

Comparison of Dylan Thomas's Two Poems

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I. Introduction

Dylan Marlais Thomas (1914–1953) is a Welsh poet and writer is one of the writers who have often been associated with Welsh literature and culture. Dylan Thomas's most notoriously difficult poem in 1935-36 he wrote his 'Altarwise by owl-light' sonnet sequence, and here we shall look at the first two sonnets of that sequence. The amount of commentary necessitated by all ten of the sonnets makes a discussion of the whole sequence here impossible, though the first two sonnets may lead you to explore further at a later stage.

We will find it convenient to approach the two sonnets on their own for the time being. And first of all limit yourself to two basic exercises: (a) Try to find those points where some aspect of the narrative seems reasonable clear; b) Look up the following words in a dictionary: 'altarwise', 'owl-light', 'Abaddon', 'hangnail', 'mandrake', 'pelican'.

I

Altar wise by owl-light in the half-way house
The gentleman lay graveward with his furies;
Abaddon in the hangnail cracked from Adam,
And, from his fork, a dog among the fairies,
The atlas-eater with a jaw for news,
Bit out the mandrake with to-morrow's scream.
Then, penny-eyed, that gentleman of wounds,
Old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg,
With bones unbuttoned to the half-way winds,
Hatched from the windy salvage on one leg,
Scraped at my cradle in a walking word
That night of time under the Christward shelter:
I am the long world's gentlemen, he said,
And share my bed with Capricorn and Cancer. (p.30)

II

Death is all metaphors, shape in one history;
The child that sucketh long is shooting up,
The planet-ducted pelican of circles
Weans on an artery the gender's strip;
Child of the short spark in a shapeless country
Soon sets alight a long stick from the cradle;
The horizontal cross-bones of abaddon,
You by the cavern over the black stairs,
Rung bone and balde, the verticals of Adam,
And, manned by midnight, Jacob to the stars.
Hairs of your head, then said the hollow agent,
Are but the roots of nettles and of feathers
Over these groundworks thrusting through a pavement
And hemlock-headed in the wood of weathers.

('Jacob' is a verb = *climb, as on Jacob's Ladder*)

After two or three readings, a new reader is probably fairly confident of one thing: that in the first sonnet someone or something appeared to the speaker when he was a child, and said something ('scraped at my cradle in a walking word' 1.11); and that the child-poet is similarly addressed in the second sonnet a 'You by the cavern over the black stair's, (1.8) with a pun on 'backstairs'. In other words, one probably understands that the overall narrator is the poet, who also figures dramatically in the narrative.

Who was the visitor? Well, in the poem's own language he is a 'gentleman of wounds, /Old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg,.../ Hatched from the windy salvage on one leg'. Did you think of Christ? He is Christ, who was fathered in the first place by the Holy Ghost. He is now, however, 'hatched' again (resurrected

from a wounding death on the upright of the cross – that ‘windy salvage on one leg’. The first sonnet’s octave (last 8 lines) begins to make at least narrative sense.

Let us consider what was said of this ‘gentleman’ in the sestet (first 6 lines). Take the two opening lines:

Altarwise by owl-light in the half-way house
The gentleman lay graveward with his furies...

‘Half-way house’ might make you think of womb (between conception and birth) or tomb (between life and a second life). Similarly ‘graveward’ (in the womb, on the way to the grave, or ‘ward’ or prisoner of the grave). And again ‘Altarwise’: lying horizontally, like an altar – either the foetus born to die or the corpse actually sacrificed. In addition to womb and tomb, we might simply think of Christ in the manger. We feel that, characteristically, one meaning doesn’t drive out another. ‘Owl-light’ (dusk) seems appropriate to all three. ‘Furies’ is the remaining difficulty. But let us leave it for a moment, and try to establish the narrative of the next four lines:

Abaddon in the hangnail cracked from Adam,
And, from his fork, a dog among the fairies,
The atlas-eater with a jaw for news,
Bit out the mandrake with to-morrow’s scream.

