

DYLAN THOMAS'S *18 POEMS*: THE RISING POETIC VOICE

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ABSTRACT: *Dylan Thomas's 18 Poems is the first fruit of his contemplations during an apparently fallow period and records the mind's journey back to the womb of darkness and bangs the drum for the process of creation. The Apocalyptic poets, while extolling 18 Poems for its subjectivity and objectivity, commend its language of reasoning as the harmonizing factor between Thomas and the lost poets of the thirties. To Thomas, the songs and lyrics of John Donne indicating succession of time do not, however, evince interest in temporal sequence that characterizes the lyrics of Thomas Hardy in particular achieving a balance of movement and motionlessness. Thomas's archetypal setting, while sounding the depth of human heart and human understanding, human predicament and human mercy, reflects the sensibility of earthiness, definiteness, and vividness. John Ackerman explains that the paradoxical attitude of Thomas in 18 Poems "occasions much of the obscurity ... the images, however, are usually grouped by a sturdy advancing rhythm and an elaborate sound structure—that is the imposed formal control." To Walford Davies, Thomas's early poetry offering "the reader only an impenetrable enigma" is "difficult and obscure in an individual way." In the study of Thomas's 18 Poems the critics, focusing more on obscurity and musical structure, have hardly analysed the self-orientated individual voice. Hence, this paper, adopting a figurative study, strives to unfold the meaning of his rising poetic voice that devotes the Word-centric metaphysical tone of John Donne.*

KEYWORDS: Primordial, Plausible, Florid, Rueful, Symphony, Resurrection, and Ecstatic.

INTRODUCTION

The poets of the thirties, W.H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice, having lost their future even before the end of the Spanish Civil War, introspected over their life, on the whole, within a framework accepted as imperfect and incoherent. Day Lewis explains:

The bells that signed a conqueror in
Or franked the lovers' bed, now mean
Nothing more heavenly than their
Own impulse and recoil of air. (*Collected Poems* 177)

Reflecting over "the downward graph of natural joys ... imagination's slump, the blunted ear" (185), he recalls:

I hate this cold and politic self-defence
Of hardening arteries and nerves
Grown dull with time-serving. I see that the heart lives
By self-betrayal, by circumspection is killed. (*DCP*)

MacNeice, in his admirable study of the “debacle” of the poets, shows how the breaking down of an external frame of reference led the Apocalyptic poets to seek the principle of order within the individual, within himself, to write of man and of the world in terms of his own inner life:

Vision and sinew made it of light and stone;
Not grateful nor enchanted
Their heirs took it for granted
Having a world—a world that was all their own. (*Collected Poems* 199)

The Apocalyptic poets, while giving importance to “inner logic,” subjectivity and objectivity, “preferred to impose form on subconscious material, to give it a distinct shape” (Shires 29-30). They felt a compulsive urge to build their own patterns of poetry. Giving more scope to the inward world, “the Apocalypitics saw themselves as moralists eager both to free the individual from the constraining systems of a mechanistic universe and to exalt him into the ‘godhead’ of his own imagination” (26). MacNeice underlines that the Apocalyptic poet Dylan Thomas in working out his individual patterns achieves a positive vision:

For every static world that you or I impose
Upon the real one must crack at times and new
Patterns from new disorders open like a rose
And old assumptions yield to new sensation;
The Stranger in the wings is waiting for his cue,
The fuse is always laid to some annunciation. (*MCP* 217)

Thomas’s creativity is marked as much as by a search for form as by a fresh exploration of reality. What strikes Thomas is delight in designing the romantic and archetypal experiences into architectonic structure reflecting the archetypal sensibility in search of freedom. He evaluates it in contrast to metaphysical sensibility:

My throat knew before the structure
Of skin and vein around the well
Where words and water make a mixture
Unfailing till the blood runs foul;
My heart knew love, my belly hunger;
I smelt the maggot in my stool. (*Poems* 41)

The vision of death-in-life, cruelty to mortal nature that terrified him is replaced by life-in-death vision of harmony. Thomas’s rising inner voice gains more significance in the wake of his being introduced to Thomas Hardy’s melodious lyrics. Hardy articulates:

--Yet, voices haunting us, daunting us, taunting us,
Hint in the night-time when life beats are low
Other and graver things ... Hold we to braver things,
Wait we, in trust, what Time’s fullness shall show. (*Collected Poems*

79)

The failure to order his shifting reactions to a system assumes a special poignancy in Thomas because of his conviction in experiential mode, because of his distrust of the metaphysical tradition. Day Lewis redesigns the purpose of Thomas in his own words:

This clay that binds the roots man

And firmly foots his flying span-
Only this clay can voice, invest,
Measure and frame our mortal best. (*DCP* 183)

In the deepest sense, Thomas lived his theories and the patterns that he continually builds up and rejects evolve out of his sensuous responses to situations.

