

Thomas Saunders

RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS

IN THE POETRY OF DYLAN THOMAS

WHEN DYLAN THOMAS became a name in the world of poetry, it was popular to say that his poems did not mean much but that they sounded well. He was held up as the latter-day successor to Swinburne and Poe—poets who were also alleged to have subordinated sense to sound—and the picture of him so engendered was enhanced by his own rich, singing voice as it came to a multitude of listeners through his recordings. People, entranced by his voice, forgot to listen for the meaning in his poetry. But the poetry of Dylan Thomas is marked by sense as well as sound, as anyone can discover who takes the trouble to analyze it.

Moreover, because Thomas had a reputation as a roisterer, people refused to take his most serious utterances at face value. When his *Collected Poems* appeared in 1952, they were prefaced by the statement that “these poems, with all their crudities, doubts and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God.” But it was difficult for people, thinking of the bibulous character of the poet, to accept this declaration. It was particularly difficult because the statement did not stand alone but was accompanied by a facetious remark that seemed to imply that it was not to be taken very seriously. Even when he likened his poems to the ark and himself to the “drinking Noah”, it was not easy to believe that he meant these comparisons as anything but a joke. Thomas, in short, was described as a nature poet, a bardic poet, a sex-obsessed poet, a blasphemous poet, etcetera, because all of these elements could be seen in his work. But to have suggested that he was in any sense a religious poet was an invitation to be laughed out of court.

In recent years, however, a group of critics has come along to suggest what was once thought of as inconceivable. Thomas, they say, used biblical and religious imagery in his poems and his writing tended to become more religious as time went by. They do not deny his interest in how a poem sounded (in contrast to a mere concern with what it said); nor do they deny

his sex-obsession and blasphemy, or the fact that he can be described as a poet of nature. They do not deny—what some earlier critics had insisted upon—that much of Thomas's poetry shows the influence of surrealism and Freudian psychology. But they insist that these things are not the whole of Thomas, or even the most important part of him. As one such critic, John Ackerman, has expressed it (touching on the influence of surrealism and Freudian psychology), these "represent attitudes the poet was to outgrow." "The movement of his poetry", writes Mr. Ackerman, "was from a clinical towards a religious purpose."

It was perhaps in recognition of this movement that Saunders Lewis wrote of Thomas: "He sang of the glory of the universe when it was the fashion for every prominent poet in Europe to sing despairingly and with passion and anguish of the end of civilization."

Another critic, Aneurin Talfan Davies (a fellow Welshman and a personal friend of Thomas), deals with the more obvious contradiction (or seeming contradiction) between the poet's life and his work. How, he asks, can a drunkard be religious? How can the author of a poem such as *Lament* be considered in the company of Milton and Francis Thompson and the writers of the *Psalms*? Mr. Davies has ready answers. "It is only a misunderstanding of the role and function of the poet's vocation", he states, "which could lead us to believe that a poet's public (or private) misdemeanors invalidate, in any real way, his poetic statements." Mr. Davies might have amplified this remark by pointing out that David was an adulterer and that Francis Thompson had been in the gutter before he wrote *The Hound of Heaven* and *In No Strange Land*. But he still makes the essential point. "Ultimately", he says, "Thomas, like every other poet, will have to be judged as an artist, and not as a saint."

Mr. Davies does not stop here. He goes on to deal with the charge that Thomas's poetry is sex-obsessed. "The relation between man's capacity for love and the sexual act is a complicated one", he says; "and we should be impressed, and not foolishly shocked, that much of Thomas's poetry is centred in the sexual act. . . ." And again: "No one, I hope, would deem it enough to trace the sexual imagery of the *Psalms* and leave it there. It is enough to know that it is there; if it weren't then we would immediately become suspicious." Of sex and love in Thomas's poetry he writes: "It is cause for congratulation when a poet acknowledges the mystery and passes through the more superficial aspects of sexuality to the fundamental truth concerning man as a being capable of love." Even to the charge that Thomas is at times

blasphemous Mr. Davies has his answer. His irreverencies, he says, are reverent irreverencies and must be seen in relation to the totality of his work.

But such critics as Mr. Ackerman and Mr. Davies—and others, including Vernon Watkins, who sees in Thomas's use of religious symbols an acceptance of religious truth—have not had matters all their own way. Another critic, Constantine Fitzgibbon, rebukes them in no uncertain terms. "To read, and even more to hear, some of these [critics] today", he says, "one would imagine that Dylan Thomas visited more churches than Mr. John Betjeman, passed his evenings meditating upon ritual and theology, and spent more time on his knees than Mr. Eliot and Mr. Auden rolled into one." Mr. Fitzgibbon makes refreshing reading, but he misses the point. Critics such as Davies, Ackerman, and Watkins do not say that Thomas was a church-Christian. They do not suggest that he spent his evenings "meditating on ritual and theology" or that he was a man given to prayer. I have already cited Davies' awareness of the contradiction between Thomas's life and work. Ackerman suggests that Thomas was almost an unwilling writer of religious poetry. The dominant influence on his writing, he believes, was his early Welsh background—a Bible-centred, Bible-oriented background from which he was never able to escape. He rebelled against that background, but continually came back to it.

Perhaps it is time, however, to let some of Thomas's poems speak for themselves. This, in effect, is what Mr. Davies does in his excellent little volume, *Dylan: Druid of the Broken Body*. Before he is through, indeed, Mr. Davies comes close to convincing us that Thomas is not only a religious poet but a Christian poet as well. Here he perhaps oversteps the mark. It is true that Thomas uses Christian symbols; but the use of Christian symbols does not necessarily make him a Christian poet. Thomas's own father was full of the Bible—but he was an agnostic. Perhaps Thomas used Christian symbols only because they were the symbols most accessible to him. He was not like Yeats who, eschewing Christian symbols, created a whole world of new symbols of his own. Nevertheless, Mr. Davies' main point is still valid. If Thomas was not a Christian poet, there is ample evidence that he was a religious poet. When he wrote that his poems were "for the love of Man and in praise of God", we must do him the honour of assuming that he meant what he said. His theme was human nature and destiny—and in man's nature and destiny he did not rule out the importance of belief in a supreme being. Nor, given the Christian imagery in much that he wrote, did he rule out the role of Christ.

