

## Dylan Thomas, a Naked Vision

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And what's the rub? Death's feather on the nerve?  
Your mouth, my love, the thistle in the kiss?  
My Jack of Christ born thorny on the tree?  
The words of death are dryer than his stiff,  
My wordy wounds are printed with your hair.  
I would be tickled by the rub that is:  
Man be my metaphor.

—*Eighteen Poems:* Dylan Thomas—

We see the eternal boy of summer, Dylan Thomas, whose advent and exit was as blunt as an incandescent flower. It was a windy phenomenon that stirred the face of the relatively stable water of modern poetry. He perhaps heralds the second coming of the *Romantics* or perhaps is only another of such freaks as Blake, who just appears irrelevantly in literary history.

His romanticism is antipodal to that of E. E. Cummings. The romantic flavor of Cummings is synthetic while Thomas' passion is organic. His romantic diffuseness is that of the enigma of the universe, life, the facts, and above all, of himself. The motif and the final truth of his obscurity focus upon this original unknowable and there burns "the mounting fire" that feeds on itself.

Thomasian obscurity, be it romantic or otherwise, veins the marrow of his poems which is much *incantatory*. It is only in this realm of magic where language exists and acts. Insofar as the charm is spelled by some outside cause and authority, and not by virtue of any literary objectivity, it is an affair of extraliterary order. Non-conceptual factors of language play a dominant role in his poetry with due merits and demerits to the poems.

In his practice of poetry, the magic, however, is not exploited for a mere poetic side-effect of an auxiliary status. If there is something called *absolute poetry*, it must also be incantatory. For Cummings, language was a feeble servant, whereas to Thomas, it was the sacred medium.

The undefinable private religion of Thomas took its metaphor in the poetic trinity...of *the described*, *the description* and *the effect*. This is a doctrinal mystery, an impossibility, and here the actual poems are but poor incarnations. In his religion, poems are not only independent of the poet and the audience, but also it engages them for its own integrity and there *Man* is made the final metaphor of the poetic absolute. We see the flesh hung thorny upon the trees, young and bleeding.

## I

In the early spring of 1950, Dylan Thomas called on E. E. Cummings in New York shortly after his first arrival in the United States. According to J. M. Brinnin's account, Cummings was the first poet there whose acquaintance Thomas sought.<sup>1)</sup>

A casual comparison of Cummings' <sup>2)</sup>*since feeling is first* and Thomas' *In My Craft or Sullen Art* conveniently reveals enough for us to grasp what they share and what they do not. If the term *romanticism* denotes qualities they have in common, it defines only a temperament and climate rather than the principle of the literature of these two; one Welsh, the other American, exemplar romantists of our time.

Juvenile *18 Poems* of Thomas' ironically contains most of what is essential of his life's poetry which was fated to be plucked short. Driven by an arbitrary vital impetus of an organism, it is a testament of adolescence, uncertain of its own genesis and of its destiny.

The weather of Thomas' cosmic dome into which his hero is delivered is

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1) Brinnin, J. M., *Dylan Thomas in America*, p. 20, 1956.

2) As for E. E. Cummings, ref. my paper pp. 9—21 of the previous number of this journal.

pregnant with undecipherable symbols and is haunted by unknown influences. It is a strange contrast to the boredom under the bamboo tree where Eliot's Sweeney chants "Birth, and copulation, and death." What Sweeney only "remembers" there, Thomas' "living cipher" lives and suffers, hence "wound" is the name of his protagonist.

Cummings has a known accepted reality upon which to construct his synthetic make-believe, while Thomas had an impenetrable unknown overwhelming him. He tries to bring this darkness into light,<sup>3)</sup> or the "mortal error" to right; it is an imparative choiceless reaction rather than a free act, thoroughly different from Cummings' aesthetic animation... a way to "fabricate unknownness"<sup>4)</sup>.

Admittedly Thomas' erotic, almost paranoiac obsession, among other preoccupations, persists and pervades the entire atmosphere, yet the whole allegory of and in sex points to an enigma or paradox rather than to an enlightenment...a fact epitomizing his general cast of romanticism. Such elucidations by D.Stanford and others may, however, conduct us through the labyrinthine mazes of Freudian Bedlam to some extent, if interested.