The new romances in which Thomas sought space were John Donne's songs and Thomas Hardy's *Poems of the Past and the Present* to plan for *18 Poems*. Edwin Muir explains:

See him, the gentle Bible beast,
With lacquered hoofs and curling mane,
His wondering journey from the East
Half-done, between the rock and plain.... (*Modern Verse* 360)

Thomas's strange, puzzling *18 Poems* published in 1934 is the first fruit of his contemplations during an apparently fallow period and records the mind's journey back to the womb of darkness, the primordial source of life. He dreams of his communion with Hardy and his earth-centric vision of life and poetry:

I fellowed sleep who kissed me in the brain,
Let fall the tear of time; the sleeper's eye,
Shifting to light, turned on me like a moon.
So, planning-heeled, I flew along my man
And dropped on dreaming and the upward sky. (*Poems* 67)

Hardy projects his vision of purposed poetry, "each and the whole—an essence of all the Nine":

"And that one is I; and I am projected from thee,
One that out of thy brain and heart thou caused to be-
Extern to thee nothing. Grieve not, nor thyself becall,
Woo where thou wilt; and rejoice thou canst love at all! (*HCP* 91)

The challenge that Thomas faces confronts all humanity, and his answer to the problems of existence has universal bearing. "What is remarkable is the originality and intensity with which" his themes such as birth and death, process and decay, sex and redemption, are introduced. "Difficulty occurs when the density of image embodies a depth and subtlety of emotional and sensory perception that the mind, in conceptual terms, cannot follow." (Ackerman 43).

REVIEWS, METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

What Thomas focuses in *18 Poems* is human heart and human understanding, human predicament and human mercy while searching for a system of personal regeneration as a substitute for the metaphysical tradition. In the poem "Nude in a Fountain," The Apocalyptic poet Norman MacCaig evaluates *18 Poems*:

Clip-clop go water-drops and bridles ring—
Or, visually, a gauze of water, blown
About and falling and blown about, discloses

Pudicity herself in shameless stone,
In an unlikely world of shells and roses. (*Contemporary Verse* 235)

18 Poems is a continuation of Hardy's sceptical search for the self-oriented voice against the oppressive, musical tone of Donne according to MacCaig:

On shaven grass a summer's litter lies
Of paper bags and people. One o'clock
Booms on the leaves with which the trees are quilted
And wades away through air, making it rock
On flower-beds that have blazed and dazed and wilted. (*CV*)

Henry Treece, an associate of Thomas, exalts him as "legend" and brings out the existential vision and the language of his rising skeptical voice in *18 Poems*:

There was a man
With a coloured coat of rags
Who left his body and blood on a tree,
But the thieves at his side gave the bones to the dogs,
And the black-thorn cock sang merrily. (*CV* 242)

What *18 Poems* suggests is the self-organized archetypal sensibility, "the flickering wren," "your oracle" rather than the singing metaphysical sensibility, "the rain" with "no drops" and "the white miracle." Vernon Watkins points out:

Not yet! Do not yet bend
Close to that root so tightly bound
Loosened by creeping waters as they run
Along the fork's rough groin. (*MV* 365)

He extols *18 Poems* as "this branch of silver-birch" and "the root's tapering tendrils." The Apocalyptic poet G.S. Fraser, greatly moved by the tenderness and simplicity of *18 Poems*, adjudges it as "summer's a harlot but her heart is kind" and as a dramatic song. "Summer the stones and grasses find complaint, / The waters flatter her ductility" (402). He also comments on the beauty of Thomas's *18 Poems* as "a memory of beauty" of Hardy's reflective, mellifluous lyrics:

How can the heart for sea and stone
Be cumbered, and forget a face
That moved it once to fret and moan—
Forget the woman, ssee the place? (*MV*)

The Surrealist poet David Gascoyne acclaims Thomas as redeemer of English poetry from modern "sophistry" and "subversive truth":

Not from a monstrance silver-wrought
But from the tree of human pain
Redeem our sterile misery,
Christ of Revolution and of Poetry,
That man's long journey through the night
May not have been in vain. (*MV* 352)

Analysing the poetry of Thomas, Linda M. Shires says that Thomas in “some of his early poetry is overtly self-conscious and wildly rhetorical, much of what seems drunkenly abandoned is really very structured” (45). To Walford Davies, Thomas’s early poetry offering “the reader only an impenetrable enigma” is “difficult and obscure in an individual way” (26). John Ackerman in his study of Thomas’s poetry states that “the early poems are the product of a young, obsessed mind and have a unity of theme, technique, and attitude” (38). He explains that the paradoxical attitude of Thomas in *18 Poems* “occasions much of the obscurity ... the images, however, are usually grouped by a sturdy advancing rhythm and an elaborate sound structure—that is the imposed formal control” (55). Stephen Spender estimates that Thomas “is a master of language who in his earlier poems at times let language master him. He writes in an extremely rhetorical style with a pleasure in the sound and colour of words which is intoxicating” (45). In the study of Thomas’s *18 Poems* the critics, focusing more on obscurity and musical structure, have hardly analysed his self-orientated individual voice. Hence, this paper, adopting a figurative study, strives to unfold the meaning of his rising poetic voice that devoices the Word-centric metaphysical tone of John Donne.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

18 Poems underscores, in Thomas’s words, the moment of rallying his creative efforts between death and breath. According to Donne, Time or Chance, whatever may be the Supreme Power that moves the Cosmos keeps man in “helpless bondage,” tears him wide apart, leads him to agonize and makes his joy sublime. He is free because he is non-involved, and his non-involvement springs, as Thomas observes, from his renunciation of earthly possessions:

When once the twilight screws were turned,
And mother milk was stiff as sand,
I sent my own ambassador to light;
By trick or chance he fell asleep
And conjured up a carcass shape
To rob me of my fluids in his heart. (*Poems* 148)

Such poetry, Thomas felt, could annihilate all sense of time and space and resolve all the antinomies that had so long disturbed and perplexed him. Only from such experience of sublimity, he thought, could great poetry be born.

