DYLAN THOMAS: THE ELEMENTAL POET

MARThA HALLER WILDE*

Dylan Thomas’ songs of the fundamental passions of mankind were terminated by the poet’s death last year. While the Welsh bard lived critics sometimes felt compelled to warn the reader against obscurity in his poetry. Such evaluations are likely to lead us away from a major feature of the greatness of the poems: their ingredients are actually the staples that have constituted poetry and life for time immemorial. A close reading of Thomas’ poetry suggests that beneath the difficult syntax and startling word combinations lies a unity of elemental concepts and language.

A Thomas poem is “elemental” in form and content; in fact, the form is the content, for the order and use of words and verse techniques cannot be divorced from the meaning. The words and images are basic and often traditional, the ideas and themes simple and fundamental. Elemental language is not difficult, academic, or four syllabled; unfamiliar words can usually be traced to a homely Welsh background. Often the language of the Bible can be recognized. The fundamental emotional nature of man is here; the elements are mixed by the associative processes that characterize the mind of natural man who sees himself as an extension of the external world.

The associative method of creation in Thomas does not imply lack of control. Despite strange juxtapositions and syntax, a unity of feeling is created because the combinations are not products of a blind “pin the tail on the donkey” game. Such unity courses through the entire body of Thomas’ poetry. As one reads the poems en masse they become canons of a special, personal scripture. In his later poetry Thomas himself learned to label the primary material projected in these scriptures:

Four elements and five
Senses, and man a spirit in love

There is hardly a poem that does not employ variations upon air, earth, water, and fire—the four elements. To a young poet the water is womb water of fertility; as he matures the water becomes the sea of life familiar to all readers of poetry. And the

* University of Wisconsin. The author is indebted to Professor Haskell Block of the Comparative Literature Department for helpful suggestions and criticisms.
fertility of green earth is inside the young poet, just as the earth’s worm of death is in him; the older poet is able to place this greenness and the dangers of rock barrenness in the natural world, still projecting himself so that his later poems have been called Wordsworthian. The youthful wind is his own breath of life and self destruction, whereas the wind becomes a cry of nature in later poems. The fire is the heat of his own veins at first, but it becomes the potential life-giver and life-taker, as well as the means of purification through phoenix-like resurrection and a reminder of hellfire and brimstone religious background.

After the “four elements” come the “five senses” which also suggest development from self-exploration to exploration of God, nature, and other creatures. This progress is not from subjectivity to objectivity, however; the subjective poet’s “I” is ever present, even in the latest volume, In Country Sleep, but the “I” has become aware of something besides its own body. Early poems employ the correspondence of nature and body with the center of action being the latter; later poems employ the same correspondence but the natural world is the scene. Whereas the world of seasons and elements was first used to elucidate the world of the senses, later the senses elucidate the world of nature. The “Five and Country Senses” work synaesthetically in “lunar silences,” “green thumbs,” “nostrils that see her breath and burn,” “nutmeg, civet, and sea-parsley serve the plagued groom and bride,” “moonshine echoing clear,” and “the louder the sun blooms.” Sight and sound are the favored senses.

The third label that Thomas provides is “Man a spirit in love.” “Man be my metaphor” betrays the poet’s primary theme. The man is usually himself, a spirit in love with life and out of love with death. In his own words, then, Thomas gives us a key to his imagery and the emotions expressed in his poetry. An investigation of themes as bound up in imagery will suggest the nature of the music of personal passions and problems in the elemental man.

The theme of death pursues Thomas throughout his poetry. “Death’s feather” appears to taunt him in at least two of the first 18 Poems and in two later poems; even as he describes the prenatal development of the foetus in the womb and the birth and development of the child through maturity, we find death waiting to pull “down the shabby curtains of the skin” in “The Process of the Weather of the Heart.” A symbol from the external world (weather) is juxtaposed with a symbol of the internal world (the heart); thus mutability is depicted as the
forces of nature are applied to the physical changes in the development of the individual. Life is “the Eastern weather” in “Before I Knocked” and the archetypal pattern of spring weather is utilized in “Hold Hard, These Ancient Minutes in the Cuckoo’s Month.” The poet continues to use this comparison. The “golden weather” of “We Lying By Seasand” can only be disturbed by the “rock arrival” of barrenness and death. “Storm snow, and fountain in the weather of fireworks” tells us something of the violence of the sinner of old time revival religion in “It Is the Sinner’s Dust-tongued Bell.” The “outside weathers” quarrel with the internal temperament of the animal inside of “How Shall my Animal.” Thomas sees “the boys of summer in their ruin,” knows “the message of the winter,” feels the “October wind” punishing his hair, that “Beginning with doom in the bulk, the spring unravels,” that “Here In This Spring” the world wears away, that “love in the frost is pared and wintered by,” that there is “dark-skinned summer,” “A Winter’s Tale,” and “Holy Spring.” In all of these poems from the earliest to the latest there is the simple correlation of the seasons of the year with the seasons of man’s life and the recognition of what Jeremy Taylor designated in his conduct book, Holy Dying—mutability of life where seeds of winter are present even in our spring fever.