Here we come to an oddity about Thomas's poetry: though he was heir to the Welsh puritan tradition, it is the sacramental side of Christianity which appears to have appealed to him most. He saw meaning for life in the doctrine of the Incarnation, and he saw meaning for death in the doctrine of the Resurrection. His interpretation of these doctrines may not have been orthodox, but it was there—fixed in his poetry—not just an adjunct to it but an integral part of it.

It is not difficult to find passages to illustrate this point:

On the Lord's table of the bowing grass . . .
 Her robin-breasted tree, three Marys in the rays.
 The leaping saga of prayer! and high there, on the hare-
 Heeled winds the rooks
 Cawing from their black bethels soaring, the holy books
 Of birds.

All through Thomas's verse, Christian imagery of this kind abounds. Not only the New Testament but the Old plays its part in his poems:

I know the legend
 Of Adam and Eve is never for a second
 Silent in my service.

And Davies' point about the reverence of his irreverencies can be illustrated again and again. When he makes use of the irreverent pun, it seldom stands alone. Usually it is linked up with something serious and profound, as in the lines:

You who bow down to cross and altar
 Remember me and pity Him
 Who took my flesh and blood for armour
 And doublecrossed my mother's womb.

As Davies remarks, "This is neither flat rejection nor wholehearted acceptance. It is the cry of the heart of a man confronted by a profound mystery. The ambivalence of the line 'Remember me and pity Him' strikes a note of tragic bewilderment, and the ambiguity of the final line with its mixture of colloquial nonchalance and reverent irreverence indicates the depth of the poet's predicament."

Thomas, in short, could blaspheme, but the overall impact of his poems is seldom blasphemous. He could write about the womb and the phallus and

the sexual act, but his concern was seldom only with sex. As Davies expresses it again, "There has been too much throwing around of the phallus and 'womb-tomb' clichés, and a mistaking and mistrusting of the poet's intentions." For Thomas, the great virtue was love, not sex. Related not only to man but to God, it possessed the key that could open all doors, even the door of the unknown beyond death. If there is any doubt on this score, consider his words:

—love unbolts the dark
And freely he goes lost
In the unknown, famous light of great
And fabulous, dear God.

But if it is a mistake to see Thomas only as a blasphemous and sex-obsessed poet, says Mr. Davies, it is an equally grievous mistake to see him only as the poet of nature. His theme was seldom nature only, but nature in relation to the nature and destiny of man. He sought to plumb life to its depths, and the depths of life included death. He had, indeed, a preoccupation with death, almost as if he were death-haunted and had an inner awareness that his own life would be short. But, for Thomas, even death is a triumph:

. . . the closer I move
To death, one man through his sundered hulks,
The louder the sun blooms
And the tusked, ramchackling sea exults;
And every wave of the way
And gale I tackle, the whole world then,
With more triumphant faith
Than ever was since the world was said
Spins its morning of praise . . .

Thomas's sacramental sense of life and of the nature of the universe becomes increasingly evident in his later poems. But it was there, as we look backward now, in some of his early poems. Certainly it was there in his second published volume, *25 Poems*. Perhaps one instance will suffice. The poem "This Bread I Break", first published in 1936 when Thomas was only twenty-two years of age, can be seen now as an augury of other poems to come:

This bread I break was once the oat,
This wine upon a foreign tree
Plunged in its fruit;
Man in the day or wind at night
Laid the crops low, broke the grape's joy.

Once in this wine the summer blood
Knocked in the flesh that decked the vine,
Once in this bread
The oat was merry in the wind;
Man broke the sun, pulled the wind down.

This flesh you break, this blood you let
Make desolation in the vein,
Were oat and grape
Born of the sensual root and sap;
My wine you drink, my bread you snap.

This, as Aneurin Davies says, "plumbs deep into the mystery of the sacramental nature of the universe." To what extent the poem is an exposition of Christian belief, of course, is another question. But it is obvious that already, at the early age of twenty-two, Thomas finds the sacramental approach increasingly congenial. One has only to read his later poems to see how much more congenial it ultimately became.

The foregoing, of course, does not pretend to be a comprehensive analysis of the religious elements in the poetry of Dylan Thomas. It has been indicative rather than comprehensive. But it may be hoped that at least enough has been indicated to open up the subject for further debate. Every poet of any stature needs a solid superstructure of belief to sustain his imagination. The erosion of Christian dogma, which has been part of the foundation of Western civilization, has faced the modern poet with a tremendous task—that of assembling or creating a dictionary of relevant symbols, capable of sustaining his creative activity. Yeats is the outstanding example among major poets of this century of one who raised his own private superstructure. This he did through a fantastic agglomeration of dogma and symbolism—theosophic, spiritualistic, oriental. But Thomas, faced with the same dilemma, tied his poetry to the beliefs of the community out of which he had come—a community in which the Bible, especially the Old Testament, held sufficient sway to impinge powerfully on the imagination of a growing boy. Thomas never escaped this influence. Whether, in the road that he travelled, he eventually became a Christian poet is a concern that lies beyond the scope of this article. But we certainly *can* say that he made a wide and varied use of biblical—and Christian—imagery and symbolism and that his sacramental view of the universe derived from Judaic-Christian sources.