Under the “autumnal spells” of Donne’s songs, Thomas heard “the spider-tongued,” “spelling in the scurry ... of chemic blood,” and “the dark-vowelled birds” making “the heartless words.” In the poem “Especially When the October Wind,” Thomas voices his predicament in his bid to find the ideal poetic process:

Behind a pot of ferns the wagging clock
Tells me the hour’s word, the neural meaning
Flies on the shafted disk, declaims the morning
And tells the windy weather in the clock.
Some let me make you of the meadow’s signs.... (53)

Donne's "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse" is concerned with the whole drama of quest and salvation. His painful ignorance signifies the state of necessity preceding final realization, "the amorousness of an harmonious Soule":

We thinke that Paradise and Calvarie,
Christ's Crosse, and Adams tree, stood in one place;
Looke Lord, and finde both Adams met in me;
As the first Adams sweat surrounds my face,
May the last Adams blood my soule embrace. (*Metaphysical Poets* 90)

But the description of the redemptive process contains an ambiguity. The statement in "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany" suggests the arbitrary intervention of God in the process before attaining to immortality. "And to scape stormy days, I chuse/ An Everlasting night." Donne hopes:

Scale then this bill of my Divorce to All,
On whom those fainter beams of love did fall;
Marry those loves, which in youth scattered bee
On Fame, Wit, Hopes (false mistresses) to thee.
Churches are best for Prayer, that have least light.... (89)

Donne was Thomas's earliest devotion, and he delighted in Donne's fanciful, musical passages, "... this we tread bears the angelic gangs / Sweet are their fathered faces in their wings" (*Poems* 67), and in the "rammed" and "sharp" force of his epithets and in the atmospheric effects of his art songs. Thomas remembers:

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. (83)

Thomas's poem "Before I Knocked" shows his sensitive appreciation of another aspect of Donne's architectural art and his musical structure reflecting the historic sensibility.

I who was deaf to spring and summer,
Who knew not sun nor moon by name,
Felt thud beneath my flesh's armour,
As yet was in a molten form
The leaden stars, the rainy hammer
Swung by my father from his dome. (*Poems*)

What particularly appealed to him or fascinated him was Donne's mastery of the right phrase, his image making power. Thomas makes no comment, but the two words "rainy hammer" itself is a commentary.

Thomas was surprisingly mature, but still he was very young, and he could very well appreciate Donne's musical directions and sensuous images, "in the uttermost darkness of a vase," and delight in melody and enchantment of Hardy's reflective lyrics. He recasts his enthusiastic divided response to Donne and Hardy in the early phase:

I knew the message of the winter,
The darted hail, the childish snow,
And the wind was my sister's suitor;
Wind in me leaped, the hellborn dew;
My veins flowed with the Eastern weather;
Ungotten I knew night and day. (*Poems*)

In Donne, Thomas noted another aspect: the evocative and sensuous quality of language which he could never forget.

While exploring the mighty expanse of the sea representing the vast idea of poetry, Thomas discovers from the poems of Donne life as a mystery and man as ignorant of the source of life and of his ultimate destiny. He hardly knows where he moves, what is his purpose, why should he agonize, what aches in him. Donne demands greater physical hardship, and there are moments of fatigue. Thomas thinks that poetry is "thin air above the clouds, / Vain divination of the sunless stream / Mirror that impotence... (*DCP* 219). He remarks:

As yet ungotten, I did suffer;
The rack of dreamy lily bones
Did twist into a living cipher,
And flesh was snipped to cross the lines
Of gallow crosses on the liver
And brambles in the wringing brains. (*Poems*)

The phrase "brambles in the wringing brains," especially the "wringing brains" shifts the perspective from the sublime to the earthly and suggests the essential humanity of the poets. Thomas notes this passage from the architectural art to the natural architectonic structure enhancing the dramatic effect of conflict with the poet of historic tradition, "who bow down at cross and altar," and the ahistoric, individual poets: "You who bow down at cross and altar, / Remember me and pity Him / Who took my flesh and bone for armour / And doublecrossed my mother's womb" (*Poems*).

Describing the experiences of Thomas, Day Lewis comments upon them as "symbols of gross experience!" "the veiled World's flesh, a near annunciation" (*DCP*), and "ennui of youth..." Donne recalls his youthful love of nocturnal experience in the poem "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, Being the shortest day": " 'Tis the years midnight, and it is the days," "the Sunne is spent," "the worlds whole sap is sunke," " life is shrunke," "I am dead every dead thing," "a quintessence even from nothingnesse," and "I am re-begot ... of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not" (*MP* 71). To Donne, man, like the flowers of the field or the birds of the air, becomes dust. In this constant and continuous mutational process of life and death, man is a part of the general Will. However Donne's poetry, Thomas perceives, obstructs the sun and rain, unblooms his best hopes, costs a moan and makes blisses painful. Thomas's poem "My Hero Bares His Nerves" records his immediate impressions of having read the poems of Donne:

And these poor nerves so wired to the skull
 Ache on the lovelorn paper
 I hug to love with my unruly scrawl
 That utters all love hunger
 And tells the page the empty ill. (*Poems* 97)

Thomas continued to move “slowly through the house ... up naked stairs” with his fear in “a running grave,” like “a turtle in a hearse” through “a scythe of hairs ... calm and cuddled,” “like a scissors stalking ... of love ... barer than Cadaver’s trap ... robbed of the foxy tongue, his footed tape ... of the bone itch” (149).