Your first difficulty here was probably syntactical, which as you now know is a characteristic problem with the poetry. ‘Cracked’ (from) is a main verb, not a past-participle. (If you look closely you’ll see that it can only be a main verb) Its subject is Abaddon (=Angel of Death). With Adam it would be useful to remember that Christ was called the second Adam, but even thinking of the first Adam would not lead you astray. At some event, then, Death (Abaddon) split away from Man (Adam/Christ). This would suitably describe the significance of the conception, birth, and death of Christ, singly or all three. But some prominence is given the crucifixion by that word ‘hangnail’. Literally a piece of skin hanging loose from near a finger-nail, its two component words – *hang and nail* – suggest the cross. Then Thomas uses the image of the crucifixion as a castration, with God (the ‘atlas-eater’, world-devourer) biting out the sexual, death-producing aspects of man in the suffering Christ, like a dog uprooting the ‘mandrake’ plant in the old legend. The original mandrake, on being uprooted, uttered a scream that could kill. That was why a dog was used to uproot it. And that in turn is why the ‘atlas-eater’ here is a ‘dog among the fairies’ (suggesting also God among lesser gods). He has a ‘jaw for news’ (cf. a nose for news) because ‘the mandrake with to-morrow’s scream’ is the penis, capable of creating tomorrow’s progeny. The ‘furies’ in the second line are therefore probably the sexual appetites that died with the mortal body of Christ. It is the immortal Christ who appears to the child in his cradle, and speaks to him the substance of the second sonnet. It is possible that the child thus visited is not only the poet but the Christ-child Himself. With time collapsed in this way, the manager would be both ‘the Christward shelter’ and ‘the cavern over the black stairs’, evoking the resurrected Christ’s harrowing of hell.

I don’t propose to paraphrase the second sonnet in the same detail. Much of its meaning will in any case spring from the commentary above. This seems, however, a good stage at which to remind you of a point I have tended to emphasize in a preliminary way earlier in this study. And that is, what we mean when we say that Thomas’s poetry should be read ‘literally’. With reference to these sonnets, you will certainly have felt that the vents don’t belong to any ‘literal’ world in the ordinary sense. ‘Literal’ was, rather, the word Thomas tended to use of the sort of reading his poetry demanded. And he made the point strongly in disagreement with Edith Sitwell’s interpretation of the lines.

The atlas-eater with a jaw for news,
Bit out the mandrake with to-morrow’s scream.

She had said that the lines described ‘the violent speed and the sensation-loving, horror-loving craze of modern life’. Thomas replied ‘She doesn’t take the literal meaning: that a world-devouring ghost creature bit out the horror of tomorrow from a gentleman’s loins. (p.25) Where Edith Sitwell strikes us as being simply wrong, Thomas’s comment may seem simply unhelpful, giving the lines over again in their own terms. But that’s exactly the point. Edith Sitwell’s error was to imagine that there was some much vaguer general theme which was simply ‘represented’ in these particular images. Of course, we too have to some degree used a preconception of the ‘theme’ to set the images into some kind of logical relationship. And indeed, an understanding of language, of any kind, demands that we do so. But Edith Sitwell went one step further. She got what she thought to be the theme, and then discarded the images. Much more important than ‘theme’ for Thomas is narrative. And he writes in the early poems in such a way as to retain us within that narrative. This is what makes Thomas essentially a Modernist poet: he forces us to draw our meanings from the logic of the poem itself, in concrete terms, and not from an appeal to general experience outside the verbal event of the poem. This is the sense in which so much Modernist verse, though in a variety of ways, is irreducible. (For a fuller discussion of Thomas’s Modernism, see below, pp. 106-115) The most important thing that one can offer with Thomas’s earlier poetry is some guidance as to the narrative.

I'd like you now to re-read two sonnets, surrendering to their narrative as an actual event taking place on (and in) its own terms, and not as a replacement –allegory standing for something else. Even the 'Christian' context of the images can be appealed to only up to a certain point, because the very tone of the images shows that the Christian materials are not being used in any traditional way.

Now look at a later poem, written in 1945. It is titled 'The Conversation of Prayer'.

The conversation of prayers about to be said
By the child going to bed and the man on the stairs
Who climbs to his dying love in her high room.
The one not caring to whom in his sleep he will move
And the other full of tears that she will be dead,

Turns in the dark on the sound they know will arise
Into the answering skies from the green ground,
From the man on the stairs and the child by his bed.
The sound about to be said in the two prayers
For the sleep in a safe land and the love who dies.