If the epithet *romantic* is thus accomodated, we are thereby denoting the quality of such a person or his acts so unconditionally dedicated to an objective that also transcends any rational verification. The statement is yet equivocal: it can mean either or both the actions motivated by the unknown or unknowable and/or actions motivated by defective judgement or even without a rational basis.

At any rate, Thomas is romantic in the sense that his poetry was not an act of detached selection nor an aethetic performance, but was an unavoidable conduct in language...a letting free of emotion and of energy or even a failing struggle of intellect or some mere drive coming through.

Thomas is romantic also in the sense that he worshiped an unknown god... he once said that "his aim now was to produce poems in praise of God's world by a man who doesn't believe in God"<sup>5)</sup>. In other words, his romanticism rests

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3) Treece, H., *Dylan Thomas* 2nd ed., p. 30, 1956.

4) Cummings, E. E., 1.1 *Poem 278*, *Collected Poems*

5) Brinnin, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

in the undefined or undefinable nature of the cause of action, the enigma of his subject itself. For Thomas, as H. Treece says, “the uncertainty is there, and the inner conflict is never fully resolved, in God or in the poet’s self.”<sup>6)</sup>

The tentative epithet *romantic* may be an indication of some validity, if we say that Thomas is romantic because of his passionate intentness of the action for the unknown, which perhaps is unknowable after all. As existence and act is always possible without and beyond its verification, the awareness and the attitude, whether romantic or otherwise, towards the gap between the two dimensions of the reality, fact and principle, counts a crucial point both to an author as well as to his readers.

Also, since our effort is towards some rational evaluation of poems as poems, the degree of the respect and participation the conscious intellect enjoys in the making of poems and the extent of intellect the poems duly demand of the readers, becomes an important, though perhaps not essential, factor by which we evaluate the poems, or any form of literature.

We do acknowledge, with H. Treece,<sup>7)</sup> that Thomas was not an *intellectual* poet even though we might not go as far as to agree unreservedly with S. Spender’s appraisal.<sup>8)</sup> We do not mean, however, that in his practice of poetry, Thomas did not apply his intellect; to this Treece in essence subscribes. We mean that intellect, for the poet, was only one of the available tools to deal with the situation. The effort to be true, literally realistic to the subject which is in itself a conflict, does require as much great intellectual power as to express a precise thought and a defined subject.

We also know that Thomas is guilty of weakness and more often incapable of consistency and he fails to perform as rationally as he should in his practice of poetry. Undoubtedly, many of his poems are marred by the results of such weaknesses, even if there is some distinction to be made between the evidences of failure in intellect and the resultant flaws in the poems.

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6) Treece, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

7) Treece, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

8) Olson, Elder, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas*, p. 1, 1954.

“Many poems cannot be paraphrased and are therefore defective<sup>9)</sup>” while many others may not be. We must distinguish the faults of Thomas’ which are due to the mental failure in its making, from apparent absences of rational theme, i. e., the obscurity and non-senseness of his poems. It may or may not be the result of a failure in the mental command of the situation on the part of the poet and it can as well be a successful accomplishment to constitute such a telling effect of void, as often is the case. It might even be possible that the subject itself be complete without what we intellectually anticipate—morals realized or conveyed in lingo-semantic code—in poems.

“It is a commonplace to observe that the meaning of a poem may wholly escape paraphrase. It is not quite so commonplace to observe that the meaning of a poem may be something larger than its author’s conscious purpose, and something remote from its origin<sup>10)</sup>”, says Eliot. Certainly, many of Thomas’ poems are never intended to be artificial alternative to say something in a formula of “half-convention and half-lie”. He is often successful in the administering of his poems in this technique and is also as often unsuccessful. Oftener, he seems to leave the effect to mere chance.

With what poems we have of his, no one, the poet himself being no exception, should and could expect the majority of them to be consistently deciphered or to be reducible to a prose parallel...“So be it: heaven may understand him, I do not<sup>11)</sup>” cries D. Stanford, one of the best understanders of Thomas, in exasperation.

For the unintended obscurity and nonsenseness: he may be blamed, if it is a damage to the poem concerned; and if it adds something to the poem, he collects no credit for it. As for the intended aesthetic obscurantism and the thematic vacuum, he is not blameworthy for the obscurity and the vacuum, unless they are detrimental to the effect of the poems, for he “did not think, he wrote as he wished. His contribution to poetry must, therefore be a technical

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9) Winters, Yvor, *In Defence of Reason*, p. 31, 1947.