In Donne “the weed of love’s left dry,” his “invisible ... clocking tides ... break on the lovebeds of the weeds,” his “green knots sank their splice ... into the tided cord, there goes the green unraveller” and “his scissors oiled, his knife hung loose ... to cut the channels at their source ... and lay the wet fruits low.” Thomas, describing Donne’s “cry” for musical structure of ease and grace as “dry,” sound “voids,” the paradox of death-in-living, estimates:

Where once the waters of your face
 Spun to my screws, your dry ghost blows,
 The dead turns up its eye;
 Where once the mermen through your ice
 Pushed up their hair, the dry wind steers
 Through salt and root and roe. (151)

The songs of Donne are “shod with pain” according to Day Lewis (140). MacNeice, evaluating the discordant influence of Donne’s songs and lyrics on Thomas as “cuffs of foam around the beer-brown water ... crinkled water and a mackerel sky,” “it is all in the day’s work ... the grey stones and heather ... and the sheep that breed and break their legs and die,” “the Lethe and the Styx,” “the Sleeping Beauty or the Holy Ghost ... or the greatest happiness of the greatest number,” elaborates:

In the days that were early the music came easy
 On cradle and coffin, in the corn and barn,
 Songs for the reaping and spinning and only the shepherd
 Then as now was silent beside the tarn.... (157-58)

Thomas’s emphasis is more on the poetry of archetypal structure than on the poetry of musical structure and particularly on the pictorial and sculptural effects of poetry rather than the rhythmic or auditory effects.

It is at this significant moment that he turned for inspiration and sustenance to Hardy. The most obvious reference to the voice of Hardy in whom he found comfort is seen in the poem “My Hero Bares His Nerves.” Thomas looks upon the fine words of Hardy like a lover:

My hero bares his nerves along my wrist
 That rules from wrist to shoulder,
 Unpacks the head that, like a sleepy ghost,
 Leans on my mortal ruler,
 The proud spine spurning turn and twist. (*Poems*)

MacNeice's occasional brief comments—"and the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world ... is more spiteful and gay than one supposes" (86)--indicate, more than anything else, the zealous devotion of a disciple following the footsteps of his master with animation and enthusiasm, though not without discernment. Thomas speaks of his animating force:

My hero bares my side and sees his heart
Tread; like a naked Venus,
The beach of flesh, and wind her bloodred plait;
Stripping my loin of promise,
He promises a secret heat. (*Poems*)

According to Walford Davies, "the 'hero' of 'My hero bares his nerves' is the poet's inner, conscious identity, described by the body it controls and operates" (48).

In his response to Hardy's *Poems of the Past and the Present*, Thomas notes an exultation over "the spell of inner themes and inner poetries" (*HCP* 140). The poetic process of Hardy "homely Northern breast and brain" that "grow up a Southern tree ... and strange-eyed constellations reign ... his stars eternally" (80) is Thomas's choice. He speaks of communion of his self with Hardy's process of making poetry:

A process in the weather of the heart
Turns damp to dry; the golden shot
Storms in the freezing tomb.
A weather in the quarter of the veins
Turns night to day; blood in their suns
Lights up the living worm. (*Poems* 17)

His uncommon painful striving to liberate his poetic self from the metaphysical conceit, his "struggling from the grass," "from limbs that had the measure of the worm ... metal of suns in the man-melting night" is described as "journey ... in bottom gear through night-gear man," "muzzled ... death on the mouth that ate the gas" and "harvest ... of hemlock and the blades."

Thomas is impressed by the magic and potency of Hardy's language, his power of compressing a large amount of meaning into a few words. His poem "I Dreamed my Genesis" shows a similar perception of the inner resources of language capable of rendering the totality and particularity of a mood or situation or an experience:

I dreamed my genesis in sweat of sleep, breaking
Through the rotating shell, strong
As motor muscle on the drill, driving
Through vision and the girdered nerve. (66)

MacNeice collates: "The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was / Spawning snow and pink roses against it / Soundlessly collateral and incompatible..." (*MCP*). Thomas was happy to heed to Hardy's dramatic lyrics of grief and optimism even in the beginning of his poetic career. He observes that the paradox of death-in-life as the process of poetry and the vehemence of pain is undone:

My fuses timed to charge his heart,
He blew like powder to the light
And held a little Sabbath with the sun,

But when the stars, assuming shape,
Drew in his eyes the straws of sleep,
He drowned his father's magics in a dream. (*Poems*)

MacNeice comments: "Brains and beauty festering in exile, / The shadow of bars / Falling across each page, each field, each raddled sunset, / The alien lawn and the pool of nenuphars..." (160).

To Thomas, however, an experience is not a mere sensation, it includes thought—one of Hardy's axioms is that poetry should strike the reader as the wording of his own highest thoughts:

Thus meet we five, in this still place,
At this point of time, at this point in space,
-My guests parade my new-penned ink,
Or bang at the lamp-glass, whirl, and sink.
"God's humblest, they!" I muse. Yet why?
They know Earth-secrets that know not I. (*HCP* 130)

For Hardy thought is meaningful only when it is emotionally realized and is transformed into a sensation, if the word is taken in an extended sense. His *18 Poems* illustrates his journey of pains and compassion through hell, the process of suffering only to create.

