like "huntsman and herdsman", "The hay fields high as the house", "green and golden", "fire green as the grass" effectively convey the abundant, luxurious life of the child. Even the rules of syntax are sometimes violated, clichéd expressions broken to create such novel effect as in "once below a time", "all the sun long", and "all the moon long."

Though Thomas did not fall into the pattern of political poetry that dominated the Nineteen Thirties, yet he was not indifferent to the ugliness and pity of war which he expressed in purely personal terms. His "A Refusal to Mourn the Death ,

by Fire, of a Child in London", "Ceremony after a Fire Raid", and "Among Those Killed in the Dawn Raid Was a Man Aged a Hundred" are not conventional war poems despite their implicit pacifism.¹⁰ They are also shaped by Thomas's unique fusion of the spiritual and the physical . In " A Refusal to Mourn", he rejects to lament the death of a child in an air raid since the child's death is too majestic and pathetic to be mourned conventionally¹¹ :

The majesty and burning of the child's death

I shall not murder

The mankind of her going with a grave truth

Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath

With any further

Elegy of innocence and youth.

The last line gives clue to the gist of the poet's argument: "After the first death, there is no other." Having died this early death, the child will not have to die again, as we who grow up to adulthood repeatedly die, first the child in us dies, then the young man or woman, one self after another .But the child, dying "green and fresh," without knowledge of the madness of adult life, without having to watch the brightness fade away, is to be glorified not mourned.¹²

The "quasi-sonnet" , "Among Those Killed in the Dawn Raid Was a Man Aged a Hundred," demonstrates a clear Blakean quality , but not even Blake himself , says M. L. Rosenthal, " could have made an engraving to illustrate its Surrealist sestet."¹³

When the morning was walking over the war
He put on his clothes and stepped out and he died
The locks yawned loose and a blast blew them wide ,

He dropped where he loved on the burst pavement stone .

And the funeral grains of the slaughtered floor .

Tell his street on its back he stopped a sun

And the craters of his eyes springshoots and fire

When all the keys shot from the locks , and rang.

Dig no more fore the chains of his grey-haired heart.

*The heavenly ambulance drawn by a wound
Assembling waits for the spade's ring on the cage.
O keep his bones away from that common cart ,
The morning is flying on the wings of his age
And a hundred storks perch on the sun's right hand.*

The poem exemplifies the extreme ambiguity of Thomas's imagery. However, he could have meant that "the length and solidity of the old man's life is more impressive than the fact of his death in the air raid." For each year of his life, the poet sees a child being born.¹⁴ The last line is an obvious parable of the Resurrection. Thomas was aware of the Swedish legend of the sacred bird, the stork, which derived its name from its flying round Christ as He hung on the cross, crying "Styrka!Styrka! , i.e., " Strengthen, Strengthen ." In this poem, as in the others, the political significance of the air-raids is scarcely glance at.¹⁵

In "And Death Shall Have No Dominion", Thomas conducts a spiritual service for a dead person , like any Welsh preacher asserting his firm confidence in Resurrection:

*Though they be mad and dead as nails
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion .*

The meaning of this rhetoric is that art is one source of procreation and it will therefore survive until doomsday. The title is taken from St Paul, Romans vi, 9: "Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead, death no more; death hath no more dominion over him." C. B. Cox holds that the sense of tension and hysteria in Thomas's declaration which contradicts with the sense of serenity and confidence in the Bible reflects his bitter realization that no Christ promises resurrection of the body, Tomas's major concern.¹⁶

Thomas's fusion of the Biblical and the physical reaches its culmination in "The

Altarwise Sonnets" which are his most difficult poems. They depict the fallen world of adulthood, the world of "the exodus, or wilderness, the world of the lost wanderers, and outcast voyagers." Their ambiguity itself could have been intended as an image of the fallen world they depict. These sonnets have a loose chronological framework based on reference to various periods in the process from birth to maturity.¹⁷

Hence, Sonnet III, fore instance, dramatizes in a profound symbolism the early stages of adolescence and youth. It describes the loss of innocence in terms of the murder of Abel (the Lamb) by Cain (Adam's wether).¹⁸The sun takes his " marrow-ladle/ Out of the wrinkled undertaker 's van" and dip into the "descended bone." The presence of "marrow" in Thomas's poetry distinguishes the live bone from the dead; the vital from the feeble. ¹⁹ This poem offers a perfect example on Thomas's common strategy of secularizing scriptural symbols and rites by applying them to common human experiences and types and hence lifting them to a sacred level of significance.

Sonnet IV continues the same theme of death but this time sharpening the awareness of the fleeting nature of time. It also questions most of the traditional certainties that used to provide man with spiritual assistance in the past. The secularization of Christian imagery is the poetic solution Thomas hit upon to withstand this state of spiritual vacuum. Accordingly Sonnet V exposes the hypocrisy of conventional religions and encourages revolt against them. The poet this time assumes the persona of Jonah, God's prophet to Nineveh, who was cast into the sea to be swallowed by the whale ²⁰: "A climbing sea from Asia had me down./ And Jonah's Moby snatched me by the hair."