10) Eliot, T. S., *T. S. Eliot Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward, p.53, 1955. (From *The Music of Poetry*,)

11) Stanford, Derek, *Dylan Thomas*, p. 72, 1954.

one only.”<sup>12)</sup> So be our criticism of his obscurity.

Again, even though obscurity and meaninglessness are the terms of understanding and of reason, they are not to be confused with the common fault and lack of the poet's intellectual command. Tolerance of intellectual blindness is no romanticism, nor is obscurity inherently romantic.

Designation of Thomas' poetry as romantic may not be an evaluation, nor technically a criticism, yet it is nevertheless a valid judgement as to the constitution and the type of his poetry in terms of its motivation and attitude—a judgement which, in turn, may provide a set of autonomous criteria for the evaluation. Our attention is directed towards the obscurity of his poetry.

## II

The majority of the poems of Thomas' is almost exactly what Y. Winters condemns as a new kind of poetry which “is the old kind of poetry with half the meaning removed. Its strangeness comes from its thinness” and certainly “it can do us no good to be dupes of men who do not understand themselves.”<sup>1)</sup> If *understanding* is the omega of evaluation and enjoyment in poetry, the effort to understand a poem whose creator does not know what he is doing is certainly a lost effort.

Many of his sympathetic readers do admit that a considerable portion of obscurity in Thomas' poetry is of this nature. It is the unavoidable shortcomings of youth, the innate weakness in thinking and mental irresponsibility on the part of this intensely self-contained poet...a precocious primitivist.

There are many other types of ambiguities and obscurities that feature the poems of Thomas. Perhaps, sometimes, he “became impatient of this ‘meaning’ which seems superfluous, and perceives possibilities of intensity through its elimination”<sup>2)</sup>. For such obscurities, we must take the attitude recommended by Eliot, accordingly, “we must write our poetry as we can, and take it as we find it”<sup>2)</sup>.

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12) Treece, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

1) Winters, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

2) Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 93 (from *The use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*)

Others may be due to the uniqueness of the poet in his sensibility, experience, and language etc., which made him almost incommunicable. An obscurity of this order is, however, relative and always does presuppose a comprehension. If an ambiguity of Thomas', being of this type, fails to attain the due comprehension, it is either the fault of the poet in his skill or due to the unpreparedness of the reader or of both. A poet may be too literally a realist of his imagination as Blake and perhaps Yeats himself, but, for an artist, to be a realist, whatever the realm he describes, is an effort to be communicable. "The ambiguities may be due to the fact that the poem means more, not less, than ordinary speech can communicate"<sup>3)</sup> and perhaps beyond what the poet meant to communicate.

However, a more fundamental kind of obscurity of Thomas' is the intransitive obscurity, i.e., the inherent obscurity, the unknowableness of the subject in itself. "The poet expresses his feeling as best he is able without understanding it"<sup>4)</sup> because the cause of the feeling, the subject, is in itself unknowable or not self-explanatory. "The unknowable nature of the universe,...and the incommunicable nature of the self"<sup>5)</sup> are the subjects that confronted him. Of course the obscurity of the subject (or failure to solve the apparent dilemma of the subject) does not, in any way, justify the obscurity or incompleteness of the expression thereof. Nor is there an imperative demand that the poet should negotiate his perception of the subject against that of others.

At any rate, Thomas, in his poems, gives answers to his own puzzles but he knows they are "black replies". He knows well that his riddles have no answer. He is not a skeptic, but a mystic, a believer of the incomprehensible.

We certainly hate to be dupes of a poet who does not know himself, but the fact that his subject is something that cannot and need not be explained or understood is quite a different thing, and if his obscurity is obscure as "the depth of the spirit are obscure"<sup>6)</sup>, it is valid and we must evaluate it according

3) *ibid*, pp. 57—8 (from *Music of Poetry*)

4) Winters, *op. cit.*, p. 50, Re. Collins.

5) Stanford, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

6) Treece, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

to its own efficiency in the context of each poem where such obscurity is found.

The genuine obscurity, however, is short-lived in Thomas and no sooner does he become aware of the merit of it, than the charm of the spontaneity is lost to give way to the conscious manipulation — mystification.