In the beginning was the mounting fire
That set alight the weathers from a spark,
A three-eyed, red-eyed spark, blunt as a flower,
Life rose and spouted from the rolling seas,
Burst in the roots, pumped from the earth and rock
The secret oils that drive the grass. (*Poems*)

In *18 Poems*, especially in the short poems as dramatic lyrics, "My Hero Bares His Nerves," "A Process in the Weather of the Heart," "In the Beginning," "Where Once the Waters of Your Face," "Light Breaks where no sun shines," Thomas has the envisioning power of imagination that conquers the reality of pain and that hears "some madrigals" (*DCP*). He explains the evolving language of silence and sound, discontent and content:

Light breaks on secret lots,
On tips of thought where thoughts smell in the rain;
When logics die;
The secret of the soil grows through the eye,
And blood jumps in the sun;
Above the waste allotments the dawn halts. (*Poems* 94)

Thomas brings out the illusion of reality imaged in the songs of Donne as "our eunuch dreams, all seedless in the light," "the shades of girls, all flavoured from their shrouds," "love on a reel ... strange to our solid eye," "the dream has sucked the sleeper of his faith." He, however, articulates his faith in the mortal world of "loving and being loth":

For we shall be a shouter like the cock,
Blowing the old dead back; our shots shall smack
The image from the plates;

And we shall be fit fellows for a life,
 And who remains shall flower as they love,
 Praise to our faring hearts. (110-11)

In the lyrics of Hardy, the experiential reality of a man is imaged as an archetype of poetry “of light and love, the tempers of the heart,” “the show of shadows kiss or kill ... flavoured of celluloid give love the lie,” “the shapes of daylight and their starch” and “the dream that kicks the buried from their sack.”

It is significant that many of the phrases and images, “from the soft second ... to the hollow minute of the womb,” “the time for breast and the green apron age ... when no mouth stirred about the hanging famine ... all world was one, one windy nothing,” Donne emphasizes in the songs convey the sense of arrested motion, according to Thomas:

From the first print of the unshodden foot, the lifting
 Hand, the breaking of the hair,
 From the first scent of the heart, the warning ghost,
 And to the first dumb wonder at the flesh,
 The sun was red, the moon was grey,
 The earth and sky were as two mountains meeting. (*Poems* 58)

Hardy understands that “the sense of ills misdealt for blisses blanks the mien most queenly” and “self-smitings kill self-joys” (*HCP*). Thomas also shows interest in movement, in the succession of time as assured in the poems of Hardy. Apart from indicating interest in the succession of time, Thomas shows in quick paces hours moving towards the final moment, each notation indicating the passage from night to dawn:

The plum my mother picked matured slowly,
 The boy she dropped from darkness at her side
 Into the sided lap of light grew strong,
 Was muscled, matted, wise to the crying thigh,
 And to the voice that, like the voice of hunger,
 Itched in the noise of wind and sun. (*Poems*)

Thomas re-discovers an unexpected beauty and almost hears the footsteps of “the unshodden foot, the lifting ... hand,” of a modern born dissolute prisoner in Hardy. In the poem “Rome: On the Palatine,” Hardy hints at the rising voice of poetic tradition that “stirred” him “and blended pulsing life with lives long done ... till Time seemed fiction, Past and the Present one” as against the “raised” tone of “the old routs Imperial lyres had led” and “began to melodize” wearing “its pristine glow ... of scenic friez and pompous peristyle” (*HCP* 89).

Donne’s songs indicating movement or succession of time do not, however, evince interest in temporal sequence that characterizes drama—and Sophoclean drama in particular and the dramatic poetry of Hardy in general—his attention is focused more on atmospheric shifts, “Shone in my ears the light of sound, / Called in my eyes the sound of light,” structural beauty of particular thought, “a spentout cancer” (*Poems*), and pictorial effects of individual images, “moonless acre,” achieving a balance of movement and motionlessness. Muir brings out:

The great leaves turn and then are still.
 Page after page through deepening day

He steps, and from each morning hill
Beholds his stationary way. (*MV*)

Hardy speaks of the loss of his “ardours” and his shrinking “to seek ... a modern coast ... whose riper times have yet to be” as he has discovered “the new regions claim them free ... from that long drip of human tears ... which peoples old in tragedy ... have left upon the centuried years.” In the poem “On an invitation to the United States,” he searches for a fertile land symbolic of poetic licence and practical freedom, personal salvation and co-existence:

For winning in these ancient lands,
Enchased and lettered as a tomb,
And scored with prints of perished hands,
And chronicled with dates of doom,
Though my own Being bear no bloom
I trace the lives such scenes enshrine,
Give past examplars present room,
And their experience court as mine. (*HCP 97*)

Hardy formulates three axioms of poetry in the poem “A Reverie” that influenced Thomas much recounts his enforced skeptical mind hounding for free energy, freeplay and free voice:

“Let one be born and throned whose mould shall constitute
The norm of every royal-reckoned attribute,”
No mortal knew or heard.
But in due days the purposed Life outshone-
Serene, sagacious, free;
--Her waxing seasons bloomed with deeds well done,
And the world’s heart was won.... (75)