Like the seventeenth century divines, Hamlet, and non-conformist preachers, Thomas is early preoccupied with cadavers, worms, and the grave. At first the poet is “dumb to tell the lover’s tomb/ How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.” He writes, “I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail/ Wearing the quick away” and, Hamlet-like, there’s the “rub”; “The shades of girls, all flavoured from their shrouds,/ When sunlight goes are sundered from the worm.” In October he is conscious of the “wormy” winter”; in dreaming his “genesis” he knows that limbs “had the measure of the worm”; the “worm in the scalp” haunts “All All and All the Dry Worlds Lever,” and finally the “Worms/ Tell, if at all the winter’s storms/ Or the funeral of the sun” in “Here in This Spring.” After the early poems the worms disappear from the limelight.

But death is ever present. Time and the transciency of things are the poet’s foes. “When like a running grave, time tracks you down,” as you grow older, you try to catch the physical sensations life has to offer before “time/ on track/ Shapes in a cinder death.” “Who kills my history?/ Time kills me.” “Time let me play and be”; “Time held me green and dying.” Time smirks because the poet knows that birth is only the beginning of dying:
Time is bearing another son.
Kill Time! She turns in her pain!
The oak is felled in the acorn
And the hawk in the egg kills the wren.

There is nothing more basic than the dust unto dust theme. "The corpse's lover," "cadaverous gravels," "Man was Cadaver's masker . . ." "time's maggot," "Death hairy heeled," meat on bones, marrow, and winding sheets become "the atlas-eater with a jaw for news (in fact death is "all metaphors")," "the meat eating sun," and "the last Samson of your Zodiac." The emphasis on the Elizabethan or Gothic physical obsession with death has been exchanged for a less traditional kind of imagery.

Death as a personal experience continues to haunt the poet, but he reaches out also to others. By 1939 Thomas can write "In Memory of Ann Jones," his feelings about the death of another person. "The Tombstone told when she died" finds him again exploring his relationship to an older dead woman. "The Refusal to Mourn" for a child killed in an air raid, "The Conversation of Prayers," "Ceremony After Air Raid," and "Among those Killed was a Man Aged a Hundred" objectify the problem of death, from which the poet even here cannot disassociate himself.

There is a development away from black pessimism as the poet matures. Death is always the destroyer; time is always at his back, but the poet can cry that "Death Shall Have No Dominion" for life itself goes on. Like the birthday poems, "Holy Spring" blesses and clings to life despite death's shadow. Thomas wrote "Unluckily for Death" and finally that bold but controlled defiance

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Like Yeats, he refused to acquiesce, and like a seventeenth century counterpart, he wanted to gather his rosebuds while he might.

The lyric poet whose concern is bluntly sex and death must on the other side of the coin, then, sing love songs. The melancholic is balanced by the sanguine humor. Again the technique of correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm serves him. John Donne's countryside of the female body is approximated by the elements that make the "waters . . . green knots . . . (and) tides" of "Where Once the Waters of your Face." The sexual imagery of "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" may be understood by similar elemental correspondence plus a Freudian candle
symbol. “I sent my creature scouting on the globe,/ That globe itself of hair and bone” explains the correspondence in “When Once the Twilight Locks No Longer.” “Now in the cloud’s big breast lie quiet countries/ Delivered seas my love from her proud place” in “I Make This in a Warring Absence” and “Love’s countries” of “When All My Five and Country Senses See” suggest correspondence again. In “Ears in the Turrets Hear” Thomas approaches the subject of the isolated individual in the ivory tower of “this island bound/ By a thin sea of flesh/ And a bone coast” by another comparison which forces us to recognize simultaneously the little world of the individual and the big world of nature. The difficult “Unluckily for Death” carries us to a more profane kind of comparison; as in Donne’s “Canonization,” sensual love is described in terms of holy love. “Marriage of the Virgin” also operates on these two levels.

This use of imagery from Christian belief is basic to the total Thomas scripture, but, unlike the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century and Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Welsh poet never got far beyond the Jack Donne stage. Thomas’ highest exultation is never far beyond the elemental man of flesh and fear.

Even early poetry not directly concerned with man’s awareness of God contains many Biblical allusions, terms in which to case less spiritual matter. We are reminded of the Bible and sermonizing of non-conformist Christianity by phrases such as “a little sabbath with the sun,” “Before I knocked,” “The message of his dying christ,” “In the beginning,” “my genesis,” “this bread I break,” “incarnate devil,” “manna up through the dew of heaven,” “fell from grace,” “Vision and Prayer,” and “Suffer the heaven’s children through my heartbeat.”