As to his obscurity, Thomas is recorded to have said: “My poems are formed: they are watertight compartments. Much of their obscurity is due to rigorous compression: the last thing they do is to flow; they are much rather hewn!”<sup>7)</sup> Thus the conscious obfuscation develops in the second period of his production. The excessive contortion, crass mystification, arbitrary exploitation in private jargon, equivocal allusion, deliberate derangement...are adopted as technique, no longer the sincere and spontaneous maximum clarity attainable under a despair of expression or at the limit of an intellectual perception and expression.

On this level, obscurantism of Thomas compares well with that of E. E. Cummings, both being aesthetic synthesis... Yet, the latter’s Dadaist obscurity, close to satire, does intimate certain eventually comprehensible content. Poems themselves being the tangible object in Cummings’, they do not need to be paraphrased, whereas Thomas’ obscurantism was an answerless jig-saw puzzle with threadbare substance...one is a fabricated unknownness while the other is a poetic version of Rorschach’s ink-blot.

Once adopting the obscurantism as trope of his poetry, Thomas apparently takes it for granted to the extent that he himself cannot distinguish the artificiality from the inevitability in its use. Once, the puzzles, advertent or inadvertent, were themselves significant because of their unanswerableness, but now they stand meaningless and blank without even caring to be answered.

Had he employed some more prudence in the use of this rather powerful tool, many of his desultory, pointless poems could have been salvaged. His own explanation about the “atlas-eater” biting out mandrake, is itself a confused view of his own tool. He complains that E. Sitwell “doesn’t take the literal meaning”<sup>8)</sup> of the lines... obviously he expects his poems to be read with what

7) *ibid*, p. 121.

8) as quoted by Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 3, from *Sunday Times*.

he had arbitrarily put into them and still would have them read literally. With what he had written, it is a sheer impossibility and he should have known it.

Poetry certainly does communicate before it is understood; it gets the impact, the automatic involvement...which may or may not be valued, however. If it were nonsense rhymes, we are not orientated towards an understanding. If it were surrealist painting, we do not ask for explanation...if it had to be, the painting itself is a failure.

“What Thomas wanted was for the reader to begin with the idea that he might be speaking literally... This is the right way to read Thomas, and the right way to read anything; and it is the only right way,”<sup>9)</sup> says E. Olson — a willful maintenance of reason, so to speak. With his thorough deciphering of the sonnets<sup>10)</sup> (which D. Stanford had given up) and of other poems, Olson almost convinces us to think that all of Thomas’ poems are, in some way or other, explainable.

The enlightenment of this type does greatly assist us in appreciating the poems, yet the enjoyment and evaluation of poems is one thing and deciphering is another, even though there is such a functional relation, and the poems should be independent of extra-textual references as much as possible.

Our next question is, then, when it is that Thomas himself ceased to expect his audience to read of his poems all what he put into them and began to consider poems as independent agents beyond his command and began to write with the awareness of the fact. The symptom is observed by Treece who witnesses that the elusive obfuscation is “especially the case when Thomas chose for himself a difficult way of saying something essentially simple, or when, by his music and rhetoric, he magnified a triviality”<sup>11)</sup>. And when confronted by such a bluff, D. Stanford remarks that “it would be easy enough to force a meaning *into* these lines from without, but to take them as they stand and extract a meaning *from* them is an altogether different matter,”<sup>12)</sup> and

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9) Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

10) *ibid.*, p. 63.

11) Treece, *op. cit.*, O. 124.

12) Stanford, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

to the latter way we are bound.

Now that his early integrity and the fascination of life and universe lie ashen, and with only the narrow repertory of language and experience on hand, his later poems are of a pathetic struggle. He discovers that his obscurantist poetry was incapable of making things happen or of achieving some tangible impact, and also finding that he cannot very well write different kinds of poetry, he looks for a possibility of poetry that can assert itself without the help of substantial meanings.

Whether this was a conscious attempt or otherwise, he eventually found himself writing something that was closer to occultism than to an ornate verbal type of hypnotism.

### III

“The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites”, says R. Graves in his introduction to *The White Goddess*, while according to Y. Winters, incantatory behavior of literature is a kind of “automatic writing” which is an “inevitable development from the initial Romantic ideas, and it is bound to appear whenever the ideas long govern literary practices”<sup>1)</sup>.