Thomas having these axioms in mind can appreciate Hardy’s lyrical voice as Donne’s formulations are not quite precise and unambiguous. But it seems the qualities he seeks and appreciates in poetry are intensity, spontaneity of feeling and expression, roundedness of imagery, and depth of experience and thought, universal in essence but assimilated into the poet’s own consciousness. He expresses:

Then all the matter of the living air
Raised up a voice, and, climbing on the words,
I spelt my vision with a hand and hair,
How light the sleeping on this soily star,
How deep the waking in the worlded clouds. (*Poems*)

The axioms show an attempt at a reconciliation of contrary virtues: romantic magnificence and concentration; spontaneity and constructive ability; adequacy of expressiveness and inexhaustible suggestiveness. Thomas’s *18 Poems* shows that his response is principally confined or directed to these qualities:

A million minds gave suck to such a bud
As forks my eyes;
Youth did condense; the tears of spring
Dissolved in summer and the hundred seasons;

One sun, one manna, warmed and fed. (58-59)

It should be remembered that the poet has to work within the limitations imposed by a given theme; the excellence of the poem lies in the way these limitations are transcended. Watkins comments on Thomas's sensitive appreciation of the elaborate and peculiarly beautiful paradoxical and dramatic directions:

So the whole morning he runs here, fulfilling the track
Of so many suns; vanishing the mole's way, moving
Into mole's mysteries under the zodiac,
Racing, stopping in the circle. (*MV* 369)

Watkins holds that nearly all these poems of Thomas--"Light Breaks where no sun shines," "A Process in the Weather of the Heart," "I See the Boys of Summer," "The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," "When once the Twilight Locks no longer" and "All all and all the dry worlds lever"--stage the full and dramatic setting of a "little drama" in itself. He must have been fascinated by these little dramas—complete in themselves—within a drama and Watkins cryptic line, "And under the dry, curled parchment of the soil there is always a little foal ... asleep" (*MV* 368), is pertinent. What must have especially gripped him is the vividness of the phrases building up a subtly-balanced structure of the earth and the heaven, of the tangible and the ineffable, of movement and motionlessness, "none dubious of the cause, none murmuring" (*HCP*) and "bondslave to realms, but circle earth and seas..." (76).

Thomas perceives in the dramatic reflective lyrics of Hardy directions for the poetic creation and the poetic process, "light breaks where no sun shines ... where no sea runs, the waters of the heart ... push in their tides" (*Poems*), "a weather in the quarter of the veins ... turns night to day ... blood in their suns ... lights up the living worm," "a process blows the moon into the sun ... pulls down the shabby curtains of the skin ... the heart gives up its dead" (17). The poem "The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" indicates his active and lively interest in dramatic lyrics rather than dramatic songs:

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. (127)

But the contrary directions Thomas particularly makes in the poems "When Once the Twilight Locks no Longer," and "All all and all the Dry Worlds Lever" reveal, to a much greater degree, his love of the picturesque, the magnificent and the dainty, and his appreciation of the almost sculptural symmetry of these written words, "a worker in the morning town," "the popped pickthank," "worlds hang on the trees," the waking sun, "the fences of the light," and the briskest riders" (*Poems*) indicating appropriate actions of moral disinterestedness and gestures of aesthetic disinterestedness, "out of the sea, the drive of oil ... socket and grave, the brassy blood," "the people's fusion ... light in the zenith, the coupled bud ... and the flame in the flesh's vision" (*Poems* 26).

Thomas's interest in the poets of the thirties, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice, while showing almost a loving concern for Auden's sound structure is equally indicative of his love of contrasts, chiaroscuro effects, "the winter floods ... of frozen loves" "these boys of light are

curdlers in their folly ... sour the boiling honey,” “the summer children in their mothers ... split up the brawned womb’s weathers ... divide the night and day with fairy thumbs,” “stature by seedy shifting” (*Poems* 71) and is not to be confused with Auden’s interest, as a dramatic critic, in characterization. Thomas records Auden’s contemporaries’s resolve to dissociate themselves from the influence of Auden’s historic, musical sensibility and to emulate Thomas’s ahistoric, archetypal sensibility, “the winter floods ... of frozen loves,” “the black-tongued bells ... the sleepy man of winter pulls” as the language of of skepticism, the rising of poetic voice:

We are the dark deniers, let us summon
Death from a summer woman
A muscling life from lovers in their cramp,
From the fair dead who flush the sea
The bright-eyed worm on Davy’s lamp,
And from the planted womb the man of straw. (*Poems*)

Thomas’s perceptive comments on the poetry of Auden and his contemporaries and his reviews in the poem “I see the boys of summer in their ruin” are an evidence of his personal voice of optimism:

In spring we cross our foreheads with the holly,
Heigh ho the blood and berry,
And nail the merry squires to the trees;
Here love’s damp muscle dries and dies,
Here break a kiss in no love’s quarry.
O see the poles of promise in the boys. (*Poems* 72)