Sonnet VIII shows the inevitable end of the voyager , "the crucifixion to the mountain / Time's nerve in vinegar, the gallow grave," while Sonnet IX describes

the ' mummification ' and burial of the crucified one:

*The priest and pharaoh bed my gentle wound,
World in the sand, on the triangle landscape,
With stones of Odessey for ash and garland
And rivers of the dead around my neck.*

Death then is the inevitable end of this quest in its "penance and wreath." But what implications does this death have for the speaker? This question is answered in Sonnet X, the climax of the quest, and the one in which Thomas's characteristic fusion of sex and religion reaches its highest pitch:

*This was the crucifixion on the mountain
Time's nerve in vinegar, the gallow grave
As tarred with blood as the bright thorns I wept;
The world's my wound, God's Mary in her grief,
Bent like three trees and bird-papped through her shift,
With pins for teardrops is the long wound's woman
This was the sky, Jack Christ, each minstrel angle
Drove in the heaven-driven of the nails
Till the three-colored rainbow from my nipples
From pole to pole leapt round the snail-waked wound
I by the tree of thives, all glory's sawbones
Unsex the skeleton this mountain minutes
And by this blowclock witness of the sun
Suffers the heaven's children through my heart-beat.*

The poet realizes that the crucifixion both of Christ and of man is necessary; he must die like Christ to nourish those who come after him. "There is no immortality and no redemption," Thomas believes, "but only sacrifice." The appearance of the cross signalizes the Resurrection to come.²¹ Many of the images here have sexual significance even Christian ones. Thomas was obsessed by the idea that the womb is a kind of tomb, and that the embryo begins to die at the very moment of its conception. That is why sex and death, his favorite subjects are inherently fused together. ²²The crucifixion here is described as interpreted by Mary, "the mother of Jesus and the

source of all creation." She is "bird-breasted", symbol of fertility and regeneration. Through her "heart-beat" and "tears hurting like pins", or by means of her son, she suffers, and makes possible "the children of heaven", her heavenly childbirth.²³

The figure which dominates Thomas's "fallen world" and offers the principal narrator of his "Altarwise Sonnets" is the voyager or wandering type which could be Samson, Christ, Ishmael, or Cain. The poet is one with all the rebels and outcasts of human history. He is both an individual and symbol for what William T. Moynihan calls the "Man-Christ-Poet" composite, a representation of suffering, crucified humanity every when and every where.²⁴ By secularizing Christian imagery of all sorts, Dylan Thomas achieves a twofold function: bringing these divine elements down to earth hence helping the modern skeptic mind to accept them on the one hand, and lifting the mundane experiences and types of modern life to a sacred level of importance on the other hand.

Notes:

1. Vivian De Sola Pinto, The Crisis of English Poetry (London: Hutchinson University Press, 1965), p.22.m
2. Marshall W. Stearns, "Unsex the Skeleton: Notes on the Poetry of Dylan Thomas," PMLA, Vol. LXXIX, No.5 (December, 1964): 654.
3. John Press, A Map of Modern Poetry, (Macmillan, 1972), p.113.
4. C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson "Introduction" to Modern Poetry: Essays in Practical criticism, ed. C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, (Edward Arnold, 1979) p.124. .
5. C. B. Cox, "Welsh Bards in Hard Times: Dylan Thomas and R. S. Thomas", in The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol.8, The Present, ed. Boris Ford, (London: Penguin Books, 1964), p.21.

6. Francis Scarfe , " Dylan Thomas : A Pioneer " , in Dylan Thomas : The Legend and the Poet : A Collection of Critical and Biographical Essays , ed. E. W. Tedlock , Jr. (London : Heinemann , 1960),p.96 .
7. All references to Dylan Thomas's poetry are taken from Richard Ellman and Robert O' Clair , The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry. (New York : W. W. W. Norton and Company , 1984).
8. William T. Moynihan ,The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas , (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 19660),P.250.
- 9 Ibid.
10. M. L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets : A critical Introduction,(London : Oxford university Press, 1968),p.204 .
11. Ibid.
- 12.Babette Deutsch, Poetry in Our Time, (Macmillan, 1964) ,p.34.
- 13.Rosenthal, p.205.
14. Jim Hunter, Modern Poets Three , (London : Faber and Faber, 1968 0),p.
15. Deutsch,p.387.
16. Cox,"Welsh Bards in Hard Times", p.211.
17. Moynihan," Dylan Thomas and the Biblical Rhythm", PMLA. LXXIX , Vol.5 (December , 1964):P.642.
- 18.Moynihan , The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas ,p.254.
19. Edler Olson , The Poetry of Dylan Thomas ,(University of Chicago Press, 1954),p.72.
20. Moynihan ,The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas ,p.255.
21. Olson, p.84.
22. Ibid.
- 23 Stearns,p.124.
- 24.Moynihan , " Dylan Thomas and Biblical Rhythm" ,p.640 .

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ملخص البحث:

((علمنة الرموز المسيحية في شعر دايلان توماس))
يتناول البحث أحد الأساليب المميزة للشعر الحديث والتي تبرز بجلاء أكثر عند ديلان توماس وهي اخراج الرموز والصور المسيحية من اطارها الديني الكنسي البحث وتوظيفها لتدل على حالات وموضوعات ودلالات حياتية ليست دينية بالضرورة حيث يتم اسقاط تلك الصور والقصص والرموز المسيحية على شخصيات واحداث وصور عامة مما يكسبها نوعاً من القدسية والاهمية والعمق لم تكن لتتسم بها لولا ذلك الاسلوب الذي يعد الحل الامثل الذي توصل اليه الشاعر الحديث في التعامل مع

الموروث الديني الغني بالصور والرموز والقصص التي
اهتزت قيمتها الروحية بسبب الازمة الفكرية والنفسية
والاخلاقية التي يعيشها انسان العصر الحديث . مما يتطلب
مقارنتها بأسلوب جديد يتسم مع متطلبات الحداثة .