Whatever the term, incantation seems to be inseparable from poetry...either in earnest or in pretension. Cummings, however, does not need as much help from the pseudo-magic of literary cult as did Thomas, because Cummings does not expect language to perform beyond what language can as language, i.e., the tool of his communication. His poetry was a fabrication in which language remains to be language or something less.

On the other hand, since his early days in poetry, Thomas had been in a romantic vagueness or naïveté, as to the nature of language and his rhetoric was therefore not completely literary. He seems to imagine some super-linguistic faculty of language whose influence he might improve in his favor. To him, such

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1) Winters, *op. cit.*, pp. 584—5.

rhetorical tropes as repetition, obscurity, peculiar sound consistency, surrealistic vagueness of symbolism, etc., are all half-way magic whose occurrence and consequence he could not quite explain nor control...they are somewhat extra-literary.

Admittedly language in its origin could well have been magical and poetry may still claim the incantatory function of the ul-language, and what poetry is to the language may parallel to what incantation is to poetry. Since the days of actual incantation which is gone except in religion, language has lost its actuality...the more abstract a word is, the better tool it has come to be regarded. If any word, out of context and situation, should perform something upon us, it is, we deem, utterly incidental and irrelevant.

For a closer definition of this subject, we might refer again to Y. Winters' explanation in regard to Poe's *Philosophy of Composition*. He says "it (Poe's aesthetic conviction) is rather an effort to establish the rules for a species of incantation, of witchcraft; rules, whereby, through the manipulation of certain substances in certain arbitrary ways, it may be possible to invoke, more or less accidentally, something that appears more or less to be divine emanation..."<sup>2)</sup>

We cannot imagine Thomas personally entertaining any such cult of conscious or subconscious nature in the incantatory power of language, but it seems that he too often took chance in his handling of language that it almost deprives him of the due defence: he depends upon his obscurity, threads image after image hoping that it will, by some unexplainable chance, stand up as "straight as a young elm,"...an outcome beyond his anticipation and control but nevertheless in his favor. He did not, we think, believe in the magic, but he would have almost wished that the language had such charm.

Blackmur says, "When we call man a rational animal we mean that reason is his great myth... In poetry, and largely elsewhere, imagination is based upon the reality of words and the emotion of their joining."<sup>3)</sup> We know that willing suspension of disbelief can only be an act of reason and of validity when one is

2) *ibid.*, pp. 248—9.

3) Blackmur, R. P., *Form and Value in Modern Poetry*, p. 58, 1952.

sure that he can return from it whenever he wishes and one may take in what “the reality of words” or “the emotion of joining them” do present, but no less, no more. If we are subject to some influences that are not these, it is certainly not a literary effect.

We must, therefore distinguish the literary skill, or rather the manipulation of the reasonable degree of verbal hypnotism from the occulticism in the form of poems. The former can only be administered by a person who knows it and who has control over the situation while the latter works arbitrarily independent of the reader, language and even of the poet himself. And if any form of incantation proves effective upon us, we shall certainly consider that we are duped and that it is a violation done on our mental freedom or simply that it evinces our surrender to an automatism.

Much of Thomas’ successful technical devices, either spontaneous or deliberate, are for a direct effect administered through lingo-semantic phase as well as through musico-rhythmic phase of language. The initial ideal of poetry for Thomas had been well set forth in the passage: “Poetry is the rhythmic movement from an over-clothed blindness to a naked vision. My poetry is the record of my individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light.”<sup>4)</sup>

But with the decline in his organic vitality, and with the realization that once produced, the poems are independent and factual objects, he was soon to be seen slouching over the wishful belief in super-language, the power of incantation which he might invoke by blandishing his acquired virtuosity.

Incantation in its proper sense may mean a cult of animism of language or of individual words, i. e., the belief or the wish to believe in the extra- or super-linguistic faculty of language that exists and performs beyond our ken of intellect. This function, even if it did exist, is something thoroughly outside of our reason and hence utterly a foreign affair to literature. Thomas’ incantation is, therefore, in his mental resignation and literary irresponsibility as well as in his philosophical decadence of manipulating the mildly hypnotic rhetorical elements

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4) as quoted by Treece, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

so vaguely and aimlessly in the hope that they may somehow make sense and work out well...an escapist make-believe.