The epithets used by Thomas for describing Auden— “the gold tithings barren,” “the cargoed apples in their tides,” “the bright-eyed worm on Davy’s lamp” —are all underlined, as also the phrases and epithets that indicate Day Lewis’s love for Auden’s musical structure, “the jacks of frost they finger in the hives ... there in the sun the frigid threads ... of doubt and dark they feed their nerves” and Spender’s affinity with air and fire and his longing for freedom: “the deep with quartered shades ... of sun and moon.” MacNeice’s nature, his curses and his language, “I see that from these boys shall men of nothing,” “the dogdayed pulse ... of love and light,” also attract Thomas greatly. Day Lewis must have been impressed by the design of *18 Poems* in which the three contraries— Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice— are counterpoised and held in unity. He strikes a comparison with Auden’s *Poems* (1930):

Lover’s eye is hawk’s eye, on the whole earth
Spread for him seeing only the point of desire.
And then there is the poet’s—
His gaze that like the moonlight rests on all
In level contemplation, making roof and ruin
Treachery scorn and death into silver syllables
And out of worn fragments a seamless coat. (*DCP* 161)

It is this juxtaposition, balancing and integration of contrasts and contraries rather than characterization, conflict and movement pertaining to drama proper that Thomas seeks and discovers in Hardy’s dramatic lyrics and rediscovers in W. B. Yeats’s paradoxical structure. Moreover, Thomas’s skeptical poetic voice is identical to the articulate voice of the poet Yeats

in a short lyric, "A Coat": "Song, let them take it, / For there's more enterprise / In walking naked" (*Collected Poems* 104).

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Thomas was continually baffled and enchanted by the mystery of suffering in the songs of Donne and to rediscover this mystery in the lyrics of Hardy was both terrifying and reassuring. Even in the early phase Thomas shows an awareness of this mystery. In the last poem of *18 Poems*, he makes a final assessment of his formative force Hardy who "inspired" him "to win ... ecstatic heights in thought and rhyme" (*HCP* 88), "strange orchestras of victim-shriek and song ... and curious blends of ache and ecstasy" (107). He confirms:

All all and all the dry worlds lever,
Stage of the ice, the solid ocean,
All from the oil, the pound of lava.
City of spring, the governed flower,
Turns in the earth that turns the ashen
Towns around on a wheel of fire. (*Poems*)

Hardy's reflective passage underlining the mystery of life in the sound structure and the buoyancy of his recalcitrant mind deserves special notice:

Someone said: "Nevermore will they come: evermore
Are they now lost to us." O it was wrong!
Though may be hard their ways, some Hand will guard their ways,
Bear them through safely, in brief time or long. (*HCP* 78)

Referring to Thomas's submission to Hardy's influence, "O light mellifluous, glossing the stone-blind mansion ... October light, a godsend to these groves..." his "reasoned crops," Day Lewis explains: "Through mansion, lake and the lackluster groves / We see the landscape of their dissolution" (*DCP* 174). MacNeice, commenting on Thomas's lyrical pattern of *18 Poems* in contrast to Donne's musical pattern, writes:

But dawn's waves trouble with the bubbling minute,
The names of books come clear upon their shelves,
The reason delves for duty and you will wake
With a start and go on living on your own. (109)

Although the element of music still persists in his organic structure of *18 Poems*, there is an awareness, however inadequate, of the burden of the mystery imaged as musical structure in Donne's art songs. Thomas records:

I, born of flesh and ghost, was neither
A ghost nor man, but mortal ghost.
And I was struck down by death's feather
I was a mortal to the last
Long breath that carried to my father
The message of his dying Christ. (*Poems*)

MacNeice leaves an overall estimation on the language of skeptical poetic voice in Thomas's early poems:

Yes, the earlier days had their music,
 We have some still to-day,
 But the orchestra is due for the bonfire
 If things go on this way.
 Still there are still the seeds of energy and choice
 Still alive even if forbidden, hidden,
 And while a man has voice
 He may recover. (*MCP*)

These cryptic comments of Day Lewis and MacNeice on Hardy's influence in *18 Poems* indicate Thomas's recognition of Hardy's duality or paradox as organic structure, his freeplays, "free speech and free energy" in contrast to Donne's musical mode of metaphysical tone.

18 Poems stages a dramatic conflict between fear and love, "the waking world ... the flat, synthetic blood ... the heart in the ribbing metal" and "the seeded milling ... the trigger and scythe, the bridal blade ... the flint in the lover's mauling" (*Poems*), the organizing principle of structure and the organic beauty of structure. Day Lewis's defence touches the core of the aesthetic issue involved in the poetry of Donne and Hardy:

Now we at last have crossed the line
 Where earth's exuberant fields begin,
 That green illusion in the sky
 Born of our desert years can die. (*DCP*)

Thomas, however, was receptive to the voice of Hardy whose lyrics are "blank of sound, but prophetic to sight" (*HCP 77*), that he was chiefly engrossed in the magic spell and evocative power of the language of Hardy, in his language of sound coherence and co-existence, his paradoxical structure and his concern with man's ultimate destiny, "even monochrome and curving line ... of imperturbable serenity," "the "sun-cast symmetry ... with the torn troubled form ... a brow divine ... with continents of moil and misery," and "the stellar gauge of earthly show" (*HCP*). Jacques Derrida, differentiating the "event" of post-structuralism from the Structuralism of "structure or the structurality of structure" or "the process of giving it a centre or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin," defines:

The function of this centre was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure-but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself. (90)

Hardy explains how the "cramps, black humours, wan decay, and baleful blights ... distress" "all creations groans" can be transmuted "into ... would-be perfect motions, modes, effects, and features" and "delights" through "strenuous slow endeavour":