Will be the same grief flying. Whom shall they calm
Shall the child sleep unharmed or the man be crying
The conversation of prayers about to be said
Turns on the quick and the dead, and the man on the stairs
To-night shall find no dying but alive and warm

In the fire of his care his love in the high room.
And the child not caring to whom he climbs his prayer
Shall drown in a grief as deep as his true grave,
And mark the dark eyed wave, through the eyes of sleep,
Dragging him up the stairs to one who lies dead. (p.61)

I don't think I am contradicting what I said above when I say that it is an interest in a common theme that prompts me to juxtapose the two sonnets and 'The Conversation of Prayer'. In fact, it may reinforce my point. What I think they have in common is not any comparable details as such but the dramatization of the meeting-point between innocence and experience. And this is not so much a 'theme' as a dramatic device. The crucified Christ addressing the newly-born child; a young boy experiencing by some mysterious exchange the tragic nightmare of the adult: already any common ground between the two will appear to you notional, or simply convenient. The two poems are so differently conceived, and involve such different narratives. But even that notional comparison may be helpful in drawing the poems together for a contrast of their styles. And what I'd like to do now is select some details to illustrate the difference between 'The Conversation of Prayer' and the sonnets in terms of imagery, texture, and verse-movement. These aspects of 'The Conversation of Prayer' should again be responded to only within the 'literal' assertions of the narrative.

Here are some points to compare with your own. Obviously, we get a strong sense of the *ordinary* in the later poem, despite the mysterious exchange of answer given to the prayers. We are struck not only by ordinary references such as 'the cliché going to bed' or 'the man on the stairs', but by the ordinariness also of child, as in 'full of tears' or 'the quick and the dead'. In contrast, we might almost have characterized the earlier style by saying it was a studied avoidance of cliché: indeed, a case of never calling a spade a spade, if Thomas could help it – even allowing that the actual spade exists outside the poem! In the second sonnet, for example, 'the child that sucketh long' is not long a child: it soon becomes 'the gender's strip', weaned 'on an artery', and 'a long stick from the cradle'. The self-sacrificing mother, whose blood and milk feed the child, is similarly 'The planet-ducted pelican of circles' etc.

With such indirect identities, we tend in the earlier poem, and the earlier poetry generally, to be aware of concrete parts (bone, blade, hairs) as opposed to conceptual wholes in the later (child, man, his 'love in her high room'). In this way, the earlier texture is much starker, even though some local intensities like 'the dark eyed wave' in the later poem here sometimes remind us of the earlier voice. The general perspective seems radically different. The language of an earlier poem embroils us in its physical sensations. The language of 'The Conversation of Prayer' on the other hand seems to stand over against the experience, instead of becoming the experience in itself. This greater sense of leisure is evident also in the way in which the idea of foreshortened time (of death instantaneously perceived in life) is presented. In the 'Altarwise' sonnets, a single image will give in:

Hairs of your head, then said the hollow agent,

Are but the roots of nettles and of feathers.

In the later poem, the exchanged prayers of the child and the man slowly develop into an extended image which structures the whole poem. And a reflection of the whole is there in the pun on 'conversation': it is also *The conversion of prayers*.

Trying in with these points is the different movement of the verse. Once again in the earlier example the basic unit seems to be the individual line, individually relished and weighted. 'The Conversation of Prayer' has a slow, self-echoing movement which seems to bind the whole into a consistent music. Notice, for example, that only the last of its verses is end-stopped. And notice the rhyme-scheme. End-words constantly rhyme inwards with words in the middle of the lines, again making us think of the whole rather than of individual achieved lines.

These six examples illustrate something of the range in Thomas from 'obscure' to 'relatively straightforward'. And no doubt you found the later poem in each pair the easier to read and grasp. But I think we should ask again, more pointedly, what we mean when we say an early poem is difficult. And do we mean that the later ones are not? In bringing up more general questions in this respect, I am not expecting them to be answered straightforwardly at this stage. Your own answers will be formulated gradually in a wider reading of the poems, when I would ask you to bear some of the following points in mind.

For example, does an early poem remain difficult when the reader has, perhaps convincingly, been taken through it with guidance from a critical commentary? The important test here, of course, is whether the meanings you have 'worked out', often strenuously, can be retained spontaneously when you return to read the poem as a whole. That is, are they summoned up authoritatively and cohesively by the poem itself? A poem which comes to life only next door, as it were, to a critical commentary can hardly be called meaningful in a real sense. In my own experience, very few of Thomas's poems fail to meet this test. Example of what I would personally consider failures in this respect are 'Now', 'A grief ago' and 'How soon the servant sun'. But you should make a point of testing my view against your own reading of these poems. Having read them independently first of all, consider them further in the light of the detailed commentaries by W.Y. Tindall in his *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas* (see 'Further Reading' below, p.131). Then, on returning to the poems, ask yourself if the aspects of Tindall's commentary that you found persuasive can be retained spontaneously when you return to re-reading the poems on their own. Do the poems themselves allow us natural points of access into the overall *logic* that brings the images into relationship?