The result is a cavalcade of empty loose imagery, strangely arranged jargon, deliberately deranged unity, thoroughly different from Metaphysical intense conceit, in which the author as well as the reader strain their brains to see something different from what is there, or perhaps something that is not there at all. This is a literary "insult to the brain,"<sup>5)</sup> almost comparable with his physical one through alcoholism.

Many of Thomas' later poems are of this type. He was fast losing vision of his fascinating future and was constantly aware that his poetry was failing him. Choiceless, he took to this automatism or quasi-incantation and he rested there a while until he realized that "The ball I threw while playing in the park/ Has not yet reached the ground..."that the miracles did not take place. The ball, he thought, he had thrown, but it was only a gesture without a ball.

"Magic has a tradition," says Blackmur, "but it is secret, not public. It has not only central and terminal mysteries but has also peripheral mysteries, which require not only the priest to celebrate but also the adept to manipulate. Magic has never been made 'natural' ". And again, "Magic promises precisely matters which it cannot perform—at least in poetry."<sup>6)</sup>

The remark is on some aspect of Yeats, but precisely it applies to the incantation of Thomas whose final recourse was some form of religion either conventional or private. Perhaps in the context of a religion, an incantation may not only be justifiable but also be actual. As he was personally drifting towards religion, poetically he grew mystic and religious...his poems being an apocalypse of a personal apocrypha...a lesser Blake as poet and Christian and a lesser Yeats as artist and pagan.

We do not mind, however, if a poet is a mystic or a conformist believer, neither if his poems are meant to be an incantation or a doxology, esoteric or religious, as long as the poems are good as poems. It is the final tragedy that

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5) Brinnin, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

6) Blackmur, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

his attempts were successful neither as poems nor as hymns in most of the cases.

Personal weakness of the poet is a fact responsible for his falling prey to this steril antic gesture, but there is an inherent propensity of poems becoming incantatory. Poetry, in its despair of expression and its unexorcisable will to be complete and transitive, readily grasps at such conveniences as pseudo-automatism or near-hypnotism and eventually the occultism, religious or otherwise. Poetry is an art of language, and language, after all, is a substitute to a cause as well as the cause itself and our poet is a “wordy wound” who fell between the dilemma.

#### IV

Harbert Read is often quoted to have said that Thomas has produced “the most absolute poetry that has been written in our time<sup>1)</sup>”. We might modify the statement as to read that Thomas had conceived an absolute poetry of which each actual poem was but a poor incarnation or an index...his efforts were too desultorily scattered and limited.

In a stricter sense, there is no subject in a poem except the poem itself, the reality of language so presented and emotion so fabricated. A poem is there not only as the cause of experience but also as the effect, both conceptual and emotive. It is an expression and at the same moment the objective correlative of the poem. The illusion of reality being induced by the expression is a normal literary process while at its extreme, a poet or a reader might expect a poem to become an experience of unreality by non-lingo-semantic faculty of language, either by itself or along with other ordinary faculties. There poetry becomes so pure but so altogether thin that it is reduced to a shadow of nothing. Thomas might have sought after this type of absolute poetry.

The concept can be paraphrased in a form of trinity in the one-ness of *the described* — either in or outside poems, *the description* — all the literary and

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1) as quoted by Stanford, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

extra-literary qualities and faculty of language, and *the effect*—literary or otherwise caused but not controlled. This is an abstract possibility and what there is to be done is only to work towards it poem by poem.

As any religion reveals and any romantic practices, one may not accomplish the impossible, but he can believe in it and behave accordingly. Because of a variety of factors, Thomas had acquired an attitude and direction of his efforts before he had the object, which fact makes him not only a romantic but also a mystic of poetry.

Whether it be a chanting of hymns or an administering of incantation, the object of such performances stand outside of what is being performed. Religion, personal or communal, are the affairs and attitude of man and not of the nature or the behavior of the object, known or unknown, knowable or unknowable. The incantatory nature of Thomas' later poems is as affected as they are instrumental.

For Cummings, language was an inadequate tool which he exploited and subjugated and often violated for his purpose, while for Thomas, language was a medium. If language did not have such authority and faculty, Thomas would have been fain to institute it as such. It was perhaps a misled one, but certainly one of the effective approaches to a conjuring up of absolute poems.