"Deal, then, her groping skill no scorn, no note of malediction;
 Not long on thee will press the hand that hurts the lives it loves;

And while she dares dead-reckoning on, in darkness of affliction,
Assist her where thy creaturely dependence can or may,
For thou art of her clay.” (*HCP*)

On the whole, Thomas’s *18 Poems* reveals itself as a “verbal icon” bearing the transfiguring mind of Hardy according to Watkins:

Darkness is not dark, nor sunlight the light of the sun
But a double journey of insistent silver hooves.
Light wakes in the foal’s blind eyes as lightning illuminates corn
With a rustle of fine-eared grass, where a starling shivers. (*MV*)

Thomas’s initiation for an archetypal sensibility in praise of life and love, free voice and freeplay which is simultaneously a search for a system is made possible, though inadequate, under the guidance of Hardy, “love’s yearning pulls him down ... on the white swan-breast, the magical lawn ... involved in plumage, mastered by the veins of dawn” (*MV* 367). Hardy’s process of transmutation facilitated Thomas to transform the dramatic experiences into *18 Poems*. Hardy speaks of his art of transmutation:

Perhaps Thy ancient rote-restricted ways
Thy ripening rule transcends;
That listless effort tends
To grow percipient with advance of days,
And with percipience mends. (168)

The young poet Thomas has grasped the fundamental emotion and organic structure of Hardy’s dramatic lyrics. Donne’s songs which “speak for the air, your element, you hunters ... who range across the ribbed and shifting sky,” “speak for whatever gives you mastery” of work demands his fellow-poets that they must be “quick-responsive” to his paradox of death-in-life and historic sense. Whereas Hardy’s lyrics reflect the language of transmutation, of personal salvation and personal glory, the paradox of life-in-death and the positive significance of pain, “speak of the rough and tumble in the blue ... the mast-high run, the flak, the battering gales.” Initially, Thomas under Donne’s influence renounced the “birthright ... the responsibility of moral choice” and “taking orders from ... out of a square box from a mad voice” and “lies on the air endlessly repeated ... turning the air to fog, ... blanket on blanket of lie, no room to breathe or fidget ... and nobody to jog” (*MCP*). Day Lewis adjudges *18 Poems*, “you that, until the life you love prevails ... must follow death’s impersonal vocation ... speak from the air, and tell your hunters’ tales” (229). Moreover, Thomas perceives that Hardy’s “self-oriented and balanced” structure and his moral disinterestedness gets reflected and extended in Yeats’s articulate voice searching for “that art ... of minding one’s own business ... magnanimously” (*DCP* 23), “monuments of its own magnificence” (*YCP* 164), “deep considering mind ... into the labyrinth of another’s being” (166). With his love of Yeats’s poetry Thomas’s rising poetic voice in the long poems of *18 Poems* becomes articulated as an “official recognition of rape, revival of the ghetto ... and free speech gagged and free ... energy scrapped and dropped like surplus herring ... back into the barren sea...” (*MCP*).

CONCLUSION

The maiden volume *18 Poems* is, in a sense, a moment of significant transition in Thomas's life and poetry. He emerges from boyish wonder, "yon arc ... implies ... immense Mortality... and Heaven's high human scheme" (*HCP* 102), to a serious engagement with life. Thomas, who initiated his poetic career as a voiceless and an unvoiced poet, succeeded in working out his self-evolved individual poetic voice in *18 Poems* under the direction of Hardy, keeping his "door for ever closed ... on the world," his "own world closed within" him and living on his own and acquired a space for his voice. What is more important in Thomas's personal context is to define his own position in relation to the tradition of poetry. The searching articulate voice of Yeats as the poet of *The Tower* seems to carry a message that sustains the young poet Thomas and inspires him with the sense of mission to fulfil. Thomas's thought brings along with it both hopes and fears that are projected in the mysterious and intellectual poems of Auden:

There grows the hours' ladder to the sun,
Each rung a love or losing to the last,
The inches monkeyed by the blood of man.
An old, mad man still climbing in his ghost,
My fathers' ghost is climbing in the rain. (*Poems*)

The long poems in *18 Poems* witness the surfacing of tragic images of conflict, death and passivity with the musical structure of Donne, "father's ghost ... climbing in the rain" transposed as the intellectual structure of Auden, "an old, mad man still climbing in his ghost" who articulates in *Poems* (1930) that "proliferation of mould" needs "to destroy the efflorescence of flesh ... the intricate play of the mind, to enforce ... conformity with the orthodox bone ... with organized fear, the articulated skeleton," the assurance of structure "needs death, death of the grain, our death ... death of the old gang ... (Auden, *Poems* 66), "the destruction of error" (65). Yeats, by a strange clairvoyance, also helps to set the right perspective of Thomas in the growth-centric drama of contraries and contrasts in which "the girdered nerves" turning active as "box of nerves," "mortal ruler" as "mortal error," vision of man as "vision ... of new man strength," "the shouting cock" as "a bird's sleepy cry ... among the deepening shades" (*YCP* 168). In the long poems of *18 Poems*, the articulate voice of Thomas evolved from the rising poetic voice and engaged in a relentless search for personal regeneration and moral disinterestedness stands a stark contrast to Auden's aesthetic disinterestedness, "through winter-time we call on spring ... and through the spring on summer call ... and when abounding hedges ring ... declare that winter's best of all..." (179).

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