Consider the question of obscurity from another angle. When syntax, narrative, and so on have been worked out in an early poem, does any problem remain as to Thomas's attitude or tone? Are the latter in any way obscure or ambiguous in themselves? After all, attitude and tone can remain richly problematic in poems considered much less difficult than Thomas's at first reading. For instance, Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium'. Ostensibly, that poem urges the ideal superiority of art over organic physical life. But Yeats's attitude to both remains complex, ambiguous - as, on the same theme, does Keats's attitude in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. We've seen Thomas's early tendency to conflate images from different categories of experience, but not (I would have thought) in ways that bring irony, or ambiguity of attitudes, or difficult ideas into play. On the whole, in the earlier poem, I think we know simply and directly where Thomas stands, once we've decided what the syntax and the narrative say.

The two 'Altarwise' sonnets may be an exception. One is puzzled as to what use exactly the Christian story is being put. Puzzled, too, by the coexistence of a cocky, sacrilegious note with lines of resounding gravity. Is the Christian story being used dramatically only, and not as a matter of actual belief? If you decide to tackle the whole sequence, we will find that finally *this* is the difficult question - more, even, than the obscurity of syntax or image along the way.

But the same problem, though in much simpler form, may be posed by the later poem, 'The Conversation of Prayer'. Not a problem of tone and attitude. One is much surer of tone here than in the 'Altarwise' sonnets: a humane, sympathetic one. But ask yourself what questions concerning Thomas's actual beliefs might come to mind when we read 'The Conversation of Prayer'. And are they relevant?

For example, in 'The Conversation of Prayer' is Thomas implying that human prayers are not heard at all; or heard and arbitrarily ignored; or are they heard and ignored for a reason - so that each individual has to experience suffering in the growth to maturity; or are they heard and answered kindly only for those (like the man in the poem) whose concern is selflessly for another human being? Personally, I feel the poem does not centre on this question of belief at all, but on the inevitability of suffering and disillusion (foretasted by the child in his unaccountable nightmare). The child is Thomas's real concern. The man, and the religious implications of 'prayer', I feel are ways of dramatizing this meeting-ground between innocence and experience. As in the 'Altarwise' sonnets, I think Thomas is employing religion as a pattern (generally familiar) within which to work. This is not, however, to agree with the view of a critic such as John Wain, that Thomas is only conveniently 'thumbing a lift' from religion:

Religion... seems to me Thomas's the worst pitch; he never succeeds in making me feel that he is doing more than thumbing a lift from it. Indeed it is only a helpful subject to him in those poems which are content to leave every important matter to be settled by the reader: the line 'after the first death, there is no other has been praised as an example of significant ambiguity (either 'when you are dead there's an end of it' or 'after this mortal life comes the eternal one'), and no doubt that is very valuable, but if a poet is going to be a religious poet there has (one would think) to be a little more definition about it.

An early poem adds up to be a concrete narrative, not a conceptual statement with which we might agree or disagree, or which we might find adequate or inadequate. In this way, paradoxically, it is perhaps the later poems which run the greater risks. You might like to test this further in an exercise you can do independently. David Aivaz described 'Incarnate devil' (1955, p.31) and 'This Side of the Truth' (1945, p. 63) as the only poems by Thomas in which 'morality is a theme'. There is some validity in this, if what we mean is that these two poems challenge, with uncharacteristic pointedness, the choice man is traditionally enjoined to make between Good and Evil. The earlier poem implies, and the later poem affirms, that notions of good and Evil are man's invention, superimposed on a morally neutral, though dynamic, universe.

II. Conclusion

There are always, surely, received patterns of thought (myths and images) within a culture, on which one draws, not necessarily in strict belief, but in order to make thought itself possible in the first place. But one thing seems likely. The more dilute and 'open' Thomas's later style becomes, the more nakedly will this question of his actual beliefs, or the general question of is 'ideas' or feeling, appear. The textural difficulty of an earlier poem deflects attention from the nature of its thought or implications, or at least delays attention to these things. In the end what an early poem adds up to is a concrete narrative, not a conceptual statement with which we might agree or disagree.

Bibliography

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