Cummings often used the obscurity in a poem to achieve an instantaneous comprehension of the entire...by impeding the progressional advance of the sense and through destroying the parallel with actuality. Some of Thomas' obscurities may be defensible as a purposefully applied trope regardless of the efficiency and the merit. They proved in some way and some times, to render the poems the dimension of absoluteness...it makes the poems independent, though temporarily, of meaning.

This is as if to say that an object may enjoy its independent existence without being understood and perhaps even by that very fact it gains in its possession of the objectivity. And so, in order to procure an effectual independence for his creation, Thomas installed obscurity to his poems with which the poems were to offset the gravity of reason, which he thought, was subjugating poetry. Perhaps his attempt is valid and well directed, but he seldom succeeds in it.

The excessive phonetic insistency and other metrical and rhythmic devices are also employed as “the great enacting agent of actuality in poetry”<sup>2)</sup>.

Pattern poems are another of his devices, though different in its temperament from those of Metaphysical poets, to invest the dimension of self-existence to his poems. He used diamond shapes (after an urn or womb or both), hour-glass (grail or chalice) or map of England. One also wonders what actual effect the rhyme scheme of *Vision and Prayer* really has where length of lines are so short and varied, unless it is for sheer play, a skill for no purpose. They are to superimpose, however, some symbolic, extra-textual factors to the poems, which is quite a contrast to those typographical patterns and figures in some poems of Cummings', who made the configuration as the physique, the inner part of the poems, but for no other purpose.

For the autonomy of poetry, the independence from Time is certainly another of the effective steps. A poet must create an artificial time continuum in each of his poems as a separate situation, or at least he must divorce his aesthetic time from that of the actuality. An absolute poem, if it takes place, must be either an instantaneous experience or a timeless experience rather than a developmental revelation from one point of time to another—the decisive difference from the handling of time in drama and fiction.

It is tragic that Thomas stood against Time. Time was not only one of the main concerns of Thomas' and of his poems, but also he recognized it as his fury and Nemesis, the “scissored tailor” of his universe.

In order to conquer time in his poetry, instead of doing it through time, as Eliot recommended, Thomas banished it from his poem, and we have what is to be called a “time-less” kind of poems. Most of his poems end where they began and the apparent development of images and thematic continuation along the exposition turns out to be a timeless motion around the prickly pear at five o'clock in the morning. In a word, we are made inverted Rip Van Wickles while in his poems. There are repetitions to assure the reader, thematically and

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2) Blackmur, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

psychologically, that he has not moved a step farther from where he started and in the first line you see the last and you find all the seasons in a single vista. It is ironical that he was unintendedly successful in this technique while the actual struggle itself is fated to be a defeat...no one can overcome time. He "saw time murder" him.

Tragedy is more poignant when we see, perhaps with the poet himself, in his first poems, his last, and in his last his first. The hero with whom the poet is inseparably identified, is a Prometheus who stole the Time from gods, and fell as fated.

## V

A passage in an obituary notice in *The Times* (London) November 10, 1953, speaks of Thomas as "a poet who was able to live Christianity in a public way, and whose work distilled it—a poet narrow and severe with himself and wide and forgiving in his affections. Innocence is always a paradox, and Dylan Thomas presents, in retrospect, the greatest paradox of our time".

A biographical person of a poet and his biographical existence in his poems are not always reciprocated; they may be closely related but not always identifiable. The interdependence of poems and the poet is an extra-poetic phenomenon, even though establishment of such relationship may become factors for a better understanding and a better appreciation of the poems. Our usual practice admits such extratextual evidences as long as they support the literary facts already in the poems.

Usually a conscious poet presents his poems as his public performance—a dressed production rather than a private conduct. And the discarding of this affectation, the aesthetic situation and exposition, endangers the status of his poems as products of conscious art. His work, therefore, presumes the transcendental existence of objectivity and the convention of humanity, without which no communication is possible. The supposition leads to the general compliance to the convention of expression and to the anticipation of a system of external general references by which his poems can be understood and

appreciated perhaps closest to his original experience.

But what stuns us upon the perusal of Thomas' poems is that they are a sequence of private talks throughout, a private act that does not require nor is aware of an audience. We do not know if this is a biographical fact, but such is the posture and the effect of his poems.