Biblical characters, especially from the Old Testament, are presented sometimes as straightforward allusion and sometimes with a special verbal twist reminiscent of Hopkins. Henry Treece has collected a list of Biblical references that covers all of the poetry through 1946. Adam, Eve, Eden, and Christ are among the most prevalent words listed. In the middle period of “Altarwise by Owl-Light” Thomas lets fly a volley of Biblical allusions that includes the juxtaposition of Jacob’s ladder and Adam’s ribs: “Rung bone and blade, the verticals of Adam/ And, manned by midnight, Jacob to the stars.” Other startling juxtapositions include “My camel’s eye will needle through the shroud,” “Two-gunned Gabriel,” “Jonah’s Moby (with Melville and Jonah appropriately mixed),” “tynsy from salvation’s bottle,” “Adam,
time's joker," and "Jack Christ." Even in the early poetry he describes Christ as "Jack of Christ born thorny." "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" and "Vision and Prayer" with its emblematic form might be defended as basically Christian in form and content, but even here I feel that Thomas doesn't transcend a religion of fear.

In the later poetry of *In Country Sleep* the poet clings to life, recollecting mortality rather than immortality. The pastoral nature of this poetry represents a change in scenery but not in theme; internal stresses are now objectified. "Fern Hill" paints a picture of childhood in green and gold and blue which glorify a country scene. "In Country Sleep" utilizes fairy tale and mother goose material to create a rustic scene of elemental innocence—air, water, earth and sun, where still the "Thief" of time stalks. "Over Sir John's Hill" suggests symbols and themes of other modern poets: Hopkins' falcon Christ with "The hawk on fire hangs still," Hart Crane's frisky children so unaware of danger in "Voyage I" with "the shrill child's play," Stephan Spender's "I Hear the Cries of Evening" where gulls, rooks, and the world are singing a kind of swan song too—where both poets hear with consternation the cries before the "lunge of night."

The "Poem on His Birthday" embodies some of the new calm Thomas gained in an elemental world affirmed by God as the poet sails "out to die." "Lament" traces the development of man, the poet who is Thomas' metaphor, through the elemental life of the passions, the life of the medieval humors—the windy boy, green leaved, in the swelter of summer, when the blood creeps cold; but like Yeats the poet wars against the "deadly virtues" that age would impose upon him. In these later poems the night-marish dream imagery of earlier poetry has developed into wide-eyes childhood dreams. Physiological imagery of parts of the body has been replaced by familiar animal imagery—turtles, fish, dogs, mules, and birds—or by natural objects. "In the White Giant’s Thigh" praises the body and physical life in terms of the "conceiving moon," "seed to flow," "green countries," and "breasts full of honey." Ultimately to the elemental man who goes "to the elemental town," death is the greatest fear, love of life the greatest joy.

Thomas doesn't seem to distinguish himself and the world which becomes a projection of the poet's self. Although this poetic anthropomorphism juxtaposes macrocosm and microcosm with startling fluency, the technique itself allies Thomas with poetic tradition rather than with any violent break with it. Only
occasionally does topical language suggest the age in which the
poetry was written. One finds references to war, flying, moving
pictures and modern idiom. Images from tailoring are no newer
than the Fateful sisters or Carlyle.

Concern for their art has given bards throughout the ages
material to forge into poetry. Thomas, self-conscious, is con-
scious of his art; the tools of his trade work their way into his
imagery. He tells us his subject matter with:

I would be tickled by the rub that is:
Man be my metaphor.

He creates a unity of himself, his art, and nature when his “busy
heart/ Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words ... wordy
shapes of women ... vowelled beeches ... oaken voices ... 
water’s speeches ... spelling in the scurry ... hears the dark-
vowelled birds.” Further utilization of the poet’s tools is found
welded to this explanation of the poetic process:

And from the first declension of the flesh
I learnt man’s tongue, to twist the shapes of thoughts
Into the stony idiom of the brain,
To shade and knit anew the patch of words.

In the beginning was the word, the word
That from the solid bases of the light
Abstracted all the letters of the void;
And from the cloudy bases of the breath
The word flowed up, translating to the heart
First characters of birth and death.

And finally the superb explanation of “In My Craft and Sullen
Art” exercised

for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art.

The very fact that he wrote for the lovers “their arms / Round
the griefs of the ages” suggests the elemental nature of this
music. Man’s life itself and its tragedies are his topic and meta-
phor: the foetus, the baby, the child, the lover, the adult who
fears age and wars against death, who is aware of religion and
occasionally attends a revival meeting, the country man who can
hear the “pleasure bird whistle” and feels the rush of life in all
its elemental beauty, in himself and nature. Thomas was an indi-
vidual bard who sang traditional songs in startling new keys,
who felt synaesthetically and sympathetically and saw the big
world of the elements in immediate correspondence with the little
world of the single man. He sang in the romantic tradition for
every man with a heart ("I have been told to reason by the
heart") and auditory apparatus. His images are so bound up with
his meaning that a study of them should reveal his fundamental
preoccupations, not philosophical or religious or social, but with
the core of man—himself. His canons of poetry shout a gradual
emergence from the cocoon of self to winged flight in the natural
world. Although he did not develop in a literary vacuum, he did
not associate himself with any school. His school is the oldest one
—that of the singer of "The Elemental Music."