Thomas' poems is not the mouth that asserts his observation on the universe as he sees it. The hero does not explain nor does he tell a story...he assumes no expository position. He wonders and is even "afraid" but asks for no reply. Thomas who wrote thus is certainly "a private rather than a social poet"<sup>1)</sup> who was instinctively afraid of exposure to the inhuman plurality of public. "We can hardly picture him as being concerned by the image of a possible reader of his work,"<sup>2)</sup> says Treece, his closest friend. In his note to his *Collected Poems*, Thomas says that it is intended as "an address to my readers, the strangers". He does not seem to expect others to understand him. He declares that his "craft or sullen art" is for the love of others, but these others, he knows well and so he says in the very poem, would not even give him wages. His obscurity as well as obsenity, besides that intense ego-centricity, show his sheer aesthetic disregard of others. His liturgical poems even are his own prayer and canticles offered in private to his god, and he does not even seem to care if god hears him. Thomas' own epitaph to his poetry contains a passage: "These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusion, are written for the Love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't", which reads like a sad afterthought.

In his poetry, we are not in the audience being addressed to or performed to, but we are in the backstage looking at him all to himself. The perusal of his poems bring us to a private situation of an encounter—which may or may not be aesthetic. On the part of the poet, it is a "naked exposure" of himself and on the readers' side, it is an accident somewhat irrelevant. The incipient embarrassment we undergo is because of the unpreparedness of ourselves as

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1) Treece, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

2) *ibid.*, p. 125.

well as of the poems themselves.

His poems often demand the recognition of the *persona*<sup>3)</sup> rather than *logos* that is incarnate therein. (The ambiguity in the identity of the persona and the biographical person of the poet is very tempting in the case of Thomas, however.) *The personality of poems*<sup>4)</sup> is almost literal a term when we deal with Thomas' poetry in which the ego of the individual poems are so asserting, through and beyond the personality, the physique of the poems. It is no wonder that some say that his entire collection of poems read like one long poem. It is so organic that there is a biography as well as a physiology of itself in it.

The persona we consistently confront throughout his poems may or may not be that of the biographical Mr. Dylan Thomas, no matter how biographically insistent or apologetic the poems may be. It is a private talk and art of Mr. Thomas' hero who only lived in the poems, accidentally exposed by Mr. Thomas, for a general perusal. If this is a conscious exposition towards an establishment of a new way of *poet-poem-reader* relationship, the aesthetic exposition, it is unique.

"Is this the man who wrote the poems of Dylan Thomas?" one would wonder when reading J. M. Brinnin's account of the last days for Dylan, in helpless despair. So surcharged are the poems with the personality of that aesthetic persona of the poems that the author, Mr. Dylan Thomas, was encored to the mental stage of the readers and there he appears so much identifiable with the "hero"...perhaps they are mutually identifiable. Yet it is, after all, an incident, if they did, quite outside of poetry. But if such is the asserting effect of the intended art of Thomas, the poet, then certainly the "innocence" is a paradox.

Thomas is quoted to have told Harvey Breit in 1950: "I should be what I was...twenty years ago...Then I was arrogant and lost. Now I am humble and found. I prefer the other."<sup>5)</sup> and in 1952, Brinnin asks himself, "Would he (Thomas)

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3) *ibid.*, p. 88.

4) Gravps and Riding, *A Survey of Modern Poetry*, 1927, as quoted by L. Untermeyer, *Modern American Poetry*, pp. 22—3.

5) Stanford, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

continue, year by year, to be the roaring boy, the daemonic poet endlessly celebrating the miracle of man under the eyes of God? Would he, by some reversal of spirit, some re-direction of his genius, become the wise, gray, and intellectually disciplined poet moving toward an epical summation of his lyrical gifts?" and he thinks that "the means by which Dylan might continue to grow were no longer in his possession" and that "Dylan knew this..."<sup>6)</sup>

It is indeed a tragic paradox that the first reader of his poetry, namely, the poet himself, should become so much involved and identified with the poems that with the foreseen curtain-fall to his youthful poems in view, the poet himself refused to grow, and Macbeth-like falls victim to alcoholism and dies of it abroad in New York on November 9th, 1953, thus completing the poetry whose metaphor was *man...there being only one soul upon the nightmarish surface of his poetic earth...Dylan Thomas himself.*

The wounded cross he erected there upon his exit was for human language... that it may be more than language.

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6) Brinnin, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

7) Unannotated quotations in quotation marks throughout the paper are fragmentally borrowed mostly from Thomas' poems.